



A BUNDLE OF
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For Every Season

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2019

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

JANUARY 2019

TIPS

Seven 4 You – A little R and R and R... – by Marcy Lytle

January is here and we're either glad the hoopla of the holidays is past, or we're completely saddened that all of the joy is gone and we're stuck now in the cold...and feel alone and forlorn. I feel like I'm usually on the sad side, because Christmas comes and goes so fast that I feel sad when the lights and shows and parties and celebration decline. I thrive on that stuff!

Come the New Year, I like to have plans in place to relax and get back in the groove, but not so quickly that it's an abrupt change back to normalcy. I love having a few plans to sit back and read, relax, and refigure so that life feels fresh and new, like the calendar claims it is!

Here are seven ways to refresh and renew, if you're feeling blue:

1. **Read.** Hopefully, you have a few new magazines maybe you haven't read yet (I recommend *Magnolia Journal*), or a cookbook (*Pull up a Chair*) you've only used but not read the stories inside, or a new book you received under the tree. If you don't have something to read, let me recommend a book club! My husband gave me this for Christmas, and I already got my first book! I get one every month. It's not very much money per month, and what a joy to receive something new to read every 30 days!
2. **Relax.** Carve out time to relax. That may sound funny that we have to "carve out time," but we often do. Look at your calendar and leave room for nights by the fire, watching a show or sipping hot cocoa or cider, or for a Saturday or Sunday morning for breakfast out, where you linger and chat with your spouse or a friend.
3. **Refresh.** Consider perhaps one area in your house or closet that needs a refresh, and tackle it. Organizational type boxes and folders are usually on sale this time of year, so take one mess and make it beautiful again. It will cause you to sigh in relief that you've done something so refreshing!
4. **Renew.** Maybe emotions ran high over the holidays and you became angry again at that relative, or disappointed once more at his gifts or the lack thereof, or you were just plain lonely and despondent over the holiday season. It's all over now, and don't carry those hurts into the New Year. Instead, spend a little time with your Father and pour out your heart to him – lay down those burdens at his feet. Do this often, as much as you need to, in order to breathe deeply.
5. **Recall.** Think about 2018 and recall God's blessings to you and yours. Make a list of at least 10 and type them into a pretty font, print out the list, and hang it on your fridge or board somewhere in your house. The list might include a new job, healing when you were sick, your kid making a team, a friend got a new house, etc. You don't have to stop at 10! Just make the list and recall his faithfulness; and that will boost your faith to expect more in 2019.
6. **Relay.** Make it a point this month to relay to others your appreciation and love for them. Perhaps buy a set of notecards to send by snail mail, or sit down at your computer and send an email, or type out a daily text to one friend a day. Relay your love, your encouragement, and anything else positive to a friend...expecting nothing in return.
7. **Roast.** Consider eating more veggies this year. Roast them at the start of the week, and use them in all sorts of dishes. Cup up bite size pieces of six or seven of your

favorite veggies, drizzle with olive oil and season. Bake at 375 degrees for 15-20 minutes, flip or stir around, and bake another 15-20 minutes until tender. Use them to top greens, in a quesadilla, or on a bed of fried rice with a few peanuts sprinkled on top.

There you go! Aren't you feeling better already? What other R could you add to the list?

Have a happy New Year!

The Dressing – Keeping it Warm – by Marcy Lytle

January is cold. And I love it. But it's because our cold doesn't last long when it comes. Our hot is our unwelcome visitor that stays way too long. But the cold is the time we all hunker down and get cozy in all of the fabrics that make us feel loved and warm. From hats, to gloves, to blankets, to pajamas, keeping warm is definitely the task of the month for most of us. And usually, the sales on warm wear are great, because bathing suits are hanging up soon for those early spring break planners!

Geez...

Until then, here are some great warm and cozy ideas to keep you covered...

Thermal Pj's – I just bought these right before Christmas and they're my favorite! Super soft, super comfy, and there were lots of choices. I got this navy blue pair with tiny stars, and I also bought a gray pair. I hope they're still on sale for you, because they are wonderful for sleeping and then lounging in on a weekend morning at home. And they're from Target.

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-star-print-thermal-pajama-set-gilligan-o-malley-153-blue/-/A-53868905?preselect=53763302#ink=sametaab>

The Robe: I also bought myself this robe before Christmas, just for me, as a treat! It was on sale, and when I felt it in the store, I couldn't resist the softness. It's a great length and even has a hood, should you want to wrap up completely while watching a show. It's super warm and one of the softest robes I've ever owned. It's from World Market.

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/green-paisley-fleece-robe.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

Travel Wrap: Check this out from World Market! It's a travel wrap! You can take it with you on a plane trip, a road trip or just when you're out and about in town! I love the gray color, and you get a hat and a drawstring bag too! This is worth spending some of that Christmas money on, for sure. It's a nice gray color that will go with everything and keep you cozy!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/gray-plaid-travel-wrap-3-piece-gift-set.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

Loafing Around: When's the last time you wore a pair of penny loafers? Target has these really cute suede ones in several colors from which to choose. I particularly like this pink hue, and find that this color goes with everything from black, to gray, and even brown! Keep your feet cozy and warm and styling, too!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-aa-nae-suede-closed-back-loafers-universal-thread-153/-/A-53662548?preselect=53468280#ink=sametaab>

Cozy Coat: I bought a different Sherpa jacket than the one pictured here, but it's been so fun to have this season. This pink hue will match your suede loafers, and keep you cozy right through Valentine's Day next month when you're wearing red! NOW is the time to buy coats – they should be on sale! And I love the length of this one, too!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-sherpa-jacket-wild-fable-153/-/A-53741676?preselect=53716001#ink=sameta>

Reversible Sweater: I also bought this sweater one night when I couldn't sleep, on line from Urban Outfitters, at a great clearance price! It is SO comfortable, and you can wear it with the V in the front OR the back! It's a little slouchy, just the right amount, so it's not snug and uncomfortably tight. It comes in several colors, and looks great over a turtleneck. Isn't this so pretty? You could even wear it over one of your dresses or skirts, with tights to cover your legs!

<https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/uo-coconut-reversible-v-neck-tunic-sweater?category=womens-winter-sale&color=073&quantity=1&type=REGULAR>

Glory Gloves: That's what I'm calling these chenille lined gloves. I think those gloves with cute tips and open fingers and all of that extra stuff are cute, but when it's cold, I just want a soft and warm pair of gloves to cover my hands. These also come in several hues and they are just what your dry cold hands need. This grey multi hue will go with whatever coat you're sporting this cold season of the year! They too are from UO.

<https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/flat-knit-chenille-lined-glove2?category=womens-gloves&color=024>

What are you wearing this January to keep you cozy and warm? I hope you're enjoying the season, sipping on warm or hot tea, and sitting by the fire as you relax after Christmas is over. Those chores and cleaning can wait, while you snuggle and smile...can't they?

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In the Kitchen – Little Bites – by Marcy Lytle

My husband's birthday is in the second week of January, and it's often the coldest month in the year, and of course it's a new year, so there's a reason to celebrate all month long. After all of the holiday eating, it's fun to sit back and just enjoy little bites when you're having guests over, or if you're just staying in to watch a show by the fire. In fact, little bites are my favorite type of meal to put together. I love snacking on lots of different options, whether it be from a cheese array, a cold cut board, or just bowls of different things to snack on.

Here are some fun snacking options for offering up little bites this month to you and yours:

Homemade Granola

I know granola is typically eaten layered in between rows of yogurt and fruit, and that's certainly a great option. But I love just setting out a container of this homemade crunch for snacking, as an alternative to popcorn!

- 3 cups old fashioned oats
- 3 T flour
- 1 cup almonds/cashews (or your choice of nut)
- 1 cup dried cherries
- ½ cup maple syrup
- 1/3 cup canola oil
- 1 t vanilla extract
- 1 t cinnamon
- ¼ t fine sea salt

Preheat oven to 325 and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Toss together oats, flour, nuts and cherries. In another bowl, whisk together syrup, oil, vanilla, cinnamon, and salt. Add the liquid mix to the dry and stir well.

Spread mixture on prepared sheet and bake, stirring occasionally, til browned and fragrant, 30-40 minutes. Allow it to cool before storing in an airtight container.

Apple Sweet Potato and Rosemary Flatbread

This is a great appetizer to make and then cut into small squares for eating. It's colorful and so tasty, and includes a combo of ingredients I'd never thought of putting together. But it certainly works!

- 1 lb pizza dough
- Cornmeal and flour for dusting
- 1 ½ cups gruyere or extra sharp cheddar
- 1 large Honeycrisp apple
- 1 small sweet potato peeled and thinly sliced

- ½ small red onion, thinly sliced
- 2 T olive oil
- 2 T fresh chopped rosemary
- Kosher salt and pepper

Heat oven to 425, dust a baking sheet with cornmeal.

On a lightly floured surface, shape pizza dough into a large rectangle (14 in long or more) and place on prepared sheet, and sprinkle with half the cheese.

Thinly slice apple into rounds, discarding any seeds. In a bowl, toss sweet potato and onion with oil, rosemary, and ¼ t each of salt and pepper. Add apple and remaining cheese and toss. Scatter over dough.

Bake until potatoes are tender and crust is golden, about 20 minutes.

Mini Sausage Tarts

Easy to make and they look so pretty, as they are tiny and colorful and just the right size for a little bite dinner entrée! Everyone will love these, and will want to eat several!

Heat oven to 350.

- 1 lb ground pork sausage, browned and drained
- 1 8oz pkg shredded Mexican cheese blend
- ¾ cup Ranch dressing
- 2 T chopped black olives
- 4 15-count frozen mini phyllo cups
- Diced red pepper and more diced black olives

Combine sausage, cheese, salad dressing and olives, blending well. Divide among the phyllo cups and arrange on ungreased baking sheets. Sprinkle with diced pepper and black olives.

Bake at 350 for 10-12 minutes!

Crackers and Cheese

We had this dip alongside crackers at one of our holiday parties. The spice on the crackers combined with the creamy nutty cheese was a delicious bite for sure! This is great to bring to a gathering of friends and family this new year.

<https://www.amazon.com/Savory-Saltine-Seasoning-Classic-Original/dp/B00B6DJ7OK?th=1>

The crackers:

You'll need to purchase packs of the seasoning mix. You can find them on Amazon, and we find them in small towns at festivals and home stores. If you buy, buy several. This seasoning is addicting! Just read the directions on the package!

Basically you add the mix, along with oil, and crackers in ziplock bags and shake!

The cheese:

- 8 oz sharp cheddar cheese
- 4 oz cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup butter, softened
- 1 ½ cup chopped toasted pecans
- 1 t minced roasted garlic

Mix the cheeses and butter. Add in the nuts and garlic and combine.

Serve in a cute pot nestled in the center of the crackers and enjoy.

(This cheese hardens in the fridge, so set it out a bit to soften so that it spreads, before serving.)

Tiny Muffalettas

We love these olive salad sandwiches, and usually they are ordered off a deli menu, and they're large! So these small bites are perfect for setting out for guests or enjoying with your family. And the best part is they can be made one day ahead of time. The flavor is only better the next day!

The sandwich:

28 crusty bakery rolls

28 thin slices genoa salami

¼ very thinly sliced deli ham

28 slices provolone cheese

The olive salad:

1 12oz jar roasted red peppers undrained

1 13oz jar pimiento stuffed green olives drained

1 6oz pitted black olives, drained

½ c coarsely chopped red onion

¾ cup pepperoncini chopped peppers

3 garlic cloves, halved

2 t dried Italian seasonin

¼ c olive oil

¼ t fresh ground pepper

Drain the peppers, reserving 1 T liquid. Pulse all ingredients with that liquid in a food processor until coarsely chopped.

To assemble the sandwiches: Spoon 1 T olive salad on bottom of roll, layer salami, ham and cheese over salad, and spoon another 1 T salad on top of the cheese. Cover with the top of the roll. Cut in half and secure with wooden picks and an olive, if desired.

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Selah's Style – Amazing Augie

Selah's little cousin Augie is 3 ½ years old and he has his own style and way of dressing that suits him just fine. He's a precocious little guy that loves to climb and build, fall down and tear down, and play zoo and put together puzzles. Featuring Augie's style this month, as the new year begins, is so fun and playful. He models his favorites for you to enjoy...

Long sleeve Henley – Augie loves these soft long-sleeved henleys from Target. He absolutely loves buttons on shirts so that he can unbutton them! And if there's a pair of sunglasses left unattended, he just might pick them up and wear them. Look at the sun on Augie's hair – angelic!

<https://www.target.com/p/toddler-boys-long-sleeve-striped-henley-cat-jack-153-navy/-/A-53606853?preselect=53585155#lnk=sametab>

Wrapped in a blanket – Just like Augie's dog Heismann loves a snuggly wrap in a blanket, so does Augie. These blankets are found on line and are the softest, cutest blankets around – and they can be personalized! Augie and his brother and sister both have a blanket for snuggles from blankets2!

<https://blankets2.com/>

Footie pajamas – These pajamas with feet in them are Augie's favorite type of sleepwear. In fact, he loves to linger in them almost til noon as he plays with his toys and builds villages and helps the sick animals in the zoo. He wears these all year long from season to season!

<https://www.target.com/c/footie-pajamas-union-suits-robos-boys-clothing-kids/-/N-4xnwi>

Tattoos and Tennis Shoes – This little guy is active! Here he's sitting on a fence in a button down shirt with cute tennis shoes ready for more climbing. If Augie finds markers or pens, he's sure to design something for wear on his hands or legs. After all, why not?

<https://www.target.com/c/sneakers-boys-shoes/-/N-55k0a>

Plaids with a Cap – Augie's dad wears plaid button-down shirts, and Augie loves to copy his father. What a great thing for a little guy to do! If there's a cap nearby, he'll set it on top of his head too, just to complete the outfit! We love these little plaid shirts from Old Navy.

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/search.do?searchText=toddler+plaid+boys>

Augie loves to play outside, even when it's cold. He's thoughtful and playful, and on any given day when he's tired or ready to chill, he might sink into an empty chair somewhere and relax with a couple of fingers in his mouth while he rests. He loves getting haircuts from his dad, snuggles from his mom, and playtime from his two older siblings, Ayla and Gideon.

His fashion advice? Leave a few buttons undone, copy your father, and pick up a marker and draw...and try not to get caught...

Tried and True – A View from the Fridge – by Marcy Lytle

I was sitting at my laptop working, not wanting to be disturbed. I work in the kitchen at a high table on a stool, while I have a lovely view outside.

He walked in and opened the refrigerator door and I grimaced, because there was this foul odor that wafted over in front of my nostrils and I exclaimed, “That does it. I’m cleaning the fridge!”

I’m not good at maintaining a sparkling clean fridge, and I admit it now – I wait until it’s unbearable and then I clean it. Today was that day.

As usual, my Father spoke to me while cleaning and scrubbing, and I tried to listen and learn...as I learn best from these object lessons he so nicely uses to instruct me and help me.

Hard stuff required scrubbing: I had a warm sponge for wiping down the shelves but in the back, where food spills had hardened, I had to get out a scrubber. I had to use a lot of arm strength to loosen up those frozen pieces of nasty food that were stuck. And, of course, I thought right then of some of the hard places in my heart that don’t come loose with a quick prayer and a nod toward heaven. I have to sit still and let him apply a little pressure in order to loosen them and set me free. Ouch.

Expired things needed to be tossed: This is a no-brainer, right? But sometimes I only partially clean and leave some of those bottles in the back forever! Once I got rid of the expired bottles, I felt elated, and yet a bit irritated at myself for not using those sauces and spreads before their time for good flavor was gone. Okay, lesson #2 was to take inventory often of my talents and treasures and to use them when I feel prompted.

Check your stock before you buy: I had 3 jars of roasted red peppers! What? I made a mental note to make my menu next week using these red slivers to make colorful and tasty, some of our meals! I’m sure I was in a hurry to leave and didn’t think to look what I had before I shopped, and if I had, I would have saved money. Sometimes I have just what I need and I don’t need to go looking for more of what I already have...

I could go on with the cleaning lessons, but I’ll spare you the details. It was just cool to be doing this mundane task of cleaning out my fridge and hearing his sweet voice as he taught me practical lessons along the way. He wasn’t harsh, he was conversational. And some lessons I just learned from my own observation, like how if I don’t move some things out of the way, I’ll never see that shriveled up grape near the back, all black and nasty...

For a few practical tips, here are my favorite fridge organizational conclusions:

- Nuts are best corralled in boxes and need to be eaten often, in trail mix, atop fried rice, or as an accompaniment to popcorn!
- A lazy Susan is great for tiny jars.
- I love two more big, slide-in organizational plastic containers to house breads and extra veggies that won’t fit in the crisper. These keep my shelves looking nice and they’re easy to remove and hose down under the faucet.

- Small colanders (from the dollar store) are great to place inside veggie and fruit drawers for keeping order and making them pretty.

As I was typing this story, I realized I forgot to clean the cheese/meat drawer! So up I popped to do so, and when I opened it, that was the place where the stinky smell was residing!

Last lesson...

Make sure you clean every spot and leave nothing stinky to ruin the fragrant.

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HOME

Practical Parenting – The Best and Worst – by Marcy Lytle

We were standing and talking with friends when a little boy, that my friend had previously been a nanny to, ran by.

“Hey, you!” she said, smiling and pointing at him, expecting him to run up and give her a hug.

Instead, he ran off and didn’t give her the time of day.

“And I used to keep him,” she said, laughing. “But you’d think he doesn’t even know me.”

We laughed about that, and I commented on the fickleness of children. One day we are their favorite, and the next day we’re a stranger. Kids are so like that, aren’t they? They want to crawl up in our laps and love on us, which warms our hearts. But if something better comes along, or a friend calls them to play, we’re toast!

Parenting brings with it so many “best and worst” moments, and we do just have to learn to laugh and roll with the punches, or we’ll be crying in the trenches:

- The best is when they fall asleep in our arms and look like angels as they sleep.
- The worst is when they wipe chocolate on those same arms, covered in pretty sleeves.
- The best is when they draw us a picture and hand it to us, so proudly.
- The worst is when that picture depicts us as a large overgrown potato head with a few sprigs of hair.
- The best is when they look so cute in that outfit we picked out and they actually liked.
- The worst is when they only want to wear that outfit, every day, in every place, at every event.
- The best is when they want to help us in the kitchen, or ask to set the table.
- The worst is the cleanup after they help us in the kitchen, or they throw confetti on all plates and in all cups.
- The best is when they ask us to read a book to them, as they sweetly listen and turn the pages.
- The worst is when they only want that book night after night, and we can’t bear the story one more time.
- The best is when they choose to run into our arms when spotted in a crowd of people.
- The worst is when they won’t get out of our arms and want to be carried on a mile-long hike.
- The best is when they bring home that paper with a mark stating they did so well.
- The worst is when they bring home that note with a meeting scheduled, because they need to sit still.
- The best is when they clean their rooms and make their beds and do their chores, with a smile.
- The worst is that the above best never happens.

I’m sure you could add best/worst statements to make that list several pages long, as a parent. There are best days when our kids behave, our spouses help, our houses feel somewhat put

together, and our energy level is high. But more than likely, right after the holidays is not one of those days. It may feel like the worst time, because Christmas décor has to be put away, the kids' rooms are now full of toys that need batteries that will break our budgets, school and routine is about to begin, and our house is absolute chaos.

On the best days, it's so wonderful to sit down and relax and smile and sip a cup of hot tea, while watching the children play while we do nothing.

So make these worst days of post-holiday madness one of those best days and still sit down and relax and smile with a cup of hot tea anyway, while ignoring the piles and the dirty floors and the screaming kids...at least for a moment.

After all, we're only promised today, and today's a good one to focus on the best...even if the worst is all you see.

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A Night to Remember – Show and Tell – by Marcy Lytle

We mentioned Show and Tell over on the MARRIAGE page as a date night out idea, so we thought we'd use it here as well, as an activity for the entire family! Showing and telling is something we're instructed to do in the bible, once we know Jesus. We are told to show others his love by our actions of kindness, and to tell of what He's done for us through his forgiveness and mercy. So why not have a little fun showing and telling as the family comes together?

Preparation: *Ask each family member to bring 3 items to the family room that they got for Christmas, and lay them all out in a pile in the middle as the family sits around (Look at list below for suggestions.)*

As you take turns sharing your items and saying why you like it so much, ask these questions and discuss with these possible items that are shared:

Item #1 – a toy

Maybe this item is so well liked because it was something we wished for, and now it's ours. Talk about how we all wish for a best friend and how Jesus because that for us, when we asked him into our hearts. Give thanks for Jesus granting your wish to be loved. (Read Proverbs 18:24)

Item #2 – an item of clothing

Perhaps one of you received a new coat or outfit and you love it. It's fun to look good when we go out, and to have something nice to wear! Talk about how Jesus covers us with righteousness because he forgives all our sins, and he gives us a clean heart and smile to wear every day - without any stain or wrinkle! (Read Isaiah 61:10)

Item #3 – a new game

If someone shares a game they received, maybe they like it because it's so fun to play. Talk about how God enjoys our laughter, tells us relax, and even leads as a good shepherd to water and green grass. (Read Psalm 23)

Item #4 – a personal item (toiletry, perfume, lotion, etc.)

Getting something personal, like a fragrance or a lotion, or even cologne or a new hairbrush, feels so special, doesn't it? We all like different smells and feels, and to have our own makes us feel good about ourselves! Talk about how God is attentive to our every need, so much that he's aware of how many hairs are on our heads! (Read Matthew 10:30)

Item #5 – a book

A new book opens a whole world of wonder, doesn't it? There are adventures in the book, characters to meet, and beautiful illustrations or wonderful conversations to read! Let each person tell their favorite kind of book to read. Then talk about the Good Book and about all of

the wonderful things it brings to our lives: comfort, joy, instruction, forgiveness, peace, and hope. It's a book that endures and has stories to last a lifetime!

Continue sharing and comparing each item to what God has for us, because he is the great Gift Giver. He gave his son Jesus for us! And he loves it that we enjoy the gifts we receive here on earth, and loves it when we have thankful hearts for each one of them.

Pray together and give thanks for the Christmas gifts and for the gift of Jesus.

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I Don't Do Teenagers – Make it or Break It – by Marcy Lytle

January comes, and school starts up again, and we're back into routine with getting the kids up and out, driving them around, or letting them drive themselves, and pretty soon those bad habits they have, and we have, surface again. There are so many things we start up with our kids that are hard to break, once they become normalcy in our homes. And there are also great things we've let go that we need to start up again, or new things we need to try! The beginning of a New Year is a great time to begin again...

Here are a few habits to break:

Being so busy we don't listen to our kids talk: Take time to look at your schedules and see if there's plenty of conversation time with your teens around the table, in the car, or just family time together out having dinner or playing a game at home, or even doing a jigsaw together when it's cold and dark outside. If we're too busy for any of that, we can break that habit by cutting out an activity or two.

Being so hard, our kids can't breathe: Rules are great, but if they're rules we just dole out to be mean, or because that's the way we were raised, or because we don't like our kids, we need to rethink them. Think about the rules and why you've made them, and see if you can't loosen up or at least explain and discuss, as your kids start a new year under your thumb.

Allowing unhealthy habits: Yes, teens are out of our sight sometimes and we don't know what they're doing at friends' houses or even at school. But at home, we can make sure we have healthy snacks, healthy and uplifting music, and healthy conversations full of love and acceptance and encouragement. If we're not healthy ourselves, then we can ask for help and start paving the way toward a new year for the entire family.

Here a few habits to start:

Teen dates: They might say no, and they might frown, but make it a point at least once a month this year to take your teen on a date. Let them choose the restaurant or activity (within reason – moneywise) and don't let other obligations interrupt. Make the evening all about them, with little kids in tow too, or with just you and your spouse, or with just one of you. Listen to your teens. Buy them a treat. Hug them. Even if they resist all of the above, do it.

Teen responsibility: Your teens might be on sports teams and in all sort of school clubs, but they need some responsibilities at home. Give them a chore that suits their interests. For example, have them make dinner one night, or put together a family outing. Allow them to organize a drawer. Give them one bathroom they are to keep clean. Teach them to wash their own clothes and dry them, and put them away. Require these things, as your teens are part of a family, and need to contribute. Be firm. They don't go out if these things are done. And if they're too busy to be responsible at home, then they're too busy. Reconsider your calendars.

Teen activities: Your teens will want to go to movies without you, hang out with friends at their house, and play games without you hovering. It's part of normal emergence into adulthood to want to be on your own. However, communicate. Be aware. And be the parent. Look up

movie synopses WITH your teens and let them read the gore or the filth, and ask them if they really want to see that. And say no, but give an alternative. Ask to meet the friends' parents, even if your teen frowns when you do. There's no price too big to pay for safety and wisdom. And insist on studying the game before they play, and give parameters around time spent on the game, or any other activity. Encourage movement, the outdoors, reading, and playing with siblings, and showing up for family night. In fact, make sure your teens' activities are healthy and wise, and things that help and don't harm.

What habits could you and your teenagers break this new year? And what habits could you possibly start up, ones that would make family life together more pleasant and peaceful? Take the time to think and pray and make the changes, now...before December gets here so fast again and you wonder where the time went...while your teens slipped further away.

The Family Practice – Intuition – by Brandi Oman

As a mom, I have faced many different trials and tribulations big and small for the past eight years. All these include having to make big and small decisions. I want to share a very personal experience that some of you may relate to.

My son, for the past two years, has displayed some behavior issues that I have attempted to address with him. For a short period of time things improved, but it was as if he forgot the lesson I just taught him. This year in school he has an amazing, in-tune teacher (thank the Lord) and she is not afraid to tell me her concerns. Together, we have really tag-teamed on getting Caiden on the right track. However, again it appeared he just did not remember what he was supposed to be doing. He is not a bad, disrespectful, or mean kid...he just seems to be forgetful.

I was very frustrated with him and asked him questions such as, "Do you care about school?" "Why aren't you doing your work?" "Why don't listen to me and do what you are told?" I realized how harsh and unfair these questions were becoming, as every time they carelessly flew out of my mouth I watched his innocent eyes well up, his head sink down, and he quietly replied, "I don't know Mommy."

Finally, I took a new approach and asked him to tell me what he's thinking about, when he makes X.Z decision, and his answer stopped me in my tracks. "Mommy I never think about one thing, I feel like I have a million thoughts all at the same time and I do not know how to control them! I can't control myself because my mind is EVERYWHERE!" I began asking around and reading about ADHD and all of the symptoms it listed were exactly what he was experiencing, and what I was witnessing out of my sweet boy.

I immediately requested to see his pediatrician. This was the worst experience Caiden and I would have had with a healthcare professional. I asked my mom to join as my mother has always been a great support system in my life. The doctor walked into the room and said, "I am not going to touch this. Caiden has high blood pressure. You need to take him to a behavior specialist and work on him at home. Make him a chart and make sure you are on top of him behavior-wise." She then turned to my mom and asked her questions that she should have been asking me, Caiden's mother. My mom told the doctor, "I don't even live with these two so you might want to ask your questions to Brandi." The doctor and I exchanged a few words and I had enough. I left feeling hopeless, judged, and without answers. It was a really awful feeling because I still had no answers.

It took me a day to decompress, and I began to pray for God to show me what to do. I needed answers and I knew that that doctor was not who Caiden was meant to receive medical care from. I went to the wonderful world of "People of Round Rock Facebook Page" and made a request for a pediatrician. I scheduled Caiden an appointment with his now AMAZING pediatrician. It turns out he specializes in ADHD and the medicines that affect Caiden's blood pressure. Caiden was diagnosed with ADHD and has been medicated for two weeks. He is behaving better at home and school. He is getting his school work and homework done. He is a calmer, less stressed out kid.

The way I was treated by the first pediatrician really had placed some self-doubt in me. I didn't know if I was as big of a failure as a mother as she had implied I was. By grace and my motherly intuition, I tackled a beast and showed my son I am always on his side. He makes comments on how he feels better and he is smiling more.

As parents, we face so many choices, judgements, and uncertainties. I say go with your God-given intuition and gut feelings for your babies!

God gave us our children and we are responsible for making sure they are all right!

Heeding our God-given intuition, we move forward in the way that seems wisest, trusting that the Lord is directing our steps ([Psalm 37:23](#)).

Tiny Living – No Complaints Here – by Leyanne Enterline

Wow! 2018 has already come and gone! It's hard to believe I was asked one year ago to start writing these articles!

I feel like so much has happened, and yet at the same time no progress has been made, with our land. The plans or timing we had made were not in God's plan, yet. So we wait as patiently as we can and enjoy the journey. By this time, we had expected to be building or in our new home. However, if that were the case then I probably wouldn't still be writing these articles! So tiny living it is! I can't complain though.

We have been able to travel a lot more with Brian on his work trips and not feel the pressures of a house payment, large air-conditioning bills, or just plain maintenance. There, of course, is some ongoing clearing of the property, which I feel will always be a work in progress. And there is the tiny amount of maintenance to keep the trailer working properly. For instance, the poop tank (not sure of the formal name for this) needs to be cleaned once a week, and we change the air filters often (for some reason an insane amount of dust comes in.) And like in any normal home, there is the mundane vacuuming, sanitizing, wiping down...that list goes on and on. However, in 325 square feet, the cleaning goes by much quicker! In a tiny space, decorating for Christmas posed some challenges.

Last year we tried a real tiny Christmas tree, but we found out we're allergic, so after a week of sneezing the tree went outside! We just decorated the tiny tree outside and then several larger ones on the property and had a whole festive outdoor arrangement! I took a while to start decorating this past Christmas, but thought of buying a tiny fake tree. The only spot for the tree is between the kitchen island and the wall, and this is a very tight space, so the tree had to be super skinny.

My husband always wants to get a real tree with the roots still attached and plant it after Christmas. He wants to do that every year so we have a new tradition and new trees! I loved that idea and couldn't wait to get started. I did try to add a few more tiny festive decorations...a mini wooden nativity scene, festive hands towels, ribbon to hang Christmas cards on, and a mini tree and sign on the restroom counter. I'm not lying when I say there is no room in our inn! We definitely had to get creative!

Even with all of the challenges that come with tiny living, we feel blessed beyond measure and the boys will remember this time we had together for a life time! We laugh about how we truly can't escape each other and must solve disputes quickly. It's so funny how if someone is in the restroom he can still be included in the conversation in the living room!

Again, this is not how we thought things would be right now, but we know God has our back and we will trust and let Him guide us through this strange adventure we are on!

Love grows best in tiny spaces.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core – They Told me Not to Cry – by Marcy Lytite

I know that in years past, many little boys were told it wasn't manly to cry. Little girls are often seen as criers, and they too are told to stop it, squelch it, and put on a happy face. Crying is seen as weakness, something only the faint of heart do, and certainly not pretty on the face when it occurs. Women try to keep back the tears so their makeup won't smear, and our grown men don't even consider crying because they're tough and staunch. Our teenagers shut themselves behind closed doors when they need to cry, hoping none of their friends realize their brokenness and shame while the tears flow.

However, (one of my favorite words in the English language because it offers an alternative and a hope!) crying can be something that instead of weakening us actually strengthens us!

Scientifically speaking, crying does a lot of good for our bodies, according to several articles you can read if you google the benefits of crying. It releases toxins out of our bodies when we cry, releasing all of those impurities, so that we feel healthier after a good release of tears! It releases stress and hurtful emotions when we cry. Sometimes we don't even know why we're crying, but we feel so much better after we do, because our emotions are released and let go. A long cry helps us as we grieve, not to move on and forget, but rather to remember and release.

But what about spiritually speaking? Is it okay, or good to cry, even when we've been told not to let the waterworks flow?

Genesis 21:17 tells us that God heard a little boy crying. He hears all of our wailings and verbal sorrow expressed through crying. And that brings comfort, to know that he hears us.

Exodus 3:7 reads that God heard his people's cries when they were being hurt through slavery, and he came to their rescue and brought deliverance.

2 Samuel 22:7 says that in distress he hears our cries.

Psalms 3:4 says that God heard the writer's cry and answered him.

Psalms 34:17 says this, "*The righteous cry*, and the LORD hears And delivers them out of all their troubles."

What a promise for those who cry!

Psalms 147:9 says he hears the ravens cry for food and provides for their hunger.

Mark 10 talks of a man in need who was told to be quiet, but he cried out all the more to Jesus.

Mark 15:37 says Jesus cried a loud cry just as he died on the cross.

Hebrews 5 says that Jesus prayed and cried loudly with tears to his Father to save him from death, and it says his father heard him. But he had to die, so that we might live.

There are so many verses and so many stories of people, and Jesus, crying and weeping and even wailing over all sorts of losses and hopes for the future and pain and sorrow.

We have eyes that have tear ducts, and we all know that stopped up tear ducts cause infection and have to be treated. So do stopped up tear ducts that are not flowing because of false directives that have told us not to cry.

No one likes to hear a toddler cry in order to manipulate and fake tears to get their way. However, one will scoop up a toddler that's crying tears of pain and hurt, because we want to comfort and heal.

God doesn't shame us for crying. He actually hears our cries and answers. And he even sent his Holy Spirit to comfort us because he knew there would be days for tears and sorrow.

Finally,

Psalm 126:5 says that those who sow in tears will reap with joyful shouting.

Crying over your children?

Crying because of loss?

Crying in your pain?

All of that crying doesn't go unnoticed by him. In fact, it's quite the contrary. He hears, just like we hear when our children cry. And he knows if we need to be left alone, to be scooped up and cuddled, to be alleviated of that which is causing the tears, or if those tears just need to water the ground on which we stand...until joy emerges.

Go ahead and cry, and cry loud. Release it all, and be healed. Let the tears flow, and sow.

You are now told to cry.

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Under the Influence – Probabilities and Percentage – by Marcy Lytle

One day I was thinking about probability and percentages.

We often say, “I wish it would snow,” here in Central Texas. And the probability of that happening is very low. In fact, we have no snow plows here where I live, and if that snow does happen, everything shuts down. The probability of the event is just too low.

When we realize the percentage of interest we are paying for a new car, or on a credit card, we ache in pain at the reality of what we’re actually paying at the end of our payment term. Those percentages are killers. At the same time, when interest falls in the lending area, we are excited to find and purchase a new home, hopeful that our payments will be affordable.

Probability and percentages are staples in our lives, and they affect our moods, our future, our plans, and our spending.

I remember studying probability in school, and then when I became a math teacher, I taught probability. You know the deal, when you figure out the chances of landing your penny on heads or tails, it’s 50%. That’s because there are only two sides on which to land, both of them equally probable. I remember having my class toss a penny 100 times and then marvel at how close it was to the same number of heads as tails. Probability is fascinatingly interesting.

What about percentages? I love figuring the discounts when I go shopping, and I gasp with joy when I see 70% sign at Target, and I hope for a great find. When the weatherman forecasts 70% chance of rain, we all prepare for the event with umbrellas out and cancelled outdoor plans. Doctors give us predictions in percentages when we undergo some sort of treatment after a diagnosis, and those percentages either bring hope or immense fear.

As I was thinking about both of these, I thought about how we place these same probabilities and percentages on God and our relationship to him, especially in the area of prayer. When we pray for something huge, like a miracle of healing or a large sum of money we need, we think the probability is very low that God will answer that kind of prayer. So we mostly pray for little answers, like for our runny noses to subside or our kids to win a game. That way, if loss occurs, we aren’t so devastated. It’s not very probable, we think, for God to part seas and stop the sun, like he did in stories in the Bible.

We even think God is sort of like the department store where we shop, offering us goods for the day at a certain discount, if we’ve been praying and attending church regularly and “deserve” a deal from heaven. However, if we’ve failed miserably, we think that if we want his mercies and grace, there’s a sign nearby that says there’s a 10% chance of receiving that!

God is not a father that deals with us in probabilities and percentages, based upon the number of equally probable chances, or on the atmosphere of our surroundings and economy. He’s a God that deals with us in love.

- It’s probable that we will fail and disappoint ourselves, but it’s a sure thing that he will forgive us when we ask.

- It's probable that our faith will be weak at times, but it's a sure thing that when we are weak he will be strong.
- It's probable that fear will raise its ugly face, but it's a sure thing that His perfect love will put legs on that face and send it running.
- There's a zero percent chance that God will ever leave us or forsake us.
- There's a zero percent chance that we will be left in a heap of ashes after a burn, when we call on Him.
- There's 100% chance of rain of his mercy and compassion...every single day.
- There's 100% chance of increase in our relationship with Him as He pursues us and we relax.

What numbers and ideas and probabilities and hopes are floating around in your mind? Where have you set God and all things spiritual in your relationship with him, along the number line from zero to 100?

It's good to consider probabilities and percentages sometimes, and to leave them where they belong – in forecasts and on sale signs.

It's good to consider the sureties and certainties of our Father and his love toward us, at all times, forever and ever...Amen.

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Healthy Habits – Defying Gravity – by Marcy Lytle

Gravity is a body killer, isn't it? As we age, the skin which was one taut and firm now sags and droops. Something is just pulling it down and away from our bones! We all know that we cannot defy gravity in the natural realm, say if we choose to jump from a building. Gravity will most certainly bring us crashing down hard. But gravity that pulls on us from age, from hardship, from cares and the life we live can be defied, all to the benefit of our health. At least we can try...and the trying often helps defy that which wants to leave us on the ground.

Smile. It seems that as we age we find more to frown about, and that often our default is a frown. Our lips start to thin and turn downward. But smiling is so healthy and does wonders for the look on our faces! Those fine lines around our mouths disappear when we smile! Train yourself to smile as you drift off to sleep and then again first thing in the morning, as you remember his goodness to you and yours this new year.

Lift. Body shapers can do wonders for our bodies, as they lift and smooth that saggy stomach and droopy breasts. I love them. However, some days I need a lift of a different kind. I look in the mirror and feel saggy in my attitude and emotions, or rather quite down about myself and my life, as time moves forward. The best way to create a lift of the spirit is through truth. The verse in the bible that says to gird our loins with truth is the original reference to a body shaper, my friends! Truth that God loves us and cares for us at all ages gives us the lift we need to look pounds lighter in spirit!

Raise. According to yoga instructions, raised arms can improve digestion and stretch the muscles of our abdomen. It can also increase our lung capacity. But did you know that the Bible often tells us to raise our arms, as well? We are told to lift up holy hands and to lift up the arms of the weak beside us. And raising our arms indicates surrender to His ways and His will. Raise those arms up high – your own – and those of your friends who are tired and weary. Defy gravity!

Look. I have not had an eye lift, but I often add a bit of light shadow under my brow to make my eyes look a bit brighter and less darkened from the droop! There are many times in His Word that we are told to lift our eyes up – to where our help comes from – and realize that it comes from the Lord! Pretty cool that we are told to look up. Looking down can become a way of life that often coincides with a sad shuffle of the feet. But look up, away from the ground, with arms raised and a smile on your face.

Stand. Gravity pulls at our bodies and makes us want to sit when we're tired, and that's a good thing. But sitting all day can be bad for our health, especially if that sitting is coupled with eating and watching shows on television or even reading to escape others around us for days on end. Stand up, walk around, lift your knees and skip down the street. Standing is important spiritually, as we stand against fear and discouragement. And sometimes standing can only occur when we link arms with those who are standing beside us.

How can you purpose to defy gravity in 2019? Think of all the things that pull you down, make you frown, and keep you low. Then one by one, smile, lift, raise, look, and stand up tall, defying the odds that want to bring you crashing down to leave you unrecognizable to those you love.

Happy New Year – as we defy gravity together – and soar!

Life Right Now – Gentle Conviction – by Bethany Gomez

When a new year begins instead of looking forward, I usually look back on the past year (which Facebook fully supports by the way with their time hop reminders and the like), but does God support my tendency? I think He does just as long as I don't get stuck in the past, begrudge the things that I wanted to happen but didn't, or refuse to move forward and continue growing. I try to look back over the past year to see where I've seen God provide, where I've seen Him answer prayers.

“Recalling God's faithfulness in our past fuels our faith for our future.” - Lynn Cowell

Recently, God convicted me. While examining the past year, I thought that I had definitely done a lot of growing, so surely I was done for a while, right?

“No,” is basically what God said.

This past year brought a significant change in my life - a new job. I now work in a PPCD - TWC classroom at an elementary school in Round Rock, Texas. It's a preschool program for children with disabilities combined with teaching preschool children. They are the cutest children I've ever seen and together we do the cutest activities with them. For instance, we do what is called adaptive P.E. It's P.E. just for our little class where the activities are tailored to suit our students. They love it and so do I, but there is one other thing I enjoy and love even more, and that is our visits to the library almost every Friday. We take our class to the large library in the center of the school. Our librarian is amazing. She reads one children's book which is always accompanied by a song that goes along with the book; a song that was written and sung by an adorable young lady that has her very own Youtube channel dedicated to writing children's songs based off children's books.

One Friday during our library visit, as the librarian began reading the book to the students, I was only half paying attention because I was trying to make sure the children were paying attention. As we got to the song portion of our visit I became completely engrossed and I got this feeling of conviction in my heart.

Is God really trying to get my attention with a children's book and song?

It makes sense though, because I spend the majority of my time with children, so it's obvious that God would use something like this to get my attention.

I bet your wondering now what the book and song was all about? It was about a little tree that didn't want to drop its leaves and change with the seasons. This stunted his growth and while the other trees around him grew strong and tall, he remained the same, short, skinny, with brown leaves on his little branches. Then the song began and its message hit my heart like an arrow to its target.

Basically, it went something like this,

“If you want to grow up tall, sometimes you've got to let the old leaves fall. It's easy to stay the same, don't make a change at all, but deep down you know you've got to let go.”

That's definitely the season that I've been in for quite some time. I find myself not wanting to move forward, to not "make a change at all" like the little tree in the book and song because it's easier that way, right? What's the point?

The point is that it's not all about me. It's about growing in the love of Jesus, so that others will notice and find the only One who can save them.

I can't help but be thankful for God's gentle convictions in my life, even though it's difficult sometimes to do what He wants. It reminds me of His promise that He is always with me and will always be there when I need help.

*Lord, thank you for gently convicting me.
I trust that when you are ready to move me to the next season of my life that you will,
but while I'm waiting I want to learn what you want me to learn and
continue to "grow up tall" in the knowledge of you,
so that I can reflect your heart and love for others.*

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Created for Life – Roots – by Ginny Hurley

Upon discovering some old newspaper clippings and old pictures from the past, I have thanked my Father in heaven for such lovely ancestors and ancient relatives. Truly He has blessed me with a precious family and He has blessed you, too!

“Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is, the Lord is One! You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you this day shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-7

When we teach our children and families the goodness and love of God, blessings abound for generations. Deuteronomy 7 and 28 define the blessings that will overtake us and our children. They are awesome! Deuteronomy 7 also tells us that He gives these blessings because He loves us. He chooses to be with us. Deuteronomy 28 verse 12 says that the Lord will open His good treasure, the heavens, to give us more than we need! I could make a list of these amazing things He will do for us because He loves us. Each parent, sibling, relative of any kind can receive a great inheritance from us!

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

Deuteronomy 29:29

And then...

“God reveals the revelation of His word in the hiding place of His glory. But the honor of kings is revealed by how they thoroughly search out the deeper meaning of all that God says.”

Proverbs 25:2

God says He will reveal His secrets to us and reveal who He is, to those who search for Him. In Christ Jesus God tells us that WE are His chosen treasure, priests and kings in His spiritual kingdom! I Peter 2:9! It's not about keeping the law, as Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. It's about being kingly sons and daughters who search His word for a revealing of His majesty and magnificence! He shares His secrets with His family and then releases all the blessings of heaven!

You may think, What if I am the first member of my family to know God or walk with Him? I haven't received all these foundational teachings and blessings from those before me...

I have good news! EVERYTHING He has begins with you! You are the first to extend all of these blessings to your family.

The curses listed in Deuteronomy are broken when we come to the Lord. Everything accomplished on the cross removed every curse that was passed down from past generations. If I still feel cursed but am in Christ, then I ask God if I opened a door to sin or believed a lie about what happened on the cross. Maybe, I am in a training time or He is revealing mysteries to me. Some of these trials come with no understanding or revelation, but I put my trust in His word and what He has said, not in what I am experiencing. And this is for sure...the blessings never end!

I am ever so thankful for my grandparents, parents, and for my husband's grandparents and parents! We had all eight of our grandparents when we married and I adored them all! Our families are special and I receive all the good blessings from each. Every curse or blemish from the past I place at the cross!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – The Road Ahead – by Charissa Corbin

We all have encountered different seasons of life. Some that bring immeasurable joy or heart wrenching sadness, and others that push us to our limits, test our strength, and redefine us. Not all seasons have to be met with some extreme emotion... sometimes we have seasons in life that are meant to grow and prepare us for the next!

It is January in Alaska and we are entering our final months here. It is currently -15 degrees, my pellet stove is running, my children are sound asleep, my husband is at a work event, and I'm soaking in the stillness of the night. A stillness that is rare but much needed as I reflect on our time in Alaska and prepare for the road ahead.

My husband and I are in a season of preparation. We are preparing for our upcoming move, preparing to become business owners, and preparing to make our dreams a reality. As I look at the list of preparations to be made, it dawns on me that the most important item to prepare for this upcoming season is our marriage!

In Ephesians 6 it states,

“So stand ready, with truth as a belt tight around your waist.
With righteousness as your breastplate,
and as your shoes the readiness to announce the Good News of peace.
At all times carry faith as a shield;
for with it you will be able to put out all the burning arrows shot by the Evil One.
And accept salvation as a helmet, and the word of God
as the sword which the Spirit gives you.
Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help.
Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads.
For this reason, keep alert and never give up;
pray always for God's people.”

We are about to enter a really busy season of first-time business owners that I'm sure will be faced with many challenges, frustrations, and stress. It is important that we continue to grow in our love for one another, strengthen our faith in Christ, and prepare our marriage for the challenges ahead.

How do we prepare our marriage?

PRAYER – Intentional prayer for our marriage, our future, and our children.

SCRIPTURE – Studying God's word together, writing it on our hearts, so that when challenges occur we are armed with the Word of God.

TIME – Planning time for ourselves, without our kids, to grow in love.

By doing this we will be able to “stand ready” for whatever season comes next!

Date Night Fun – Couple Goals – by Marcy Lytle

It's January and by now, if you make resolutions, you're in the process or have already made them. Perhaps you don't make resolutions because they're too hard to keep. However, resolution and goals can be a wonderful thing to make quite often, as a couple. It's healthy and wise to sit down and make a plan for date night, and the best time is to start at the beginning of the year and make it a habit! Maybe you will pick each Tuesday of the week, or Saturday morning, or Sunday night...whatever fits with your schedule.

We are here to offer ideas each month. Did you know there are plenty more in the archives here in A Bundle of THYME? There are enough ideas to keep you enjoying each other for years to come!

Here are our ideas for January and they are all double dates, so that you'll encourage another couple to experience date nights as well:

Cold night in: Invite another couple over for just desserts and drinks. Lay out a jigsaw puzzle and put it together as you talk about life and hope together, encouraging each other. There's this pecan cobbler that we just had with friends that was super delicious! Add in some hot apple cider, and that's all you need! You could totally start this date after the kids go to bed, and ask the couple to spend the night as well! Pick a 250 piece puzzle that you can finish in one sitting! Here's one for the new year!

<https://www.asweetpeachef.com/easy-hot-apple-cider-recipe/>

<https://www.tasteofhome.com/recipes/pecan-pie-cobbler/>

Warm walk and talk: Bundle up and go for a walk in the winter wonderland where you live. Even if it's not cold, or even if it's frigid, find a place to walk. It can be indoors if weather is too bad, or it can be in a park if the weather is mild. Pick a topic of conversation and questions to discuss as you walk, and talk together, getting to know each other. When you've walked about an hour, stop at a coffee house for pastries and warm drinks, and this time play a game. Old-fashioned Yahtzee is a great date night game, because it allows for conversation in between rolls. We found this fun one after Christmas one year, on sale!

<https://www.amazon.com/Library-Yahtzee-Vintage-Book-Game/dp/B000AFESJE>

Cozy movie and then discuss: Find a movie that you all agree on to see, and book a seat. Show up and enjoy. Go for a drive and park where there's a beautiful view, and discuss the movie from start to finish. Ask each other, "If you were to pick an actress/actor to play you in a biographical movie, who would it be and why?" Don't squabble over the movie. Just let the girls or the guys pick this one, then vice-versa the next one. And be sure you don't pout if your movie doesn't get picked. End the evening with ice cream in January. Why not? (One suggestion for the movie is Second Act).

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2126357/>

Musical evening: Catch a concert together, listen to live music in a restaurant or even sit around and make your own music, if you're so inclined. One of you needs to do the browsing to find out where tunes are happening or to gather tunes if they're happening at home. You could even bring your favorite playlists and share different genres throughout the night while snacking on nuts and chocolate! Check out this array you can put together for this fun date night!

<http://www.thecreativebite.com/healthy-fruit-chocolate-party-tray/>

Show and Tell: Invite two others couples, and the six of you meet up in one person's home and bring three items each that you got for Christmas, in a bag, to show and tell. Take one out at a time and take turns talking about the item, sharing what it is, and telling why you like it. Also, require each person to wear some cool socks (they can be funky or cozy or colorful!) to the gathering, and ask everyone to remove their shoes upon entering your home. Sit by the fire and enjoy an array of cheeses and meats and breads, asking each couple to bring one of those items. Sip on the drinks of your choice and you're going to have a blast!

<https://thisbeautifuldayblog.com/diy-cheese-meat-board/>

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After 30 Years – Try Again – by Marcy Lytle

If I've heard it once I've heard it a dozen times.

"I want to see that movie, but he won't go with me," she says.

She is referring to a romantic film that she knows she'll have to see with her girlfriends because he won't go with her.

When we hear others make those statements, we both sigh. We absolutely love movies, and we love going together. I love going to the ones he likes and I don't particularly love, and he enjoys going to the ones I like and he thinks are just okay. I don't recall there ever being a time when he refused to go see a romantic film with me. And I don't think it's just because he's this awesomely romantic guy (although he is pretty awesome...)

It's January, and it's time to try some new things, right? So my idea is to try new things in our marriage. We do it every year. We have good intentions of trying something new and sometimes those intentions don't stick...but sometimes they do.

If you're in that marriage where he won't go with you to that movie, consider trying again to ask him. Consider trying all sorts of new things this year in your marriage, praying about them before you ask, checking your attitude and tone before you suggest, and expecting nothing but trusting Him, before you speak. That last one is a hard one, and I'm still learning it after all these years...to ask and then trust HIM to speak to him, so I don't have to keep at it.

Here are a few things we try over and over again, even though we slip and fail at times, but we keep trying. It's a new year, and a great time to consider these new things to liven up our marriages and make life fun:

- Ask him to the movies, and suggest one of his liking, and both of you go with good attitudes to be with the other and enjoy the popcorn, whether or not you like the film.
- Sit down and talk about a prayer/devo time that you could both benefit from, perhaps using a book you go together and purchase at the bookstore. Instead of demanding one or the other initiate the time, put it on the calendar, say Sunday evenings, or Friday mornings. Make it a 15 minute slot to read and pray together.
- Make plans for weekend getaways and mark them on the calendar. Make at least one per quarter. Each of you can choose a destination.
- Schedule marriage talks where you affirm each other and communicate, not in accusatory terms, but in ways to better your communication and time together.
- Shop for a calendar together, one of those ones that hangs on the wall or fridge, where you both can write in and see what's happening and what's coming up, for your fun times together.
- Talk over goals for the New Year and pray together for those goals...regarding children, house stuff, aging parents, spiritual growth, volunteering at church, giving to others, etc.

- Reflect over the past year and give thanks to each other for at least three qualities you love about each other, or things you appreciate. Do this often. And smile at him. Kiss him.
- Purpose to go to bed together instead of apart, to linger in each other's arms in the morning before you both start your day, and to text and call during the day just to say "I love you."

What else can you add to your new list of new things to try?

Even when we get discouraged because he's not being attentive or caring or daring to try new things with us, we can try again, ask again and trust Him. God made this institution called marriage and it's high on his answer list, when we ask. He can speak to our spouses louder and more effectively than we ever can. And he can also adjust our attitudes so that we love stronger, so that he can't help but respond...

Happy New Year!

ENCOURAGEMENT

Simple Truths - Life by Design – by Erica Simmons

There comes a time when you have to stop living life by default and start living it by design. This is a message God gave to me October 20, 2013. It was just over a year of going through the hardest thing ever in my life which, unfortunately, coincided with what should have been one of the happiest times of my life: the purchase of our home. My heart was still very heavy and I remember constantly questioning God about not protecting us from this terrible hurt. You see, I didn't come from the happiest of childhoods, but I felt God's presence in my life at an early stage and His presence was my hope, my protection. I wanted to know why when I gave my boys a better situation they had not received the same protection and the same safe place I had received in Him.

The following dream is a message He gave me on December 3, 2018. I had a garden with what to me looked like a cucumber vine, but in this case the cucumber was growing inside yellow sieves. There was this one cucumber that one of my former co-workers (who happened to be in the dream) focused on, even though it was not the biggest. She decided to pull off the sieves and the fruit inside was dying; not producing as the healthy outer skin suggested. When she grabbed for it, I noticed that it was actually detached from the vine. No life was actually flowing to the fruit.

This dream is the PERFECT example of how life can be lived by defaults and not by design.

Most of my Christian life, it had been a pitfall of mine to hit my knees in prayer when things got bad. After I went through a tough situation through that famous *hindsight* I would see the signs that I ignored or poor choices I made that led to where I was. I was living life by default, and I was living with a false sense of security. Then when the inevitable crisis hit, I called on God in a panic driven prayer. That's what happened the summer of 2012. I was caught up in going back to school on line while working, and my life got hectic and I was hit with the worse crisis of my life. To top it off, I got angry with God for not stopping that crisis from happening. You see, human nature has to blame someone so I chose God because when my parents failed He surrounded me. At that time, I felt He should have covered them more. From those ashes emerged my simple truth and that experience was instrumental in my continuing journey to live life by design.

The truth of the matter is it was so much easier for me in my childhood to hear God. I was in a small town during the 70's and 80's at a time when the majority of our country still lived by a very similar moral character. Now is a different story, as there are so many layers to our country's morality, many of which do not align with God, and His voice and presence can be so easily drowned out. I didn't realize this in a timely manner and the result was a rash of crisis moments that will forever impact my boys' lives. But like always, it is not the end of the story. I learned to lean into Him, spend time with Him in His presence and in His word, and to pray protection over my children. Most importantly, I learned to live my life according to His promises, His word...by the design He created for us.

I have to look past the outside of the lives of my now graduated sons and not let the appearance of them doing well lull me into a false narrative. This will only continue to lead to crisis situations when they need me. I have to start being deliberate in addressing the areas in their lives of

weakness and simply share the truth of God's word. I don't have to fix it all. I just have to stay in prayer about it and trust that God's word will not return void, that it will accomplish that which is was sent out to do (Isaiah 55:11).

Even though the example shared revolved around my children and the events that triggered God's words to me, they are never truer than now. As I move into this next season of my life and learn to parent adult children, I also have to craft a life that does not revolve around them. Being Mom to them helped to block out some of the old desires of my heart and help me bury them. I have a lot of life out in front of me and I can make decisions about what that life will be or I can let that life happen by default and wake up day after day with regrets about the things I never had or did. I can continue to count the number years it has been since I _____. So many things can go into that blank or I can count the number of years it has been since I found/got/did _____. The problem is that I have lived the vast majority of my life for someone else. It is hard to start living it for me, but I will take my own advice and lean into my Heavenly Father, and His grace will be all I need.

I ran into this Lauren Daigle song earlier this week and it is very befitting for my moving forward. He will give me everything I need. I just have to trust in Him.

[Everything](#)

Moving Forward – A Daughter Heart – Pam Charro

I've been focusing a lot lately on discovering the Father's heart for me, but only recently did it occur to me that it is my responsibility to have the heart of a daughter.

It was about four or five years ago that I heard a faint whisper at church,

"You don't know how to be a daughter."

This convicted me and broke my heart but I didn't know I could do anything about it. After all, how can I help it if I don't know how to do something?

The good news is, it isn't hard to learn how to have a daughter (or son) heart if I look at scripture. Jesus was a perfect son to a perfect Father, but he was also known as the Son of Man as well as the son of David. So even though my parents were not perfect, I can still learn how to have a daughter heart.

The first question I must ask myself is,

"Have I truly forgiven my parents for their shortcomings?"

It may be unnatural and even painful, but the Spirit within me will help me to do it. I want my parents to experience the same grace that I've been given, and I don't want any bitterness to keep me from experiencing the Father's love.

Other traits of a daughter heart are loyalty and trust. Am I willing to give my heart back to my parents, even with their weaknesses? If they are not safe people, is there a spiritual father or mother, or a godly group of people that I am willing to fully invest my heart in? If I am always standoffish, I will probably always have a spirit of being orphaned.

The willingness to give my heart as a trusting daughter
is a vital part of receiving the Father's heart for me.

I am the only one who can make the choice to desire the heart of a daughter.

Dear Lord, create that heart in me so that you and I can be close! I don't want to miss out on any of your Father heart for me.

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Firmly Planted – Transformation – by Dina Cavazos

Reflecting on the past year, several things stand out that would take pages to write and most likely wouldn't be too interesting to read. The beauty of poetry is that it can express the deep and complex in a few words. Each reader can fill in the gaps with their own interpretation as they relate to what the words stir up. So this month I share my thoughts in a different form...perhaps you can relate in some way to my poetic meandering, pizza slices (so to speak) of personal transformation served up in no particular order.

Walk

Time moves forward, time past is gone...only dust of words spoke or unspoken, things done or undone, faith walked or unwalked, remains underfoot.

Can I shake the dust from my feet, renew my step, undo defeat?

Forgive the cloud that hid Your way, my eye is more clear today.

Then comes the answer resting near..."Call out in truth, agree with me. I renew and make the way."

Surrender

My heart is full of love for you...kind and gracious or rough and raw. Within my circle, constant and firm, God presses His life as leaking oil, from me to you.

Do I say I love, or do I turn away?

Oh let the words of my mouth be true and high and gold and pray

Then comes the answer resting near..."I in you and you in me, abiding is the only way."

Engage

The room is full of brother-sister strangers, the conversation hums. I hear the question going round but I don't make a sound.

Why should I bare my soul to these, do they even care?

Help me be known, Life is to give, as you give me, as I give you,.

Then comes the answer resting near..."This is my body, take your place—hand or foot, or hair."

Change

Joyful place, now hurting place; fullness turned to emptiness. Things once held so tightly and brightly slip from clasping and grasping.

Do I pry off the fingers that hold and wrestle my way to freedom?

Show me how to loose the grip and cling only to things worth winning.

Then comes the answer resting near..."I am your all in all I say, enter in the Kingdom.

Knowing

Mysterious, miraculous, indefinable, incomprehensible, substance of wondrous beauty that surrounds and abounds amid the dark and suffering

Is it stupidity or blind belief that denies knowing the unknowable or wisdom and certainty that transcends it?

Grant me courage to accept the truth and speak it, live it, love it—with love, in love, for love, through love—Yours of course, not mine.

Then comes the answer resting near...” *Through a glass darkly you see now, but press on my love; My love I give, My love you live, forever I am thine.*”

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Bits and Pieces – The Hope – by Debbie Haynes

I survived the hub-bub of the Christmas season; I hope you did, too! There is always so much to do, to prepare for, anticipate and then, finally, the experience seems to fly by in the snap of a finger! So quickly it's over and time to clean up.

As soon as Christmas dinner has passed, and my guests have gone home, I like to put on my PJ's and start tearing down the tree and all the decorations. I package them so carefully and store them all away. The beautiful decorations we made, the bows, the candles and lights, all of it gets re-packaged and stored for another year. And then, oh my, the clean-up begins! Where does all that GLITTER come from?

I like to finish the season this way so that I can spend the remainder of my vacation days relaxing and focusing ahead on the New Year instead of looking back at the leftovers of what was. Somehow, quickly storing items away and cleaning up the mess frees my mind to look ahead.

I think life is like that sometimes. Things can get very cluttered and cloudy and we have to clear out the cobwebs to see the light clearly. Not triviality, but important, hard things, like enduring physical pain, contending with emotional hurts, dealing with fear. These can all completely obscure our hope for the future. Hope literally must fight its way to the top of our minds.

Colossians 1:20 talks about us being aliens and enemies in our MINDS yet, through re-birth in Christ, we have been reconciled to Him. Verse 23 admonishes us to REMAIN grounded and settled in our faith in Him, and not to move away from *the hope of the gospel*, and Proverbs 10:28 tells us that the hope of the righteous is gladness!

The gospel, or good news, is a complete story, from the beginning, to the birth of Christ, to the end with His death on the cross, to the NEW beginning, His resurrection! This is what gives us the hope to plod on through the maze of this life, and even traverse the minefield of our own mind. It's what He came for!

Happy New Year to all of you.

I pray that you can look forward with hope in your heart.

Real Stories – Grammy Yo’s Story – by Sarah Yoder

Nine years after the Great Depression, I was born into a hard-working Amish family; the fourth of seven children. My mother especially helped me learn to work and not give up. But most of all I learned about the love Jesus had for me and invited Him into my life as a young child.

Because we were poor, we raised most of the vegetables and meat that we ate and our meals were repetitive. Many would consider our food odd; however, I still crave and sometimes cook these dishes for my family. For breakfast we had pancakes or fried corn mush. This we topped with honey or sorghum molasses (that we raised, processed and marketed).

Our mother always served tomato gravy; stewed tomatoes thickened with flour along with cooked oatmeal sweetened with a little brown sugar, honey or sorghum molasses, with cream or milk in it. Canned or fresh fruit was a common treat and a syrup substitute. In the summer, we had fresh tomatoes diced fine with a little brown sugar or honey, finished with thick sweet cream to dip over the pancakes. (Now, I use mayo instead of sweet cream.) That sweet cream is still my favorite.

Our dad bought things in bulk, so in the winter we often had large bags of oranges and grapefruit, and in the fall we canned bushels of apples, peaches and any other fruit he purchased cheaply. As autumn approached, we butchered poultry, beef and pork.

I do not remember much of our lunch or evening meals. I remember having vegetable soup in the winter that was made in a big cake pan with biscuit dough over top and baked. We’d have pot pies, graham pudding baked in a tube pan, roasted turkey or chicken with vegetables; all raised in our garden and truck patches. In the summer it was fresh fruit, mulberries, blackberries, peaches, etc.

Since they were costly, we seldom had noodles to cook. So my mother used 1 cup of flour, salt to taste and a large egg. She then took two forks to cut through the flour and eggs to make little rivels (small crumbs the size of peas) and pour it in hot chicken broth with left over chicken to make it stretch for the family. When we didn’t have chicken with broth she thickened milk and made a milk soup. Milk needed to be watched carefully so it would not scorch.

We moved from Missouri to Iowa soon after my 12 birthday. I got married when I was 35 and we have two married girls and one son. They are now grown and we have three grandchildren. I am a homemaker and love hospitality. Family and friends are always welcome

So how did I learn to cook? When I was around 17 I was taken to a home with two children to be the nanny. I cleaned, did laundry and cooked. I always had a menu with recipes written out and followed directions. That was my introduction to stepping out of the “same over and over cooking box.”

When I was in my 20’s, I worked more nanny jobs where I learned different kinds of cooking and learned how to have fancy tea parties. It sparked interest in my life to try new recipes. Later I got my first apartment, then my first house. I loved to have friends over for Sunday dinner and my favorite meal to cook was roast with potatoes and carrots. I’d get a big roast and put in way more potatoes and carrots than needed for lunch in order to make my much-loved vegetable soup later. I’d make noodles and gravy with the broth, then serve coleslaw, homemade bread, and, of course, I had to have dessert of chocolate cake and ice cream.

Below are three recipes (without definite measurements) from Grammy Yo. Grammy Yo comes from being a grandma and the Yo is short for Yoder!

Grammy Yo's Sunday Roast

1 Large (3-4 lbs) beef roast. Flour it all over, then brown in a hot iron skillet with plenty of coconut oil to give it a nice crust all around and put in a roaster pan.

Season with salt and Morton's nature seasoning. Rub all over.

Add a coarsely chopped onion over top of the roast

Add ½ to 1 cup of water for broth.

Bake at 300° covered for 3 -3.5 hours

Grammy Yo's Veggie Soup (used with leftover roast – my favorite!)

Left over roast, potatoes and carrots

1 ½ to 2 lbs. frozen mixed veggies

1 quart stewed tomatoes.

Chop beef, potatoes and carrots into ½ inch cubes. Set aside.

Boil the veggies till done.

Add the tomatoes, beef, carrots and potatoes and any leftover gravy and onions.

Season to taste.

Grammy Yo's Fast Potato Soup (my second favorite!)

3-4 big potatoes peeled and diced into 1" cubes.

Add water just to cover. Cook till done.

While potatoes are boiling, sauté 1 diced onions & 1 to 2 stalk of diced celery (more or less to your taste.)

When potatoes are soft (do not drain), use a wire potato masher and slightly mash.

Add 1 can cream of mushroom soup, onion and celery and ½ to 1 can of milk (depends on your desire of thickness.)

Warm through and serve with a pat of butter, grated cheese and crackers.

Grammy Yo's Homemade Bread

This recipe yields 5 -1 ½ lb. loaves.

Turn on the oven light. It heats the oven to help raise the bread.

In your bread dough mixer (I have a Bosh) combine:

5 cups of very warm tap water

4 scant teaspoons of salt (I like the pink salt)

1/3 cup of sugar

1/3 cup of oil (I prefer avocado oil)

Add:

4 cups of fresh ground whole wheat flour

Let set 10-15 min.

Add 2 Tablespoons yeast. Stir in, let set till bubbly.

Add 5-6 cups of all-purpose flour. Knead in and add more flour as needed.

Add flour so it is damp but not sticky where it sticks to your hand when you press it between your fingers.

Divide and shape the dough into loaves; placing them into 5 sprayed pans. Put in the warm oven. Cover with a lightweight tea towel till almost raised. Remove bread dough and preheat oven to 350°. Bake uncovered for approximately 35-40 minutes; knowing that oven temperatures vary.

How do I test bread for doneness? First it needs to be nice and brown, than I tap on the top of the bread and remove if it sounds hollow.

After removing the bread from the oven I take a cold stick of butter, peel back the paper from one end and butter the top of each loaf and then let it cool around 3-4 minutes. It is then removed from the pans and put in Baggie Brand baggies. The loaves fit very nicely. The bread is put in the bags before completely cooled to keep the steam locked in and the bread stays moist when frozen.

Of course the end-product must be taste-tested, so I eat a crust of the first loaf and put 4 loaves in the freezer or share with a friend.

GF Potato Pizza in a Skillet - By Sarah Yoder

This is a fast and easy meal once you get the steps. My family loves it and it is gluten free.

You decide how many potatoes & vegetables you like.

For my down-sized family of three adults, I used vie med-small potatoes. Grate like hash browns, soak in cold water (this helps to remove the starch) while you fry up 1 lb. of hamburger meat, seasoned to your liking. Keep warm. While the hamburger is browning, boil one small pack of mixed frozen vegetables (do not overcook.) In another sauce pan put two cups of stewed tomatoes, thickened and seasoned to taste. Add water as needed to make a sauce. I ended up with around 3 cups of sauce. When all three of those things are done; keep everything warm. Swish the potatoes in the water and drain. (I put them in my lettuce spinner to dry them.) Brown in a 10"skillet with butter and coconut oil, or whatever you choose, on high-med heat.

When they are golden on one side turn them over and pat them flat for the crust. Pour the tomatoes sauce over top of the potatoes, then the hamburger followed by the mixed veggies. Load the top with grated cheese. Turn heat down to med. Pop a lid on & let it melt while the potatoes brown on the bottom. Serve hot from the skillet with a side of salad.

Sarah's Stuffed Meatloaf

You'll need 1 lb. hamburger and ½ chicken breast, thinly sliced across the grain. It helps to have it partially frozen for thinner slices. Put in a glass bowl and stir with ¼ cup salsa and let it sit while mixing the meatloaf. Use your favorite recipe, or mine is by guess, a dip & a dash - 1 lb. hamburger. 2 med-lg. eggs ½ cup processed Garlic and onion croutons, Nature seasoning to taste and 1/3-1/2 C of salsa and thoroughly mix. Have a prepared Jelly-roll pan with parchment paper to cover the bottom of the pan and pat the meat loaf to the edges of the paper. Then carefully lay the thin slices of chicken over the hamburger. We enjoy onions so I sliced some paper thin and layer randomly over top. A little pepper Jack cheese is good. After the toppings are on, use the parchment to help roll it length wise lifting the paper, rolling it then pulling the paper away from the meat till you have it all wrapped with the seam on the bottom. I left the paper under the meat to help with clean up, but did cut off the big part that was used to roll it.

Bake 1 hour at 350.

In the last 15 min I covered it with a sauce made of catchup mustard & Brown sugar. We served it with mashed potatoes, gravy, peas, salad and homemade bread.

Happy Eating! I'm happy to answer any questions you have from the comments below!

My name is Sarah Yoder; born the middle child of 7, into an Amish family. I live with my husband Anthony, of 35 years, in Joetown; a small country town of Iowa. We have two married daughters and a 23 year old son and three grandchildren. I very much enjoy hospitality, cooking, spending time with my family doing child care, etc. I am also involved with our church Sunday school and AWANA programs. Family and friends are my favorite with fellowship, food and games.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Maybe Next Time – by Marcy Lytle

We prayed. In fact, thousands prayed.

We groaned. In fact, all who knew them groaned.

We begged. In fact, we implored and pleaded.

And still our prayers weren't answered as we asked, when we prayed for our friend's little boy to live here on this earth with us all, with a whole and healthy heart.

"Maybe next time," I remember thinking. "Maybe next time, God will come through," I thought as I got up off my knees after hearing the news that baby Ben had passed, and our friends had lost their son.

Prayer is one of those mysteries, isn't it? It's one of the greatest privileges and honors as a Christian to be invited to come boldly to God to make our requests and petitions known to him. He is holy and we are not, yet because of his son Jesus we are made holy and pure and righteous, and yes – invited – to sit in his presence and lay out our needs before his feet. However, we know that some answers might be yes and immediate. And other answers might be no, and never seen here on this earth. And yet other replies might be to wait a while, a long while...

I've known those who pray a prayer, don't get an answer, and their faith is weakened. They don't think that maybe next time they'll get their desire. They instead think that God doesn't care, he doesn't answer prayer, and he's certainly not a good father. How can he be good, when he didn't care enough to heal our sick and our broken?

There's this passage in Ephesians 6 that uses great imagery as we are reminded to put on this full suit of armor so that we can stand against all kinds of struggles – like doubt and disappointment and despair. And it reminds us that our struggle is against spiritual forces, not necessarily physical ones. And it talks about standing our ground, after we've done everything else. We have to buckle on truth, cover our hearts with His righteousness, keep shoes on our feet that are ready to move, and above all of those things carry a shield of faith.

And just what will that shield of faith do? The words say that the shield will extinguish flaming arrows that seek to penetrate the very center of our hearts and burn us for good.

Our minds have to be covered with the helmet of salvation, and the sword with which we fight has to be the word of God.

Then...we are to keep praying "on all occasions" with "all kinds of prayers and requests" for "all the Lord's people."

That's a tall order for us, when we're in this battle of flaming arrows being thrown at us daily, as we live here on earth and encounter the pull of discouragement when prayers are not answered as we asked.

Pat phrases, encouragement that one day we will understand, scriptures that tell us everything works together for good, and reminders that “God knows best” don’t really seem to comfort or strengthen any of us right after a devastating loss.

For my friends, I don’t want to just shrug and say “maybe next time” God will get it, and I’ll figure out how to manipulate Him to answer properly, and hope for a better outcome. I want to keep on my knees for them now, after their family is gone, while the memories still linger and the pain still stings and sorrow still sings its woeful song. I want to put on that full armor myself and pray that they too will find strength to carry their faith again, while we all move forward together across the enemy lines where flames are burning.

I want to keep praying for every need presented to me with full faith and fervency in expectation that God will answer, that He cares, and that He most certainly is good.

It’s really the only choice, the right choice, and the best one, to make when we want to quit and throw up our hands in God’s face and ask, “Really? Don’t you get that this prayer would have been nice to answer?”

We can’t do it alone. That’s why we need each other, “all the Lord’s people,” to stand firm with us, beside us, and throughout the entire course of a lifetime, so that when we’ve done all we’re still standing in the land of the living...together...with Him on the other side of the darkness in which we could not see.

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FRESH THYME – No Flipping Allowed – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever started reading a mystery novel and once you've met all the characters, your curiosity gets the best of you? So you flip on through to the last chapter of the book to see who committed the crime? I have done this. Guilty. I think I only did it once or twice, and it was years ago. The experience was completely a downer, because I ruined the book completely. I only read the beginning, fast-forwarded to the end, and knew nothing of the story in between! If the author knew I'd done that, on my, I'm sure he/she would be mad at me.

It's quite absurd, if you think about it, to do such a thing. After all, reading a book is exhilarating and like time travel, as you read through each chapter, meeting the players, imagining their next move, and visualizing all of the scenes as the writer brings them to life. You keep reading, if and only if there is a conflict brewing so that you get to stay attached to the story, to see how indeed this impossible situation is going to play out. And then as you've read all of the chapters, over a period of time, you read the conclusion.

It's then that you're satisfied tremendously and you then marvel at the author...or you place that book aside as rubbish and vow to never recommend it to anyone at all.

However, I just thought the other day that most of us want our life, that open book that takes years to read, to be a book that we can skip to the end and see how it turns out. We want to know if our kids are going to be okay, experience successful marriages and jobs, and have lots of healthy children. We want to know if we're going to have good health and no mishaps as we age. And we for sure want to know that all we're working for and believing in is going to pay off in the end. And that conflict that makes a good book so good? We don't want any of that...at all.

In The Lord's Prayer, he tells to make this petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." This means we are to read this day only, without flipping forward to what might happen later. He wants us to get all of the adjectives, the descriptive scenery, and meet more players, before we move forward another chapter. He doesn't want us to miss one beautiful piece of information that might be the hinge on that door that opens in future chapters to come.

And just like I was disappointed when I flipped to the end of that book, realizing I'd wasted good money in purchasing a book I now was not going to read, and ruined the anticipation and even lost the longing to hear the story because I now knew the ending, we would be so disappointed if we knew the future.

We look back at 2018 and we might summarize it by saying it was a good year indeed, or one we never want to repeat again. We learn from our mistakes and we ask God to heal our hurts, and meet our needs that cropped up over the last 12 months.

But as we stand on the horizon of a new year, we can only see so far, because we are not tall enough to see over the trees that surround us or high enough to soar to places that lay far away from us. And that's okay.

Today he's given us this page to read. The sun rises and we have our chores to do. We give thanks for our blessings and we pray for the bread we need today. Then we worship him in all that we do, as we work, cook, bathe, sleep and play, all the while aware of His presence near us and in us. It's in that slow page turning and eyes focused on every word that we actually enjoy the book of our life. It's not found in flipping through quickly to the end, skipping all of the middle in between...including the conflict.

They say every good book has a conflict, and it's true. There's nothing more boring than reading a story with characters that live, breathe, and die with no lessons learned or consequences served. None of those stories make the best seller list. The ones with intrigue, adventure, and amazement do.

Join with me as we enjoy our daily bread, our one page we've been given today, and let's anticipate the story that unfolds tomorrow...and read it when tomorrow comes.

FRESH THYME – The Process – by Marcy Lytle

One of my favorite electronic devices for the kitchen is my food processor. I have several friends that don't have one or haven't ever used one. But for me, that little appliance works wonders for me as I prepare meals. I'm sure there are all sorts of processors with attachments and arrays of buttons for all sorts of purposes, but mine (with very few bells and whistles) has taught me some great lessons.

Transformation. I can place carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, cilantro and jalapenos inside the bowl as chunks, then push a button, and they transform into fine pieces to make salsa. Individually they were one flavor, but together they make a whole new flavor – one that is a favorite in our house!

Tempering. That jalapeno mentioned above would never touch my lips alone, or without being cut and the seeds removed. However, placed into the processor with lots of other ingredients, that green pepper flavors the salsa to just the right temperature that is pleasurable when I eat it. Amazing!

Sharpness. I've put the processor in place, set the bowl on top, tossed in all of the ingredients and pushed the button, only to realize I forgot to insert the chopping blade! The processor is of no use whatsoever without that blade. I have to dump out everything into a bowl, insert the blade, and try it again.

Blending. The items I choose to place in that processor would never work if I just tossed them into a bowl. Imagine tossing in a large carrot, a whole cucumber, a big bunch of cilantro and a whole jalapeno, and asking my guests to eat that salad with a fork. No way! The chopping process makes the ingredients not only transform into smaller pieces, but as they whirl away, they blend together so that something flavorful and easy to eat is produced.

There are so many more things a processor can do, but these four things reminded me of the "process" we go through as we live, allowing Him to take all that we are and all that we give him and transform it, temper it, refine it sharply and blend it with others to make us presentable on the table around which we sit with other friends and neighbors.

I've offered up hardness and bitterness, and his loving hands have chopped both of those into love and forgiveness. I've also had huge chunks of hot anger or disappointment that have left a terrible burned taste in my heart, only to have him temper all of that down and use what the enemy meant for evil into something actually palatable and tasty. Many times, I've avoided the sharpness of the Word, wanting to be processed or transformed into his image without obeying it, only to realize I must have it. Just like that blade is necessary in the processor, so is His word necessary in my heart. And finally, when I want to be the star player, front and center, because I want to feel more important than others...he pushes the blend button. I am only a part of a larger body and although the role I play is an important one, I'm only good in the blend!

That blend after the processing is a transformation that is then poured into a bowl, set in the fridge for the flavors to meld, and then served on the table as a tasty dip for chips.

Next time you're chopping up veggies to make something tasty for you and yours, think about the process it takes to get those big garden items transformed into a dish where all flavors come together to make those who taste say, "That's delicious!" And then give thanks that you have a Father that isn't content to leave you in the ground, or alone in a crisper drawer, but rather draws you out into the process of being remade into His image. And that process, although painful at times, produces the best kind of offering to a hungry world.

#

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

FEBRUARY 2019

TIPS

The Dressing – Those Lips – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not a person that wears lipstick all the time, at all. However, I do enjoy having the option in my purse, for brightening up my dull face later in the day...and lip gloss or lipstick does just that! I've tried lots of different brands and hues, and I am by no means an expert on lips. However, in the past year or so, I've found some that I like and keep on hand for adding a little color to my lips! Others I've just read about and want to try. Here they are...

Sephora almond lip balm – This won't add color to your lips but it will soften and make your lips feel grand, when you apply it by itself or on top of a lip color that has left your lips dry! I absolutely love the scent and the feel.

<https://www.amazon.com/Sephora-Collection-Nurtures-Moisturizes-Authentic/dp/B01MZF2ONR>

Powerlips fluid – My daughter Kamrin Wolfe sells these powerlips in so many colorful hues. They are super rich in color and coverage and make your lips feel fuller, too! Like mentioned above, some rich colors and make lips a speck dry, so just apply that balm above and you're good to go! My favorite color in this line is Promotion. You can order through Kamrin!

https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=oh%20the%20joy!%20by%20kamrin%20wolfe&epa=SEARCH_BOX

Superstay lips – A friend suggested this to me, because it's lipstick and balm in one tube! You apply the color, let it dry, and then apply the balm. But instead of having two different tubes in your makeup bag, it's all in one! Check out this product by Maybelline.

<https://www.maybelline.com/lip-makeup/lipstick/superstay-24-liquid-lipstick>

Triple threat – Have you heard of Thrive Causemetics? This triple threat color stick is so cool because it can be used on body, lips and cheeks! I have one of these sticks and I enjoy having it in my purse as well, for touchups. If the cheeks and lips are brightened late in the day, you're ready for the night!

<https://thrivecausemetics.com/collections/all/products/triple-threat-color-stick>

Pure red – NYX lipstick is super inexpensive and even made the top 25 list of best lipsticks, according to a list put out last year! Since Valentine's Day is this month, and some of us rarely wear a bold red hue, this option is great for date night out!

https://www.ulta.com/matte-lipstick?productId=xlsImpprod4141597&sku=2297471&nrtv_cid=bd05e2c963bae6c65eb7c25c84bb11dfb24c215a7e467eb486d937f8da56315a&utm_source=bam&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=bam_premium_editorial&utm_content=nymag&irgwc=1&AID=313779&PID=376373&CID=af_313779_376373_&clickId=3VrRady9CSj90Pfy0-WHW38dUkgTThwhr3XFSg0

Catsuit Lipstick – Wet and Wild is another super inexpensive line of makeup and their lipstick made the grade, according to USA Today. It's lightweight and smooth. Have you tried a purple hue? I love that for February!

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/reviewedcom/2018/07/26/best-lipsticks-2018/37126555/>

Chubby Stick – This is by Clinique and it's a moisturizing lip balm. It has a pencil style applicator and comes in a huge array of colors. Try it, you might like it!

<https://www.clinique.co.uk/product/1605/15520/makeup/lipsticks/chubby-sticktm-moisturizing-lip-colour-balm>

If you're like me, so many days you forget to color your lips because it's too much trouble to keep up! However, sometimes I pass a mirror in a store and realize how sullen and dull my face looks. I add just a touch of color to my lips and it makes me smile! Maybe it will you, too!

#

Seven for You – Gifts to Love – by Marcy Lytle

We're into the second month of 2019 already and we've either been delighted and are enjoying the gifts we received for Christmas, or some of them have already found their way to the drawer of items we will re-gift or give away. It happens to all of us. We receive a gift that someone else thought was really cool, only to realize it's too hard to use, not practical, or it doesn't fit or look just right.

For February, the month we love to give again to those we love, I thought it would be fun to share with you my favorite gifts from Christmas – ones I love and am using and that bring me great delight! If you're out shopping for him/her or for yourself, maybe you'll want to snag one of these as well from the reviews I'm giving it below:

Initial Necklace – I never got in on the craze of wearing initials in jewelry way back when it first started, but I saw this one by Kate Spade and it captured my attention. It's a round pendant on a gold chain with a cute charm up by the clasp. It also has a saying on the back of the disk "One in a million." It's a perfect length and goes with everything from t-shirts to dresses to jackets and all pieces of my wardrobe! It's from Nordstrom and will set you back \$58.00.

<https://shop.nordstrom.com/s/kate-spade-new-york-one-in-a-million-initial-pendant-necklace/3628637>

Book Club – It's \$14.99 a month and I receive an email with five choices of books. I choose one and then it arrives in a cool box. It's a hard cover, and it's a new read, and it motivates me to slow down and relax. One book a month comes to my door, and helps me complete my goal of reading for the year! How fantastic is that! This is the book I got for January and it was delightful!

Mismatched earrings – This is one of my favorite pair of earrings, even though I have several that I love! I posted a picture of these the very next day after opening them, because I love them so much! One is a flight of birds, and the other is a single bird. I also got another pair where one is a moon, and the other is a star. Visit the Etsy shop for Jamber Jewels and check out these unique pairs of earrings and get yourself a pair!

https://www.etsy.com/shop/JamberJewels?search_query=birds

Tshirt for traveling – We absolutely love taking road trips, and I got this really cute tshirt that says "Road Trippin" on the front. The Etsy shop has lots of other choices like "Beach Please" and "World Traveler" as choices. My shirt is really cute and I plan to wear it underneath a cardigan for these cooler days still ahead.

https://www.etsy.com/listing/628863457/road-trippin-shirt-road-tripping-road?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=road+trippin+shirt&ref=sc_gallery-1-1&plkey=ccf614cbd5160e7396fb5d1e7661235c27db6245%3A628863457&col=1

Letter board – My kids got me that for using with this magazine for posts! But look at how cute this letter board is! The words and quotes and inspiration can be changed weekly, monthly, or however often I'd like to change them. And the board looks so cute nestled in between a vase and a plant! I am enjoying this gift.

<https://www.target.com/p/new-view-12-x12-black-letter-board-with-gray-trim/-/A-52929437>

Signature Set – I wanted a small compact that included all of the refreshers needed for my face when I'm gone all day long, into the evening. I used to carry my blush and lip gloss and powder from my bathroom, but then I had to remember to put it back when I arrived back home. This is a small compact that's great for touch-ups and I can leave it in my purse!

<https://www.sephora.com/product/signature-set-mod-collection-P419210>

Candle in a jar – Who doesn't love a good candle, and one that looks pretty while it's burning? I buy lots of candles during the year, and this one by Magnolia Hearth & Hand – the leather and tobacco scent – is one of my faves. It comes in this dark teal jar, but they have so many other options as well and wonderful scents! Check them out!

<https://www.target.com/p/container-candle-leather-tobacco-hearth-hand-153-with-magnolia/-/A-53607797>

I hope these ideas inspire you to find something special this month as a gift for that special person in your life, or just for you! Treat yourself to something new and different, or give it away to someone you love.

#

Selah's Style – Room Reno – by Ayla Wolfe

Ayla is Selah's 5 year old (soon to be 6!) cousin; and she recently did a room renovation, decorating with all of her favorite things and styles. She loves jewelry, makeup, and art – and she needed to have places for things that were out of reach of her little brother's curious hands! She had ideas of just what to do in her personal space to brighten and organize, which all began with a new bunk bed – mattress on the top – and lots of space underneath.

Enjoy Ayla's room reno, and see if you don't come away with a few ideas for your kids' rooms, as well!

Shelf and Hooks – Ayla has lots of bags and purses, and needed a place to hang them. She also has a few special gifts that needed a place to be displayed! These cute hooks from Hobby Lobby were just the thing and made her wall look so pretty – while organizing the bags and beauties!

<https://www.hobbylobby.com/search/?text=flower+hooks>

Cubbies with labels – These super cute polka-dot cubbies hold all of Ayla's special toys. Her mom helped her with the labels that include a picture and words, because Ayla is definitely learning to read in kindergarten this year. She now knows just where to stash things when Mom instructs, "Clean your room, Ayla!"

The Vanity – This might be Ayla's favorite piece of furniture in her room. It too is from Hobby Lobby and was a great price, so her parents snatched it right up for her. She loves to sit and get ready, as she picks out just the right piece of jewelry (or pieces!) for her outfit each day. She also includes a bit of lip color, as her mom allows...

<https://www.hobbylobby.com/search/?text=white+vanity&quickview=80738377>

The Stands – It seems that once Ayla's extended family realized how much she likes jewelry, they all bought her some – especially chokers and dangly earrings! Ayla recently got her ears pierced, and is so excited to be able to wear all sorts of colors and shapes now, to coordinate her choice of dress for the day! Check out these cute stands!

<https://www.hobbylobby.com/search/?text=jewelry+stands>

Caboodle, Yes! – Ayla's mom saw this caboodle at Target and remembered how cool they were back in the day, so she picked up one for Ayla. Inside goes her makeup and brushes, so that Augie doesn't end up painting the walls with color – where it doesn't belong! Ayla LOVES the color blue, so blue her caboodle is!

<https://www.target.com/p/caboodles-classic-caboodles-on-the-go-girl-case-millennial-pink/-/A-53510261>

Bag it up – This pretty, teal bag hangs on the back of Ayla's closet door and hold her shoes. She does need a little help in storing the ones up top, but those can be for the shoes that are

out of season. Recently, Ella (her grandmother) bought Ayla several new pairs from Target, all on clearance, of course!

Hamper basket – On the floor of Ayla’s closet sits this cute basket/metal hamper where Ayla can toss her clothes, instead of leaving them on the floor. This helps her mom when it’s laundry time, and the basket itself is really pretty (even though it holds really stinky clothes.)

<https://www.target.com/p/extra-large-round-wire-decorative-storage-bin-antique-pewter-with-copper-handle-threshold-153/-/A-16251828>

Atmosphere cove – Under Ayla’s bed is this room area by the window. Lights are strung, and this cool gray chair (where Ayla and her friend Madeline can both fit) is just waiting for someone to open a book and read an adventure out loud. Ayla loves a good story!

<https://www.target.com/p/kids-double-dish-chair-gray-pillowfort-153/-/A-52924901>

This room reno didn’t happen overnight, because Ayla’s parents had to save up and buy each little thing one at a time. That made it all the more fun, to see each item nailed to the wall or organized and neat. Having two brothers that sleep across the hall, Ayla enjoys having her own space with all things Barbie and fashion, without a hint of smelly boys anywhere around...

#

In the Kitchen – Soups and Sauces – by Marcy Lytle

February is still cold in most places, and it's that month of romance where we see all things red everywhere! This month we are combining those two things into sharing recipes of soups for warming up those chilly nights, and red sauces for brightening up those dull evening meals! I love a good soup, one with flavor and texture. I love a good sauce that's rich in that red hue of ripe tomatoes. Don't you?

Here's what we're eating:

Creamy Lentil Soup

You'll need:

- 1 large onion
- 1 cup lentils
- 2 ½ c water
- 2 t salt
- ¼ t pepper
- 1 clove minced garlic
- ¼ c tomato sauce
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 ½ c milk

Finely chop onion, rinse lentils and drain. Place in saucepan, add onion and next 6 ingredients. Cover and simmer one hour. Remove bay leaf. Blend in blender (careful, it's hot) til pureed and return to saucepan. Add milk, heat and stir til hot and blended. (We ate with spicy crackers and added more pepper to the soup.)

Chicken Trio

You'll need:

- 1 lb chicken tenders
- 4 cups pico de gallo (or one container premade)
- ½ cup green olives
- 2 T capers
- Lime
- Tortillas

Salt and pepper the chicken and cook until browned on both sides. Toss in pico, olives and capers and simmer until chicken is tender and sauce thickens. Grill a few tortillas in the pan, then serve up the dish with lime wedges on the side! Easy and oh, so tasty!

Pasta Fagioli Soup

- 1 T olive oil

- 2 oz diced pancetta
- 1 onion chopped
- 2 carrots chopped
- 2 celery stalks chopped
- 2 garlic cloves finely chopped
- 6 c low sodium chicken broth
- 1 15oz can no salt added cannellini beans drained and rinsed
- 1 c no salt added crushed tomatoes
- 1 t minced fresh rosemary
- ½ t salt
- 6 oz small pasta (I used spinach fusilli from Gourmet Texas Pasta)
- Shaved Parm
- Oregano leaves for garnish

Heat olive oil over med heat in large pot. Add pancetta and cook about 5 min. Add onion, carrots, celery and cook stirring occasionally til onion starts to soften, about 5 min. Add garlic and cook, stirring, 1 minute.

Add broth, beans, tomatoes, rosemary and salt and bring to boil. reduce to simmer, cover and cook 15 min. Remove one coup of mixture to blender and puree, then return to pot and add the pasta. Cook, til pasta is tender.

Top each bowl with shaved Parm and oregano leaves.

Stir Fry with Lemony Soy Sauce

For the sauce:

¼ soy sauce

¼ c water

2 T brown sugar

2 T lemon juice

Mix these together and set aside.

For the veggies:

1 garlic clove minced

Mushrooms, carrots, zucchini, red pepper, green pepper, green onions (all sliced thin)

2 c cooked brown rice

1 can (8oz) sliced water chestnuts, drained

½ c honey roasted cashews

In a large skillet stir fry garlic in olive oil for 1 minute, then the veggies til crisp-tender, about 8 minutes longer. Stir in sauce, bring to a boil. Then add the rice and water chestnuts, heat through. Top with cashews.

Texas Chowder

- 1 large onion chopped
- 1 red pepper chopped
- 1 green pepper chopped
- ½ c butter
- 1 can cream of potato soup
- 2 ½ c milk
- 1 T Worcestershire sauce
- 1 T chicken seasoning
- ½-1 lb cooked and crumbled bacon
- 2 cans cream style corn
- 2 c shredded Cheddar
- ¼ c chopped cilantro

Saute the onion and peppers in the butter until tender. Add all of the other ingredients and simmer until the cheese is melted, stirring often.

This tastes great with savory crackers.

Tried and True – Love Hacks – by Marcy Lytle

“Love hurts” is part of the lyrics of an old song, and I suppose it’s true. We love and we get hurt, for sure, because we’re all human and we make mistakes. Even when we love our kids, we get hurt, because they are fickle in their love and their actions. And loving in the romantic kind of way can be exhilarating or devastating, depending on whether or not the love is returned...

This month we are reminded to love and to show love. Since there are always lists and lists of kitchen hacks, cleaning hacks, etc., why not list some love hacks? Maybe you’re short on time or creativity. These are simple ways to show that special someone that you think they’re awesome. So instead of saying, “Love hurts,” we’re saying here are some “Love Hacks!”

- Write it on his mirror (use your lipstick).
- Leave a sticky note on his car window before they leave for work.
- Print out a photo from your phone of the two of you and frame it, and give it to him.
- Slip in a cloth napkin and a heart-shaped chocolate in his lunchbox.
- Buy tickets to see that movie he wants to see but you don’t, and go with him.
- Take him bowling or to play mini golf, even if you detest both.
- Text him a little poem you write that doesn’t rhyme but it says how you feel.
- Leave a cold drink he loves in the fridge with his name on it.
- Send him an email with just an image inserted of a beating heart.
- Give *him* a box of chocolates...
- Go to a coffee shop and bring a game to play while you both sip.
- Purchase a new game for the two of you to play by the fire.
- Whisk him away on a trip across your city, stopping at three of favorite places.
- Let him roam Home Depot and give him a wad of cash to spend.
- Do one of his chores for him.

That’s 15 hacks to do all on one day or to spread out this month, while you’re sharing your love. I bet you can think of even more.

He might not reciprocate, he may not notice, and he may not care. Or...he might be inspired to think of you, he may notice and stand amazed, and he may thank you profusely. Either way, you’ve loved and given and shared with him a piece of your heart. And even if it hurts, God knows you did it and He will love you back like no one else can...

And if there’s no man in your life to hack, do these for your kiddos or best friends!

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HOME

Practical Parenting – Twist and Bake – by Marcy Lytle

We recently made Auntie Anne's pretzels in the kitchen with three littles, ages 7, 5 and 3. It started out with the 5-year old and by the end of the process, all three were in the kitchen pulling and rolling and stretching out the dough to twist and then flipping onto the baking sheet to wait for that delicious treat!

Baking with kids is so fun, but it's messy and takes planning. Here's what we did and learned in that one experience in the kitchen with them:

- **Wash their hands.** I told them they could not help with dirty hands. So that made them willing to wash before baking. And boy, were their hands and nails dirty!
- **Planning helps.** Having the bowls and utensils and ingredients out on the counter works wonders in keeping them attentive. If I had to stop and find something or make her get down off her stool, it only delayed and frustrated both of us.
- **Stools are essential.** Speaking of stools, get one that's safe and let the child stand on the same level as you are, so he can work at the counter without reaching. We have a two-step stool that works great.
- **Read the recipe ahead of time.** Once you start baking with littles, your mind will be all sorts of full and you won't remember what comes next. Reading the recipe and knowing what steps to take ahead of time works wonders!
- **Let them do.** If there's a package to open, you cut it and let them pour it out into the bowl. Let them start the stirring and you can finish with arm power. Let her get down and go preheat the oven, showing her the numbers and when to stop. Model, and then let them try shaping the dough.
- **Use sprinkles.** Kids love to sprinkle! These pretzels came with a cinnamon sugar packet and a salt packet, so they were poured into tiny bowls before we sprinkled. This was their favorite part, aside from the actual twisting and forming of the pretzel.
- **Clean while you bake.** If there's a baking time (ours was 15 minutes) let them start rinsing and wiping the counter, to prepare for the end product. No bites after baking, until the counter is clean!
- **Eat and enjoy.** Get out cute plates and napkins and let each child have a piece of their baking presentation! Take them all, including yourself, into the other room to sit down and enjoy every bite.

Have you baked with your kids? It's a chore for sure, and it's quite a mess, and when three want to have their hands in the process, it's quite a challenge! Pretzels are a good start, because they require several hands to shape and form and sprinkle. You can buy the Auntie Anne's Pretzel kits that come with everything inside that you need to get started!

<https://www.walmart.com/ip/Auntie-Annes-Auntie-Annes-Pretzels-More-Baking-Mix-1-99-lb/40685372>

Happy baking and making memories together!

I Don't Do Teens – Just One Song – by Marcy Lytle

Music and teens stick together and go together like peanut butter and jelly. Our teens just love music of all kinds and they want to listen to music all the time. Music is one of those things that lifts the soul, lightens the spirit and renews hope...if the music is uplifting and the lyrics speak truth. And if that's not the case, what our teens are listening to can damage their souls, their minds, and their relationships with parents, friends, and Him.

I'm not for banning all secular music from teens, but rather training and teaching them on how to select their music. There are some really good songs out there of all genres, and there are also some really bad selections of songs out there. The goal isn't to just ban our kids from all that is bad, but rather to talk about it and set guidelines and tell why certain music and lyrics are not a good choice. Yes, we can set rules for them to follow, but those rules should include thinking and making choices that are wise, not just setting up rules for rules sake.

There's a popular song called "Thank U, Next" by Ariana Grande. It talks about a list of boyfriends and breakups. There's foul language in it, and there's an attitude of being done with boys and looking for the next, etc. as if they're a piece of trash to be discarded.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=thank+u+next+lyrics&oq=thank+u+next+lyrics&ags=chrome.0.016.3770j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

It might be a good idea to take a song that's popular that our kids are drawn to and listen to the lyrics with them. Talking to our sons and daughters, and asking what draws them to the song is a good and healthy activity, if we listen and learn what makes our kids' interested. Maybe our daughter likes a boy that doesn't like her. Maybe our son thinks Ariana Grande is hot.

It's important in training kids to be adults that we offer them tools on how to make wise choices and how to guard their minds against wrong and destructive thinking.

Just that one song mentioned above could spark so many cool conversations like:

- Dating multiple people before marriage...is that a good thing? Why or why not?
- Getting back at friends that hurt you with hateful words...is that helpful? What else could you do instead?
- Treating people badly and writing them off...is that kind and loving?
- The F-word. Is it offensive or normal language today?

Teens might respond that they just like the music, or the beat, or that the song's lyrics aren't what attracts them to listen. They might argue that we just don't understand how they feel.

As parents, it's our job to be aware of and instruct and train our kids until they leave home. And if we don't take the time to observe what it is they're listening to, take time to understand why they've chosen that particular music, or how that music makes them feel and act, then we're missing a big part of that training.

I love some secular songs. There's one by Avril Lavigne about keeping her head above water in a hard time, and it's got awesome lyrics and a great sound. I have secular artists from my own teen years that I really loved to listen to. So banning all secular music from our kids might just make them run to it, later.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=avril+keep+my+head+above+water+lyrics&oq=avril+keep+&ags=chrome.2.0j69i57j0l4.5300j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

Sit down and watch the music awards shows with teenagers, ask them to share their playlist with you, and take interest in their life. Listen without judgment, but offer guidelines and prayer. Then explain why they are to choose life and not death...literally sometimes...in the lyrics that rise in volume into their ears and then seep into their hearts.

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A Night to Remember – Broken Hearts – by Marcy Lytle

We always hear adult lessons on how to heal broken hearts, by pouring our hearts out to Jesus and asking him to heal our wounds, etc. But what about little broken hearts, in our children? They too experience brokenness when puppies die, grandparents pass away, a favorite stuffed animal is lost, or friends move away. Broken hearts don't just happen in adulthood!

This month is going to be about broken hearts with a lesson on how they heal.

Preparation: You'll need lots of red construction paper and scissors, and some heart-shaped cookies or candies to enjoy at the end of the lesson.

Either provide or allow those who can use scissors to cut out three hearts for each person. They can be small or large, misshapen or perfectly made.

We're going to talk about broken hearts. When we are happy and feel safe and warm our hearts feel full and whole and pretty and red. (Ask everyone to hold up their three hearts for display!)

However, sometimes things happen in life that causes our hearts to break in to pieces. Has anything happened in your lives that made your heart hurt? (Perhaps suggest to them some of the above scenarios or let them think of some of their own.)

Let's read these stories and follow along:

Pete got a new puppy for his birthday and named him Lucky. Pete and Lucky were best of friends and played outside together, and at night Lucky even had a bed right beside Pete's bed! One day Lucky got sick and had to go to the doctor where Lucky stayed and never came home. Pete was super sad at the loss of his best friend. (Ask the kids to tear one of their hearts into two pieces)

It wasn't until months later that Pete's parents took him to find a new puppy, a big black lab, and Pete's heart was full again.

- Talk about how Jesus is the mender of broken hearts, and when we feel sad He loves to bring us joy again to make us joyful. (Read Psalm 147:3)

Sarah had an outfit on for school that she absolutely loved, because it included a special necklace her grandmother had given her. On that necklace was a little locket that opened, and inside was a picture of her grandmother that Sarah loved so much. On the playground that day, Sarah played hard swinging and sliding and running, and when she got home she exclaimed to her mom, "My locket! It's gone!" The locket had somehow come off during recess at school. (Ask the kids to tear off a big corner of their second heart)

Mom and Sarah went to the school and searched and searched, and guess what? There it was underneath the bench where Sarah had sat to rest for a few minutes. They took it home and reattached it to the chain, and all was well.

- Talk about how Jesus always cares about loss and sorrow, and he is always searching to find that and those who are lost. He loves us all so much. (Read Luke 19:10)

Terry and Tobin were best friends. They had been best friends since they were two years old and now they were in second grade! They played every day after school together, they spent the night at each other's houses for sleepovers, and their parents went on trips together, too! One weekend, Terry's parents got a call that Tobin's family was going to move far away to another state. Terry was heartbroken and went to his room and sobbed, crying, "I don't want Tobin to move!" (Ask kids to shred up their third heart.)

Tobin moved, Terry cried a lot, but they were able to connect and continue to be friends, seeing each other once a year. And Terry made lots of new friends at school.

- Talk about how people move and lives change, but Jesus is a friend that never leaves us or forsakes us, AND he brings new friends into our lives when we are friendly to others. (Read Proverbs 18:24)

Look at our three hearts – all broken and torn!

There is no way we can fix these hearts. We can tape them up, glue them together, and even try to just make new ones, but nothing can restore them back to their original beauty.

Jesus can! He can take all of our brokenness and heal our hearts to pump just like new!

Pray this prayer together:

Jesus, we give you our broken hearts and sadness,

and we ask you to comfort us and heal us.

Thank you that you are the healer of broken hearts.

Enjoy some Valentine heart cookies or candies together.

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The Family Practice - What Now? – by Brandi Oman

The holiday season brought joy, memories, and lots of out of the ordinary events to do with our kiddos. We cooked and shopped for the best things until we couldn't stand anymore. We laughed until we cried. We saw and then our missed families when they returned home! We enjoyed lights and went caroling. We have since bundled up in our coziest pajamas and watched all the best movies Netflix has to offer!

So what do we do when the holidays are over, January is already gone, and February is here?

Caiden and I decided to kick the year off with enjoying a day of fishing! As I have shared before, this activity is his favorite! He received some Christmas money and so we went shopping. He has been eyeballing a pair of boots for over a year and I told him when I feel like he is ready, we would get them for him. He purchased them himself! He was overjoyed with excitement! His next goal is to buy spurs for his boots (I am not ready for that yet...) I made plans to take him on a date and we went to Taco Bell. That too is one of his favorites!

The most important thing we can do to make the wintry holiday spirit stay with us all year long is to love on our babies!

As a mother of youngster, I want to keep having fun and stay active. Our kids stay young for such a short amount of time, so the time we spend with them when they are little matters so much when they are older.

Here are five inexpensive ideas of things to do with your kids that may leave an everlasting impression:

- Take them fishing at the local pond and talk about what nature is around.
- Take them on a walk and race them...they love winning!
- Take them on piggy back rides (if you can!) or join them on the jungle gym at the local playground.
- Take them to the zoo or the aquarium (Groupon always has discounts!)
- Take them to a park and pitch balls while they practice their swing.

Being present, loving, and able means the world to our babies!

Psalm 127:3

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.

Our Father asks us to take care of the gifts he graciously gives us! In my opinion, our children are the highest, most pure, rare, and beautiful possessions we may ever receive.

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Tiny Living – Elves, Please – by Leyanne Enterline

The holidays came and went so quickly, as I always feel they do. I wasn't prepared again for the ridiculous amount of gifts that we are trying to shove into such a tiny space, and we didn't clean out before the new things arrived at our home. Maybe we didn't really receive that much, but in 350 square feet, it feels like we received Santa's workshop!

"Out with the old and in with new," has become a bit easier for me, but to 10 and 11 year old boys, that's not what they want to hear. Everything is super special and "may come in handy at some point," so they say. Though they have their own space, mom guilt still comes in and lets them keep half of which I know is junk, because I feel like they don't truly have a place to call their own. I mean it's a camper! So with two sets of bunk beds and a tiny bench table to do their work on in their room, there really isn't that much space for all their extras.

As I've mentioned before, I try to add a bit of organization to the chaos, but in such a tiny space any type of extra drawers or book cases take up too much room and things begin to get shoved wherever they can. I can't stand clutter, so going into their room gives me anxiety, but maybe the Lord is trying to teach me to take a *chill pill* and let them have their stuff that they think is so amazing. Not everyone is like me and that's okay!

Thanks for the therapy. I guess writing this story is helping me get that off my chest!

And another thing...

Living tiny, one would think there are smaller problems when dealing with the house maintenance. Yes, everything is smaller, but when something under the bathroom sink breaks (because everything is so tiny) we need to grab an elf from the North Pole to help get under there! Brian and I worked for hours under our bathroom sink because it decided to only drip the water out. Brian thought perhaps calcium from our well was built up in the pipes. Since we are not elves, it was extra difficult to get up into this tiny space to disconnect and reconnect everything back. At one point, I was literally praying for God to give us strength and power and might to get through this task without ripping the entire sink out or anyone's head off! We've had to apologize many times to our children for our bad attitudes when dealing with stuff made for Barbies!

Luckily, my prayers worked and the bathroom sink is also working again!

I'll save the kitchen saga for next month...

Remember, love grows best in tiny spaces!

YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Gone for Good – by Marcy Lytle

There are feelings we have in this life that we just can't explain, but they're there. There are people we want to like and enjoy, but we don't. There are places we go where we feel something isn't right, but we can't explain what it is. And then there are times we feel so guilty about the way we experience or look at a certain situation or person, and we just don't know what to do about it.

Let me explain.

I lost my mother and my mother-in-law in the past year and a half. Both of these ladies left a legacy of faith and love like no other. They were wonderful women that loved their families and showed it in every way. I loved them both. However, like lots of daughters and daughters-in-law, I got irritated often with both of them.

On occasion, something my mom said to me cut to the bone, and it hurt deeply. I found out in later years why my mom had some of the insecurities and habits that she did, and that helped me a little to understand her. However, we didn't have the relationship I wanted, one where I could share my heart and be heard, without judgment or criticism. We did have a great time shopping together and doing family activities, but I missed the connection I always desired. For that, I often felt guilty for getting upset at her or not wanting to be around her.

On occasion, a visit to my see my mother-in-law wasn't so fun, as she talked an awful lot, and she worried even more. It wasn't so inspiring to sit and listen to her go on and on, and I often found myself dreading those visits, because they weren't fun for me. And I also never connected with her either, in an intimate way. She was my husband's mom, and that was it. There were times I felt guilty for those feelings, and shamed myself for not wanting to be around her more.

I think all of us have parents that frustrate us, or kids that annoy us at times, and we leave their presence weighed down with guilt at what should have been a pleasant experience but it turned out to be something we had to endure...not enjoy.

As my mom and mother-in-law aged and I watched them deal with that gracefully and with dignity, I grew to respect both of them more, and enjoyed them more. But in the back of my mind, I wondered if when they were gone the guilt that hovered over my mind would crush me. It always bugged me that these ladies got under my skin at times, and I felt so bad about it.

They are both gone now, and I have grieved and am still grieving. And the beautiful thing about His grace is that I don't feel one ounce of guilt. I'm able to put that behind me and enjoy the pleasant memories and love these ladies for who they were inside, not for their shortcomings that hurt my feelings. I too have shortcomings that hurt others, even when I'm unaware.

I cannot explain the relief I felt when I realized that the guilt I had carried left me and is no longer there, even after these beautiful women have left this earth.

We all have experiences in our lives that leave us with scars that cause us to say and act certain ways, some of which are not pleasant to others or to ourselves. And we all feel a twinge of guilt, especially if it's a parent that's driving us crazy. Aging parents are not easy to deal with, when their filters go, their tempers flare, and their own weariness sets in. And we will at times wish for that pain to be over and for them to go...for their sake and ours.

We're not bad people for feeling annoyed or guilty. It happens. It's reality.

I just wanted to share that the guilt I felt I feel no more, and I'm elated and relieved to know that God forgives me, helps me, and heals me, while at the same time he carries those with whom I struggle – as we all move on in this life.

There's hope for all of us. Even on days when the ones we love annoy the heck out of us or we annoy them. Love is crazy like that. And guilt doesn't have to ride us forever...

Under the Influence - Diseases of the Heart – by Marcy Lytle

February is the month of red, the month of hearts, the month of love. The color red started appearing on shelves and even on dish towels in the form of little hearts and cupid arrows way back at the first of the year. There's this day on the 14th where hearts are supposed to be thrilled with proposals, made happy with expressions of love, and delighted with boxes of chocolates.

However, there are most likely many hearts that are broken and only more so this month, when all of that gooey lovely expression just makes those broken hearts ache all the more, because of loss, wounds and disappointments. I remember when I lost my mom and entered the stores near Mother's Day and saw all of the cute sayings and cards about moms, it was hard to experience. It's the same for some in the month of February.

It's hard to experience the joy of a season when sadness looms instead.

Psalm 147:3 says,

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Psalm 103: 3-5 says,

He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases.

He redeems me from death and crowns me with love and tender mercies.

He fills my life with good things.

My youth is renewed like the eagle's!

We all long to love and be loved, but it's so hard when our hearts are full of disease from the experience of life.

For example,

The disease of bitterness taints a heart that was once sweet into an angry red.

The disease of hatred destroys a heart that was once tender and leaves it hard.

The disease of disappointment leaves an always expectant heart shivering in the dark.

The disease of brokenness rips apart a complete heart into shreds.

We all know that heart disease is a killer if changes are not made in our physical bodies. We have to eat healthy, undergo repairs of blockages and tears and leaks. Time is necessary after surgeries take place, in order for hearts to heal. And sometimes, nothing heals except a heart transplant when the heart of another once healthy individual is placed in the space where our diseased heart resides.

I think all of us, whether we're madly in love this month or not, have areas of brokenness and disease in our hearts. If we've lived more than five minutes, we've experienced disappointment of some kind. Even a newborn baby cries when it's not fed on demand, not receiving that which is expected.

I love all of the reminders in His Word about his goodness to me and mine. It's so helpful to read about the character and power of God to heal and restore. Just those two verses up above are enough to bring healing to hurting hearts ridden with disease.

Where are you this month? Pumping fast and strong, healthy and whole? Or do you find yourself just a little heartsick over the last blow that left you low?

He heals hearts that are diseased and he mends broken hearts. It's what he does, it's why he came, and this restoration is ours for the asking.

Just sit back and imagine walking into a room full of red hearts lining the shelves, stuffed with sweets too sweet to imagine and finding one in particular with your name on it. Grab it, open it, sit in a cozy corner and indulge in every piece of His goodness. Savor the flavor, release the anger and bitterness, and allow the sweetness of the Giver to perform radical surgery of the most extreme kind so that you can skip with your hand in his...with no more heart disease or gaping wounds.

He heals ALL our diseases...even those of the heart.

Healthy Habits – Step Away – by Marcy Lytle

Editing a magazine is no small feat. And it doesn't matter how many times I read through an article, if I'm reading when I'm tired I'm going to miss something. I remember when I published my first book *Catching Fireflies* I didn't think I needed an editor, because I had read the entire book over and over, and just assumed I had caught every error. Imagine my dismay when the book was published, and there were several errors that I missed!

We cannot and will never be able to see every little thing we need to correct when we are constantly doing and reading and going...unless we step away for a while...ask for help...and revisit and rewrite.

How does that translate into healthy living?

- When you're under a heap of laundry day after day and can't see the light, step away and enlist help from your family or friends. Don't be a martyr to housework. Little kids can fold, husbands and put away, friends can come alongside on busy weeks, and guess what else? Laundry doesn't have to be folded at all if that's your life right now! Give yourself a break!
- When you're thinking nothing but negative thoughts about all of your friends and family because you've been around people SO MUCH; just step away for a bit. Say no to that next gathering or meeting or party, and rest by yourself away from the noise and the crowds. It's okay to do that. You're allowed.
- When the to-do list lengthens and the chores never end and life just gets busier and busier, step away on a weekend getaway or day trip and enjoy. Leave the lists and the notes and the schedules behind and do nothing but ride and observe and look and breathe. Take a friend or go alone...but go.
- When sadness and despondency are your only friends day after day and loneliness is more than you can stand, step away from those dark corners of your house where you've retreated. Call up a friend, volunteer and give, or show up at church and greet. Give away your gift of friendship, even if there are no gifts on your doorstep at this time.
- When parents are demanding, kids are pulling, spouses are waiting and the entire world is calling, step away and voice your needs loud and clear. Communicate your need to chill, to retreat, to relax and refresh. They don't know if you don't tell them. And you won't go if you don't speak up and realize that it's good for your health to do so.

There are millions of tiny things in life that become huge heavy weights over time and space, if we aren't cognizant of the fact that we cannot do it all. We were not made to live under stress, but rather under peace.

With my second book, I hired an editor and she caught every mistake my tired eyes could not see. She was awesome. I was relieved. And so very grateful.

Tired eyes, weary bodies and exhausted minds cannot and will not catch the snafus present on the pages of our life that will result in a less than stellar read. Stepping away from that which

tires us out is necessary and healthy and good, and results in clear vision and corrective instruction that makes for a great story to tell.

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Life Right Now – Perfect Timing – by Bethany Gomez

Currently, I live with two of my very best friends. One of them is my older sister, Miranda, and the other is my childhood best friend, Abby. We have lived together for a combined total of about six years now. I have no doubt in my mind and heart that God brought us together for this season of our lives. If finding a total of two amazing rental homes and the timing of both of these is not proof enough, I don't know what is.

For instance, over five years ago we all found ourselves in the same boat. We were three young, single girls living with our parents. One day we began to talk about the possibility of all three of us living together. Where would we live, how could we make this work, was the main topic of conversation between all three of us and God. Thankfully, we didn't have to wait long before God opened a door wide open. Abby's aunt just so happened to own a rental property that (low and behold) was soon to be empty and it was within our budget.

Our time spent together in that small, cozy home was one of the happiest times of my life. We quickly made the space our own and began doing life together with ease, to make it another indication that God meant for us to live together. Even all three of our pets got along. Also, funny enough, our home even got nicknamed, "Angel house," which ultimately made it easier to RSVP for events that all three of us were attending without having to type out all our names. We had so much fun! We celebrated birthdays and holidays, had game nights and started all sorts of new traditions together. We hosted countless events including, but not limited to, movie nights, baby showers, a wedding shower, a bachelorette party, and one epic "parents night out" with all our friends' children. Even more, we held countless ladies bible study nights which, for me, truly were some of my most favorite and memorable moments spent in that home.

About two years in to us becoming roommates, Abby's aunt told us she was going to sell her rental house and move to another state. Around that same time, Abby's older sister was going to have her first baby and she asked Abby to move to Dallas to be their nanny for about the first year of their daughter's life. We were of course sad to no longer live together, but we all had a peace about it because Abby had mentioned that she would move back after she was done being a nanny to her niece. We were hopeful that maybe, just maybe, we could find another place to all live together again. At the time, we didn't really think about the fact that Abby could potentially find her husband up in Dallas or even one of us could find our husbands. God had other plans, though.

When Abby's nanny job was coming to an end and my and my sister's living arrangement was drawing to a close, we got the go-ahead to try and find another rental home. This time around we had a few specific criteria for the next place where we wanted to live. To others it was probably silly little things, but it wasn't silly to God. While Miranda was going around town trying to find a property with a property management agent, she came across a house that had been available for quite some time. Miranda went in, expecting something to be seriously wrong with this place, but it was within our budget and location criteria, so she checked it out. She told us the moment she saw the house she knew this was the one. It had everything we wanted down to the criteria of a larger sink.

It has been almost four years spent in our "practically perfect" second home together and if I had to choose one word to describe our time spent living together, it would have to be the word "compatible," which by its definition between two people or in our case three people, it means "able to have a harmonious relationship; well suited." This is not to say we haven't had our

disagreements over the years, but for the most part we have maintained a peaceful home, been willing to compromise, and quick to make things right.

Why all the reminiscing, you might ask?

Well, it was bound to happen eventually. I am so happy to report that Abby is engaged! It was an adorable New Year's Eve proposal. I couldn't be more excited for her even if I tried, but try as I might, I can't help but be sad that our time as roommates is officially coming to an end.

Their story has given me hope. I think it is simply the sweetest, coolest story out there and of course - uniquely theirs. It is a great testimony of how God's timing is perfect.

I am beyond thankful for the time we have had as roommates, and I wouldn't trade it for the world. Rest assured, I will savor and cherish these next several months we have left together as we plan a wedding!

#

Created for Life - Never Satisfied, yet Content – by Ginny Hurley

Longing for more of God is a constant in my life as I observe my world and those around me. I want to see sadness wiped out and for violence to cease. I cry out for healing to those in dark situations when I know it is God's heart to heal. I am passionate about our foster system and children in trauma. Teaching school has given me a picture of God's heart for education. Yet I see classrooms overtaken by bullies and out of control students. I long to bring justice in situations, that are in crisis. My heart yearns for those lost without Jesus that don't know His goodness. I cry out when people believe the lies of the enemy and persecute those in truth.

Yet, I have encountered the One who answers every prayer and hears every cry. He loves every single person and grieves with me for each of these situations. He loves like no other and offers hope every time. He loves to heal bodies and hearts too. His plan is for everyone to know His joy and peace, salvation and love.

“God of Heaven’s Armies, you find so much beauty in your people. They’re like lovely sanctuaries of your presence. Deep within me are these lovesick longings, desires and daydreams of living in union with you. When I’m near you my Heart and my soul will sing and worship with my joyful songs of you, my true source and spring of life!”

Psalm 84:1-2 Passion

Our church has a healing ministry for the physically sick, and for the soul and spirit. We minister to people daily and I personally have seen many healed and even more set free from bondage and evil. I have watched faces transform as they realize how loved they are. I have witnessed transformed lives as the enemy's lies have fallen to the ground, replaced with truth and wisdom. Families have been restored and addictions have been broken. I've seen it myself. I love it! I crave it! There is nothing like observing our great big God moving and being uncontainable. *Yet, I long for more.* I applaud the testimonies and dance about when He shows up, but I want to KNOW Him more and be like Him. I realize that when I don't see healing and someone goes home disappointed I long for more of Him. He never disappoints, so I await His promise. He never leaves me. He never lets me down. I cannot answer the things I don't understand, but I choose to trust Him. I am lovesick without His voice. I want more...

“We are like common clay jars that carry this glorious treasure within, so that the extraordinary overflow of power will be seen as God’s, not ours. Though we experience every kind of pressure, we’re not crushed. At times we don’t know what to do, but quitting is not an option.”

2 Corinthians 4:7-8

Then I realize that the veil has been removed! We've had a permanent impartation of the Holy Spirit. The glory of God living within us is mindboggling. How can this be true?

“But the moment one turns to the Lord with an open heart, the veil is lifted and they see. Now the Lord I’m referring to is the Holy Spirit, and wherever He is Lord, there is freedom.”

2 Corinthians 3:6-17

Every single time Jesus showed up in His earthly ministry, something happened. He never did things the same way, nor did He do the things His disciples thought He should do. He did what He saw His Father do in heaven and always listened to His voice. And that is what I want to do. I want an abandonment to God that attracts Him. I desire to know Him without needing to control, explain, or understand Him. I really do believe Him and I completely know that He is good.

Therefore, I choose to live in this tension of wanting more, yet content in His goodness and overwhelming blessings! I can stand my watch upon the wall with eager eyes and full assurance that He will bring MORE of Himself to my world. He has captured my heart and I want to rest in Him without an agenda. It doesn't make sense that my hunger is content, but the tension between these two words is rest.

As the deer pants for water, so my soul longs for Him.

I will receive a long drink; then thirst again for MORE!

MARRIAGE

In This Together - Layering Your Marriage – by Charissa Corbin

Growing up in Texas, all I needed for the winter was maybe a fleece coat. Rarely would the weather require me to have thermal underwear or even multiple layers of clothes. Some winters I spent in flip flops and shorts!

Living in Interior Alaska is a completely different story. Our winter nights have been as cold as 50 below zero and subzero temps can last for weeks at a time. Not only do I have to prepare myself with layers of clothing, -50 rated boots, and thick gloves but I also have to prepare my 2-year old and 4-month old (not an easy task). Layers are key! With temperatures so cold, we can get frostbite quickly if we are not dressed appropriately. Most of the time we are going from the car to some place inside, but even that one-minute walk can chill us all to the bone.

At the beginning of the winter season, I always feel overwhelmed as I'm preparing myself and our family for the day. Don't forget gloves! Or the parka! Do I have foot and hand warmers in case of an emergency? Did I put warm socks on the girls? After several weeks, it starts to become routine and we are prepared to face the day.

Just as I layer my physical body to protect it from the cold, I can't help but think how I can layer my marriage to protect it from the wickedness of this world. Marriages fail every day because - let's face it - marriage is HARD. Our culture has become self-serving and it is no longer about how I can best serve my spouse but rather how I can serve myself. It's important that we layer our marriages every day so that we are ready to face the day together, no matter what comes our way.

Our basic layer should always be God. Keep him at the forefront of our marriages, pray daily for protection, love, and growth. Without Him it would be nearly impossible to keep our marriages warm.

The next layer is communication. Not just, "Hey honey, how was your day?" but deep, engaging conversation. We should always be honest, humble, and consistently patient. As we grow in years, so does our conversation. We can learn how our spouse communicates best and SPEAK that.

If you're looking for a good read on this, I've personally enjoyed the classic book *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman.

Our outer layer should consist of love and service. This is what people see, this is what our children see, and it's important that we act in love and service to one another. Even when it is hard to serve our spouse, we do it. We definitely didn't deserve Jesus' servitude, but He served anyway because He loved us. To love our spouses is to serve them.

Each layer builds on one another.

Work on each one, starting with God and build from there.

Layer your marriage daily because it is precious, it needs protection, and it CAN last against any winter blast...

Date Night Fun – Simple and Sweet – by Marcy Lytle

Sometimes date night doesn't occur because we think it has to be a big production with tickets to some event, a romantic dinner for two atop white tablecloths, as we are both all dressed up in our finest. And that doesn't happen regularly because of finances, time, or just plain weariness from working and kids and well...life. However, date night doesn't always have to be a huge fanfare or a big fuss. Yes, those kinds of dates are fun. But so are dates that are simple and sweet!

Here are five ideas for you and that special someone this month, if funds are low and bodies and minds are tired:

Peanuts and Popcorn – A friend gave us two oversized mugs, hot chocolate and marshmallows for Christmas, and we have a large bag of unshelled peanuts in our pantry (in a cute burlap bag), as well. Then we got a new cookbook that has a recipe for salted caramel popcorn. There's the date right there! All we need is a movie on Netflix, a comfy blanket for two, and we have our snacks ready to enjoy. Simple and sweet.

https://www.samsclub.com/sams/in-shell-peanuts-48-3-oz/prod21363371.ip?&source=ifpla&CAWELAID=730010300001902054&pid=CSE Google P LA 1013572015&wl0=&wl1=g&wl2=c&wl3=260269145953&wl4=pla-414270867050&wl5=9028263&wl6=&wl7=&wl9=pla&wl10=1247713&wl11=online&wl12={productid}&wl13=&wl15=57612602048&wl17=1o2&veh=sem&kclid=241a6dbb-eacb-47c1-931f-fb062051f17a&qclid=EAlaIqobChMIquD3tv_d3wIVC0RpCh3iZqtZEAkYAiABEqLyGPD_BwE

<https://www.amazon.com/Pull-Up-Chair-Recipes-Family-ebook/dp/B0789JSNRY>

Coziness and Cuteness - Surely you have some cozy or cute socks. If you don't, you can find some at the dollar store. For a date night in, require the cozy socks and then set up a cute box. Use a plastic tub, a large plastic popcorn bowl, or even a fun tote and fill it with all things simple and sweet. Include some snacks from World Market that maybe you haven't tried before, a deck of cards for game playing, some cute plates and napkins, and set it in the middle of the floor as you enjoy your evening together.

<https://www.target.com/s/casual+cozy+socks>

<https://www.target.com/p/west-bend-medium-popcorn-bucket/-/A-14224733>

Mints and Magazines – Find a place that has mint ice cream, either with chocolate chunks mixed in or peppermint candies crushed and stirred. It can be a gelato shop or a drive-thru like Dairy Queen. Next, either bring unread magazines from home or pick up a couple at your local stores, one that each of you likes. Include highlighters. Enjoy your sweet treats as you each read, highlighting words or pictures or stories of interest. Do this for a bit, and then share what you read. A great night of connecting, simply and sweetly!

<https://www.amazon.com/Trusted-Media-Brands-Inc-Handyman/dp/B00005N7Q1>

<https://www.amazon.com/Meredith-Corporation-Real-Simple/dp/B002PWX1IE>

Crimson and Clover – These two words are part of an old song – take a listen! Crimson is a deep red found everywhere this month, so incorporate that into date night. Gather the ingredients to make this crimson drink together and serve in sweet delicate glasses. Don't have any? There are plastic versions at the dollar store! Print out this recipe for cloverleaf dinner rolls and make them together, as well. Add a few other things like cheeses and meats, if you like, and you have a simply sweet date night all ready to enjoy!

<https://aseasyasapplepie.com/cloverleaf-dinner-rolls/>

<https://www.geniuskitchen.com/recipe/crimson-drink-355068>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpGEeneO-t0>

Drink and Drive – No, not the drinking until drunk and the driving recklessly – but rather going for a pleasure ride and enjoying sips along the way! Make this an afternoon date while the sun is still up and line out a nice drive away from town, perhaps an hour out and an hour back. Find three drive-through stops for different three different drinks along the way. There might be choices like sodas, milkshakes, and stopping for flavored waters or slushes. Since you're drinking so much, just provide nuts for snacking with your sips. Simply fun, sweet, and special!

<http://digg.com/2018/we-tried-every-hint-water-flavor-these-are-the-10-best>

#

After 30 Years – All Toned Up – by Marcy Lytle

I know that millions of women on January 1 decidedly made goals to be more fit this year, to tone up those legs and arms and abs, because they felt they overate during the holidays and needed to start new. I'm sure that's a good thing for all of us to, to stay toned and tight, by exercising and eating right! However, this article is not about that kind of toning up. It's about the tone of our voices!

Here's the scene:

"Whatcha doing?" she says, as she lovingly caresses his neck and peers over his shoulder to see what it is he's reading at the table.

He pauses and gazes into her eyes and replies, "Nothing important," as he holds her near and asks what it is she needs him to do.

Is that the normal scene at your house?

Some days, mine looks more like this:

"WHAT are you doing?" I query, as I realize he's propped in front of his laptop and I need him to get up and get moving on my to-do list I handed him an hour ago. I say it with emphasis on the what, with a tone that is accusatory, and with an eye that is evil.

He doesn't pause, he gives me a look, and his tone is stern as he replies, "Can I answer an urgent work email? Geez!"

That tone with emphasis on the *WHAT* instead of lightly on the *whatcha* makes all the difference in the world! One is curiously interested, and the other is determinedly condemning.

I'm really good at ugly tones when I'm tired, have too much on my plate, or when I'm irritated and unforgiving about something else totally unrelated to the matter at hand.

One of my goals this year (and every year, sigh...) is to work on my tone of voice, even more than my toned legs and arms.

Tone can reveal a loving sound that invites a sweet response.

Tone can reveal an ugly snarl that evokes a rise and a ruckus.

So how do we tone up our voices and our sounds?

For me, I have to do several things, and I have to do these things daily, not just once and be done:

- I need to rest
- I need to let go
- I need to pray for him
- I need to realize he has things to do

- I need to stop and think before I speak

If I take a pause and do these things, it helps me question in a tone of curiosity seeking an answer, rather than a tone of shame seeking retribution.

And that, my friend, makes all the difference in the world as to whether or not we have a good and fun day after he closes out his window and I close my mouth.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Simple Truths - Football and Promises – by Erica Simmons

God can use the things we care about to teach us some of our most important lessons...

The Dallas Cowboys

This is the team I used to love to cheer against, until three years ago when Dak Prescott was drafted by them. You see, Dak was the quarterback at Mississippi State where I went to college. It is funny how one person has made me personally vest in this team. I started following people on Twitter who reported on the Dallas Cowboys, I tracked training camp progress and even watch the draft in its entirety this past year. I was surrounded by Dallas Cowboy fans at work, who love to talk the game of football, and it was great until the losing started. This year, when they were 3 and 3, I had a gut feeling they would go 10 and 6. To get my prediction on record, I told one of my co-workers so that I could brag later when it came true. To cap such a statement, I rattled off which games they would win and which ones they would lose. In the end, God used something that I cared a lot about to teach me a lesson about my life following Him.

As the season began to unfold, this month's story began to grow. Right out of the gate they lost two games in a row. They are now 3 and 5 and can only lose one more game out of the 8 remaining games, games I stated they would lose. Immediately doubt started to creep in. What was I thinking! As a former Dallas Cowboys anti-fan, these were the games I used to love to watch. Now they are the ones that frustrate me, just like the decades-old Cowboy fans. Then I watch a 5 game win streak, winning two games I said they would lose. The games were close and filled with really good moments, really frustrating moments, but in the end were victories. They were 8 and 5 and only had to win 1 more game to win their division and claim a spot in the playoffs. They lost the next week, but won the final two, to win the division and make the playoffs. Their final record? 10 and 6. *So I was right, right?*

Not exactly, but I did win something more valuable than the right to gloat about having the final record correct.

Around week 13, a light of knowledge began to glow in this situation. As I was watching the Saints game (one which I had them losing by the way), thoughts began to form on the parallels of my prediction and my life of faith. Hear me out on this. Jesus used parables in His time walking the earth, not because He liked telling stories. Telling stories allowed Him to take things the people knew and understood and connect them to the lesson He wanted to teach them. I will go out on a limb and say the Holy Spirit did the same thing here. Point in case, I never got a gut feeling about which games the Cowboys would win, but nevertheless I chose which games I thought they could win. This is important, because how many times has God told us something was going to happen and the next thing we know we are mapping a course of action as to how this will come about? For me that answer is *way too many times*.

A few months ago, I shared a story in one of my columns about my friend at work whose husband was diagnosed with cancer and how I was led by God to declare his healing. For me that was the end of it. I thought that he would get nothing but good news from that point on. You see, I mapped how God was going to make his healing complete. The truth of the matter he has been going through treatment and life has not been the easiest on them. Does that make what God told me to do and the fact that he is healed wrong? No, God gave me a command and the faith to stand on what He has told me to be truth. I don't get to map the way to the truth. It is the

same thing I did with the Cowboys' record. I had a feeling of the final outcome, but that was not enough. I had to be in control of how they got to 10 and 6.

Ah, Erica, that is just you and your fanciful thinking.

Well let's go to the ultimate authority, the Bible.

Abraham and Sara

What did God tell them? He told them they would have a son. That was truth God tells us in His word, that He is not a liar (Numbers 23:19). Same thing happened to Abraham and Sara as it did to me. They were not content with holding on in faith to the truth that God gave them. *Hogwash Erica, how could you know that?* It is evident in their behavior, which finally led to Sara offering up her servant to "help" God with His promise. Ever wonder why God didn't just walk away from them after that fiasco? He couldn't because He said He would give them a son and remember - He can't lie. So even when we don't deserve it, God is ever so faithful to us. This week in our women's discipleship meeting, our leader talked about how we don't get a glimpse into the back story of the Bible. Even though we don't, I can't imagine that Abraham and Sara wouldn't have learned more than how to trust God. I know I did.

- I learned that I picked out the path of what I thought was the easiest. What I was reminded of was that "All things are possible for those who believe." (Mark 9:23) This happened when the Cowboys beat the New Orleans Saints in week 13. No one gave them a chance to win that game. It was awesome.
- I learned that even though no matter what the situation looks like, I can hold fast to my faith (Hebrews 10:23). This happened times two in the Giants game. They were down by seven and it was 4th and 20. They won the game and that gave them the final record at 10 and 6. The Dallas Cowboys' season record holds no consequences in the big picture of life, but this lesson God taught me with something that was important to me does.

These are lessons I have and will continue to apply to the promises God has given me, like the promises about my boys' lives. As a parent, the biggest thing I want to do is map my young men's lives. This lesson has taught me that if I could, I would deprive them of oh so many lessons their Heavenly Father wants to teach them. They would miss out on the joy of watching the impossible become possible, they would miss out on watching their darkest hour turn to light, and they would miss out on developing and establishing their relationship with their Heavenly Father.

Knowing this, I can easily step out of the way.

Firmly Planted - Spark of Joy – by Dina Cavazos

It's hard to believe we're in the second month of the New Year already! This year, 2019, I'm expecting the mission I've been on to simplify and de-clutter will become Mission Accomplished. The gentle prods—which are becoming more like shoves—are enough, but a new Netflix series is helping to motivate and inspire me to complete my goal. The sweet, soft-spoken Asian hostess has developed a method; one of the key things being to keep only what gives a “spark of joy”. That resonates with me. Finally, after many years, I'm getting it, and I'm excited about where this will lead...because everything we do leads somewhere, right?

My nature is to be frugal, to save, recycle, repurpose, etc. ad nauseum—to the point of washing and reusing plastic bags, and recovering items thrown away in my adult kids' trash. (Yes, I confess to having done this!) This, and other hazards of being human, has brought me to the place I've been moving away from for a few years...years, because it takes time to realize some things, because it takes time to change ingrained habits, because life changes...because God is gracious like that. But he's also serious about business and I have to admit I've dilly-dallied a bit. That explains the shoves.

Going through my closet, there's not a lot that gives me joy. Flannel shirts, boots and sandals, jeans and comfy sweats, and a very few recently purchased tops— I'm sizzling with joy! But my waste-not nature makes it hard to cull out the downers. I realize that I've bought a lot of things haphazardly because of price and appeal without a thought to coordination. I've settled for things that aren't really comfortable because they were more affordable, and bought things that weren't really “me”; consequently, they sit in my closet unworn, receipt long gone or out of date. What a waste and what a shame! Of course I give them to someone or donate, but still...I want to be a better steward of my resources. You clothes people out there—no judgment, but I also realize I don't really need as many clothes as I have—I wear pretty much the same things and my social world is mostly the creatures in the garden.

Through this process of simplifying I'm learning a lot about myself: my habits, my wrong thinking, my misplaced values, what I really value, who I really am, and what I really love. I'm getting on track to run on my rail and it feels good. That “spark of joy” is an affirmation that I'm going the right direction.

So what's the ultimate value of this? It's not to have fewer clothes in my closet or to have everything neatly folded. That has earthly value, but what's the eternal value? For me, it's of eternal value to be who God made me to be; it's of eternal value to follow his direction because he knows what's best for me; it's of eternal value to be mindful of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it; it's of eternal value to use the resources he's given me wisely. The “spark of joy” ignites the flame of my true self—the part of me that connects to God and is at peace and rest there. I think it's so kind of God to want us to be who we are—to have made us each unique and to be able to reflect that in our tastes, our desires, our gifts, our personalities.

My life isn't your life—God is doing something unique and important in each of us. I share my experience to encourage you in whatever place you're in right now. Whatever it is, if you **love**

and seek what is true and right and good—which is God—he’s working to move you from that place to another because he wants the best and is always working to get us there. Believe it, look for it, listen to your inner longings, and find the “spark of joy” that brings you peace.

Moving Forward - What Do You Want? – by Pam Charro

It's a question I believe the Lord has asked me several times throughout my life, and it always brings mixed feelings:

Joy that he is speaking to me,
Hesitation because I don't have a quick answer,
And the tiniest bit of apprehension because I realize he wants me to give a responsible answer.

See, if someone not fond of me asks that question, I know I probably want to end the interaction fairly quickly. And if a magic genie were to ask, I might say that I'd like a million dollars or endless dark chocolate. But when God asks, it's different; I know he really wants me to think about it, because he's the one friend who loves me perfectly, but is also capable of bringing about what I want.

The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 that in Christ we are given all things. So if Father is asking me what I want, I suppose another way he might word it would be,

"What kind of faith do you have in who I am,
who I say you are,
and the kind of life that is available to you?"

The question gently implies that I have dreams I am not yet living. So I must ask myself why.

I believe that God is glorified when I live the life that he put me here to live, and that many of my gifts and desires are seeds that he planted in order to make himself known. But those seeds will never grow into anything if I don't have the faith and courage to live out those dreams. And it's scary. What if I fail?

I heard a quote recently that I really like:

"If you think you are capable of God's plan for your life, then you have no idea how big it is."

I'm convinced that when God asks me what I want, it's a challenge to dream bigger. But it's also an invitation to watch him do what only he can do so that those dreams come true.

So I must think, pray, and carefully consider my response. And then be prepared to put my whole heart into living what I say I believe.

So ... what do I want?

#

Bits and Pieces – A Fun Follow – by Marcy Lytle

“I love your makeup...tell us all about it!”

This was a comment I saw on an Instagram feed from a celebrity, and actually I see it a lot on all sorts of feeds of those who are high profile faces on social media. Perhaps a person is high profile because of their food expertise and gain followers because of that. All of a sudden women desire to be like that person, to own the same kitchen tools, to be creative with leftovers...and then to wear what she wears and shop where she shops, etc. Joanna Gaines is a high-profile face on social media, and many want to copy her style in clothing and decorating.

I too think it's fun to follow others and what they're doing for inspiration and creativity. It's great to try out new styles and recipes and gadgets and gifts. It's a good thing to see a beautiful wreath, for example, made by someone on social media and to then copy that inspiration for one to fit our own home! It's also great to try out new makeup products that are promoted as being anti-aging, or ones that give that smoky eye we want to try...

But, wait!

This following and idolizing and adoring these other women who have what we don't have can become an obsession. Just take a few moments and read the comments below one of these people's posts. Women ask personal questions like how to become “zero waste” during their periods, to asking advice on how to raise their children to be planet-conscious, to how to slim down and tone up so they can look as good as the person they're following and so on...

If that's you, or if that's me, following and desiring and adoring and wanting to be like someone else, it's okay as long as...that's not our passion and identity!

I long for the day when I see on someone's feed this question,

“I love your heart and compassion...where did you get that?”

We are a society that wants all sorts of material things, possessions that give us order and youth, and ways to make us eternally young and intellectual. Women everywhere want to look good and feel good about themselves. I do too! Don't you?

I'm realizing, however, that if I'm not careful I will focus too much on what I see in the mirror and in my kitchen and on my body and forget to see what's in my heart. I want to realize the mess in the corner of my heart that hates instead of loves. I want to make that area of my mind that's cluttered with fear and guilt more organized with thoughts of peace and His love. And I definitely want to clean the windows of my soul so that I can look out and see others instead of the dust on my own curtains!

I'm on social media, I follow all sorts of interesting people, and I can get caught in the stream of reading and wishing and desiring to be like someone else if I'm not careful. I love to copy a good organizing tip or try out a suggested recipe or purchase the latest mascara that fills my lashes. However, I hope to this year follow quotes that talk about His goodness to my neighbor and ways of showing kindness to the unkind. I hope that someone's selfless act of love inspires

me to do the same, and that I can read and grow in giving and living outside the confines of my home that I'm decorating and the closets that I'm filling.

There's nothing wrong with a fun follow and a question of interest. It's exhilaratingly fun. But there's something so right about a fun follow with an answer of hope and love. That's exhilaratingly fun, as well!

Real Stories - A Diamond in the Mud - by Vivian Nichols

It was one of those fantastic summer days when all seemed well with the world. Spending the day with our 22 year-old son Jared and two teenagers, Crystal and Seth, out on Lake Palestine and riding Jared's Sea-Doo was an absolute thrill. The weather was remarkable, as if we'd special-ordered it from above. Water temperatures were perfect, and we made the most of it all: the fellowship with our kids, the beautiful lake setting, and the clean, fresh air. We were living our dream!

Late that afternoon, we loaded up and headed home in order to clean up for a family get-together that evening at my sister's. Because we were in a rush when we reached the house, we quickly took baths, changed clothes, grabbed a bite to eat, and left the dishes in the sink. Then it was off to Deborah's house.

The whole family was there, my parents, my sisters' families, my brother, and all of the grandkids and great-grandkids of my parents. There was quite a crew. I remember getting down on the floor and playing with my niece's baby and small children. Suddenly, as I raked my hand across the carpet, my wedding ring prong caught in the carpet fibers, and I was stunned to realize that my large diamond was missing! This was the wedding ring that I had worn for twenty-five years.

Frantically, down on my hands and knees, I began searching the breadth and width of the floor, assuming it had to be there. It wasn't. I was devastated. It took only a few minutes for us to comb the entire house, unfortunately, with no success.

My heart sank because deep down inside, I knew it was covered in mud at the bottom of Lake Palestine. Despondent, I rode quietly home with my husband, Gary, and the kids. All I could think about was that diamond. "Why, oh why did I wear my ring to the lake? Why was I so stupid?" My mind was on rewind and replay modes, but I also knew I had hardly taken it off in the 25 years we had been married, not even to bathe.

Arriving home without an ounce of gumption, I drug myself to the kitchen and forced myself to wash the dishes. There was nothing at all I could do to change the situation. I knew this for a fact. As I stood there washing, I decided that I would just leave it in God's hands. There was nothing else I could do, so why torture myself? With this thought, I drew in a deep breath of air and my shoulders relaxed. "I need to just trust...I need to just..." I thought. "I need to...I need to pee!"

The next thing I knew, I was in the bathroom. You know, there's something very humbling about sitting on the toilet. What better place to just open up and let it all out there, just bare your soul? I bowed my head, leaned down to my lap, closed my eyes and began to pray. "Lord, it's not the material value of the diamond; although, you know we can't possibly afford to buy another one, but it's the sentimental value. Even if we could afford to buy another one, it wouldn't be the same. Please, please let me find it."

Still in a prostrated position and slowly opening my eyes, I was face-to-face with this brilliant, sparkling stone. There it lay, next to my bath towel. Apparently, when I had taken a bath earlier that evening, the towel had caught the loose stone and pulled it out.

During my life, I have had many prayers answered, but this was undoubtedly the fastest one ever answered. My soul soared to new heights that night. In my excitement to show my husband, I nearly dropped it. Then I would have kicked myself. I know that a diamond is only a compressed piece of coal, but what it symbolizes means more and will last through the ages, even after we're gone.

#

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Annoyed at the Table – by Marcy Lytle

It was New Year's Eve and we (four of us) had started a puzzle about 10:30 pm hoping to finish it by midnight. I'd say we had about 50 pieces left to place, when a stranger walked up to our table and started commenting on where to place this and that. She hovered over our shoulders and said things about how she's a very good puzzle worker, she told us how to sort and organize, and began picking up our pieces and telling us where they went!

Needless to say, she was annoying!

We all were nice to this woman, but I think we were all relieved when she got a call and had to exit the coffee shop.

I realized that I do not like strangers hovering and honing in on my space! I especially do not like strangers who think they know it all and proceed to talk about that knowledge...

One of the goals of the church where I attend is to reach those outside the church through kindness and intentional acts of love. After all, that's what loving Christ is all about – loving others. I really have to work at loving others, at least those who are annoying (in my estimation.)

When that lady hovered over our table, she introduced herself, she was friendly, and I'm certain she meant no harm. Each of us told her our names and that only encouraged her to stand near us longer! I honestly at one point wanted to slap her hand away when she picked up a piece and had the audacity to instruct on puzzle-working!

One of the things I've learned over the years is that while others certainly are annoying sometimes, I can be annoying myself. I may not hover and spout of knowledge, but I can get on a soap box about issues, I can easily become irritated when I'm tired, and I can certainly be annoying if I'm not having a good time somewhere!

We all have annoyances. And yet...we're told to love others as we love ourselves.

It shouldn't be a hard task, but it is sometimes. I wanted to shoo that lady away, but none of did that. We talked to her and conversed and even thanked her for placing a few pieces of the puzzle. And yes, some of that nicety was forced and not genuine at all.

I'm thinking that if I learn to practice kindness this month, the month of love, it will soon be something I enjoying offering instead of grimacing when it's not comfortable. Or maybe, it will still be hard to be kind to some people, those that grate on my nerves.

Are there annoying people hovering around your table? Are they putting their hands into something you've been creating and messing up the picture you had in mind?

Join me in a quest to be intentionally kind, especially to the annoying ones. And join me in giving thanks that He is kind to us every day, when we are annoyingly doubting, mistrusting and disobeying...for no good reason at all.

FRESH THYME – Capture the Moments – by Marcy Lytle

I was waiting on my husband to arrive home so that we could slip out to a movie, when he opened the front door and called to me, “Come outside.” That was not the usual way he arrived home, and I ran to the front of the house expecting to see something odd or unusual in our yard or on the porch. I stepped outside and he pointed across the street where the sun was setting behind the houses. The view was breathtakingly beautiful, with the fiery reds and oranges and yellows in the sky, so much amazement that I had to take this photo.

Immediately, I posted this picture on Facebook so that all of my friends could see, in case they hadn’t stepped out and observed the beauty of this day’s sunset. A winter sunset like that doesn’t happen that often, not one with those vibrant colors that blanket the entire sky. So I posted and we went to the movies.

As we were going to bed, I scrolled through Facebook and saw that multiple people captured that sunset and although all photos were similar in color, every one of them was a bit different as they captured a different second or minute of the sun setting in their particular neighborhood.

I told my husband, “It was there. And then it was gone.”

The sunset takes place and we have to capture it, or within just a few minutes it’s completely gone and darkness settles in, in its place.

There’s got to be a lesson learned just from capturing the moments of the sun setting. There’s got to be some encouragement and wonder and awe and faith that take place after witnessing such a wonderful view.

- The sun rises and sets every day, without fail, and so do his mercies.
- The beauty of the sunset is often missed, when we don’t step out to see it. We must open our doors.
- The spectacular handiwork in the sky needs to be shared so that others and awe and wonder, too.
- The colors of the sunset cannot be replicated or caught in a bottle, but must be enjoyed when seen.
- The sunset happens just before darkness, but then the moon appears to light the dark sky.
- The reminders in the sky of a power that is greater than any other are comforting and faith-building.

When is the last time you were called to observe the beauty of the sky, or stepped out your front door to witness a sunset, or used your phone to capture creation?

I was stunned and in awe of that beauty, and apparently people were everywhere in our city, as photos of that miraculous moment were on the news just before bedtime. His reminders of His power and creativity in color in the skies are there, if we just observe them and breathe deeply at his care over this world and over us.

Capture the moments, call others to see them too, and do it quickly...before darkness settles in. And then do it again and again as the sun rises and sets, establishing his faithfulness to the world that He loves.

#

FRESH THYME - Counting Comments – by Marcy Lytle

It seems we have become a world, at least for a good majority, of people who look at social media to see if anyone commented or liked our last post. Because of the type of business *A Bundle of THYME* is, social media is important in getting the word out of a new article and obtaining followers and readers. Therefore, we post often on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. And very often I'm asked how many followers and readers we have.

There are days when I get on these social media platforms to see if there has been any interaction on our posts, and sometimes there is and sometimes there isn't. There are all sorts of ways to post things that make them more visible, like using good quality photos, adding proper hashtags, and then there's always the content, too. We can see the accounts of others, especially on Instagram, and observe that they get tens of thousands of likes compared to our tens of likes.

It's really mind-boggling, exhausting, and quite impossible to stay afloat with counting comments and likes in the social media world without being consumed with that world.

Recently, I thought about how much time is spent by so many looking for comments and affirmation on what is posted or shared. I realized that we don't spend near as much time looking for that affirmation and for those comments from the only ONE who really matters.

Our self-worth doesn't come from what others say about us, how often they affirm us, or even if they notice and like our latest recipe, words of wisdom, or photos of our adorable dog.

Here are some incredible affirmations found in his Word:

Psalm 139:17, 18

How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
When I awake, I am still with You.

Psalm 40:5

Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders which You have done,
And Your thoughts toward us;
There is none to compare with You.
If I would declare and speak of them,
They would be too numerous to count.

Romans 5:7,8

For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Psalm 149:1

The LORD called Me from the womb;
From the body of My mother He named Me.

All we have to do is search His words for countless affirmations and likes and comments towards us, his children, those he loves and cares for.

February is a month where people count comments and look for affirmation and love from those in their lives, they hope for the one they love to pour out their love and affection in gifts and experiences, and they pine and long for the love their heart desires. We're made to be loved, and it's normal to seek to be loved.

However, counting comments on social media is not the place to receive that affirmation. Those comments can be bought, sometimes our posts are not even seen, and what we post and share with strangers behind a screen is not what makes us or breaks us.

I decided a long time ago to not subscribe to statistic counting features for this magazine. I feel as though this magazine is an act of obedience to share encouragement with women, and the affirmation that comes from obedience is the best affirmation to have.

God loves you, and He loves me, with a love like no other. He comments about it often, and all we have to do is believe it and receive it.

Go on. Count His comments above and search His word for more. Then just enjoy social media for what it is, and post that picture of your adorable pet for the pure pleasure of sharing...whether anyone likes with a cute emoji face or not.

FRESH THYME – Neither Does Joy – by Marcy Lytle

Sadness arrives at our doorsteps uninvited, doesn't it? If we just sit in the theater week after week, we watch stories of sadness of the most depressing kind. We recently watched *Beautiful Boy*, a film about a young man and his dad, and the struggles of addiction. Another movie called *Ben is Back* is another tale of a mother's love for her son struggling with the same thing...addiction. We also saw the film *Shoplifters*, a tale of a very poor family struggling to make ends meet, and how all of their "baggage" catches up with them, even though they love and are loved...

Sadness is on the television screen, in the newspapers, and on our screens. The main stories are not ones that uplift, but rather ones that scare, hype and sadden the very core of our hearts. Another shooting has occurred, a child has gone missing, or a new type of disease is killing children. Most of the sitcoms we watch are stories about families with only one parent, because that's the norm now – one parent families. If we watch and read constantly, we carry around a heavy heart at all of the sadness in the world.

Yes, sadness waits for no one. It shows up without an invitation and stays in our homes too long, after devastation has occurred. Floods come and we lose our things, disease ravages and we watch our families suffer, and then loss of relationship happens and our hearts ache.

But, wait!

There's a flip side – there's joy!

Joy arrives, too, if we take time to notice it, and it too arrives at our doorsteps daily and minute by minute, if we dare to open the door and let it in. In fact, joy is more intrusive, more impacting, and has more longevity than sadness!

- We can consider trials and count it joy – so that means joy can supersede sadness of the saddest kind. (James 1: 2,3)
- Those who love Him have an eternal outcome of joy, but it's not so with those who don't. (Proverbs 10:28)
- There's a joy that awaits us that is inexplicable and glorious. I want that! (1 Peter 1: 8,9)
- All of heaven rejoices when one person says, "I believe," and we can rejoice too! (Luke 15:7)
- When we are weak, his joy gives us strength. (Nehemiah 8:10)
- Gladness and joy overtake us and send sadness and sighing away! (Isaiah 35:10)
- NO ONE can steal our joy. (John 16:22)

Sadness doesn't wait and doesn't stay away while we're here on this earth, but neither does joy! It's ours for the asking, for the leaping, and for the long-haul...forever and ever. Sorrow might last for a night, but joy comes with the morning light...

If sadness is your visitor at this time, take time to mourn and express sorrow. That's healthy. But never forget that joy is relentless and yours. And though sadness sometimes seems it won't let go...neither will joy! It's here to stay and it sends sadness away...

A BUNDLE OF

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MARCH 2019

TIPS

Seven for You – Check These Out – by Marcy Lytle

I feel sorry for so many brick and mortar businesses, I really do! There are so many that are closing, and I'm reading that it's partly due to online sales. These storefronts just can't compete with the ease and availability of shopping online. I totally get that. I too shop online at Christmas and during the year more than I ever used to. And I enjoy browsing the internet to see what's new and interesting. However, I LOVE going to the physical stores, as well!

For this month of March, I thought it would be fun to share my newest and favorite websites or apps that I frequent often, and why I do! Maybe next month, I'll share my favorite shops where I show up in person to buy.

Thrillist. This is actually something I signed up for, to receive in my email. I know...another email. However, this site sends lists of all kinds. "Best tacos" or "the most quaint towns in each state" or "things to do this weekend" and it's all centered around where YOU live. You can just visit the site or sign up to have it visit you. I use this often for inspiration! <https://www.thrillist.com/>

Lakeside Collections. This is one of those mail order catalog sites, but the thing I like about their options are that they are affordable, I've liked every item I've ordered, and they're dependable and fast! There are really cute kids' toys and yard décor and even kitchen items. Just click through and shop, and I think you'll like it too. <https://www.lakeside.com/homels>

Texas Escapes. If you don't live in Texas, I hope you have a similar site for your state. It's a site where you can search for towns and up will pop the history and interesting information. We use this site often when going on road trips. We pick several small towns, search, and print out the story of its origin and try to find the old buildings pictured on the site. It's great fun! <http://www.texasescapes.com/>

Cinemark App – If you attend a lot of movies, you'll want this app on your phone. It's only \$8.99 a month and there are all sorts of perks involved. You can order tickets on line and have no convenience fee added, and you get free tickets and points, and discounts on concessions. It's really user friendly once you figure out how to purchase, to show the code to the ticket taker, and how to use your other code for snacks! <https://www.cinemark.com/movieclub>

Duluth Trading Company – Love this site for the guys. I bought my husband several items from this site for Christmas and he loves each one. Mainly, I like the workshop tools and gear links. Check out all the categories. One favorite from Christmas was the grapefruit hand lotion! <https://www.duluthtrading.com/workshop-and-gear/>

Kelsey Nixon – This is a young lady that used to have a cooking show on the Food Network and that gave her a name. I follow her on Instagram, but she has a website too. She cooks and organizes and shares all of her tips and tricks. She has two little kids and has just a very pleasant way of spreading cheer and good stuff with women everywhere! She's a fun follow. <http://www.kelseynixon.com/>

The Book of the Month Club – One of my gifts from Christmas was that my husband signed me up for this book club where for \$14.99 a month I get to choose from five options, and receive a hardbound book of my choice (I'm not a fan of Kindle – I like paper in my hand!) in a cute box, with a bookmark around the first week of every month! I have received three books so far and am loving my collection. Not sure what I'll do with them all once they're read though...maybe have a book swap! <https://www.bookofthemonth.com/>

What are your favorite websites or apps or places you like to browse? I try to pare down to just the ones I really love every once in a while, so that I'm actually using them for good and not having them use me for wasting time! I hope you click and check them out, too!

#

The Dressing – So, It’s Spring! – by Marcy Lytle

It’s so fun, in my opinion, to see what new trends are popping up each season. Some of them are outlandish and most of us wouldn’t wear them to the places we usually go. Others are so pretty and a great idea to try, if we love fashion and all things clothes. I love all of it! I love seeing what new ideas are being presented on the runway and then adjusting them to fit my own wardrobe and closet. There are lots of new trends for 2019, but here are a few of my personal faves:

Pale Blue – This color is in for spring and we found this pretty blouse from H&M that looks crisp, stylish and comfy. If you look closely, it’s a small stripe. It ties at the waist and would look cute with so many colors on the bottom – from jeans to khaki to black – and more!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0745816001.html

Scarf print – I love scarves, so this idea of a scarf print in a dress is so cool! Check out this beauty. It’s long-sleeved but lightweight. Great for those spring lunches or weddings or evenings out with him. Do you love it, too? It too is from H&M.

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0766324001.html

Ruffled blouse – I’m not a fan of lots of ruffles, but just a few are okay and look great. Check out this pretty floral print with a small ruffle on the shoulders. Super pretty and feminine for your spring wardrobe! This one is from Old Navy.

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=393950012&cid=1105426&pcid=10018>

Color block - Yes, it’s back. And we LOVE this color block sweater in black and white from Target. It’s paired with a green skirt, and we love that as well! This sweater will go with everything in your closet! (need pic)

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-elbow-sleeve-color-block-pullover-sweater-who-what-wear-153-black/-/A-54201218?preselect=54138228#lnk=sametab>

Crochet - I’m not a huge fan of crochet, maybe because I wore it in the 70’s? But it’s back, and this really pretty top from Maurice’s is just crocheted in the front. It comes in this beautiful marigold hue, and what a great top for spring!

https://www.maurices.com/product/solid-crocheted-front-tee/107181?ref_page=search#color/C3855

Polka Dot – Yes, those little cute dots are showing up this spring. Check out this blouse with a subtle ruffled sleeve in a beautiful color – gold rush - for the season. It can be found at Dillards!

https://www.dillards.com/p/jolt-polka-dot-ruffle-sleeve-tie-front-top/508817897?di=05660210_zi_gold_rush

Natural Bag – One trend is neutral hues top to bottom. We love this natural box bag from Zara. It just screams, “Spring!” It’s not large, so you’ll want to pare down and just carry the essentials to lunch or out for a day of shopping. It comes in two options!

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/natural-handbag-p12624004.html?v1=7887699&v2=1180507>

You can always keep a bright cardigan and tights on standby for those chilly mornings, as pictured above...to wear with a new dress that’s for the new season. (That one is from Francesca’s!)

What pieces are you adding to your wardrobe this spring? What pieces will you keep? Will you try one of the trends or stick to your core traditions? Why not consider doing both? Spring is all about the new shoots and blooms and leaves appearing, so let the new you spring forth as well.

Selah's Style – On the Playground – by Marcy Lytle

Spring break is this month, and kids will be out playing (hopefully) if the weather cooperates. It's that time of year to venture back to the parks and the playgrounds for loads of fun. And who knows, maybe you can take in a movie or two, as well. Have you seen the new LEGO movie? Kids need to be able to move about (and you do, too!) as they climb and swing and run. But then again, they like to dress themselves...so that's always fun, too.

It might be still a bit chilly during Spring Break, so always have coats in the car just in case. On the day we ventured out, it was just right...no coats needed.

Ayla loves to wear her "costumes" anywhere she goes, and she always includes leggings or pants underneath for modest playing while climbing and sliding. And nope, shoes do NOT have to match when one is playing outside. They just have to be comfy! If it's okay with her mom, sometimes Ayla adds a bright hue of lip color for any outing at all...

Gideon goes for comfort all the way, and he's wearing a matching set of shorts with a tee today! Decked out in blue sneakers from Target, Gideon is also sporting a cool watch that is in sync with his parents' watches! He has a schedule he follows from his watch! On this particular day, Gideon brought a sketch and writing book, because he's working on a short story about a stink bug...

Augie is dressed so stylish and cute in his long sleeve denim shirt and khaki shorts from Target. He wants you to be sure and notice the "fween" color on the bottom of his sneakers that he can put on by himself, because they Velcro! Blue and khaki is a combo that is never wrong.

Here's a better view of the front of Ayla's dress as she slides down with her Mister (grandfather) – which is great fun. Having a sliding partner is quite special, isn't it? And those leggings under the dress are great, to keep legs covered and warm.

Finally, what about the style for the adults who are on the playground with the kiddos? Here, Mister is sporting a plaid shirt from Eddie Bauer, one of his favorite places for clothes. He says they don't wrinkle and they retain their shape! And his shoes? They're Sperry's brand, of course!

Kids enjoy playing outside, as it allows them to get their energy out. Imagine with them, sing as you swing them "higher, " and put your own book or phone away as you climb and slide, as well. They might want to sit and draw, they may say they can do it by themselves, or they may grab your hand and plead, "One more time!"

Enjoy spring style from your favorite clothing store for kids...which for these kids – it's Target!

In the Kitchen – March Muffins – by Marcy Lytle

I don't usually gravitate toward muffins, or any pastries, for that matter. However, homemade muffins or big blueberry ones freshly baked in a coffee shop do alert my senses! March is a great time for breakfast on the patio, if the temperatures aren't still too cold. Or we can start packing up food to go in the car, for a nice spring drive outside of town. What could be better than filling a small basket with muffins, tucking in a thermos filled with our favorite drink, and heading out for these scrumptious treats with friends or family?

Here are a few of our faves...

Blueberry Muffins

One of my friends has a famous mom, Marjorie Johnson, and she is 99 years young! She travels around appearing on television shows, and she wins blue ribbons at the Minnesota State Fair all the time! She has a cookbook I love, and her blueberry muffins are the best! Did you know (her hint) that you only need to spray the bottoms of the tins for a perfect rise and lift from the pan!? It really works!

<https://www.amazon.com/Road-Blue-Ribbon-Baking-Marjorie/dp/159298195X>

Here's her recipe:

- 2 c all purpose flour
- 3 t baking powder
- ½ t salt
- ½ c sugar
- 1 large egg
- ¾ c milk
- ½ cup melted butter
- 1 c fresh blueberries

Sift flour, baking powder, salt and sugar in large bowl and set aside. In separate bowl beat egg slightly then add milk and butter, and whisk. Pour the wet into the dry and stir till just moistened. (Batter will be lumpy). Fold in the berries.

Grease 12 muffin cups (only the bottom – to allow for a perfect round top!). Fill ¾ full. Bake at 400 degrees for 20-25 minutes til golden brown. Test with toothpick. Remove and cool on wire rack.

Honey Muffins

This recipe is from a tiny cookbook I purchased at a festival where the folks were selling their honey. I made these recently one Sunday morning for the kids when they were visiting, and they were a hit! They're easy and tasty, great paired with a hot drink or juice!

https://www.amazon.com/Bubbas-Beez-Honey-Hive-Cookbook/dp/0989084620/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=beez+honey+from+the+hive&qid=1550062965&s=books&sr=1-1-spell

- 2 T honey
- 1 c milk
- 1 beaten egg
- 2 T melted butter
- 2 c graham flour
- ½ t salt
- 1 ½ t baking powder

Preheat oven to 350. Mix honey, milk, egg and butter in a bowl. Mix flour, salt and baking powder in a separate bowl. Add to the liquid mixture.

Bake in greased muffin pans until golden brown.

Crunchy Pear Muffins

- 1 ¾ c flour
- 2 t baking powder
- 2/3 c soft brown sugar
- ½ t salt
- 3 t cinnamon
- 1 large egg
- ¼ c vegetable oil
- ¼ cup 2% milk
- 2 pears
- 1 T walnuts chopped finely
- 2 T turbinado sugar

Preheat oven to 400. Grease a muffin pan (bottoms only) or line with paper cups.

Sift the flour and baking powder in a large bowl, then stir in brown sugar, salt and 2T of the cinnamon. Beat the oil, egg and milk in a small bowl, then pour into the flour and mix til just combined (it will appear dry). Peel and chop the pears and fold in. Spoon into the muffin tin.

Mix the finely chopped nuts with the turbinado and 1T cinnamon. Sprinkle over top and bake for 20 minutes until well risen and cooked through!

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Tried and True – Today's Dishes – by Marcy Lytle

I have dishes and cute serving pieces for every season of the year...almost. At least, I'm trying to collect them. In a culture where so many are headed toward minimalism, perhaps you aren't interested in collecting any more dishes at all. However, there's a reason that I think we all need some seasonal dishes to set on our tables...

We are a group of people that anticipate and long for that which is not the present. When summer is over, people pine for the lazy vacation days they had or the warmth of the sun's rays. When September barely begins, stores hit us with Christmas décor to make us look forward to the holiday season way ahead of time. And when the coldness of winter lasts too long, we start wishing for spring and might plant a seed or too way before it's time...

I found myself these past few weeks being inundated with spring décor every time I hit the store, but I wasn't quite ready for it back in February! There have still been fires to enjoy and cider to sip...before I trade all of that for spring flowers and outdoor picnics.

All of that anticipation and pining, back and forth, seeps its way into our souls as well. We are constantly in a state of dissatisfaction with our lives, hoping and wishing that God would swoop down and make a change and lead us into our "destiny," while we miss today's blessings. We also pine for and reminisce about the past, or if it's been a bad one, we feel shame and regret. So much of this mind turmoil disturbs the beauty of the season we are in, right now.

That's why I love seasonal dishes! I just finished setting out cute little muffin stands and heart shaped plates for my husband and I to enjoy, and to set out for the kids. This month, I'll start preparing my front porch for spring décor and pulling out pastels for serving and filling with fun food. I can't wait to use our picnic gear that's been stashed away since early last fall.

I have this large cabinet in the garage where I finally organized my seasonal dishes. I don't have a huge amount of each, but I love a pretty tray that speaks to my kitchen and says what season it is. I also enjoy a couple of small plates for serving our lunches upon, as we see the flowers or rabbits, or whatever might happen to be there. Any time I'm out and can find cute paper napkins to tuck into his lunchbox or aside my breakfast plate, I grab them, to use for the current season.

All of these little seasonal things remind me to be present, enjoy the moment, look at the beauty, and savor the flavor of the here and the now. It calms me down. Having these small things in my home, on the table, and in the kitchen, keep me from feeling anxious about what season just passed or what season lies ahead.

Go on. Shop for a little seasonal plate or napkin or candle, and set it out. You don't have to spend a lot; you can even visit the Dollar Store for a treat.

March is here and spring is near. Enjoy every moment and don't worry about the summer heat on the horizon or what the winter did to your flowering garden. Observe the tiny green shoots coming out of that cute wicker basket etched into the bottom of that triangular plate you just spotted on the shelf...and purchase it.

Set it on your table and eat from it...while you enjoy today.

(Pictured above is a tiny spring plate I found on the shelf at Marshall, with a blue rabbit in the corner. And the dip is in a small ceramic pot!)

HOME

Practical Parenting – Listen and Laugh – by Marcy Lytle

She stepped on the stool to wash her hands in my bathroom but barely ran her hands under the water, using no soap all. Aghast, I tried to convince her to lather and scrub and rinse! Kiddos just don't want to take the time to do jobs correctly, and that's why we as parents have to train them to do so. It's a super hard job, especially when we don't always perform at our best, either. And we just get tired and weary as we constantly instruct and command and yell for the tenth time to do the job right!

Here are some funny things we all do and say and observe, as we try to train these kids in the way they're supposed to go...only to fall into bed at night thankful they are just still alive.

"Dab it" – This is what Augie, age 3, tells me when he pees in the toilet and I help him finish the job. He can't balance on the stool AND grab the paper, so he instructs me as to what to do with a few squares of paper before pulling up his pants.

"There's dirt under your nails!" – This is what I said to her after she washed those hands mentioned above, when she only ran them through the water for one second. That dirt doesn't bother her one bit, and she will happily eat her lunch and lick her fingers, dirt and all.

"Wipe your mouth." – Isn't that the number one instruction of all parents everywhere? Kids eat chocolate and get it on their cheeks and all over their face, and we try to wipe it when they're babies (screams and fits occur) and then we try to get them to wipe it themselves when they're toddlers (only they always leave it or smear it onto other parts of their bodies!)

"No jumping, please." – Any soft surface, like the sofa or the bed, requires at least one high jump, right? But we know, as the wise parents that we are, that one jump might result in one nasty fall with a broken arm. Our "please" soon turns to "or else" when multiple jumps ensue...

"Just a little bit!" – You know, you're doing crafts with the kids and you let them handle the glue bottle (because sometimes glue sticks don't get the job done!). He turns it over and starts squeezing but then forgets to quickly turn the bottle right side up. And...well you know...a puddle of glue forms on your table...

"Let me help you." – That offer is almost always refused by any child once they can talk and walk away. She grabs the scissors to cut off the tag from her new stuffy (stuffed animal) and you don't want her cutting into the animal itself. So you offer, she refuses, and before you know it, the tag is off and everything is intact...or not.

"Go to the potty." – We say this directive before bedtime, before we head out the door, and anytime it's been over an hour since the last time the one who's new to underwear went to the bathroom. And we say it to the toddlers who dance around in circles stating, "I don't need to go!" Potties are downright scary to some kids, and we'll never know why...but they have to learn to go.

"Only one more story." – As our eyes are barely open and our words become slurred because we're so dang sleepy ourselves, she begs for another book and another tale. Those big eyes

and that sweet voice jolt us to rouse ourselves for this one request, because it's the most snuggly time of the day and we really want it to stay...so we acquiesce and we read.

"I don't ever wash my face." – And...that's where you pray for your kiddos to know the truth and the truth to set them free. You're pretty sure that's NOT the case when kiddos visit your house and you're trying to get them to bathe. So when they're not looking, you wet the cloth and you swoop in for one big swipe across their face, and you do it so quickly and move on...hoping they don't realize what you just did.

All of those statements above were heard in our house in one night's stay by three littles, just recently. I bet most moms hear them every hour all day long, and want to pull their hair out by dinner time.

Parenting is laborious, requires tenacity, and sometimes is barely rewarding AT ALL. And then one day she's reading her own books and doesn't want you nearby, and she's polishing her perfectly cleaned fingernails. And he's fully potty-trained and a clean freak, and won't let you near the bathroom door, and in a few years he's putting together wood creations with drill guns and not glue.

Training does pay off. It works. And it's good to sometimes just sit and listen to yourself and to them as well, and laugh hard at the pain of it all.

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I Don't Do Teens – Seasonal Fun – by Marcy Lytle

Spring is in the air. And our teenagers might not even notice the change in seasons, because they're too busy noticing their faces in the mirror, the text she just sent that had a "tone," or the way his teammate just missed the ball because he wasn't paying attention. Our teens are consumed with all things personal in their looks, their relationships, and their social media. Noticing a change of season, the blooms on the trees, and the brisk March winds is not anywhere on their radar.

So why not, as parents, place this season in front of them?

Here's how:

- Over spring break, let them build and plant and start tending an herb box. They can Google how, you can purchase a small one, or you and or Dad can help them put one together. Take or send them shopping for the herbs you use the most that grow well in the spring, and ask them to plant them and start tending them. You could even have them research dishes to make with these herbs! Great idea! <https://www.diynetwork.com/how-to/make-and-decorate/decorating/how-to-make-a-kitchen-planter-box-for-herbs>
- Take the family on a picnic in a beautiful park where blooms are plenty, on a sunny day. Assign your teens the task of putting together the basket full of goodies, snacks, sides, drinks and dessert for the meal! Give them a dollar amount to spend, and ask them to get creative with the cloth, the napkins, the plates and the décor. What a fun outing that will be.
- Spring cleaning is a real thing, but it doesn't have to only be YOUR thing. Figure out the area most in need of organizing (closet, drawers, bathroom) where your teens house their junk, and give them the task and a time limit to be done. Offer suggestions of boxes to use, how to label items, how to sort and give away, etc. Let them go to the dollar store for bins and markers. You might be surprised at their skills!
- All things new – that's what spring is about. New blooms emerge from plants that looked dead. Temps rise and warm our skin. Everything screams, "New!" If you can, gather a few dollars and let her or him shop for something new – either a new room décor piece or a new pair of shoes. Give them the job of hunting for a coupon or a sale, and budgeting out the amount they're given. Maybe there's a chore they can do to earn the funds to spend. Everyone likes new, so let them have new.
- Have you or your teens tried flavor infused waters, with herbs and fruit? There are so many ideas out there, and wouldn't it be fun for your teens, each night of spring break, to present to the family a new flavor? Show them a clear pitcher or glasses to use, have them make a list of the groceries they'll need, and let them shop with you to get. Then each evening, let them prepare the refreshing drinks. This could result in a good habit for all of drinking more water! <http://healthylivingmadesimple.com/infused-water-perfect-spring-refresher/>

We often welcome a new season just as adults, and forget to include our kids. Help them look up from their phones and step away from themselves to notice the scents, the sights, the beauty and the fun in this season we call spring. And invite the family to work together and enjoy what these soon-to-be-adults present with their creativity and fun!

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The Family Practice - Wood Floors – by Brandi Oman

Every so often we have to change things up in our homes. We repair fences, change faucets, and change the flooring. This is partly because as humans we like fresh things and also because floors get old.

The changes in our home become disruptive with the dust and noise. Tools and trash everywhere can bring frustrations and tension into the home. Arguments between the household may break out and at the end of the day everyone is ready for the new floor. All an 8 year old picks up on is that everyone is in a bad mood and the house is messy.

So what does a mom do when it feels like everything is falling apart?

Make a memory!

We are repairing the faux wood flooring on our stairs with real wood. When we rip up faux wood it snaps and rips up - real bad. A few weekends ago my family decided to grill and the grill broke on us. So we took the old faux wood and burned it. Caiden's daddy showed him how to properly snap the wood and place it in the fire. Caiden learned how to nurse the fire. Caiden had a ton of fun. He forgot that the household was losing their mind, and that the tables were dusty...he just knew it was him and his daddy.

The stairs are now placed; they are a real wood, beautifully stained and very sturdy.

Many times in our lives, we like to hold on to the old "faux wood" because when we start making changes it gets dirty, messy, and disrupts what we are used to. When God gives us our new "stairs" it's usually always better, beautiful, and cleaner.

Finding the good in letting go of the old, and even making it a fun, learning experience can be everlasting.

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. Jeremiah 29:11

A Night to Remember – All Things Green – by Marcy Lytle

St. Patrick's Day is this month, and while some don't really do much to celebrate this particular holiday, it might be fun to bring the family together to see what it's all about, and the importance of the color green. It also might be fun to start by reading the history and origin of St. Patrick's Day just for fun! Discuss the three leaf clover and show the kids a picture! Then sit down and take a look at this time of year when that which was brown now starts to turn green...

Preparation: Pack a picnic for indoors on the floor or outdoors if weather permits. Include a wooden cutting board where you can set up an array of green olives and cubes of cheese, with toothpicks utensils. Also include a dip made like this: 3 T maple syrup, $\frac{3}{4}$ c sour cream and cinnamon – just mix syrup and sour cream and sprinkle cinnamon on top! Serve fruit alongside for dipping. Include fresh water for drinking.

The first sign that spring is near is when green grass starts to appear!

Psalm 23:2 says he makes his sheep lie down in green pastures. Would you like to lie down on the brown dry ground or the thick green grass? Jesus, our good Shepherd, knows when we need to rest and he offers us a beautiful place to be!

March winds blow the leaves on trees, green not brown – blow in the breeze!

Psalm 52:8 says “But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever.”

Did you know that an olive tree is known for its longevity, and able to withstand all kinds of harsh weather? God makes us like that, when we trust in Him. No matter what kinds of breezes blow, we won't bend and bow!

Plants that live are nice and green, none of that brown or in between.

Psalm 92:12-14 says, “The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still yield fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and very green...”

Here's another promise about green! Trees that are full of sap and green provide life to those around them. In early spring, when a tree is cut, sap runs out to be then made into maple syrup!

Green means life and there is no fear, when planted deep by the water near.

Jeremiah 17: 7,8 says “But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

Another promise to those who trust in Him – is that even when there's a drought (lack of water) the leaves are always green (life is there!)

Family prayer: *Father, thank you for spring. Thank you for new life after winter has passed. Thank you for the promises you give that if we trust in you, we never have to worry about a thing. Amen.*

Tiny Living – A Few Stories – by Leyanne Enterline

Besides the one time when we were told that ISIS was after our neighbor, everything else was pretty calm living in town in suburbia. However, I feel like living tiny on property outside of town warrants some very odd things happening. Perhaps it's the area where we live. It's mostly farm land with lake rats from the 70's (both I love,) and it makes life super interesting.

So interesting that I have to tell a few stories...

Today, for instance, a lady pulled onto our property while we were outside and she got out of her car. We walked over and asked what she was doing and if she needed any help. She said, "Nope," as she stared up at our oak tree and told us she was looking for mesquite! She said, "Sorry," and slowly walked back to her car. We didn't say anything else. I think we were in shock that she was literally considering just cutting our tree down. What? I have no idea what was going on there. Who just exits their car to cut down a person's tree? I'm super confused on this one! And we have tons of mesquite that we would have gladly surrendered, if she just would have asked.

Our property is on the corner of a main road and across from the famous Willie Nelson's storage units. So you can only imagine the interesting people that rent those units...including my parents! We're pretty sure there were people living in one unit at some point in time. These units have also been a stakeout for the FBI. I mean, *where in the world are we?* Occasionally, we hear some crazy yelling from over there and Brian has to call the cops. But really, for the most part it is very quiet. I just wanted to share the randomness. We hear Willie will be selling soon!

We have a farmer that lives across the street and we get to see the cows come out all the time. All of the mooing and poop smells have been pretty fun! We found out that Farmer John's family owned the land that we're on and he remembers growing up playing on our property with his cousins.

Our son Asher has found one arrowhead so far, and we can't wait to continue the search! It's such a cool feeling to know that Indians once roamed our land. I wonder what all they did on it? We find random pumpkins and onions growing. Perhaps they planted these seeds? With such a tiny footprint, it makes our land seem so large with ample room to explore.

We'll see how long these oddities continue; and in the meantime, we will enjoy our blessings of living tiny!

Remember, love grows best in tiny spaces!

YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Soft Eyes – by Marcy Lytle

We watch this show on television called *New Amsterdam*. It's a series about a new medical director that comes to run a huge hospital in New York, where the patient is put first, no matter the cost...even in the most unconventional ways. It's a great show, and we love it. One particular episode recently stayed with me...

There was a patient that had gone blind and she was unable to see her daughter or husband, for years. However, a new treatment had become available, one the doctor assured her would work, so the family waited with bated breath until she returned to her room after surgery. As the bandages were removed, we could tell just from her countenance that it didn't work. Her little girl was on her lap, but her mom still could not see her face. It was quite disappointing, to say the least!

The doctors were dumbfounded but soon discovered that her eyeballs were just hard (an after effect from the surgery) and needed some drops to moisten and soften them up. The drops were applied, a simple thing, and she could see again! Imagine the change on the lady's face when she saw her daughter, and when her daughter was seen!

This episode brought a tear to my eye, because I was struck by the fact that a lot of us have hard eyes...and hard hearts. We've been broken, cut into, messed up, and left for blind...because of a hard life. Perhaps parents have disappointed us, disease has stolen from us, or money has slipped down the drain too many times and we're destitute. It's sort of like the lady, after surgery. She had been cut on, promised a new view, only to be left in the same blind condition.

We go to church, we pray, we read the bible, and we feel like screaming at God, "Do I really have to go through this again?" as we feel as if he's taking us down the hall once again into that cold operating room where he works on that which we cannot see. We try to obey and do what we're told, only to emerge back into our same room with our same blindness, while those around us wait to be seen.

It was all because of her eyes being hard that the lady could not see. It was a simple fix of applying some drops; drops that the doctor knew existed that could heal, after the surgery she had. The moistening of the eyeball enabled that surgery to be complete.

I thought about my eyeballs and how they get hard and unable to see those around me. I get weary in well-doing and disappointed over and over again with life, as we all do. Here are a few specific ways my own eyeballs have hardened after life's cuts and scrapes:

- Friends disappointed – so I shut my eyes to new relationships - for fear of hurt.
- Struggled too hard and long with a particular behavior or thought – so I hardened my eyes not wanting to look at that struggle anymore and to just accept it and live with it.
- Saw and made too many judgments on the shortcomings of those closest to me – so too many eye rolls that state "whatever" had caused my eyes to harden and not want to see people anymore.

- Didn't understand scripture and it didn't work for me – so I shut my eyes to reading anything else for lack of understanding and desire to learn.
- Circumstances at times overwhelmed me – eyes hardened and shut just for protection – like trying to avoid dust that was circling around me.

Maybe you have been through too many “surgeries” in life where you've tried time and time again to forgive, move on, be healed, get over it, etc. and you're just not willing to undergo any more cutting in order to see or be seen. It's so understandable to feel that way!

However, just like this lady had a doctor in the room that knew about this simple application of ointment to soften her hardened eyeballs, we have Jesus. He never tires of waiting on us to sit still and just be. Just be in his presence with his tender hands holding us until we soften and breathe and see the beauty again, sitting in our laps right near us.

I hope this story speaks to you. It's so easy to allow ourselves to stay hard and shut out those around us with beautiful faces, because of hurt. But that's no way to live, even if seeing again brings about hurt again.

It's one thing to be born blind never able to see or have memories of color or beauty. But it's quite another to be born seeing all of the beauty in the world and then become blind to it, because of pain.

I don't want to live in a hardened eye ball state of mind...do you?

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Under the Influence – Can I Borrow That? – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when I was a kid that my mom and other moms would go next door and ask, “Can I borrow a cup of sugar?” They did this when they were baking and realized they were one cup short or one egg short, and had this need to finish their task! Neighbors didn’t mind at all hearing the knock and answering the door, happy to share with a friend.

I also remember at summer camp having friends that wanted to borrow my clothes, and I could in turn borrow theirs. She wore my cute dress and I borrowed and wore her cute shoes. I never really liked doing that, but I felt pressured to do so. One time a friend tore my dress, and that made me mad.

I know lots of folks that have a library of books they are willing to loan out to other readers. Inside the books they have these little stickers that say who the books belong to, so that the one borrowing will know who to return to the book to, once it’s read.

I don’t really like to borrow anything, for fear that I may forget to give it back, or even worse damage it!

However...I have no trouble borrowing trouble from tomorrow.

We all know that it’s unwise to borrow trouble, because each day has worries of its own, right? And yet, we all do it.

We that have aging parents borrow trouble by worrying about the how and the way and the worry of what will happen when our parents can no longer take care of themselves. That’s a legitimate borrowing of worry, isn’t it?

We have kids, tiny and big, that have these problems in life. Maybe they’re struggling in school or with peers, or they need finances or wisdom in making big decisions, and we borrow trouble by worrying. We worry if they will ever be well, successful, and able to “make it” without our help.

I can certainly borrow trouble about all sorts of things if I let my mind go there. And to be honest, it’s SO EASY to borrow trouble. It’s so easy to let the boat of worry where I’m sitting to just drift out to sea far from the shore, because I loosened the knot where I was tethered and tied.

Think back to those analogies above:

We borrowed sugar because we just needed one cup to complete a cake recipe. So why can’t we borrow faith from a friend in the same way, just to help us complete our beautiful day we’re struggling through because we’re a bit short? I know we have friends who are glad to offer, because their cups are full.

We borrowed clothes because we liked what she had and she liked what we had, so we thought, “Why not have a little fun?” Why can’t we train ourselves to borrow, or trade, our sorrow and angst for someone else’s beauty and fun? We can surround ourselves with friends

that won't worry and drift with us, but rather open their closet and share a belt of truth to hold up our sagging pants of worry!

We borrow books because there are adventures to be read, and she's got that great one sitting on her shelf! Or we loan out a book to a friend to borrow, because what we've read was so good that we want to share! Why can't we borrow goodness and mercy instead of worry and trouble, just for the asking? That story of how he pursues us is all throughout the bible!

You may be reading and saying (along with me), "That sounds well and good, but I can't help but worry." I feel that way too, sometimes. I feel unable to control the thoughts that enter my mind. It's like this ticker tape that runs constantly and I don't know where to turn off the button that makes it scroll.

Imagine with me, upon rising in the morning, you are sitting in front of a huge bookcase stockpiled with true stories of hope and faith. In fact, you are...in His word. Imagine that living on either side of you are neighbors with pantries full of sugar, just waiting to be shared. You have that...if you have friends. And imagine that there's a closet awaiting you to wear a different outfit each day, one that fits you perfectly in fabrics that make you sing, all for the choosing. You do...it's all of the beauty he's clothed you with since you were beautifully and wonderfully made.

I have to consciously make the effort to pick out the truth and read it, ask for the sugar I need, and choose to wear beauty and not ashes. It's hard, I'm not gonna lie. But borrowing trouble is heavy and sorrowful, and that's harder to bear and worse for the wear.

Go on, borrow. Ask for what you need. Trade it in.

But don't borrow trouble.

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Healthy Habits – Quiet, Please – by Marcy Lytle

I have a lot of quiet time. My kids are grown and gone, I work out of my house, and I have all this time by myself. And yet...sometimes I still need quiet time. By definition in this story, quiet time is where we sit still away from the “noise” of the world and its duties and we focus on hearing and being and resting in Him. That’s what I’m referring to as quiet time. Oh, it’s quiet every day in my house while I’m working, but that’s not quiet time where I rest. My mind is full of what I need to get done, my lists are near me so I can add to them, and my phone is within view so I can catch calls and texts and messages...so there is plenty of noise!

Everyone’s quiet time with Him probably looks different. And the time of day is different, too, depending on our schedules. However, I’m thinking that across the board most of us don’t have enough quiet time with Him at all...and when we do...we’re in a hurry to get back to those things mentioned above for fear of getting behind.

Here are some ways to maybe find and cherish and protect and fence off that quiet time we all need so much. Why? Because it’s in the stillness and the quiet with Him that we hear him say things to us that strengthen us, give us hope and assure us that he “Is God.” We need that. And we don’t hear that when every thought and action requires a balancing act because our plates are too full.

Some of this list won’t be doable for all, but it will for some:

1. Take a lunch break. Don’t work through lunch eating on the run. Make yourself sit down, actually chew and savor each bite, and just be still and alone – like tea for two – with Him. You might find that you realize you are His delight.
2. Walk away. Even if it’s just a 15 minute walk down the street and back, do it. Observe the sky and the trees and feel the breeze. You might find that your faith is renewed in the One who created all that you see.
3. Close your eyes. If you’re able to sit down or turn off your motor and park under a shade tree, do so and close your eyes for a few minutes. Think of at least seven things you’re thankful for. You might open your eyes and see more clearly to face whatever lies ahead in your day.
4. Indulge. I know. Every woman everywhere wants to shed pounds and not gain an ounce. However, that little mini blizzard at DQ is small and delicious and won’t hurt you – once in a while. In fact, it might satisfy every sweet tooth you’re feeling, and make you smile. That’s a good thing! Eat it alone in your car, with no one else near to ask for a bite and you might taste His goodness too!
5. Just one verse. Don’t tackle a whole sermon series or topic or chapter. Hone in on one encouraging verse. You can google “scripture for sadness” and a list of happy truths will pop up to choose from. Pick One! Read it to yourself silently, sing it softly, and chew on it for a while until you believe it. You just might feel like you’ve been infused with a strong antibiotic to ward off the diseases of the day!
6. Listen. Ask a question, a simple one, like, “God what do you want to tell me today?” and then be still to hear. If one thought of condemnation or shame pops up, that’s not His voice. So tune that one out. His words will be that he loves you, He loves you, He loves

you... If you can hear that and believe it in the quietness of your ears, you'll emerge back to the noise above it all.

7. Let the sun. One of my favorite things to do on a cool day is to park, lay back my seat and feel just a hint of sun on my skin through the window. This only works right now, before the heat of summer arrives. There's something about being still and quiet in the sunshine, feeling that vitamin D soak into your skin, that lifts the spirit. Do it. You might be surprised as how your attitude shifts upward

What do you do for quiet time? Is there not a chance of having it, because kids are around constantly? Ask, speak up, and request for 15 minutes alone. Mark it on the calendar. Are you too afraid to sit still and be, for fear of what you might think? Find a list of encouraging scriptures and keep it on your fridge, and go with one of those for your thinking...every time you're alone. Is being alone with Him frightening, because of fear that He might point to some huge shortcoming in your life? There is no fear in His presence. None. And he never points and shames.

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Life Right Now – Impacted and Inspired – by Bethany Gomez

A little over a month ago, my family and I went to visit my grandma, my dad's mom, for her 85th birthday party. It was a big, fun celebration with well over 20 people in attendance. Close and distant relatives and dear family friends all came out to help celebrate my grandma. My dad revealed to me that a couple of years ago he and his sister decided to throw my grandma a birthday party every year from then on. Not only does my grandma love any chance she can get to spend time with her family, but my dad said he wants to honor and celebrate her life and legacy while she is still here.

It was during this visit that I realized a few things.

First, I don't like to think about it but my grandma, along with my other grandparents, are not getting any younger. My thoughts of late have really been ones of longing to spend time with my grandma as much as I can and to show her just how thankful I am for her. She is one amazing lady. Although I wouldn't know just how amazing she is without my dad telling me stories about her, for she very rarely voluntarily shares stories about her life.

One story in particular that my dad told me is a story that I will never get tired of hearing. It brings him to tears every time he tells it and my tears are not far behind. He told me that when my grandma was 3 years old her mom passed away, and when she was 5 her dad abandoned her. She was sent to live with her aunt in Chicago and while there her aunt physically abused her for several years. My grandma ended up trying to run away, twice. The first time she ran away, she ended up at a nun's convent. They took her back, not quite understanding my grandma's situation until the second time she ran away. Thankfully, the convent helped her find relatives that lived in Houston, Texas. So at the age of 9 she moved across the country to Texas, where she grew up, and by the age of 16 she got married to my grandpa.

Fast forward many years, my dad remembers my grandpa would make phone calls to my grandma's aunt and talk to her for a little while, sometimes passing the phone to him, to say hi. On occasion, even my grandma would talk to her, but finally one time she told my grandpa she just couldn't do it anymore. My grandpa (being the wise person he always was) told her,

“Then why do you go to church if you're not
going to do what the priest says to do,
which is to forgive?”

That question brought conviction to my grandma and it was soon after she was able to forgive her aunt, not knowing what she would be asked to do down the road. I was too young to remember this, but my dad told me that my grandparents got a call one day from a lady that found my grandma's aunt sick and bedridden in her home up in Chicago. My grandma flew up there and for a month visited her aunt in the hospital until she was well enough to go home, but clearly she was not able to live on her own anymore. So it was decided that she would live with my grandparents in Houston. My grandma welcomed her into her home and cared for her until she passed away from cancer about a year later.

After hearing this story for the first time, I was blown away by this powerful testimony of forgiveness. My grandma had every right to hate her aunt for what she did to her, but my grandma chose forgiveness. And in the end, Grandma received her aunt's entire inheritance. If I had to bet, I think my grandma was more blessed when her aunt finally asked my grandma to forgive her for what she had done and when my grandma told her that she already had.

Second, during this past visit with my grandma, it hit me how much she has changed, or in other words, how she has adapted since my grandpa passed away seven years ago from cancer. They were married almost 60 years, and during that time I noticed that she was more quiet and reserved, while my grandpa was this big personality, loud and outgoing. I think my grandma loved letting him take the lead at social events, while she did what she loved, which was cooking and serving her family. When my grandpa passed away I thought *how is she going to make it* as I watched her tiny little frame sob over losing her husband at his funeral. Most of the family was concerned for her. I thought my grandpa was the stronger one out of the two, but during this past visit my dad told me that he was finally able to tell her that had she been the one to pass away first he thinks my grandpa would not have had the strength to keep on living without her. He told her she was stronger than my grandpa. She, of course, denied it and didn't want to accept it, but the more she thought about it I think she realized the same thing my dad did. I've realized that my grandma is sweet but feisty, petite but strong, quiet in words but loud in her actions. She is loving, (including the tough kind of love) and she has a cute, funny sense of humor.

Thirdly, without fail, for as long as I can remember, my grandma has asked the same question to me (or anyone) almost the moment I walk through her door.

“Are you hungry, Miya?”

It doesn't matter how late it is or if I tell her that I'm not that hungry, she almost instantly begins pulling out yummy things to eat, usually her homemade tortillas with a side of refried beans. She tells me to sit down and eat, and she says it in such a way that makes it nearly impossible to say no.

Finally, I realized she is going to, and already has, left a tremendous legacy. I've been thinking and praying about how I can honor her more, along with my other grandparents. They have impacted my life tremendously. They continue to inspire me to be more giving, forgiving, serving, and loving. I am so thankful to God for each one of them.

#

Created for You - Magnificent March Musings – by Ginny Hurley

While visiting with a friend, she began to share about branding. As she continued to speak, I found myself laughing and expressed to her that my idea of branding seemed to be at odds with what she was saying. This little West Texas girl knows that branding is a hot iron that you place in the fire to brand your livestock. You do it to keep track of your cattle, horses, or whatever animal you happen to be raising, so it will be distinguished.

Her idea of branding had something to do with communication, new technology, and labels. Aw Ha! There we have an understanding! Branding! Well, I can get that! Keeping track of your personal visual representation. It's mine! So the term branding actually fits both scenarios, two cultures, colliding into one. I can work with that!

This silly thought came to me about words. Some of the terms or words I've heard throughout different seasons in my life are obsolete or have morphed into something new. Several of these words are slang and no longer used at all in this millennial age. Let's take a look at some of these!

Who remembers:

Mergatroyd
Hunky Dory
Living the life of Riley
In like Flynn
Holy Moley
Jumpin' Jehoshaphat
Gee whillikers
Heavens to Betsy
Knee high to a grasshopper

She's got moxie
Okidoki
Gadzooks
Knucklehead
Nincompoop
Pshaw
Fiddlesticks
Made in the shade
Life is swell

Then:

You're cruisin' for a bruisin'
See ya later alligator
Open a can of worms
Hang loose
Far out
Good buddy

Burn rubber
After while crocodile
Knuckle sandwich
Let's split
Groovy
Space cadet

What are these:

Spats
Fedoras
Saddle shoes
Floppy disk
Xerox
Rotary phone

Knickers
Poodle skirts
Pedal pushers
Record player
Carbon copy
Party line

Remember:

Kilroy was here
This is a fine kettle of fish
Wake up and smell the roses
More than Carter has pills
Shooting the breeze

I'll be a monkey's uncle
The milkman did it
You're pullin' my chain
Hung out to dry
Draggin' Broadway

Hanging out
Getting licks

I'm about to bust
Sittin' pretty

Okay, so are you smiling yet? I know some of you are laughing while others are reminiscing. Some of you are clueless and puzzled. For those with raised eyebrows, wait a few years. Your little terms and endearments will be gone with the wind, out with the lights, skiddaddled, water under the bridge, gone girl!

Look these over and enjoy the memories! Laugh at yourself or your parents! Time marches on yet has a way of remaining in our hearts. Delight yourself in celebrating the past while looking forward to the new!

MARRIAGE

In This Together - March Madness – by Charissa Corbin

It is that time of year – March Madness. For me, March Madness tops all other sporting events... the Super Bowl, NCAAF championship, Wimbledon, and The Masters (heck, every sporting event beats golf!) My husband and I fill out our brackets, and as competitive as we are, it is an intense few weeks of banter on whose team will win.

As a previous collegiate athlete, I know the feeling of playing in a game that you know could be the very last one you will ever play. You have spent a lifetime building up the strength, skills, and stamina for this moment. You have a team that you have spent countless hours with on (and off) the court, pouring blood, sweat, and tears into every practice and every sprint. The teams that make up March Madness all have different stories, different skillsets, and come from all over the nation. One thing they ALL have in common is they had to work hard to make it to this tournament. They didn't get lucky. They worked day in and day out to make it to this moment.

I read a Facebook post from a friend the other day that said,

“A great marriage isn't something you find.
It's something you make and have to keep working on.”

This is so true. Picture your marriage as one of the teams in March Madness. You're not competing against other marriages but you're competing against the daily, weekly, yearly struggles that marriages face. The loss of a loved one, financial instability, a new move, health issues, raising children, maintaining passion, job insecurity, and the list goes on... Overcoming these obstacles TOGETHER builds tenacity, a closeness only marriage provides, and a deeper love and understanding for one another. March Madness in a marriage doesn't just last a month but a lifetime. You will have moments of victory and defeat, some games will be easier than others, but both will make your marriage great.

Continue on learning together, practicing, committing yourselves to one another daily, communicating through struggles, and most importantly trusting in your Heavenly coach and your marriage will be unstoppable.

Continue your game... I'm cheering you on!

#

Date Night Fun – The List – by Marcy Lytle

Every month we usually share five ideas of date nights for you. However, this month we thought we'd share "the list." It's so helpful to have a list of ideas to pull from, when planning a night out. Usually, one person is a great thinker of "things to do" and has no trouble being creative thinking outside the box for a day or night out for fun. But that creative one likes a break now and then, as they wish their spouse/date would plan a night out for them.

This list is for you...the one who has trouble and needs a reference sheet:

1. Make a list of 10 couple questions (even Google for ideas), print them out and quiz each other over dinner or coffee and dessert.
2. Bake and/or pack a meal or dessert together and enjoy it by the fireplace, or out by a fire pit in the yard or park.
3. Check out a new coffee shop and all it has to offer, while putting together a 100-piece puzzle.
4. Take a drive outside the city in a loop – one that will take a few hours – stopping at will to read historical markers, try small town diners, take photos of abandoned buildings, etc.
5. Find a new restaurant to try, eat there, and then walk around in that neighborhood.
6. Flip through photo albums, or visit a bookstore and flip through picture books of foreign countries or exotic animals.
7. Go for a walk on a trail, with a backpack full of snacks and drinks. Even pack a cloth for your stop to sit and refresh. You can pick up snacks from Trader Joe's!
8. Hold hands together and stroll through an outlet mall, going in new stores you've not tried before, and trying out a new snack from the food court.
9. Make it all about ice cream. Visit three creameries and try one scoop at each place!
10. Just listen to music on his playlist and her playlist. Share the why's of the music you love and the lyrics that speak.
11. Think of a kind act for another couple – perhaps a surprise gift on their porch, shop for gifts for their kids, actually hand-write cards to send, etc.
12. Listen to a podcast together, take notes, then discuss.
13. Learn to dance by searching YouTube for the type of dancing you want to learn!
14. Visit a craft store and pick out a kit or brainstorm a yard decoration idea, get the stuff, and make!
15. Make it all about "newness" – visit three places in your city you've never been before – museum, coffee shop, park, etc.
16. Peruse magazines and/or newspapers together, try the crossword puzzle, read out loud to each other, find a coupon and use it.
17. Write or read poetry to each other, then sketch each other or a beautiful scene.
18. Use one of those unused appliances like the ice cream maker, the panini grill or the fondue set.
19. Visit a garden for inspiration, then a garden center for new herbs or plants or veggies, and then plant!
20. Cross something of your to-do list TOGETHER.

21. Say yes to the dress or the shoes, or something each of you wants to buy, and go for it.
22. Zip into a convenience store for peanuts and coke, then sit in the car and people watch.
23. When's the last time you make milkshakes for dinner? Throw in dark chocolate almonds, your favorite ice cream, and anything else that sounds good – and blend! Watch a Netflix movie while you enjoy.
24. Go see a movie you wouldn't normally pick to see – like a foreign film with subtitles.
25. Find live music in your town at a coffee shop or venue, and go listen.
26. Pick a high rise hotel and take a game like Outburst, buy a snack, and play the game and relax in the lobby. (We love the newest version of this game!)
27. Make it a spa night. Rub each other's feet with lotion, give massages, brush each other's hair, light scented candles.
28. Set out a picnic on the floor or in your own backyard. Order pizza to be delivered. Buy fancy paper plates and napkins, and try a cool drink using a recipe you find on Pinterest.
29. Rent a pedal boat or kayak or just sit by a body of water in yard chairs, with dips and chip.
30. Organize phone photos and send a few faves to be printed, pick out frames, and set them for display in your home.
31. Find a sports event nearby, soccer or baseball or tennis, and go watch. Eat popcorn. Drink coke.

I'm the one who is constantly brainstorming date fun ideas, but my husband is willing and happy to give me a break and plan a date, too. He just has a hard time and takes a long time to plan an outing. Once in a while, I update this list, print it out and hand it him for easy reference. I don't mind if he chooses an idea I wrote down, as long as he plans it and I can just show up and enjoy. And he doesn't mind giving my brain a break, and making me feel special and loved.

After 30 Years – Up and Away – by Marcy Lytle

We will celebrate 40 years of marriage this month! It's hard to believe, and I suppose I'll have to change the title of this column to up the decade, right? Neither one of us wants a party with friends; as we'd both much rather go on a trip to celebrate. After all of these decades of marriage, we've figured out our common likes and we run with them. We still enjoy each other so much. And traveling is at the top of our list!

Budgeting, planning and actually going on trips can be daunting for some, too expensive to even consider, and some have too many details to take care of behind...so vacations are few and far between. However, there are ways we've found to still go, get away, and enjoy, and here's how it went down for our 40th anniversary trip out of town:

We started months ago, planning. We subscribe to a few lists (Thrillist is one of our faves) that we receive in our inbox. We recently got a list of quaint towns in each state to visit, and we saw that St. Augustine, Florida was one of them. That's how we picked our destination!

Next, we go to the website for the city and see what there is to do. Trip Advisor usually pops up with the "best" places to visit, eateries, museums, landmarks, etc. We both enjoy history and sightseeing, as well as perhaps a good play or show. We look to see if there is enough for us to do while visiting. It's also important to us that we read reviews and other folks' itineraries. (Google "Two days in St. Augustine") or however many days you'll be staying and blogs and stories pop up!

Once we've picked our destination, we start a list of all the places we'd like to see and what we want to do, and what time of year is best to visit. This is a fun activity we do at night together, while sitting with laptop on my knees, as he writes down questions and ideas while I visit sites.

After we've decided, we check airfares. We do this for a few weeks, until we find prices that fit our budget. We usually switch destinations if the cost is outrageous, AND we have now started going on off-seasons – which makes a huge difference in cost. We make sure the cheap fare isn't then increased by huge luggage costs – we try to read the fine print!

Lodging is next, and we decide if we want a B&B or a hotel. If we're going to be gone most of the days and evenings, then we opt for a hotel. If we are leisurely seeing a city and relaxing in our room a bit, we might choose a B&B for ambience and atmosphere. We check to see if parking is included, if breakfast is part of the price, etc. And again, we read reviews. Then we book!

The last big thing we reserve is a rental car. We often have travel points from our credit card which pay for the rental and sometimes the airfare too! That's always a winner!

We do all of the above months in advance so that we can pay as we go, and when the actual trip arrives the big ticket items are paid for.

Finally, we make a list of the things we want to do and the cost, and whether or not we need reservations. We write down what we will be spending. We also choose lots of restaurant ideas to pull from, while in the city or destination of choice.

All of these ideas are printed out, along with our reservation confirmations, city maps, etc. and placed in a plastic ziptop folder (I find these at the Dollar Store sometimes!) This way, everything is together and will fit in our bag. I even paperclip each day's activities and papers together, with an itinerary on the top sheet. This way, we don't have to spend our vacation planning and talking and deciding. We have an outline to follow!

40 years. It's a huge milestone, isn't it? I love him more than I ever have. Over the years, we have argued until we don't remember the original source of disagreement, we have blown our budget and experienced losses, we have said good-bye to parents and seen our own bodies start to age, and we've prayed and seen miracles in our family and kids. We've seen, and done and experienced a lot. But there's lots of life to yet live.

And one of the greatest and most fun things we've done and still hope to do is travel. It releases stress, it helps us connect, and it gets us outside of our familiar environment into other worlds around us. We meet cool people, pray and ask God for amazing encounters, and we enjoy the planning almost as much as the going.

Sometimes, we have funds to go for a week and other times for a weekend. Every chance we get to go is fun, no matter the time we spend away.

I hope you both read lists and plan and organize...and go. It's a great boost for any relationship from year one to year 70 and beyond...to get up and away from it all as often as you can.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Do the Exercises

A few weeks ago through a series of events I my back locked up. It became very tight and it was Very painful to stand and move around. It was one of a few things going on that eventually drove me to the doctor. To help my back I was given a sheet of stretches to do to help loosen it up. That was on Tuesday January 29th. Every day my back would bother me, every night I said I was going to do the exercises the next morning, every morning I would not take the to do them. Wednesday February 6th a walk of about a quarter mile caused some pretty good pain and I again said I was going to do the exercises. I didn't. The next day I ran to HEB to grab me some lunch and the walking around caused me to hurt. By now you know what my thoughts were, yep, do the exercises. As surely as my name is Erica the next thoughts that entered my head was God laying out to me how my mantra over the last few days of do the exercises was not only the solution to my physical ailments, it was the answer to spiritual ailments as well. As I took that elevator right to the SECOND floor, my spirit was flooded with this message and the seeds of this story planted. It is funny how God can use the most ordinary of circumstances to deliver and extraordinary yet simple message. Do the exercises. You see ... By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a Godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know Him, the One who called us to Himself by means of His marvelous glory and excellence (2 Peter 1:3, NLT). What is a Godly life? Glad you asked.

A Godly life is that life full of the spiritual fruit outlined in Galatians 5:22-23. To access it all we just need to do the exercises. OH MY GOSH, literally as I am writing this I realized that what if the fruits of the spirit laid out in Galatians ARE the exercises!!! What is the common thing between my stretching exercises and the fruit of the spirit outlined on Galatians? We have to CHOOSE to do them. I have always looked at this verse as measuring stick to how well I am aligning my life to God's word. The more aligned the more fruit I will have in my life. What just stirred in my spirit is that no matter what my life looks like if I am a Christian I should be walking in love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. My key to overcoming is choosing to do the exercises.

John 15:2 talks about Christians being branches that have fruit (the exercises we have learned to use) and How God then purges those branches to give us opportunities to learn to use more exercises (to bear more fruit).

When the enemy is waging war, I have to put my shield up and stand my ground. I have to trust the Lord to fight those battles out in front of me and walk the path that He clears. If I retreat the enemy advances and that which was mine I have given away. Jesus said in the word John 10: 29C ... no one can snatch

them out of my Father's hand. That is the same thing for us, the battles that my Father has won for me, the victories He has given me, NO ONE can take from me, but I can sure give them away, to the enemy. Getting them back is not as easy as oops I made a mistake can I get that back please. Quit. Giving. Your. Victories. Back! Don't stop doing your exercises, keep doing them, exercising makes us stronger, adding more makes us even stronger.

I was an athlete through my college years and I remember how much I would dread coming off my offseason. I dreaded it because I hate how sore it made me. The truth is if I had continued to work out during my offseason I would not have been nearly as sore. I would have been more prepared for what I was about to go through. Being a Christian has not offseason, life has no offseason there is no time off. I should always be doing my exercises. Unlike pre-season workout the enemy's attacks have no start date I can mark on my calendar. We have to stay ready stay spiritually in shape so we are prepared for the enemy's attack. Not so I am physically ready to do battle, but spiritually ready to stand as my Heavenly Father delivers me the victory.

The hard part about writing encouraging stories about faith is making sure I not giving the impression that I am trying to change God's narrative. In the case of this story, by not mentioning prayer and reading the word, I am NOT saying they are not VERY important exercises in our Christian routine. I am sharing a new perspective for ME on how the fruit of the spirit, up until now, was viewed for ME as a measuring stick of how spiritual I am. They are things I should be doing, not acquiring. As life happens I can choose to live it in the fruits of the spirit building up my spiritual character standing strong in the knowledge that for my Father there is no failure.

A few weeks ago I set before the Lord during our women's discipleship group two things I wanted to start doing in my life, to learn to speak boldly in truth and to have more self-control (which is one of the fruits in Galatians). Speaking boldly has its roots in love or should be guided by love to be able to speak the truth to two very important people in my life. Already I see God's faithfulness in these two areas. You see He pruned me so and gave me the opportunity to bear more of His fruit. I can honestly say neither of these have ever been easy for me, but now how looking back on the two weeks there just seems to be a different level of something about being able to do it. Too much to try to share, but suffice it to say God has been setting me up and I had to choose to step up.

Firmly Planted – New Grace – by Dina Cavazos

Last month I wrote about simplifying the clothes closet—keeping only what gives me that “spark of joy.” As an experiment, my daughter and I each counted one row of tops—she had 75 and I had 73. That’s not counting folded items and summer clothes put away. Crazy! I haven’t done the brutal work of piling and eliminating—I’m taking a more gentle approach, but at least I’m making progress. I’ve pared down home décor and essentials and I’m happy with the simple, clean look. A box of once-treasured vintage items and some things in the attic that I haven’t touched in 12 years will soon be a memory of times past, and even that will fade.

But there’s more. Eight years ago, I started working on creating a prayer garden in my backyard. I had so many ideas and a vision of what it should be. The materials I needed seemed to appear at every thrift store and garage sale I went to; I found some relics in the barn of my childhood country home; I knew all the best places for landscape supplies and plants. Pretty soon, I had a collection of unique items—rusty metal pieces, beautiful aged wood, garden art, several types of rocks, benches and chairs, pots, bird feeders, etc. They were there at the ready when I had an inspiration for another element of the garden.

Etched into the concrete patio (the piece that launched the start of my backyard retreat) are the words, “*All for Him 2011.*” I really did give all for Him—the One who spoke quietly in my heart and challenged me to listen. I wasn’t sure of the purpose for the garden; I just knew I had to create it. Primarily, it’s been a place for me to meet with God as I work or contemplate the wonder of life seen everywhere in nature. It’s revealed new layers in spiritual life lessons I don’t think I’ll ever master: walking in faith, paying attention to the invisible as well as the visible, being ok with making mistakes, finding peace in chaos. For several years I’ve been fueled by this mission. It’s been fulfilling to use my energies and resources to create a peaceful sanctuary right out my back door.

But I sense I’m moving into a new season.

The hardscaping is in place, trees are finally providing shade, and the beds are planted. The sense of mission, the momentum, and the energy that propelled the accomplishment of the prayer garden vision have faded. When I think of the physical labor alone, moving rocks and dumping wagons of decomposed granite...how did I do that?! He gave me grace. The clutter of unrealized projects in the garage and the side yard is getting on my nerves. Everywhere I look I see parts and pieces--the collection of wood standing in the corner, items on stand-by hiding in cabinets, nooks, and crannies collecting dust and taking up space—it feels smothering and heavy. These feelings evoked by what I see as “clutter,” but used to see as potential, tell me that season of grace has been lifted.

A new season is bringing simplification and rest and I know it’s time to extend this journey into the garden. My plan is to clear the clutter and look for ways to reduce maintenance in order to make room for something else. For me, simplicity brings peace and clarity. A life uncluttered with “seen things” helps me focus on “unseen things.” The garden is still an important part of my life, but it belongs to the Lord. It’s only a means to know him better—the Alpha and Omega, Faithful and True, the Light of the World, Bread of Life. There’s no purpose at all otherwise. As

long as I'm "firmly planted" in his being and nothing else, I can move with him. I don't know what the next "assignment" will be, but I'm confident it will come, and, with it, new grace.

Moving Forward – In My Dreams – by Pam Charro

All of my life, I've had mostly negative, scary and stressful dreams. I've either been running away from something or someone, fighting with family members, or stressed out from trying to accomplish tasks or pass tests.

I'm happy to share that all of that is finally starting to change.

Recently I've noticed that when I do battle in my dreams...I actually win! I very seldom, if ever, dream of running away from something. And I often even dream of healing people and/or preaching the gospel to them! I stand up to what is threatening or stealing with God's word and it actually works, even while I'm asleep! It's so exciting, empowering and liberating, and all I can attribute it to is renewing my mind.

The Bible says in Roman's 12:2 that we are actually transformed when we renew our thoughts to agree with what the Word says. So I have the opportunity to be renewed and restored from the very deepest parts of my subconscious, the parts I'm not even aware of.

Those parts that come out while I'm asleep.

It also reminds me of Mark 4:27, when Jesus is sharing the story of the farmer's crop. "Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how." Again, he is referring to the Word of God and its powerful ability to constantly grow, even when no one seems to be paying attention.

How exciting it is for me to see God's faithful transforming in my life! And all the more encouraging to see it happening...even in my dreams!

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Best of the Mess – Today – by Ashley Zanella

Today I lost it.

It's been a hard month, which is comical, because I actually got away for a whole week with my husband on a cruise. Everything has a cost though, and going on that trip meant that I was going to see my husband a lot less when we returned so he could work to make up those missed days. It also meant my toddler and baby were completely off their sleep schedules (and of course as parenting would have it, they also started sleep regressions right before we left.)

Don't get me wrong!

I was incredibly grateful and blessed to have that alone time with my husband. And for my out-of-state mom to have gotten the opportunity to spend time bonding alone with her grandsons, I'm so thankful. I'm so blessed. I'm also so overwhelmed sometimes. And you know what? That's okay.

- Today had been over a week since I'd had more than a few hours with my husband...and zero alone time.
- Today marked nearly two weeks of what used to be 2-3 hour naps, but now totaling a lovely 20-30 minutes.
- Today, every single time I sat down, my toddler found something new he wanted, needed and had to have now.
- Today he broke his record by throwing a fit for 25 solid minutes because I wouldn't open the closet where we stash the toys that get taken away.
- And...today was day two of body aches, slight fever, hot flashes and fatigue.

So yes, today I got to a point where I was just overwhelmed!

After my toddler woke up the baby for the second time, only 20 minutes into his nap, I lost it. I had no idea where I would find the energy to keep up with the demands of the rest of the day. I went to get the baby and, with tears in my eyes, I told my husband "I'm done." And I felt done. I felt so utterly exhausted. I felt like I was drowning. In that moment, I knew my frustrations were petty. I knew it could be so much worse. I realized there are people that never get to meet their baby or have lost theirs. Two of my friends have experienced both of those losses recently. Yet there I was just SO frustrated, so overwhelmed that I was about to cry over an interrupted nap.

So what did I do?

I did what most women do. I vented to my best friend and got the words of encouragement I needed. Not only did she help encourage me through words, but she snuck by the house and dropped off a goodie bag with a card, wine, and pick-me-up snacks. Her act of selflessness and love helped refill the cup that had been gradually depleting over the past week and was nearly empty. It helped me realize that a little selflessness goes a long way. This made me think of my

boys who were probably acting out because they knew their mom wasn't fully present or willing to really play with them. We just needed to get out of the house, even if I didn't quite have the energy for it. So when that third nap was interrupted, I packed up the boys and went straight to the park. We had a blast! It turned out that the fresh air and time outdoors was the exact medicine we all needed. That feeling of drowning, fatigue and exhaustion was lifted. There were no more tantrums the rest of the night, just hugs and kisses. It's amazing how all it took was an amazing friend, a different perspective, and some fresh air.

Now here I am at the end of one of the most exhausting days I've had in months, with my cup full. I may have lost it today, but without getting *that* exhausted and *that* just "done" earlier, I wouldn't be going to bed reflecting on how blessed I am to have a hard working husband, two incredibly fun and independent kids, and a compassionate friend.

Thank you for reading my very first article for *A Bundle of THYME* Magazine! As a mom of two small children, life can get hectic, but I aim every day to make the best of the mess! I hope you'll come along the ride with me whether you're a mom, mom to be, or simply find these experiences fascinating.

Real Stories – Every Single Day – by Bekah Holland

Sometimes, it takes me a long time to learn the most simplest of lessons.

I mean, take cooking, for example. My mom is like June Cleaver meets Betty Crocker....no pressure, right? Growing up, she made the most wonderful home for us. She spent her days chasing two kids, cleaning, managing schedules and even making our clothes. Even with all of that, she put these amazing, homemade meals on the table by the time my dad got home from work. All through my childhood and teen years, she tried to pique my interest and teach me to cook. I wasn't interested in learning to make anything requiring more thought or time than a Hot Pocket.

Fast forward to about 10 years, and this comes back to bite me. My soon to be husband's birthday fell on a week he happened to be out of town for business. I had big plans to make him this grand dinner. I pictured candlelight, music, ambiance and of course, a delicious homemade meal. Keep in mind that these were the days before smart phone and high-speed internet access. I finally found a pork tenderloin recipe that didn't seem too complicated (thanks to AOL's search engine). So I made a list, did the shopping, cleaned and set a beautiful table before starting my preparations.

A bit late into the process, I realized that I didn't have a string to tie the pork loin. "Meh," I thought. "No big deal. I mean, twine should be fine", I thought. In case you were wondering, the results from cooking with blue fishing twine closely resembles roasted Smurf. It was horrible! My fiancé sat down at my table with beautiful drippy candles, soft music playing in the background, and a plate of inedible food in front of him. He laughed. I cried. We ordered pizza. I also may or may not have accidentally given him food poisoning on our first Thanksgiving as a married couple where he ended up in the ER, but we won't talk about that one. It's funny now, but I'm still a little surprised he didn't run out the door and never come back. I got better at cooking (and not poisoning people) over the years, but there's not a day that goes by that I cook a meal that I don't wish I had listened to my mom years ago and saved myself some pride-reducing moments and many disastrous meal attempts.

Fast forward many years...

Here are some things to know about me. I was raised in church. I grew up with parents and grandparents, family near and far who prayed for me and over me every single day of my life. I know how powerful prayer is. I know our God is capable of more than I can imagine. But sometimes I just get distracted or busy. And this time, I got so wrapped up in our life and the craziness that comes with having kids that I sometimes forgot to pray like I should. Our family went through some rough years. Things I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. And I knew that not only did I need to pray more, but I needed to start praying more intentionally.

I began praying and I saw God move again and again. I saw changes in people and dynamics and situations. It was amazing to see God work in people that I love so deeply, and work in me at the same time. But I'll be honest. After a while, some days I'd choose sleep over getting up to spend time in prayer. Or I would completely forget and then just quickly say, "Lord bless us," and move on with my day. When I did that, I'd see things change for the worse. The same people, dynamics and situations that I'd seen improve would look just like they had before God had shown up. Like the enemy saw some weakness and beat his way back in. When that happened, I'd get back on my knees and get back to work. But I didn't always want to. I was

exhausted and empty trying to do it all on my own. I was constantly pouring my time and energy into praying protection over my family and interceding for those I love.

I should have felt filled up and confident, I thought, but instead I just felt depleted. One morning, rather frustrated, I vented my heart to God.

“Why can’t I just take a break, God?

Why do I have to fight this battle every single day?

It’s not like YOU need ME!”

In typical God fashion, he poked at my heart and opened my eyes. He brought to my mind the story of Moses and the Amalekites. In case you need a quick Cliffs Notes version reminder of the story, here’s a recap. When the Amalekites attacked the Israelites, as long as Moses held up his arms with the staff in his hands, the children of God would advance toward victory. When he got tired and dropped his arms, they would start losing ground to the Amalekites. And, of course, Moses’ arms were going to get tired! I mean, have you ever carried a baby in a baby carrier...you know, the kind that clicks into the car seat and feels like it weighs 75 pounds when you’re walking across a parking lot? Or raked leaves? Or raised your hand waiting to be called on for so long your arm feels like it’s a weight? You get tired. Moses did too. But God didn’t leave him to hold his arms up in the air all on his own. He gave him support. He gave him people like Aaron and Hur to hold him up when he was too tired to continue on his own. And God gave me support too. He gave me family who will stand in the gap for me and pray over me when I’m weak and loved ones who encourage me along the way. He gave me people who will hold up my arms so that we can continue working toward the victory God has for us.

I wish I didn’t take so long to learn these simple truths God put in His word for me. But sometimes I do. Sometimes I missed the full impact of His truth because I wasn’t ready. Just like my mom trying to give me the tools I might need to feed my family someday, I wasn’t paying attention. Now, I have a funny story about a blue dinner and possibly trying to poison my husband, but I want to do better when it comes to praying God’s Word over my family and interceding on their behalf. I don’t want to miss the ways that God wants to use me, and also how He wants to fill me up and strengthen me, because there is more victory in store when we’re ready to raise our arms and hold them there, even when they get tired. That’s what our village is here for. That’s why we surround ourselves with people who love God. All so we can stand together...”for where two or more are gathered, there I am.”

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Unleashed and Free

I think one of the biggest things for girls (especially girls) to overcome is worrying about what others think about us. I don't know at what age it kicks in, but once that thought process grabs hold, it keeps us on a leash the rest of our life. If that worry is never overcome, we end up as older women in a chair multiple times a week trying to erase signs of aging and lift that which is fallen. On, there's nothing wrong with that either, unless it's the worry that motivates the sit.

Little girls are often so confident in their style, when they play dress-up, aren't they? She emerges from her room with a boa around her neck, clunky plastic high heels, and lipstick that is quite outside the lines of her lips. We applaud, she loves it, and she prances around as if she's Queen for the Day.

Fast forward to age 13 or so and that same little girl is now emerging from her room where she spent too much time trying to cover that zit and too long staring into her closet wishing she had clothes like her friend. She's also extremely self-conscious about her belly pooch, that baby fat, that hasn't disappeared like some of the girls that now have their boobs in bloom. And it's all most likely because she has spent countless hours watching girls of her age on television, or perhaps one girl at school made a rude comment.

That's when the worry starts...those thoughts that we aren't pretty or skinny enough, we're too short or too dumb, or any number of other thoughts about how we don't measure up to some sort of standard placed on us by society. Sometimes, those standards are even placed on us by our parents.

It's time to get married and we're planning a wedding, and then our friends are throwing us a baby shower. We want our wedding to be unique and for our guests to think we've done a spectacular job in presentation and beauty. We compete with others for a more grand announcement of the gender of our baby, as we worry what others will think about what we share and how we share it. Social media has infused worry that we won't stand out or be loved, like she is over there on her page or her site...

Now the leash is attached our neck and the cord has shortened. If we don't snip it loose, here's what then occurs:

Aging start happening, kids leave home, life deals us some hard blows. We look around at her and she still looks good, her kids hang out with her constantly, and her life seems all bliss. And ours? We look into the mirror still feeling like that little girl that one time realized she wasn't all that cute, she didn't really fit in, and most likely the other girls don't like us anyway...because we can't erase the lines of time and loss.

This is where we have another chance to change, ladies, to snip the leash and run free!

I've been there, and am in the throes now of the aging process and losing my parents and losing my own footing in this crazy world. I can at times find myself wondering what others must think of the way I dress or my lack of this, or why I don't show up here, or how in the world can I

allow that. Some days I wake up and find myself on that short leash and it chokes me. It chokes me dry.

But here's the difference between us and those animals that are fastened to collars with leashes. Our leash is self-snapped and we can just as easily unsnap it and run free. It's not easy, but we can do it! We can tell ourselves that no weapon formed against us will prosper, we are the apple of His eye, and we are beautiful in all our phases of life – inside and out. We can shake loose the worry and whining and wondering what they think or how they look at us, and we can step away from the house with a smile.

In fact, a smile is one of the most beautiful things we can wear as we age. It softens lines and fills our lips, it brightens our mood and lifts our spirit, and it causes others to look at us and wonder – not why we don't look like this or do that – but rather why we are so happy!

What others think about us cannot define us, and the quicker we tell our girls (and boys) this truth, over and over again, the better their lives will be. The only thing that defines our life is what HE thinks, and his Word is full of how his thoughts toward us are innumerable and wonderful.

Psalm 139:17,18

*How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.*

Think on this verse until you hear the “click” from the collar that's been choking you and you see it fall to the ground. Shake yourself and realize that you are no longer tethered to worry and fear...and then run. Run free and run hard, and emerge from your room wearing those shoes no one else likes...but you think make you feel grand, comfy and smart. Yep, even a shoe can do that!

FRESH THYME - Not Doing It

I think all women everywhere have anxiety in some area, even though they pray, fight against it, gather their thoughts, meditate, attend yoga sessions, or whatever they do to stave off fear and worry. I know I do. I have to daily choose to think on good things, cast my cares on Him, believe the truth, and surround myself with others who do the same. It's an ongoing battle, and one we just have to win if we are to be of any good to our families and friends...and to ourselves.

However, at least in my own life, there are so many other areas where I've lived in peace and not worried and experienced faith and walked in truth and slept well at night...and I'm so thankful.

The culture that surrounds us these days is screaming and pulling at us to say, "Have you thought about this, though?" "Here. Take up this new worry. Fear this. And do this in order to avoid disaster." It's everywhere, from the moment I wake until I rest my head at night, new possibilities to worry myself to death with.

But...I'm not doing it.

Here are a few things I'm talking about, new worries that are offered to us on a daily basis:

Aging. If we scroll through the cable television channels, there will be several infomercials on wrinkly skin and how to avoid the signs of aging. Besides that, for those of us who deal with elderly parents and see what they experience with memory loss, aches and pains, and even loneliness...we can totally lie awake at night wondering if that too will be our plight as we observe more wrinkles and drooping eyes. So we're enticed to buy this cream and have that procedure and sign up for this beauty enhancer to stave off the loss of beauty we see in the mirror.

I'm not doing it.

Cancer. I have a friend right now that's in the hospital, and I bet you have friends with the diagnosis, or maybe you yourself have cancer. When I wake in the morning, there is certainly going to be one news clip on my laptop news that tells me about a food I'm eating that causes cancer, or some product I'm using that's sure to be the death of me. I can click and read each one and change up my pantry and clean out my fridge, for fear that I might die tomorrow. But I cannot pick up one more worry.

I'm not doing it.

E coli or other foodborne woes. There's a cruise somewhere that's full of passengers with stomach bugs. There's a lettuce in our crispers that's carrying bacteria. Another restaurant is shut down for uncleanliness in the food prep area. We're eating and wondering if there's some creepy thing on the food we're trying to enjoy, so we wash our food, we buy organic, and we fret and stew (no pun intended) over every dish we eat and offer at our table. Fear wants to set up in a canister on the shelf in our kitchen.

I'm not doing it.

Bread, sugar, preservatives. She's not feeding her kids sugar of any kind. In fact, she's taking her kids food to every party and every event, so they don't taste anything bad for them. They're not eating carbs so you can't invite them over for the newest sandwich recipe you found that includes strawberries with chicken! They'll insist on eating it sans that new potato bread you found that tastes delicious. You read the labels and there are so many ingredients that you know aren't good, so you put the jar back on the shelf and walk away...from everything. It's overwhelming to keep up with what's good and what's bad to ingest and digest. Maybe you should quit your job and devote it to clean and healthy living.

I'm not doing it.

Suicide. Anti-depressants can cause it, her daughter talks about it, there are signs you must notice in your children, and it's on the rise in our world among kids. Yikes! Could your own children be contemplating it, your grandchildren influenced by their peers about it, and is the world actually so desolate and hopeless now that you've even considered this selfish act of death that would critically harm those you love and those that love you? They want us to take these pills to stave off our sorrowful sighs, but yet the side effects can cause the very thing we fear.

I'm not doing it.

Perfection. Ah, there it is. Another video pops up on Facebook where she shows us how to get that perfect makeup with long eyelashes and flawless skin. Oh, and she has this great product she's selling to straighten, curl, give lift to and much more – to our hair! Even if our hair is thin and brittle and lifeless, we can expect miracles. Or there's another picture of a white sofa with a counter in the back with perfectly lined stools at a counter where there's a candle burning and fresh fruit in a bowl, with not a crumb to be seen. That's how we want our houses to look and it's how we want our hair and face to shine. But it's all so expensive and time consuming and we just click off and sigh...as we go back to our thin lips and dull colors in our home that we used to think were so cute. Should we work on our perfect look?

I'm not doing it.

I could go on and on, but you get the picture, don't you? Am I saying to ditch healthy living and eating and wisdom and medicine? No way. I am saying we don't have to buy into the worry behind all of the above. My dad has this saying, "Do what you can with what you have. And don't worry about the rest." The truth of the matter is that I cannot control all of the above, stave off the aging process, build a wall around my family so that they never hurt or get sick, keep my skin and hair from experiencing the beauty of time (yes, I said *beauty*), or only eat that which I prepare, refusing to enjoy life with my friends.

I will not pick up worry in more areas than those I already have, as I don't believe that's healthy...at all. I love to eat good food, dress in cute clothes and wear makeup that enhances. I want to live a long life free of disease, and I absolutely love decorating and fixing up my closet and my home. But I want to enjoy and do all of that because it's fun and enjoyable, not because

I'm scared to death I'm going to fall prey to the evils that lurk in the shadows. And that's the difference.

I'm not doing it. I'm not picking up another worry or woe, when today is all I have promised, anyway. I will pursue peace and ask for wisdom, and walk in that direction daily, as I live and enjoy life to its fullest. And I will be careful to skip over articles and commercials and even conversations that cause anxiety to rise because I didn't "know that." After all, the information I just read might change tomorrow!

I'm not doing it. Are you?

(If you do any of the above because of health concerns in your kids or your family, I'm not referring to you. Of course, you need to proceed with caution. This article is meant to encourage all of us that struggle with fear of the unknown and that which we read and that which we see...when there is no worry at hand.)

FRESH THYME - Observations

It's everywhere. Friends and young people and celebrities – everyone is minimalizing. In fact, you'll read about one of our writer's journey on clearing out clutter over on the ENCOURAGEMENT page. It's a great thing to do, to clear away clutter, to make our spaces simpler and more pleasant and cleaner and more enjoyable. I'm totally into that, as well. I cannot stand junky areas of the house, and when I notice them they stress me out. So onto my to-do list that goes – clean that shelf, organize that drawer, arrange that pantry.

Minimalizing is such a good way to assess and discard, to bring peace. It's a good way to observe and see how much stuff we have amassed and to also teach our kids to share and give or swap with our friends or kids in need. It's necessary in this consumer-crazed world in which we live as we see and then we buy and we store. It's all SO GOOD.

However, as we humans all like to do at times, it seems sometimes extremes are taken that cause stress the other way. Let me explain:

Shopping for furniture, I notice lots of white. White dining room chairs (seriously?), white sofas and white rugs. While it's quite beautiful and stunning, who can really live in a room adorned in white on places where we are supposed to walk, sit, and dine?

Looking at decorating ideas on line, I see lots of open space with nothing on the walls or floors, and then a massive – dining room table – in the center. Space is limited in my house, and while some can afford a ton of square feet, I cannot! So isn't that quite defeating the purpose of minimization if we buy a bigger space to display our lack of clutter?

I read about ridding our homes of paper and plastic, while these folks promote sites that only sell fair trade and recycled items that are quite pricey. That's wonderful to save the planet, but I would have to rethink before I chunk down \$300 for a sweater. I suppose if your closet is minimal, this might work well for you. But I like lots of options.

There seems to be a "Look at me and what I'm doing and how much better the way I live is than yours" type of attitude that goes with some extremes. Not all, but some. In other words, if we could all "see the light" and do what they do, our world would be a much better place. Maybe it would, but for some reason that attitude is not attracting me towards that reasoning right now...

Maybe it's all because I'm of the older generation that I see the extreme (at least, what I call extreme) as not really doable for me, and because I like a comfy sofa more than a pristine one, and well...I have grandkids with sticky hands from eating...yes from eating candy that I gave them that's not organic or 100% pure. For some reason, extremes seem exhausting to me.

If you're into minimalizing, go for it. I am too, along with so many as we observe our clutter and pare down. And share your story with a peaceful intent as it relates to YOU, like Dina does in her story "New Grace." But if you're into minimalizing so that you can show the world your perfection without a dot of dirt or one piece of plastic in your pantry, go for it as well. Just don't tell me that your way is a better way...because that doesn't make me want to follow suit.

#

FRESH THYME – She Told Me Twice

It was really cold, and the weather forecasters had mentioned a slight chance of snow/sleet in my area, which is a big thing where I live. While all of you northerners sleep right through that kind of forecast, I toss and turn hoping if we do indeed get that white stuff, that it doesn't melt before sunrise!

Imagine my dismay when I awoke that morning to see absolutely nothing on the ground, and then...my daughter called. She was taking the kids to school and they squealed as they noticed white stuff in the crevices of roofs in their neighborhood! She knew I might not know, so she called to see if I'd stepped outside to look. I hadn't even thought of looking up! And there it was – a happy line of white on the tops of the houses on my street – that stuff we rarely see. And it made my day.

The very next week I received another phone call from my daughter. Once again, she was calling to inform me about an icy view I might have missed. She knew it would burn off when the sun rose in the sky, but there it was, on the way to school again, but this time on the ground. The heavy dew and light mist had frozen and the fields were glistening and white. She knew I wouldn't see it in my front yard because the heat of the house would prohibit the frost. But down the street we have an open field.

I pulled on a coat and hopped in the car and drove a few hundred feet just to observe the beauty, once again. I was so happy she called to tell me, and so thrilled that I got to see the beauty!

By now, some of you know exactly what I mean, if you're a neighbor and a Texan. Others of you are giving me the eye roll and thinking, "Seriously? A bit of icy frost made your day?"

My daughter knows me well. She knows I absolutely love weather and all that it brings, and I especially love those rare winter moments when we get any hint of that wintry mix. If she hadn't called me, however, I would have missed out on those small pleasures. She took the time to let me know, to call me outside to look up, and encouraged me to drive down the street to look around...to see!

I know it's a little thing, but it was huge to me!

It reminded me to think of my friends, and to let them in, focus their attention, or call them to see that which I know makes them happy!

For instance...

- When I see a good movie, I can write my movie buff friends a text and recommend.
- When I eat at an awesome restaurant, I can invite a friend to join.
- When there's this incredible sale on shoes, I can phone the one who will be delighted at the news!
- When I read an awesome verse that brightens my mood, I can share with a friend who's feeling the same.

- When I read a good book, I can loan it or offer the title to a book lover friend.
- When there's a rainbow in the sky or a full moon at night, I can share that news with one who cares.
- When I have a creative idea I can take a photo and inspire a friend.
- And when any of my friends do the above for me, I can be sure to thank them and pass it on.

I'm so thankful that my daughter knows me, she took the time to listen to her kiddos, and she cared enough to text her mom to take a look at that which she knew would make her smile.

And it did! In fact, she did it twice!

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

ARIL 2019

TIPS

The Dressing – A Shoe for You – by Marcy Lytle

I absolutely love shoes! However, finding the right shoe that fits, feels comfy, and is cute is a combo that's hard to come by. There are so many heights of heels, fits in width and length, and styles that vary in color and shape, it's hard to know which ones to pick. And don't even get me started on which shoe to wear with which outfit. We need sandals, flats, mules, booties, slides, sneakers, etc. to go with our shorts, our skirts, our capris, and so on! All of these shoes can be expensive!

This month we're showing you a style for each outfit you might wear this spring, shoes that are affordable and cute. The comfy part you'll have to decide on your own, depending on your feet! I love to shop at discount stores, once I see the styles out there, but it's impossible to show you those here because they aren't for sale on line.

We chose Target to be our shoe source for this month's styles. Use your red card, ask for gift cards, or save up a few dollars to get you a new closet full of shoes – tailored just for you!

The neutral slide – Neutral from head to toe is a trend in fashion this spring, and this super cute slide would be a great choice to have as one of your shoes. Pair it with your denims, or even with a long flowy skirt.

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-violet-woven-backless-mules-universal-thread-153/-/A-53918958?preselect=53822688#ink=sametab>

Two strap slide – I actually have this pair of slides and they are comfortable and go with everything! I wear them with shorts to an outdoor concert, or out shopping with capris and a flowy blouse. These are a classic staple for your shoe closet this spring.

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-kerryl-wedge-footbed-slide-sandals-universal-thread-153/-/A-52998419?preselect=52954641#ink=sametab>

Canvas sneakers – This style of sneaker is so comfortable and cute! Notice the elastic on the heel – it's awesome! And the multi-stripe is just perfect to go with all of your denim shorts, skirts and pants of any length. You just slip them on and go, no tying required!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-mad-love-lennie-lace-up-canvas-sneakers/-/A-54085613?preselect=53813890#ink=sametab>

T-Strap Thong – I am not super comfortable in sandals that go between the toes, but I know many women who love them. And this pewter thong sandal is so pretty. It's dressy enough for an outdoor wedding, and casual enough for a picnic on the same day. There are a few other choices of color, as well!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-archer-t-strap-thong-sandals-a-new-day-153/-/A-54141030?preselect=53835360#ink=sametab>

Block Heel pump – Isn't this blue color with the clear strap so awesome? What a great pair of sandals to have this season. The block heel makes it comfortable, and style is so flattering to any foot! Grab a pair in blush OR blue!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-michaela-lucite-mid-block-heel-pumps-a-new-day-153/-/A-54451701?preselect=53811115#lnk=sametab>

Rain boots? - We say, yes! Wear them in the yard for gardening, or even keep in your car for that sudden downpour when parking lots are filled with puddles! Isn't this yellow polka dot pair the cutest? This is something you'll keep around for years...

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-novel-dot-rain-boots/-/A-14354227?preselect=15690972#lnk=sametab>

Another sneaker – Hopefully, there are lots of walks in your weekly routine, and so you'll need more sneakers in your closet. I haven't tried these, but I love the new look of them. They have great reviews, and I love the gray color, and the wide white sole! The fabric is also stretchy!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-carina-stretch-knit-sneakers-a-new-day-153/-/A-53918930?preselect=53837595#lnk=sametab>

Music will be played and heard around the world this Easter Season, in churches everywhere! There will be familiar hymns, new songs of worship, and maybe even a spontaneous song or two about the love of God. Music is that universal language of hope that lifts us up above the din of the world, the lyrics can sometimes transform our thinking, and the rhythm can cause our feet to move when we thought we couldn't take a step.

I love music. Who doesn't? So I thought it would be fun to share a few of my all-time favorite songs so that you too can take a listen and enjoy and be lifted up, this season of hope. These are songs that either spoke to me in the darkest of times, or just made my soul sing on a cloudy day. Enjoy....

All Through the Night

Our Life is in Your Hands

Sarah Groves ?

Avril Lavigne head above water

Selah's Style – Designer Box – by Marcy Lytle

Children are so creative. They really are. And this month, Selah's cousin Ayla – who is just now 6 years old – shares her creativity with us. She got this really cool designer box from Lakeshore Learning for Christmas, and it allows her imagination to soar. She spends hours creating dress designs, and she'd like to share some of her favorites with you!

The box came with a small mannequin that has a slit down the back for pushing in these rubber fasteners to hold the fabric pieces in place. There are lots of patterns and sizes, as well as different ribbons for creating straps and belts! The combinations seem endless! Even her brother took time to draw and design a few ideas for her to try!

Polka dots and stripes – This was one of her first designs. She chose polka dots for the bottom and stripes for the top, pulling it all together with a cinched belt at the waist and a thin neck strap!

Blue stars with yellow waist – Isn't this just so pretty for spring? The blue fabric dotted with stars looks stunning with the yellow double-wrapped belt. And look at Ayla's new chair in the background! It's her favorite place to sit and do her work.

Stripes for the win – Here's that wide pink belt again, this time set against teal stripes! She's super proud of this look, and would wear it anywhere at all – even to a ball!

Lace and flowers – This might be one of my faves that she created, because it's so summery and light. And the little touch of lace makes it fun, as well as the shorter length! So pretty!

Two-piece – Ayla folded a piece of fabric to make this skirt, and another for the top, leaving some belly exposed in the middle. She wants an outfit like this for herself, but she's not quite sure if Mom will allow...

Pinky show – Here's another two-piece, with pink on the bottom and stripes at the top. There's a pretty belt at the waist. What a great spring-forward mind this little girl has, and she's so proud of each creation!

Different! – Just look at Ayla's face in this pose, as she's not quite sure if this outfit will work but it sure is creative! Can this person walk while wearing this outfit? We aren't quite sure...

This little designer box is only \$19.99 and it will provide hours of entertainment and creativity for your kids that love this sort of thing. I even enjoyed creating a few outfits myself, once she let me have a turn! And her brother Gideon designed a dress on paper for her to copy!

<https://www.lakeshorelearning.com/products/arts-crafts/craft-collage-materials/my-first-fashion-designer/p/DD409/>

In the Kitchen – Snappy Salsas – by Marcy Lytle

Salsa. It's a staple at our house, and we love it on the table at any Mexican restaurant we frequent. There are all sorts of salsas, from green to red, mild to hot, and fruity to veggie! Since it's spring and picnics are hopefully happening on your calendar, we are bringing to you some salsa recipes that can be made quickly, and they taste oh so good!

Fruit Salsa

We recently visited a fruit stand and purchased a large pineapple and mango. We had some oranges, so this is the recipe we used. It's super tasty and fresh, and looks beautiful as well!

Diced: (amounts depend on how much you want to make!)

- Mango
- Pineapple
- Orange segments
- Jalapeno (seeds removed)
- Red onion

Cilantro (optional)

Juice of a lime

Salt and pepper

Orange halves

Cut out the segments of an orange, after halving it. Scoop out the pulp with a serrated spoon. Set aside.

Mix the fruit together, squeeze the lime juice on top, season, and toss.

Serve in the cute orange bowl (you can very thinly slice the bottom so it sits level but be careful, not to slice a hole in the orange.)

Radish/Cucumber Salsa

This is so refreshing, and the honey makes it sing! We recently packed this in both of our lunches, with chips for dipping. So good!

- 1 cup diced cucumber
- 1 cup diced radishes
- ¼ cup diced red onion
- 1 diced seeded jalapeno
- ¼ c chopped cilantro
- 1 lime – the juice
- Honey and salt to taste

Just mix it all together – that's it! It not only tastes good, it looks so pretty!

Zucchini Pepita Salsa

We took this to a gathering and served it with North of the Border tortilla chips. Super yummy!

- 1 cup pepitas (green pumpkin seeds)
- 2 sliced zucchini
- ¼ c chopped cilantro
- ¼ c chopped mint
- 1 diced Fresno chile
- Lime juice and salt to taste

Toast the pepitas in a skillet. Grill the zucchini til charred and then chop it. Toss with the pepitas, cilantro, mint and chile. Add in juice and salt.

(I didn't have two zucchini so I added a bit of sweet potato, and didn't have a jalapeno so I used a poblano!)

Tried and True – Herb Gardens – by Marcy Lytle

My husband put together an herb box, years ago, and it's still standing and serving us well! But herbs can actually be grown in lots of containers and they all look so pretty and inviting. Whether you use mason jars, pots, or standing boxes, or whatever you choose – consider planting your own herb garden for spring/summer dishes. You'll be so happy to just step outside and snip away when you're creating in the kitchen.

Here are some easy steps to follow with links for browsing and ideas:

Think about your budget. Do you have \$100 or \$300 to spend on this? Or only \$50? You'll need to calculate the cost of the herb planting. You can totally plant seeds, or purchase herbs that are already up and ready for picking. That's my favorite!

Find your space. Herbs look pretty in a huge pot – planting several at different heights (use a couple of pots within a pot!). They would look great in an arrangement on a table outside. Or you can use a planter box. Browse the internet for the best choice for you! Read up on spacing, watering and season. Check out this cute windowsill herb kit!

https://express.google.com/u/0/product/5783933804109908528_3568748318977716275_2890743?utm_source=google_shopping&utm_medium=tu_prop&utm_content=eid-lsjeuxoeqt>im=CKzwgMXmjoimJBC1zJ3m0eTfuq0BGLCApA4iA1VTRCjw3erkBTD3t7AB&utm_campaign=2890743&gclid=EAlalQobChMI9sWU4-P84AIVibfACh0jFQxDEAkYASABEgl_d_D_BwE

<https://www.retirementlivingonline.com.au/2016/05/DIY-Herb-Gardens-Perfect-for-Small-Spaces>

Decide what herbs you want/need. If you make a lot of salsa (see In the Kitchen for recipes this month!) you might want to plant veggies like jalapenos and tomatoes, and the herb cilantro! Maybe you're an Italian lover, so you'll definitely want basil, rosemary and oregano and parsley. I like to have an assortment to choose from. Think through your choices and your space, then...

Go shopping. Herbs can be found at Home Depot or even your local grocery store. However, if you're new at herb planting, you'll want to visit a nursery with knowledgeable staff to ask them what's best to plant this time of year. For example, basil freezes in the winter, and cilantro burns up in the heat. These things are good to know! Be sure to ask about the best soil, as well. You might want to pick up some gardening gloves and tools, while you're shopping.

<https://www.target.com/p/4pc-steel-gardening-tool-set-pure-garden/-/A-76159314>

Get decorative. Think about purchasing or making signage for your herbs. When they start growing and mingling together, you might get confused on what is what – especially considering the fact that parsley and cilantro look like twins! Don't get wooden stakes, they'll ruin. Opt for cute stakes that can weather the sun and water.

https://www.amazon.com/Markers-Reusable-Planting-Gardening-Vegetable/dp/B07BBR2Y4Q/ref=asc_df_B07BBR2Y4Q/?tag=hyprod-

[20&linkCode=df0&hvadid=242015693684&hvpos=1o5&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=15156259664361014276&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9028263&hvtargid=pla-438693592516&psc=1](https://www.amazon.com/20&linkCode=df0&hvadid=242015693684&hvpos=1o5&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=15156259664361014276&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9028263&hvtargid=pla-438693592516&psc=1)

Start arranging and planting. You'll want to plant the tallest herbs at the back, with the lower trailing herbs toward the front of your containers. Read instructions on placement. After you have everything planted, be sure to water and read how often to prune, water, and pick the herbs. Otherwise you'll have a tangled mess or dead plants, really quickly!

Dress it up. Why? Because it's fun. Hang a sign or insert something really cute like a ladybug. This completes the look of your herb garden and makes it pretty. Here's a set of ladybugs from Amazon that would look so cute crawling up the fence nearby your garden.

https://www.amazon.com/GIFTME-Decorative-Ladybugs-Outdoor-Sculptures/dp/B07HF2Z653/ref=asc_df_B07HF2Z653/?tag=hyprod-20&linkCode=df0&hvadid=309822045967&hvpos=1o6&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=5210803313978622745&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9028263&hvtargid=pla-608738324044&psc=1

Maintain. This is the hard part. You'll need to arrange your schedule for watering and picking and using the herbs you've planted. If you harvest too much, share it with a friend! If not enough, plant some more! See what grows well where, and keep a garden log.

https://www.amazon.com/Garden-Planner-Journal-Log-Book/dp/1545088977/ref=sr_1_5?keywords=garden+log+book&qid=1552400141&s=books&sr=1-5

Enjoy. I think it's absolutely thrilling to take a basket and snips, and to browse your herb garden for dinner. Be sure to rinse them well, because little spiders and bugs like to hang around sometimes when you bring your greens inside. Just snip and use what you need.

Once you have your favorite herbs established in jars or pots or in your own herb box, you'll really enjoy them. There's nothing like the flavor that fresh herbs provide when cooking all sorts of goodies in the kitchen. And if you add a small mint plant, you can add that to your cup of tea when you're relaxing on your back porch...admiring your garden.

HOME

Practical Parenting – How Much is Too Much? – by Marcy Lytle

Kids take what we give them and run with it. If we say they can watch television, they'll watch it all day if we let them. If we allow them outdoors without instructions, they'll soon have on the water hose and there will be a mud puddle that gets them dirty and our house a mess. If we set out a bowl of candy, it will all be gone before we turn around, and sick tummies will be crying shortly. Give a kid an inch, and...well you know...he grabs the entire ruler and runs through the house chasing his sibling with it.

It's often hard to know how to set limits on things that we don't even realize we need limits on, until our kids prove that we do! Here are some practical helps on some common situations where kids run amuck and chaos ensues:

Snacks after school: If they're hungry (which they are), give them choices – not an open pantry. Let them choose one fruit and one snack from a bin. That's it, until dinner. If you're running straight from school to practice or lessons, keep a cooler full of these same choices, so that you're not in the drive-thru ordering large fries and cokes. Enlist the help of the kids for packing this cooler at night.

Television: Why not sit down as a family and let everyone talk about their favorite shows and what they like to watch. Write it down with length of program beside it, and the person's name. Give each person a limited number of choices. You can re-do this monthly or quarterly, to adjust to new shows and likes. Assign each person a day where they get to choose a 30-minute or hour long program. In other words, they control the remote for that family sitting. Of course, people can trade if need be, but this at least gives time limits and order to an otherwise long day of noise in the background.

Toys: Keep many toys in bins that are out of reach of the kids. Place them on shelves in closets, if possible, especially if lots of little pieces are present. Set parameters on where toys can be played with, and how many toys can be gotten out at once. This is probably one of the most overwhelming things a mom/dad face in the house – toys everywhere – under the feet, under the couch, on top of the table, and all over the kitchen. We are tired and we just let the kids go. However, once we train our kids that one toy out, one toy back, is the rule of thumb and we enforce it – it helps. And when we require that all toys be put away nightly before bed; that helps too! Consistency is the key to too much toys underfoot!

Sleep: As kids get older, they want to stay up later and then sleep until noon or later. Do we really want this? What are they doing while they're up at night and you're asleep? What habits are they creating by sleeping so late, so that half the day is wasted when they get out of bed? Don't let weekends become the time when life wisdom flies out the window. Sleeping in is great, but too much of it is not so great, for you or them.

Friends: No, she doesn't have to invite 30 kids to her birthday party where you have to feed them all and their parents. No, he doesn't have to have five boys over at once to play in the backyard that is shared by his siblings. If you have several children, let them take turns inviting

a friend over. You control the amount of people you can deal with at a given time. And if you would prefer no extra neighborhood kids around at times, then say no. It's okay to say no.

Clothes: One of my children went through a phase of changing clothes every few hours depending on the mood. Then each of these outfits was stuck in the hamper and I ended up with a mountain of wash. This had to be nipped right away – one outfit per day – unless necessary to change. And as soon as kids are old enough, let them help wash and put away their own clothes. They won't want a mountain to deal with, either.

Play Dough and Slime and Sand: Any sticky and messy substances can quickly turn into ruined carpets and messes that take hours to clean! Set rules like: This can only be played with outside (sand.) This has to be kept in a pan or on a mat (play dough). This is off limits in the car (slime.) Keep these types of play items put away in YOUR pantry up high, where you have to be asked before they can play with it. Problem solved.

What other things are just “too much” at your house? Noise? Create spaces and call each kid to that calm quiet zone when you need it. Screaming? Turn off the television and play classical music and require that voices and mouths be shut for a certain amount of time. Whining? Don't even give in to one request made in a whiny voice. Don't do it.

Parenting is exhausting, and some days you're going to succumb to “too much” of it all because you're tired and cannot lift a word or a finger. That's okay. You'll step up with your whistle in hand next time, when your energy is back. Too much is too much, and kids can learn this over time...with a little effort and extra encouragement and a pat on your own back.

I Don't Do Teenagers – Are They Too Old? – by Marcy Lytle

Punishing little kids is often where we use time out, and it's often effective. But punishing our teens? Even the word "punish" sounds so harsh nowadays. And our teens are often bigger than we are! However, we all know that our teens need guidance and that sometimes comes in the form of punishment when they veer off course from the directions they've been given. Teens want boundaries, they really do. They want us to care, even when they push us away.

Below are some ideas of punishment that fits the "crime" to try with your teens, all done in love and in prayer, asking God for direction from Him for sure! Often, just a word is all that's needed to get our teens back on track, and other times we just have to be the parent, as hard as it might be.

When he talks back with a smart mouth. I'm pretty sure all teens smart off to their parents once in a while. Maybe we say, "Get started on your homework," for the third time and he retorts back with, "Geez! Leave me alone, Mom! What's your problem?" Those kinds of responses need to be dealt with, nipped in the bud. We can first look at ourselves and see if we have provoked our child through belittling or shaming. That's never a good way to instruct. If we have, we can apologize first. This often brings an apology in turn. We can also walk away and wait, to see if he realizes his tone and comes forward. If we need to, we can talk to him later after homework is done and nerves are cooled, about what provoked him to answer you the way he did. Listen to the why, and offer solutions together.

When she won't keep her room clean. Maybe she eats in her bed, throws her clothes on the floor, and refuses to change her bedding, and worse. There should be bedroom rules to be followed, and kept. And teens can totally be held "hostage" at home until their chores are done. Try helping her with a schedule of cleaning nightly, putting away things before they pile up into a mountain of a mess. And we can model this behavior in our rooms as well. Let her shop for organizers. But be firm on what kind of cleaning you expect versus what she thinks you want. Sometimes communication can be the problem!

When he disobeys car rules. Car rules are life-giving, and we as parents cannot budge. Seatbelts must be worn, kids in the car when they're not supposed to be is not a flexible rule, and obeying traffic laws is a must. If he gets a ticket for speeding, or refuses to buckle up, or abuses the car by trashing it out, take the keys. No, that's not too harsh. Until your teen leaves the home, he has to learn to obey a big piece of machinery that can kill. Until he obeys all of these rules faithfully, he doesn't even need a license or keys.

When she lies. Maybe you catch her lying about completing her homework or what friend she visited after school. Once the lie is verified, this is the time to talk. Ask her why she felt the need to lie to you. Respond according to her answer. If she's fearful of you or what her friends will think, then talk about that. Restore the relationship. Talk about being true to oneself regardless of what others think. Remind her that the leash gets fastened back on the collar when lying occurs. Trust is broken, and until that's earned back, activities will be curtailed.

When he exhibits anger through words or actions. Anger is always one of those tell-tell reactions that something else is going on, deeper than the action that caused the anger to stir. Maybe our teens have seen us in our anger, or maybe they're bitter about an experience with a peer or an authority. Or perhaps they're hurt or angry at God for something bad that has occurred. Pray with your teens, release the anger together, and ask Him to help you both navigate back to peace by releasing those frustrations and trusting Him that he does care and He will heal.

When she abuses phone privileges. Our teens are given privileges because they're our kids, but electronics are gifts. Talk about this before ever issuing the phone in the first place. Electronics, keys to the car, laptops, etc. are all gifts that we happily share with our teens, but they have to be esteemed with care and gratefulness. Even if they save up and purchase some of these things, they are still privileges to use. Talk with your teens when they first get the phone about rules such as who and what and when and how, and write it out. Post it where they can see it. Remind them that the phone is not just for their eyes, but you are free to read texts if you feel the need to do so. That may be harsh, but it may be life-saving, as well.

The above words are not "the way" to parent. They are suggestions. Obviously, some teens get out of control and on drugs, run away, and have a host of serious problems that punishment won't solve. Seek intervention from counselors and get other prayer warriors moms to join with you for your kids. However, for the everyday teen struggles that we all face, we need to model our best behavior in front of our kids (don't speed, and then get on to him for a ticket receives), we need to ask forgiveness when we are rude (we can't punish him for anger if we just yelled at his dad), and we need to make sure our teens know our expectations as a family unit. They need to know they are loved and that we love to share all that we have with them, but respect and honor are top dogs in our home...from us to them...and from them back to us.

Enjoy your teens, let them grow up, but keep them safe with correction IN LOVE.

Little Things - Tiny Living – by Leyanne Enterline

Still living tiny!

As of late, my hubby has been on the road more. And fortunately, I and the kids have had the opportunity to travel with him! One of many benefits to living tiny is that we don't have to maintain much of a house or yard. So leaving for longer bits of time works out just fine! However, after Brian has been gone for so long, he starts to feel a bit overwhelmed at the two acres to maintain. I think it's really just mowing down a bunch of weeds! Then everything looks great again!

Also recently, I decided to put some bird feeders out on the property. We can now look out our tiny window in the trailer and see all the variety of birds that have been coming to feed. I guess living tiny has really made us slow down and look at the little things!

We have a game camera on the property as well, and we really love watching all the creatures that enjoy our land. I think in one single day we had a fox, raccoon, ringtail cat, axis deer, coyote, some jaguar-looking creature, someone's wolf dog, and of course my son Eli randomly making faces into the camera!

We just built a rough bike path around the property so the boys can ride their bikes and do some tiny jump ramps. We've had many falls and lots of tears, but also lots of laughs!

Of course, as is our usual practice, we have been house/pet sitting a lot, which gives me access to the washer, dryer and dishwasher that I have been missing out on! I get my appliance fix and the kids get their pet fix!

Not much else has changed, besides the freezing cold last month that made us want to stay indoors more. Running out of propane was a real concern with how cold it was in early March! Luckily, with family around the corner if we run out of anything, they have extras for us to borrow!

We've got many trips coming up and many house/pet sitting gigs so we're off to travel the U.S. and create new memories together, while enjoying every little thing in the meantime...

Cheers to living tiny!

The Family Practice – Restless? - by Brandi Oman

Every school year is special, our children get older, learn new things, make new friends, overcome different obstacles, and become more and more their own person. They use up their new school supplies, follow new routines, and remind you of things you haven't thought about since you were in school.

Our kiddos are head strong and motivated in the fall semester. They shed their past grade and start prepping exams after Christmas. Once they tackle the Christmas chaos and return to school they are restless as spring begins to make its entrance. To our children (and sometimes even to us) homework feels like abuse and the video consoles seem like a sweet break from all the commotion. I believe parents and students become anxious and ready for summer to appear at this time of year.

So how do we keep our children motivated to keep on completing and working on their school work?

Well, I don't have the black and white answer to that but I would love to share some ideas that have worked for Caiden and me:

- When the weather is permitting we take it outside! There is nothing like going to the park, having a picnic and reading under a shade tree. Nature gives us things to talk about and brings a peace outside of the walls we are conformed to in our home.
- I keep up with the lessons Caiden's teacher is going over in class and try to incorporate them in everyday living or with nature. It is a fresh way to keep his mind going. I love letting Caiden make a "lesson plan" for me and then teaching me on something he feels passionate about! Our recent one was Abraham Lincoln...Caiden really loves the American presidents. I am so amazed at what Caiden has learned and absorbed in and out of class.
- We can show them that we love to learn as much as they do, and go back to school if we have the will and financial ability! I myself am hoping to get enrolled in some classes at the community college.
- We can try to always use positive reinforcement with our children, as the world is constantly trying to beat them down, so it's okay to be a light in their life.
- Caiden and I love to plan an affordable summer trip this time of year. I set up goals that he needs to achieve at home and school. I also set up my budgeting so we can splurge a little bit. Goal boards are great visuals for everyone to see how on track everyone is, and who may need a push of motivation!

Most of all, we can have fun with our kids, as they do not stay small forever.

Enjoy the rest of the school year and bring on summer 2019 strong!

Proverbs 22:6

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

A Night to Remember – A Basket Full – by Marcy Lytle

Easter with the kiddos, it's all so fun, isn't it? Hiding eggs, buying Easter baskets, making Easter resurrection cookies, giving out candy and reading them the story of Jesus and his love for us is all part of sharing new life with our kids. My favorite is to have a picnic lunch outdoors and then have the kids hunt for eggs. It's so fun to watch the youngest ones as they learn to master the art of carrying a basket and filling it with eggs.

But what if it rains? That's always a possibility this time of year where I live. Or perhaps we just want an alternative to the traditional egg hunt in the yard for various other reasons such as allergies, we live in an apartment, or all sorts of reasons! This month's devo is for YOU! Or if you're still having an egg hunt outside, consider this one inside, as well!

Preparation: You'll need construction paper, two Bibles, and candy. Cut out 12 eggs of different colors to hide in the pages of the bible in random spots. As the kids "hunt" for the eggs, you'll be passing the other bible around to take turns reading. Number the eggs #1-12. Have the older kids read and the younger ones draw and place the eggs in a tiny basket you provide. For the candy, just use small pieces like Starburst, M&M, malted milk balls, etc. so that if kids eat all 12 it's not an overload! Or you could even provide small segments of fruit, if you prefer.

Hidden egg #1 – Matthew 27:32 This man was forced to carry the cross for Jesus. Draw a cross on this egg and place it in the basket.

Hidden egg #2 – John 19: 1, 2 Jesus was flogged and then had to wear a crown of thorns. Draw a crown of thorns and place this egg in the basket.

Hidden egg #3 – Mark 15:27 There were two others crucified besides Jesus on crosses, as well. Draw two crosses on this egg and place it in the basket.

Hidden egg #4 – Luke 23:44-46 Jesus breathed his last breath upon the cross. Color this egg dark, because darkness covered the earth. Place the egg in the basket.

Hidden egg #5 – Read Matthew 29: 59, 60 Jesus' body was wrapped in linen and placed in a tomb. Draw a mummy-like shape and place this egg in the basket.

Hidden egg #6 – Read Luke 24:1-3 The ladies came and didn't see Jesus in the tomb! The stone was rolled away. Draw an empty tomb and place this egg in the basket.

Hidden egg #7 – Read Matthew 28: 5, 6 Jesus is risen! The angel appeared and spoke these truthful words of hope. Draw an angel on the egg and then place in the basket.

Hidden egg #8 – Read Luke 24:37-39 Jesus appeared to his disciples and pointed to his hands and feet. Draw hands and feet with marks where nails would have been. Place the egg in the basket.

Hidden egg #9 – Read Mark 16:15 Jesus says to go into all the world and share the gospel – the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Draw a world or globe, and place this egg in the basket.

Hidden egg #10 – Find another egg and draw a smiley face on this one, placing it in the basket.

Hidden egg #11 – As you discover this egg, draw a heart on it and place in the basket.

Hidden egg #12 – For this final egg, write in big letters “Thank you” and place in the basket.

We now have a full basket of Easter eggs. Let’s review them by just observing the pictures we’ve drawn. Ask kids to take out each egg and recall what the drawing referred to, as they share aloud. With each egg drawn, let them dip into the candy bowl for a treat.

It is SO IMPORTANT as Christians to understand what Jesus did on the cross. Not only did he die for our sins as a perfect sacrifice, but he conquered the power of death over our bodies by rising from the dead. We do not have to feel shame or guilt when we mess up, because we can repent and Jesus forgives and removes our sins forever! We do not have to fear death, because He has a home awaiting all of us that believe – to live eternally with Him. That’s the good news!

Family prayer:

Jesus, thank you so much for what you did on the cross.

Thank you for forgiveness and for your great love. Thank you for resurrection life.

You are love, you are good, and we love you so much.

As we celebrate new life at Easter,

may we ever remember the sacrifice and love you showed as you hung on the cross,

forgave the rebel next to you, and obeyed your Father so that we could live! – Amen

(Consider keeping the tiny basket on the dinner table for the rest of the week, to recall Jesus’ story of the cross and the tomb.)

YOU

Under the Influence – Prompted to Write – by Marcy Lytle

There are so many books out there to buy, aren't there? And it's maddening to me how that a celebrity, just because of his/her name, can write a children's book that ends up immediately on the best seller list just because of a name! We can constantly read what others have written on how to do this or that, or a novel that keeps us intrigued, or we can be entrenched in a good mystery – all of which are fantastic and fun. But what about writing our own thoughts down and influencing others with what we have to say...or just releasing what we have in our minds down onto actual paper...where we use our hands and a pen to write?

Maybe you journal, and maybe you don't. But I challenge you to think about journaling for one month in a cute little notebook, your own thoughts. Maybe you don't have a cute notebook. I know a young lady that makes them and they're super unique and would be perfect! Perhaps you don't know what to write about. I'm going to influence you to write by providing prompts for your writing...for one month. See what you come up with, and see if you aren't then hooked on journaling and want to continue on.

<https://www.etsy.com/shop/OhDearOhMyCreations>

Journal Prompts:

1. Think over the past week and write down five things for which you are thankful for, and why.
2. Write a note of encouragement to yourself for the last accomplishment you felt pleased to make.
3. Is there a negative thought that plagues your mind daily? Write it down; then write the converse thought beside it. Find a verse to give you hope to overcome.
4. Where would you go if you had limitless funds to travel, and why?
5. Is there an obstacle in your path right now that hinders your faith? Write about it as if you're writing to Him, and ask Him to take care of it.
6. What's your favorite meal? Write in detail what each part would look like from appetizer to dessert.
7. Look out your window and write about what you see and how it makes you feel.
8. Write down as many adjectives as you can to describe your life right now, and count how many positives and how many negative ones you use. Mark out the negatives.
9. What's the best thing you like about yourself? Write it down and elaborate on it.
10. What's your favorite room in the house and why? Write about it.
11. If you could organize one area in your house soon, what area would it be and what do you need in order to make that happen? Make a list.
12. Is there a friend that has disappointed you lately? Write it down, tell God about it, and ask Him to help you forgive. Then write that forgiveness out.
13. Are you attending a church regularly? Write down why or why not, and consider seeking a place to make new friends.
14. Lie down on your bed and close your eyes for five minutes. Write down every thought entered your mind while there, emptying your mind of worry and fear.

15. Which season is your favorite? Write down every scent and visual you can think of to describe it.
16. Is your hand tired of writing, yet? Write down what areas of your life make you feel the most tired, and ask Him to give you rest.
17. Write your own book review right here, of the best book or story you've read lately.
18. Have you listened to a great song lately? Write about it here and why you love it so much.
19. What chores do you hate the most? List them, and consider changing or asking for help, so that they are not such a burden.
20. What's a fun date idea you'd like to try? Think of at least three and write them down, then call a friend or ask him, and put it on the calendar.
21. Look in the mirror for two full minutes. Write immediately about the thoughts you had while staring at your face.
22. Experienced a loss lately? Write about it and pour out your sorrow onto the paper, and weep.
23. Experienced a high lately? Write about it and how it came about and then consider telling that to your children or to a friend.
24. What's your favorite dessert? Describe its flavor, its presentation, and why you love it so much. Then make it this weekend!
25. Think about your parents and write down what it is you appreciate about them. If there's nothing, then write what you wish they'd done. Pray. Ask God to heal the void.
26. What are your weekends like? Write down a perfect weekend getaway and what all it would include. Make it happen soon.
27. What advice would you give your younger self, 10 years ago? Write it down and see how much you've learned.
28. What's the biggest fear in your life right now? Write it down and then pray. Listen and write down His answer – even if it's hard for you to believe.
29. Pick a chapter from the books of psalms and read it. Write your thoughts here about what you read.
30. Summer is coming. What do you love most about a change of seasons?

Strengthening Your Core – Can't Pack Early – by Marcy Lytle

Do you love to pack for vacation? I know some who do, and some who don't. Most of will agree that unpacking is the worst! However, packing can be fun as we pick out outfits, try out new packing organizational tips and more. However, one of the things that is the most maddening about packing up is that you can't really do it all that early...unless you're traveling to a place where there's a whole other season going on!

I had time to pack a few days before our last trip, and I wanted to do so badly, because I knew that the day before our trip I was going to have a lot of work to finish. However, so many of the pieces of clothing I was taking with me were ones I was wearing now. I also had shoes to pack that I was wearing. I needed to wait until the day before, when everything I owned was washed and clean, and I knew what I was wearing on the plane...then I could pack.

Of course, we can pack some things early, but most of our essentials need to wait! We can't pack our makeup and toiletry items either, because we use them. I often pack them and then use them from the zipper bag the morning of the trip, to make sure I haven't forgotten something.

I'm always thinking while living and doing the mundane, and this day was no exception. I thought again of how God provided manna in the desert for his people while they were traveling through the wilderness. They wanted to pack and store it up for future days in case there was no provision one morning. However, God had promised to provide for them each morning, and they were to only gather enough for the day.

There's a lot to learn from that story. As much as I wanted to pack early and be ready days ahead of time, I had some living to do in the meantime. It wasn't until I was about ready to board the plane that I could insert that last makeup bag or store that last item of clothing I just pulled from the dryer. Packing up too early might make me miss a piece I needed, be unaware that I hadn't included this...or that.

If you're like me, you like to have safety nets...just in case. I like to plan and be prepared for guests coming over and have everything completed and ready before they step inside the house. I enjoy having extra savings in the bank to draw from, for emergencies and vacations and all things fun. None of that is bad; in fact, it's a good thing. But when I can't enjoy the present unless I have loads stored up for the future - that's bad.

Each day I've been trying to wake up and cast my cares on Him. Why? Because he said he cares for me and he tells me to do so. He tells me not to worry about tomorrow and what I will wear or put on, because He will care for me. And he says that he is my Father, so fretting and trying to be prepared way ahead of time for every trip and experience just negates the beauty of the day I'm living right now...in his presence...with him.

Traveling teaches us so much about God's care. Packing and planning. Dreaming and envisioning. Getting away for rest and relaxation. And even savoring the food that's prepared while we dine out, instead of cooking in our home kitchen. One of my favorite things is having

our hotel room all tidy and neat when we return from our excursions, and I don't have to lift a finger!

There are just some things in life that we cannot be prepared for, we cannot hoard to protect ourselves from lack, and we just can't store to carry with us...until that traveling day. There's too much living to be done in the meantime with what we've given today.

I'm all unpacked now, every dirty piece of clothing is washed, and our suitcases are stored. Unpacking can be done right away or it can linger for weeks, can't it? It's because the fun of the anticipation is gone, and reality is set in once again.

Next time you pack for a trip, ask Him what lessons you can learn from being prepared and wanting life to be packed up and neat, instead of hurried and last-minute. You might be surprised what lessons await you and what peace pursues you...when you just sigh and realize that some things just have to wait. And you have to be okay with that, and enjoy the journey.

Healthy Habits – Friend Failure – by Marcy Lytle

This month's topic is keeping our friendships healthy, even when we feel like maybe every relationship we've had is a failure given time and space, with each friend we make. It happens to the best of us. While I have a few lifelong friends that I can talk to on a whim, about anything at all, most of them don't live nearby. And even best friends I've made over the years have moved, left my circle of friends, or we've just gone in different directions. I can't say it doesn't hurt, because it does. A friend once told me that our friendship was just for a season. What? That bothered me....

However, after living and learning and loving and letting go, I feel like there have been a few things I've realized about keeping friendships healthy, even when it seems like they've failed. They all start with the letter F so they'll be easy to remember.

1. **Forgive.** This is huge. If a friend disappears without a good-bye, finds another friend she'd rather be with, or just "outgrows" you, don't hold a grudge. I just listened to a woman talk about forgiveness and how when we hold onto hurt we're just causing our own backs to ache from the heaviness of the offense. We never know what's going in her life, her marriage, or with her heart, so just pray for her and forgive.
2. **Forever love.** It's easy to just shut ourselves away and determine that we will not be hurt again, so we will keep an arm's length from any new relationships that try to surface. That way we will "protect" our heart from getting stepped on once again. That might be one option in response to unhealthy friendships, but love is the best option. Keep loving that new person that shows up, invite her over, and enjoy her company...no matter how long that company lasts.
3. **Find the good.** Look at each one of your friends where you felt the friendship failed. Find the good in that person, and appreciate the wonderful visits you had. It's often easier to just remember that last encounter where she said this or didn't say that, and to allow that to erase all of the many good times before that. Give thanks for what you had and don't allow your mind to wander off to anything else!
4. **Fix your heart on Him.** Friendships are awesome, and baring our souls to another is freeing, and telling secrets and creating kindred spirits – it's all right there with some women we meet. We think we've found the best friend in life, and we don't need anyone else. That usually never ends well, because we're all human and we all fail. If we fix our heart on Him, though, and are careful to bare our souls and secrets to Him first...that leaves all kinds of wiggle room for a fun friendship with her. And she doesn't have to carry all of our baggage, because we aren't carrying it either!
5. **Fear nothing.** Sometimes we're afraid to try again, once a friendship has failed. We fear that the next friend won't like us, or we are fearful that what happened last time will happen again. We become scared to put ourselves on the line by being friendly, in case she doesn't reciprocate when we ask her to lunch or over to visit. And there are just so many fears that can pop up like moles under the ground when previous friendships have failed. Fear stifles friendship. And while it's true that new friends will once again leave, hurt us, and move on...fear will ensure that never enter into friendship again. And friendship is one of the best risks we can take in this life we live.

Why is friendship worth the risk? John 15:13 says that there's no greater love than to lay down our lives for a friend. Does that mean that we lay down as a doormat for others to step on and wipe their feet? No way. It means that love is always the best route to go, because He first loved us. He took a risk and died for us, knowing that we would reject Him and his love often during our lives. And yet He still loves us, always. And that reward he received from being obedient to His Father to love the world even unto death was worth the risk.

I've retreated, felt defeated, criticized, cried, and pointed the finger at friendships that have failed during my life as an adult woman. I'm sure I've been the reason for some of the failures, due to my own shortcomings and fears. But it's a lonely place to live if we hide out because of hurt, never to have a friend again, for fear that she might hurt us, too.

The only way to turn friendship failure into success is to love, with abandon, knowing that we are loved. We run to Him with our intimate desires and needs, instead of to her, and this allows us to be a friend that can enjoy shopping, dinner, or a movie without an agenda. We've made friendship out to be some sort of soul connection that was never meant to be, nor was it healthy, because that soul to soul connection only is fulfilled in Him.

One final thought...

Consider making friends with someone different than you altogether, in age, looks, interests, etc. and you might be surprised at how much you enjoy her company!

Created for Life - Unfolding Jewels – by Ginny Hurley

I just completed a third reading of the book by Kathie Lee Gifford called, *The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi*. To say it is magnificent, is putting it mildly. I have known and studied the Bible for years and found this book to have hidden treasures and mysteries that make me want to do cartwheels. For this article, I want to focus on the last days of Jesus, depicted by Rabbi Jason Sobel.

First, I want to list some things here that make me smile:

1. Adam and Eve were created in a garden. Gethsemane means *oil press* where Jesus was so pressed that He sweat drops of blood. It is a garden on the Mount of Olives where Jesus prayed before the cross. So his last hours took place in a garden.
2. Jesus' last day on earth was an almost exact copy of what is called the Roman Triumph. As the Romans mocked Jesus, everything they did to Him was what they would do to celebrate their triumphant king. What the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders thought was Jesus' poor tragedy was actually the Greatest Triumph in all of history.
3. The Caesars considered themselves divine. Caesar Augustus even called himself the 'Son of God'; as his father, Julius Caesar, was their declared God.
4. After they would place the purple robe on their king, they would give him a cup of wine, which he would pour on a sacrificial bull. They placed a purple robe on Jesus and tried to give Him sour wine.
5. They would shout, "Hail Caesar, Lord and God!" to the entering king. This, we know, they shouted at Jesus, screaming, "Hail! King of the Jews!" while yelling at Him to deliver Himself.
6. A comet was supposed to have fallen from the sky for Caesar. Jesus gave up His spirit and suddenly an earthquake split the atmosphere causing the huge curtain in the temple to split from top to bottom. Surely signs and wonders were rendered from heaven and earth!
7. The Roman centurion who watched the entire event was heard to declare, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"
8. Jesus' words of forgiveness were heard several times as He hung on the cross because the grammar used in that speech indicates a repeated action. I had never heard that, and the Rabbi says that is probably why one of the thieves at his side became convicted of sin, recognizing his Savior.

If these amazing jewels are not enough, my very favorite section is from John 10:27-30.

"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish."

David Epstein, Kathie Lee Gifford's brother, shares from the biblical Greek that this actually means that those who truly believe in Jesus will never lose His love in the secure forever! He says the meaning here is clear and that one who follows Jesus under any circumstances or any reason could never perish. His promise is total and complete, without question. It doesn't come and go depending on our behavior.

"No one can snatch them out of My hand!"

(Jesus' hand and His Father's hand)

Therefore, salvation isn't just our gift, but we are a gift exchanged between the Father and the Son. We are His and we belong to Him and with Him, forever. Neither will give their gift back to one another, EVER! We are sealed in His finished work! He will not take it back or get rid of us when we mess up. It is FOREVER and EVER! Now that is the GOSPEL of GOOD NEWS! From the first word in Genesis, to the last word of Revelation, Jesus name and God's plan is perfect. Every single action and word done and spoken by Jesus was perfect in every way for everyone who believes.

JESUS IS THE PERFECT JEWEL!

Life Right Now – Feeling Ready – by Bethany Gomez

April 7th is almost here!

Why is this day important? It is the date for the 42nd Austin American Statesman Capitol 10K race and I will be running in it. It is Texas' largest state 10k and in the U.S. it is the 6th largest national 10K. When it began in 1978 there were 3400 participants. Last year they had 23,200 participants. I have done this race before but I didn't train for it; therefore, I wasn't able to run the entire race. That's about to change this time. I am determined to train and run the entire 6.2 miles, hills and all, God willing.

I never thought I would say this, but I honestly enjoy running. However, that was not always the case. Notice I didn't say *love*; too strong of a word, as is hate. I have never really hated running, but I have resented it, yes.

Back in May of last year, I began running, but my running journey actually began when I was in college (let's just say a while ago). I was required to take a physical education class. It was a small school so the only phys-ed class they offered was a walk/run class. It was brutal; I was so out of shape and the Texas heat didn't help. I don't think I would have made it had my mom not helped me. At the time, my mom was doing triathlons and she trained with me, giving me running tips and tricks, encouraging and motivating me to get better. I hated the feeling of my body not doing what I wanted it to do, but I liked the feeling of accomplishment afterward (gotta love those endorphins). I also liked spending time with my mom doing what she loved to do. Shortly after I completed my phys-ed class, I lost the will to continue running.

What changed back in May? What caused me to pick up running again? Basically, I began running out of necessity, as a way to relieve an over-abundance of stress that was unfortunately being caused by conditions at my job at the time and partly because I desired to become more active and healthy. You might be thinking if I wasn't a fan of running, why pick it? I could've picked another physical activity to help relieve stress and become healthier. True, but two things swayed my decision to pick up running again. One, I already had a basic running foundation thanks to my momma; and two, it is one of the cheaper, more easily accessible options. I simply put on running shoes and walk out the front door. This time around, it didn't take long for me to become hooked. Getting to strengthen the body God gave me and spend time in worship was more than enough to keep me motivated. It hasn't been easy, but I have felt God with me every step of the way. It's been quite the adventure so far.

For instance, while I was visiting my brother and his family in Lubbock, I went for a run in their neighborhood. As I rounded a corner, I spotted a dog lying down next to a house and before I knew it, he came charging at me barking ferociously while I froze, my mind struggling to think of what to do in those few split seconds before he got to me. I stayed calm as best I could as he growled at me, sniffed me, and then proceeded to jump up at me excitedly, thankfully only giving me a few scratches on my arms. I think that is the most terrified I've ever been.

Then there was that time I took a different route in my neighborhood and I tripped on the tiniest of raised lips in the sidewalk, which is probably why I didn't see it. I of course nearly face planted into the concrete. Thankfully, I was wearing a cap, which slowed down my head from hitting the concrete because I barely had any time to get my hands under me to catch my fall. I walked away from that incident jostled, but with only a few minor scrapes.

Another time, I got bit by a small dog in the back of my leg. It was partly my fault, but regardless it was not a great experience. I was running on the trail at the park near my house and I was coming up on this lady walking her dog. I assumed they had heard me. I should've run off the trail and around them, but I didn't and I startled the dog so much as I ran by him that he lashed out and bit me. The owner was just as shocked as I was and very apologetic, assuring me that he was up to date on all his shots.

After each of these less than ideal situations, I know without any doubt that God was protecting me. Had that dog not been deceptively friendly, had I not been wearing a hat, or had that dog been bigger and not up to date on his shots, the outcomes would have been significantly different.

I have become more aware of God's protection throughout my running journey, not just over my physical body, but over my mind as well. The enemy has tried to come in and change my motivation for running. At times, I have really struggled to keep my focus more on running as a way to get healthy than as a way to look a certain way, much like those models or celebrities in the magazines. I have found that when I keep my focus on God and what He thinks about me, that I am "fearfully and wonderfully made," then that silences the enemy's lies and deceitful ways.

I'm feeling ready and looking forward to race day because I know God is with me, protecting my mind and body, helping me love and accept myself just the way that I am. I believe that God used a complete stranger to encourage me to keep on running, in the moment, but also in the long run. On one of my more recent runs, I felt like giving up at mile 4, but then I heard someone yell out their car window, "You've got this, keep going!", as they drove by. That day I completed a 6 mile run, and that run gave me hope that I can complete this upcoming race well.

MARRIAGE

In This Together – I Have to Choose – by Bekah Holland

Leading up to my wedding, I know that people gave us plenty of sage wisdom for a successful marriage....it was like a being in the self-help section of the bookstore. So did I really listen to any of it? Probably not.

When planning a wedding, so much is about the dress, or the location, or the vows and the pictures. However, my mom's voice broke through all of the noise and offered us a bit of advice that we have used on repeat over the years - ***love is a choice***.

My husband and I were (are) two incredibly independent people (maybe a bit selfish to boot), who, like most, have learned the hard way that marriage isn't always sunshine and rainbows. Don't get me wrong. Sometimes it's amazing! We are so in love, things are going great....no one is sick, no one is struggling, no one is unhappy at work. It's just all good and our days are full of sentiments like, "I love you."

But let's all be honest.

There are other days.

There are those days where someone (*clears throat, husband*) snored loud enough to rattle the walls and we don't get any sleep. There are days when we deal with heartbreak, illness, depression, and financial blows...or we've been fighting and our spouse doesn't seem so loveable. I promise you, there have been days that I personally have been cranky because our kids ensured that I didn't sleep for a decade, I hadn't showered in a week, and somehow ran out of coffee. Those days were days my husband would probably tell you he had to dig deep and choose to love me.

There have been days where we struggled so long and so hard both separately and together, that I didn't even remember what love felt like. We may have felt hurt, anger, resentment, discouragement...*but love?* That one wasn't on the long list of definable feelings. But I learned how important my mom's words from years ago were, because I wasn't always loveable. And neither was my husband. But choosing to love was an action, not just an emotion.

I had to choose to put action behind the vows that we had made. I said I love you no matter what. I did my best to show my appreciation for the little things. I supported him, even when I wanted to scream at him, because it was important that I be his biggest fan. Those choices built a stronger and stronger foundation, and even a place for some of those warm and fuzzy, mushy early "in love" feelings.

Not that we have this whole thing figured out yet. We don't. And not that there aren't still times, almost 13 years later, that we both would like to shake the stupid out of the other one. There are. But we keep choosing. Every day I choose to see his good, to see how far we've come. I choose to notice how hard he tries and the struggles he faces. He chooses to see past my mess, past my brave, tough front I try to put up and loves the me that cries at Pampers commercials, or loses it on the kids. He chooses to love me despite the fact that we now have an entire couch dedicated to laundry (because laundry is my nemesis and we've all given up on that changing without seriously expensive, professional intervention).

We choose.

Some days it's an easier choice than others.

But each day is a new day to show love instead of just waiting around to feel it. So today, choose love!

Date Night Fun – All the Things – by Marcy Lytle

We recently found 40 things to do on a weekend that we enjoy doing, because we were celebrating 40 years of marriage. It was so fun and not really all too hard to think of the 40 things. We had limited time, because of other commitments, but we ended up finishing our list. This made me think of how to incorporate those 40 things in five date night ideas for you this month of April!

Here they are:

People Watch. When is the last time you focused your date time together around people watching? Start out at a bench near a shopping area and sit down close to each other and just watch. Observe the people coming out and going in and speculate about their vocation and personalities. It's a great way for communication. Next, make a stop at a food truck in your area and enjoy your food out on a picnic table and people watch again. Compare the folks there to the ones where you just were. Notice this time styles of clothing and shoes, and comment on likes and dislikes (all discreetly and quietly, of course!). Finally, stop by a coffee shop in a book store and people watch a third time. For this activity, make note of what books people are carrying and what ages the people might be. End your conversation reminding yourselves to be aware of others around, to be able to engage in acts of kindness toward others.

<https://medium.com/the-mission/13-little-random-acts-of-kindness-put-some-wow-in-your-day-and-someone-elses-simultaneously-d1b6b4a01cc2>

Tennis Time. We stopped to buy fresh new tennis balls. Isn't that fragrance of those new bright orbs intoxicating? If you don't play tennis, then find a sport to enjoy together on a date. It could be bowling, mini golf, or even pinball machines. Or maybe include a couple of sports. Pack up some good dark chocolate and your favorite drinks for a snack during a break. End with a long walk around the park where you played or nearby. Engage in conversation about competition in your marriage and places where you feel less than or accomplished, and then offer compliments to each other in those areas.

Out of Town. I've included this suggestion many times in date ideas, and here it is again. Take a country drive, but this time with intent for photo taking and adventure finding. Look for these things as you drive: wheels of hay, an abandoned house, fruit stands, wildflowers, a crooked tree, a dog running loose, a pond, someone sitting on their porch, a windmill, and a bridge. Take photos of these things and of each other as you stop to notice. If you find a place to eat, stop and enjoy a bite at a place with that country charm. Roll down the windows and let the breezes blow in as you head back in and enjoy the photos that you snapped. Talk about country life versus city life and what you like about both.

Music and Poetry. Search for the top pop songs in the year you both were born, or the year you were married and play them and listen. Share with other your faves from when you were a kid and play for each other, reading the lyrics, as well. In a journal, write each other a poem. Or search and bring a poem you find to read to each other while out. Finally, find a coffee house or

live music somewhere, or even a poetry reading, and attend. Talk about all kinds of music and what you like/dislike about each genre. The poem he read to me was “My Red Red Rose” and we realized it was actually from an old Scottish song that we listened to after he read the poem to me!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QK9WK0QhejA>

Stroll a Garden. We have a very large garden in a park in our town that has all sorts of pathways and water features and benches and statues. Try to identify the foliage, to see if either of you knows your plants very well. Offer to take a picture of another couple you see strolling, as well. Take your picnic lunch and lay out a blanket in a nice spot for eating. Spend this time asking each other for prayer and praying together, looking for shapes in the clouds, and stealing kisses when no one is looking. Bring along a set of trivia cards and ask each other questions (if you answer correctly, you get to go again) to see who knows the most about nothing important at all. Laugh out loud. Linger long.

https://www.kohls.com/product/prd-3369697/tv-and-film-trivia-cards-game-by-ginger-fox.jsp?skuid=61882648&ci_mcc=ci&utm_campaign=MENS%20GIFTS&utm_medium=CSE&utm_source=google&utm_product=61882648&CID=shopping15&utm_campaignid=196835972&pid=googleadwords_int&af_channel=CSE&gclid=EAlaIqobChMIIsceT-b794AIVBLXCh2THAMhEAQYBCABEgK_EvD_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds

Most of the above ideas sprang from things we enjoy doing together. Make the ideas your own. Think of your likes and interests and plan outings around those, giving and taking to his/her ideas even when it's not your fave. Take food, go for walks, ask questions and learn about each other...never stop learning. It's so fun and fabulous to be alone together looking at the weather, or reading or playing or anything at all...

After 30 Years – Glamour Shot Marriage – by Marcy Lytle

We've been married 40 years now! I suppose I need to change the title of this column, but I'll let it be for now. I've been on social media for many years and posted pictures of our outings together as a couple, from date nights to movies, to picnics to trips, and I try to post the best pictures possible – because after all – who wants to look at our bulging tummies or wrinkles in our faces? There are filters and stances we can use to present a better picture than what we look like in real life!

I was thinking about this the other day and how often we like to present to others what I call a “glamour shot” marriage. You know those photos where normal people are made to look like they've had a makeup artist, a hair stylist, and a clothing makeover – all to impress a company, a boyfriend, or just to make ourselves look younger and feel better! I get it. We all like to present to others a stellar version of ourselves!

However, marriage isn't a glamour shot – not by a mile! It's hard work and the decades and years of working together take a toll on our bodies and minds and spirits, for sure! No matter how many pictures we post of holding hands and skipping down parking lots, there are plenty of pictures we don't share – like arguing, giving each other “the look,” and being disappointed in the other. It happens in every relationship.

But here's the deal...

Over the years, we can either allow the hurts and disappointments to pile on until we both end up in chairs across the room, never saying a word to each other, or...

We can look realistically at the work it's taken to get us where we are and purpose to keep that flame alive between us until we're old and gray.

- We still argue. When we're tired, we say and do things that aren't nice. But now we recognize it and stop, whereas we used to continue for days until we sent daggers in too deep.
- We still get disappointed. Sometimes he doesn't “perform” as romantically as I'd like, or other times I'm not as nice as I should be when he's telling me a story, and we feel a bit let down. But now we tried to say how we feel without accusing, and to honestly try to work on ourselves – instead of demanding that of each other.
- We are aging. Our bodies and skin are not as firm as they used to be, and we don't look as pretty or handsome as we'd like to, because of age! It's so frustrating and no matter how hard we fight against it, we cannot stop the hands of time. But we grab each other's hands and look into each other's eyes and we still see the longing and the sparkle...and chill bumps still appear when that connection is made!
- We fear. Well, he doesn't really fear, but I do. I am afraid of the next phase in life, after watching our parents fail and pass away, realizing we are now the older generation in our family. I don't like thinking about the “what-if's” but there they are in my head, on some days. But I have to give thanks for this moment and this day, because that's what

the Good Book says to do. Giving thanks is an awesome way to add glamour to any marriage.

- We keep trying. There are all sorts of things we've said and promised over the years to do better at, like praying more, planning outings, honoring each other, reaching out to friends, etc. that we have failed at miserably at times. But life and time and decades never stop us from continue to seek the best in each other and our relationship with Him and others.

Don't worry if your marriage isn't all glamorous and perfect. And don't be disheartened if you had that same argument again last night about that same subject. Filters are just adjustments we use to tweak pictures by using light and color. They make us look better than we are. And that's what HE does, too, when we have a marriage that's got that third party of the triangle – JESUS. His reflection is all we need, his light is that which shines, and He's all shades of beautiful color we can add to our marriage...even after decades and decades together!

ENCOURAGEMENT

Best of the Mess – I Just Can't – by Ashley Zanella

I've recently had to re-learn a lesson I've learned time and time again in life. I am the only one that is capable of and willing to fight for my own happiness.

Without realizing it, I'd dug myself into a hole of depression and anxiety. I wasn't myself anymore. From the time I woke up in the morning to the time I went to bed, to every bathroom trip in the middle of the night, I was anxiously fretting over certain circumstances in my life. The sad and alarming thing is that I proactively put myself into those positions. I'd invited suffering into my life by focusing too much on what others wanted and needed, and not nearly enough on what brought me peace, joy and personal growth. I was saying yes when I really wanted to say no.

Like a sponge, I soak up the energy of everyone I'm near. I am extremely perceptive and because of this blessing, I can usually see what others need before they even say it. And because I care, because I can literally put myself in their shoes and feel those emotions as if they're my own, I have a tendency to make other people's problems my own. I am also a problem solver. This is another blessing; however, being an empath and a problem solver brings a plethora of problems into my life.

It's natural for me to say yes when someone asks for help. And it's natural for me to seek out opportunities to help. What does not come naturally to me at all is realizing when saying "yes" to someone else means saying "no" to myself or my family.

Lately, my husband and I have been listening to a few personal development podcasts and I also finished listening to Rachel Hollis' *Girl Wash Your Face* on audible. A common thought that continues to be repeated in these successful, driven and talented people's lives, is that at some point in life they said, "Dang it, I matter too," and they never turned back. They don't read negative reviews. They don't feel bad having uncomfortable conversations with people to say "Hey, I get what you're going through and though I'd love to help, I just can't."

It's not that they aren't helping anyone or that they're being incredibly selfish. These are generous, kind, giving, volunteering people that we've been listening to. They are just demonstrating that sometimes, it's okay to be a little selfish. In fact, sometimes it's the only way to live a fulfilling life. Their number one rule is to never intentionally cause their own suffering. They have the mental clarity to know when something is going to cause that suffering, and the courage to say what needs to be said to prevent it. They ask themselves questions before they make a decision such as:

"Is this going to bring joy, fulfillment or personal growth?"

"How might this negatively impact my day to day life?"

"Is this me? Is this something I would ever even want to do or be involved in?"

"If I make this commitment, what sacrifices am I making and are they really worth it?"

I've implemented a lot of this mindset into my life lately. A month ago, I was telling my husband

that I didn't feel like me anymore. I thought it was hormones or the fact that I was weaning off breastfeeding. But those were just were excuses, crutches. In reality, what I didn't want to address was that I wasn't standing up for what brought me peace, fulfillment or joy. And if I wasn't happy or feeling complete, how much could I truly help others?

How do you share a light that doesn't exist anymore?

You don't.

You first have to find where that light went, fuel it and do whatever it takes to not let it go out again. Sometimes, to maintain who you are and to keep yourself healthy and sane, you do have to say, "No." It's always uncomfortable, but the more I've been standing up for myself in the ways that count, the happier I've become. I feel like myself again. I can finally breathe. I can look back now and realize just how dark times had gotten and thank God I found my way out of the darkness so that when the time is right I can share some of my light again - just not all of it.

Firmly Planted – The Impossible – by Dina Cavazos

Have you ever wondered if the words written so long ago, under seemingly impossible circumstances, are *really* true? For example: *Nothing is impossible with God* is a pretty radical statement. Even though I've seen things I never thought were possible happen, I still sometimes doubt when a situation calls for the seemingly impossible. But today I was reminded again that those words are true, and we have reason to hope and believe that God is able to do the impossible.

I met Don and Mechelle a couple of months ago through [The Prayer Collective](#), a ministry to the homeless and needy. Medical care is something the homeless often do without, but it's foundational to getting on the right track. As we rode to the (wonderful) [Sacred Heart Community Clinic](#) in Round Rock, Mechelle told me she's walked all over Texas. She told me about a time it was very cold and all they had for heat was one candle under a tarp. She said you wouldn't believe the heat one little candle can put out. It must have been the warmth of God. Read more about Mechelle [here](#).

As an alternative to sleeping under bridges, in the woods, or wherever they can stay under the radar, Donnie, the founder of the ministry, had the idea of setting up camps at a public camping area. The ministry provided camping gear, cooking utensils, coolers, food, and even delivered hot meals several days a week. The campgrounds had electricity and bathrooms and showers. This worked well through the winter, with intermittent motel nights during freezing weather, but the camps had to move for Spring as all the spots were rented. Sadly, it was back to the woods for Don and Mechelle, and the others, their whole lives packed into backpacks.

The Prayer Collective ministry has a very low budget, all of which goes to provide for those we serve—there is no money for the big things we dream about. Hearts breaking for our friends, we prayed for answers and God's provision. Unexpectedly, God's divine hand moved someone to donate two RV's on a rent-to-own basis. Not only that, but the first three months would be paid for to give time to get established in jobs and take over the payments. Those most ready for this responsibility were chosen, including Don and Mechelle.

Today, the RV was set up, stocked, and ready for move in. Their days of hiding in the woods, struggling to stay fed, warm, and dry are over. A new life has begun for Don and Mechelle because of the generosity and obedience of people God used to channel his love, and we were reminded one more time that *nothing is impossible with God*.

Simple Truths - What If – by Erica Simmons

For the last few years I have had a hard time reconciling a Heavenly Father who I consider loving, kind and gracious to the Heavenly Father who knew the pain, misery and hurt that so many of mankind would suffer - and yet He created us anyway. This is the type of question any wise Christian would reply, "That's just one of those questions you will have to ask God when you get to Heaven." What if it's not? We use this quote when we are witnessing and we get a tough question that we can't answer. It is our security blanket and it is used with an air of reference because it allows us to sacrifice knowing these answers with our faith.

What if we are wrong?

What if these questions are stumbling blocks separating non-believers from God?

We as Christians know the sinful stumbling blocks our generational curses passed on to us from our forefathers - the things we thought were okay, because it is all we knew. However, when we get in relationship with God, He begins to reveal those things to us as hindrances to the relationship we can have with Him. My question will never keep me from pursuing a deeper relationship with God, but I also don't see Him sitting up there thinking that I can never know the answer until I get to heaven. I do believe that as I press into Him and take my humanness out of the equation, He will indeed allow me to have an understanding of the lack of knowledge I have. Lack of knowledge does not erase the truth of who He is. Knowing the truth of who He is does not mean we cannot have these questions. I believe He wants us to have them, because having them motivates us to seek out the truth and the only way to truth is through relationship with Him.

My son Jerimiah moved out yesterday, Tuesday March 5th. I didn't want him to, but at least instead of getting in an apartment and locking himself into a 12-month lease with a friend who I had concerns about, he moved in with her family. I think he wanted to move out because he can be all those things people he looks up to says he is: mature, responsible and level headed are a few. I see the choices he has made and don't think he is ready. I was frustrated and my spirit was quickly nudged that I do the same thing. We are in a discipleship course and it requires us to do lessons every week. I don't like the prep lessons, I prefer to be authentic and in the moment with my responses, but not doing them makes me feel like I am doing something wrong. It is that way with my decision to eat healthier. I do it when at work, but struggle at home on the weekends. So can I condemn him for feeling the same way?

We let what people's qualifications are drive us and not our natural inclination for how we are drawn to our Heavenly Father. In avoiding issues like abortion and homosexuality, we are giving the enemy not just a foothold, but a hand up in how we treat and respond to these questions.

We are charged to go out to seek and save those who are lost, but those souls of those babies are not lost - they are welcomed home, they are where we strive to be. The souls of the women who participated in the abortion get battered bruised and pushed further away from our loving Father, because of our behavior.

What if when they emerge from the clinic we surrounded them with love and the truth of who our Heavenly Father is and how NOTHING they can EVER do will cause Him to stop loving them? We know this because that is the way He is with us.

Several years ago, one of my children came to me with a problem. I was so unprepared to deal with it - not because I was not spiritually grounded - but because I let my emotions lead the way. I was screaming and yelling at him so hard and vehemently to get him to see why what he was talking about was WRONG. In the midst of it all, my other son was struggling with the same issue and due to my response he would not come to me about how he was feeling. To find out years later that you deeply hurt your son is not a revelation any parent who loves their children wants to have.

What if all those years ago, instead of handling the first situation with my humanness, I had handled it with my godliness? I was binge-watching a show last weekend and one of the episodes had a message that I think is so relevant here and it can be delivered in two words:

Everything matters.

How we deal with every situation that Christians face in our current society matters.

Our church participated in the community outreach program called Build the Rock a few years ago. There were several others from our church and we were divided into teams to do various work in our church neighborhood. Our team broke into smaller groups and we all gathered at the last job on our list. When we all got back together we shared our experiences so far that day. One group accidentally went to the wrong address and started mowing the lawn. The owners of course came out to see what was going on and when the church members realized their mistake they offered to complete the lawn anyway. The owners refused and explained they were a gay couple. The team indicated they would still love to finish the lawn, but the owners refused. The upside to this story was that the couple was surprised that the church members still wanted to finish the work anyway. The downside it that they were surprised by the gesture.

*What if we as Christians learned to love truly love
and see our fellow humans as God sees them?*

What if?

Moving Forward - Springtime – by Pam Charro

I went for a drive today, and it's definitely looking like spring. New green (including weeds, unfortunately) is showing up everywhere, temperatures are nice and warm for exploring, and insects are buzzing. I even saw some Texas bluebonnets! Winter seems to be over.

I feel I am also entering a spiritual springtime. Lots of transition is happening and the comfort and familiarity of my past is quickly disappearing in the rear view mirror. It's terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

Sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night, fear of what lies ahead tries to smother me there in the dark, but I know I have a choice about how to view all of the upcoming unknown; so I've decided to depend on what I know to be true of God, his word, and prophetic words I've received. Because I know that God is good, I can be sure that lots of new goodness is coming my way. I've begun to speak back to the fear, saying,

"Nothing painful or uncomfortable that might happen is bigger than my great big good God."

I've noticed it's getting easier and easier to fall right back to sleep since I've started saying it.

I'm also focused on how exciting many of the new things are as I look back on events that have led me here. It's clear that God has been at work to bring so much that I am looking forward to, and even though change is uncomfortable and a little scary, I don't want to miss out on whatever is next. What fun would life be if I just stayed the same and everything was predictable? A new *me* is being created and I look forward to watching her grow.

Any type of springtime brings new life (yes, weeds and all). I may not know exactly all that is coming, but what an exciting time as I grow in my experiences and in learning more and more to keep in peace and trust God.

I am confident that the best is yet to come.

Real Stories – Storms and All - by Lauren Cloud

Tonight I found a testimony I wrote a few years back about our journey with Gabe, our son with Angelman Syndrome. I have so much yet to process in our journey of losing Ben, our infant we lost a few months ago, but I find it amazing to read my own words and have them speak to me as if someone else wrote them. One day, I pray I will find the words to write a testimony about Ben. Lord, give me perspective and peace in all things.

Below is what I wrote about Gabe:

As I sit and think about my testimonies of hope, many come to me. The time my husband got laid off three months before Gabe was born and a few weeks later our house was struck by lightning. Through a literal storm, God gave us money to provide for bills, repair what we had to, and allowed me to still take a maternity leave. Dave then received a new job offer the very day that Gabe was born. Many others also come to mind, but the one that I tend to talk about the least is the very one that I need to share: my journey with Gabe.

Don't get me wrong, I don't have any problems talking about Gabe, about his Angelman Syndrome, his therapies, his communication. I am a strong advocate for him and love to bring more awareness to a rare disorder that I had never even heard of before he was diagnosed. What is harder to share is my testimony of hope through this journey because let's face it. Living with a child with special needs is like a storm hitting out of nowhere and staying for the rest of your life. So I had to ask myself,

“When the storm is my life, how do I stop seeing the storm?

When the storm is so violent as to permanently change the direction that we were headed, how do we find peace with our new path?”

We received Gabe's diagnosis by a telephone call a month before his first birthday. We had just gotten back from a cruise with 20 of our friends and we were happy, relaxed and totally unprepared for the tidal wave that struck us. We were told that Gabe was born missing some of chromosome 15 and that he had either Angelman Syndrome or Prader-Willi and more testing would be needed to find out which one it was. I had to ask the doctor how to even spell each one, because I had no clue about either of them. The doctor then proceeded to give us a summary of what to expect with each one. When he talked about AS, he said that it was more medically challenging, that there were significant developmental delays, that he would never speak, most likely never walk, have seizures, could have feeding challenges, and the list went on.

We got off the phone and just wept. I have never seen a man more broken until I saw my husband that day. My heart just broke as well. The next day, we went for more tests and had to wait a month to know which disorder Gabe had.

It was the longest month of my life.

For the first few weeks, I didn't read anything on either disorder. I didn't want to go down a rabbit hole of which would be worse or what he might have. We began some OT for him and the therapist said she thought it was probably AS. I finally looked it up and cried for days. It was confirmed on February 15, the first International Angelman day by some strange irony, and less than a week before his first birthday. For weeks, I was an empty shell. I couldn't understand why God would give me all these dreams for my life and for my son's life and then just rip them away in an instant. We had a large group of friends who all had boys within a year of Gabe. So I spent every day watching my friends' boys do things that Gabe couldn't and might never do. I

suddenly couldn't relate at all to anything they talked about. I was happy for the accomplishments their kids were making and equally devastated every time I heard about another milestone.

We had several friends come over to pray with us in those early days. During one session while someone was praying for healing over Gabe, they started to pray for Satan to leave his body - and in that instant I knew that this wasn't a work of the devil. How could my perfect, precious child be filled with the devil? God brought back a verse that had been on my mirror most of my pregnancy. It was verse that came up during another study and I kept it there.

Psalms 139:11-16

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

I knew in that moment, that God had a perfect and wonderful plan for Gabe and that he knows exactly what he is doing!

I think back to Peter, standing in the boat with a storm raging around him and then he saw Jesus. In that moment, he didn't see a storm, he didn't see the waves - he just saw Jesus. And through His eyes, everything was calm, that water was firm, and he had no fear. He stepped out of that boat with his eyes on Jesus and all was well. That is how we can live our lives with peace in a storm, even a lifelong storm.

In the weeks to come, I happened across a list serve for AS and was directed to some Facebook groups. As I got connected with those groups, I began to see that what the doctor and reports said about AS wasn't all as dire as they made it out to be. Sure, we deal with almost everything that he told us we would, the seizures, the lack of speech, mobility challenges, sleep disorders and more, but they don't tell you about all the amazing things that your child will do that will be that much more special because of how hard they fight for it. They don't share the ways that these kids will impact your life and make you a better person...or how with just a smile and a hug they touch the lives of complete strangers. I didn't realize that I would get to join a community of amazing people that have brought me strength, comfort, laughter and joy.

Being a special needs mom does not make me anymore special than anyone else. My boat is rocked often, storms come and go frequently, but I have learned that it's not the storm that matters. What matters is that my anchor is firm in God. My boat can be spinning out of control. I can have no idea where it will end up and yet there can amazingly be times of absolute peace because God knows it all. There is a freedom in giving it all to Him, because I couldn't do this on my own. I would be NOTHING without him.

There is a poem called "Welcome to Holland" by Emily Kingsley that is shared in the special needs community often. It says,

I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability - to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's like this.....When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip - to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum. The

Michelangelo David. The gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting. After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland." "Holland? What do you mean Holland?" you ask. I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met. It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around.... and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills....and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts. But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy... and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned." And the pain of that will never, ever, ever go away... because the loss of that dream is a very very significant loss. But... if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things ... about Holland.

Jeremiah 29:11-13 says it so perfectly,

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 a hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

God knows. God KNOWS. Even if I spend the rest of my days in the storm, God will not only be there in the storm with me, but he is outside of it. He knows exactly where I am headed. He knows exactly where he is taking Gabe.

I prayed for healing a lot in the beginning and then slowly my prayers for Gabe began to change. I realized that Gabe didn't need to change at all. I needed to. I needed to get out of the way and let God have Gabe to fulfill his perfect plan for him. If his plan includes complete healing someday, I will be thrilled, but if it doesn't, I am at peace with that.

Gabe has an amazing life ahead of him and I am so privileged to be his mom, storms and all.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – A New Line of Thinking – by Marcy Lytle

Blessings.

We all want them and enjoy them in life, don't we? And when we think about blessings in America, most of us think of tangible things like houses, cars, jobs, kids, money, etc. Somehow those are the blessings that come to mind when we are asked what we are thankful for the most. Then we also include things like healing, restored relationships, and emotional blessings that fit into that basket of things we've received as well.

However, we were talking with some friends recently about blessings and how we often forget to be thankful for transformation. For example, maybe we had a sour attitude toward our kids or our spouse, and went through a real change for the better, because of forgiveness. We realized we were angry about something in the past and we let it go, and we had this overwhelming peace that caused our sour attitude to change to one of contentment. We then began speaking in love to our family.

That type of blessing – forgiveness – is huge. We actually have all sorts of attitudes and sins and ugliness that He has been transforming into love over the course of knowing Him as our Savior. And yet...we still look for and count our blessings in terms of things and emotions.

We look at friends and watch them build a new house while we sit in a fixer-upper, and we consider them to be blessed while we are "suffering." Their kids receive scholarships to their colleges of their choice, while our kids have to stay home and take out student loans to make it the next step in their education. We wonder why they are "blessed" and we are not. *What's the deal, God?*

I read a book one time about women who were martyrs, persecuted for their faith, in other poverty-stricken and war-torn countries. All eight of them in the story were so struck by the goodness and mercy of Jesus that they considered it a "privilege" and an "honor" to suffer for him. And suffering, in their lives, was not missing out on college or new housing opportunities. Suffering included being beaten or imprisoned, or starved...because of their faith.

I've written before about the terminology we Christians often used when we say people are "blessed" and how we must start intentionally using it to refer to the blessings we have of transformation from a person lost without God or hope, to one full of hope and restored and whole in our hearts. We are truly blessed when forgiveness takes place and we stand before a holy God and he sees us pure and lovely...because of Jesus.

Someone recently quoted John Piper where he said something like this,

If you could have heaven with no sickness and all friends and food from the earth, and all leisure and beauty you had ever experienced or seen, all the physical pleasures of life with no human conflict or disaster – could you be satisfied in heaven if Christ were not there?

I thought long and hard about that question and I realized that I personally have thought about how good life is sometimes, and why would I want to die and live elsewhere. When I'm feeling

good, my marriage is strong, kids are healthy, and money is in the bank, I feel happy. My focus too often is not on what He is doing inside my heart and mind and soul. That transformation He's doing in me - that makes me blessed. Those other blessings are nice, but when they're not present, I'm still blessed.

When you are asked at Thanksgiving or any time of the year, "What are you most thankful for?" do you answer one of those tangible things from the list above? It's okay and normal if you do. But for a minute today, think about what you truly are thankful for, things that matter for all eternity. When is the last time you actually asked him to transform something ugly in your heart to something beautiful toward others? Or are your prayers full of wants and wishes?

I'd love to hear of those things in a group setting where people share, "I'm thankful that I no longer hate my brother," "I'm so glad the guilt of my past sex life is washed clean from me," or "Thank God that he has shown me love when I felt so unloved."

Maybe, just maybe, if our shift on our view of what blessings really are changes, we will actually transform into grateful human beings that long to know more of this Jesus we call Savior, in intimate ways like never before, to sit with him and long for his presence...instead of desiring bonuses and new cars.

Just something I'm thinking about personally...while I continue to pray for healing for my sick friends, provision for finances, ability to deal with aging parents, and so many more things that are real needs. Those are super important and those requests weigh me down, so much! But I'm just wondering if I start focusing on the other blessings I've received through transformation and pray for more of Christlikeness toward others, if that other list will be less of a weight and I'll be full of faith instead of fear.

FRESH THYME - Essentials for Rest – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever taken a good look at the restroom facilities you attend? At home, we keep our restrooms tidy and decorated, but out in public, most restrooms are just functional...and hopefully clean. Often we use the term bathroom, but that originally meant a room that contained a bathtub. The toilet refers to the actual fixture, but “restroom” signifies a room where one goes to when one is tired. That might not even require a bathtub or a toilet!

A restroom is an essential part of a house. We can leave out a playroom in our plans, some can opt to omit a washroom and just place their washer/dryer in the garage, but we cannot leave out a restroom. No one considers omitting that room of the house. And when we have the luxury of having several restrooms in one house, we often like to keep the main one very attractive to all our guests, so that they truly have a place of refreshing or repose, when they stay with us.

It might be a silly thing to think about, but it was on my mind one day as I observed all the things in the restroom in our home that made it appealing and a place I like to be, and I considered these essentials:

- A sink with water and soap available
- A tub for soaking a tired and dirty body
- Towels for drying hands and body
- Scents and lotions for treating that body well
- A mirror for adjusting before presenting
- Drawers for stashing away private necessities
- A place to sit and release waste, and rest...

While I was looking at these essentials, I thought of that verse “Come unto me all that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” And I thought about what it looks like to come into his room of rest, and what essentials he offers us while there. They weren’t much different than the ones I listed above:

- Refreshing water that cleanses
- Soaking rain of his presence that refreshes
- Love-wraps that are warm and cozy after we’ve been cleansed
- His acceptance and love that hints at scents like lavender and rosemary
- The mirror of his word that allows us to see his reflection through us
- Space in our heart that only he knows about, where we are safe leaving secrets with him
- Confession that releases toxins and brings about peace of mind

It might be an odd thing that I thought of the essentials of a restroom while I was actually in the restroom getting ready for the day. However, that room is such a part of who we are...really. It’s the place where we stand naked and unafraid, it’s a room that receives and empties away everything in our bodies to where it needs to go, and it’s full of everything good that washes, covers and smells divine to jump start our day. It’s really a great room, isn’t it?

Next time you're getting ready for your day, retreating to the restroom to get away from your kids or the noise, or just stepping inside to check your face...pause and remember this. You can do everything in your power to rest and refresh, empty and wash, and still emerge feeling less than – after you've done your best. In his rest – room it's all about the Host that awaits you there to take care of every need you have IF you just come. Weary and tired, broken and confused...just come. And he will give you REST that results in breathing deep and long. You'll let out a "sighhhh" of relief as you close the door to return to the day that awaits you. And the best thing of all? You can visit that room as often as you like throughout every day of your life.

Strengthening Your Core – Sometimes I Care

Sometimes I care about looking young and hip

Sometimes I just want to eat chips with dip

Sometimes I care about what others think of my house

Sometimes I'm thankful that inside there's no mouse

Sometimes I care about what he wears and how he looks

Sometimes I only marvel at the way he hangs those hooks

Sometimes I care that she doesn't call or stop by

Sometimes I text her and encourage and smile with a sigh

Sometimes I care about eating all things healthy and green

Sometimes I order a burger on a bun and eat all in between

Sometimes I care about the number of LIKES on my page

Sometimes I noticed the number of prayer requests on their page

Sometimes I care about taking that three mile walk

Sometimes I'd rather sit and rest a while, and talk

Sometimes I care about my church and its people

Sometimes I'd rather complain and find fault with the steeple

Sometimes I care about writing and sharing with you

Sometimes I care about buying a new pair of shoes

Sometimes I care for my garden so that nothing will die

Sometimes I give up that care and let each plant lie

Sometimes I care that the house needs repairing

Sometimes I find myself not even caring

Sometimes I care about the state of the land

Sometimes I only want popcorn in hand

Sometimes I care that I'm up writing instead of sleeping

Sometimes I think about sowing and reaping

Sometimes I care to give money to help meet a need

Sometimes I'd rather open a book and take time to read

Sometimes I care about all those around me

Sometimes I only see me and no one around me

Sometimes I care to rhyme and to reason

Sometimes I only live in the season

FRESH THYME – There's This Verse – by Marcy Lytle

Unless you have two closets, one for travel, and one for everyday life, you can't really pack too early for trips. And I'm not aware of anyone with those two closets! However, it's a struggle to go on a trip without stressing just a bit because of all the clothes washing, figuring out if you have enough underwear and socks for the number of days you're gone, and choosing outfits to go with your activities. Let's not forget the shoes! Isn't that the worst? What shoes to pack for vacation is so hard because you can't take too many!

I was thinking about this as we prepared for our recent trip. I wanted to pack everything days ahead of time, so that I wouldn't be time crunched as our flight drew near, but it just wasn't feasible to do so. I had to live life while I was waiting on that trip, I had to wear some of the sweaters and jeans up until the day before, and so...

There I was, washing and scrambling and packing on the day before, even though I had a lot of work to finish as well. I even realized that my purse and book bag just wouldn't do, so I ran out and purchased new ones before we left!

There's this verse in the bible in the Lord's Prayer where he instructs us to pray for our daily bread – *give us this day* – it says. And remember the story in the Old Testament where the people tried to hoard up God's provision that fell from heaven in the form of manna? If they did, it rotted! He had told them to gather just enough for each day and He would then provide what they needed again the next morning. He wanted them to trust Him for their provision, not their ability to save and stack up so that they could thrive, even at the expense of a neighbor that may not be able to do so.

Living this life, it seems we all want things to be secure, we want a firm footing, and we want to be prepared ahead of time as much as possible for fun and family and friends. Just like I wanted to have all of my clothes and shoes and underwear packed and folded days ahead of time for our trip! That would be so nice, wouldn't it? We could pack at our leisure when time allowed, and then as the trip approached we would be less harried and scattered.

However, that doesn't seem to be God's plan for us AT ALL. He knows that if we had the ability to store and save and set up for ourselves all that we needed for our future, we would tend to depend and lean into that storehouse. We might shut others out, because we'd become smug in our abilities and forethought to plan ahead. We wouldn't find it necessary to depend on anyone, have any relationships, or trust at all, because we'd have it all set up on shelves, neatly arranged, ready for whatever...

Can you imagine with me for a minute having all that you need NOW for all that you might need later? It might look like a full account of thousands of dollars for leisure, extra cars in garages in case the one you drive breaks down, shoes and clothes and books and stuff in fireproof boxes

just in case disaster strikes, and insurance policies of every kind to cover our kids over the next 100 years, and so on.

Yes, it's wise to plan ahead and provide for our families!

However, there's something to be said for living while you're planning. Just as I could not pack up my suitcase totally until the day before, because I had to live in what I was packing, so we have to live now. We have to be present and trust that if we don't have the means to store up for every hidden breakdown or lack in the future, we can rest in the fact that manna will fall TODAY and be just what we need...and satisfy our hunger.

I was finally all packed, the clothes were washed and cleaned, the house was picked up, the dishes were washed in the dishwasher, all counters were clear, and my new bags were full. But it wasn't until a few hours before we left, because I had living to do before the trip.

Do you have all sorts of provisions stored up now, for your future? Good for you. But even in our best abilities and forethought, things happen that we aren't prepared for, and hunger sets in even when our pantries are full. And for most of us, we have just enough provision for today and maybe a few days more, so we have to live in the meantime and trust.

"Give us this day our daily bread," was what he said to ask for. And he said when we ask we shall receive. After all, today is here now, and we are not promised tomorrow. But if and when tomorrow comes, there will be bread for that day, as well...when we ask.



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TIPS

The Dressing – Less Capris and More Knees! – by Marcy Lytle

I'm into dresses this summer. They're so versatile and I've put them on the back burner for years, in favor of jeans and capris, and maybe a few skirts now and then. But there are so many cute dresses out there on the racks this season, and they're quite affordable if you know where to look! I've not worn dresses in the summer because I don't fancy nylon slips, but there are other options!

Here are some fun ideas of dresses to wear this summer, with cute sneakers or slides or heels or even booties! Buy yourself some tanning lotion and use it all summer long to give your skin an even hue and a bit of color. Purchase a long tank top (that goes below your butt and preferable to your mid-thigh!) to wear for a "slip" underneath. Then you're good to go!

https://www.maurices.com/product/basic-tunic-layering-tank/104490?FamilySKU=104490&prodSKU=24072944&mr:trackingCode=D629CB7C-40D1-E811-80FE-0050569428E8&mr:referralID=NA&mr:device=c&mr:adType=plaonline&camp=PLA|RTN|GOOG|STND|c|NA|CORE|shopping_brand_low_priority_pla|24072944||kid:k_EA|a|QobChMI1rvqldDF4QIVpBx9Ch0magb7EAYYA|ABEg|L7mPD_BwE_k|||315021318142||&gclid=EA|a|QobChMI1rvqldDF4QIVpBx9Ch0magb7EAYYA|ABEg|L7mPD_BwE

The criteria I used in searching for these fun dresses included sleeve and dress length – so I hope you enjoy and can find the ones you love! And of course, keep that classic jean skirt (like the one pictured above) to wear all summer long, as well!

Gingham wrap – Isn't this cute? If you're wearing your long white tank underneath, it will serve as a slip and make sure coverage is there! It comes in a couple of colors, and the price is right!

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=416544012&cid=1114843&pcid=15292>

Floral Swing – Look at the sleeves and the "swing" in this black and white dress for spring/summer. Can you just imagine it with red sandals or yellow, or any color at all! And what about a pair of cute sneakers?

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=390760102&cid=1114235&pcid=15292>

Scarf wrap – Scarf dresses are in this season, and this one just screams in color and prettiness! This is a great vacation dress to pack and wear, and enjoy for an evening out on the town.

<https://www.burkesoutlet.com/shop/women-womens-stripe-floral-print-wrap-dress-red-mul-2035008918569/>

Linen Midi – Check out the stripes and the belted waist and the cute sleeves and the pockets on this dress. I love the way it's made, and it looks like it would be cool even on the hottest of summer days. They even show you how to style it if you scroll down!

<https://www.francescas.com/product/blakely-linen-midi-dress.do?sortby=ourPicks&refType=&from=fn&ecList=7&ecCategory=106120>

Peaches and Cream – If you like a looser fit and a softer color scheme; check out this amazing dress. Super cute flowy sleeves are fun, and be sure to check out the back view as well! I want this one!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/daphnes-stp-drss-s.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

Stripes, Anyone? – Another loose fitting dress that can be dressed up or down, with sneakers or sandals, with jewelry or a head scarf, with a purse or a clutch! Grab one before they're gone!

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/striped-dress-p04215310.html?v1=11459039&v2=1180719>

Fit and Flare – The coral and navy, the sheer and the mint background, make this a perfect dress for summer weddings or gatherings where you need to dress up, just a little!

https://www.jcpenny.com/p/studio-1-short-sleeve-fit-flare-dress/ppr5007814235?pTplType=regular&catId=cat100210008&deptId=dept20000013&urlState=/g/womens-dresses/N-bwo3xD1nnujcZ1feZy1q&sort=NA&productGridView=medium&badge=new&selectedSKUId=22358340224&facetSelected=size_range

Consider finding a few dresses to hang in your closet and wear this next season. Stop in some of your favorite discount stores and find some more dresses at super low prices and buy several! You can always add a cardigan if you're chilly indoors, and then wear these dresses on into the fall by adding tights and booties! Enjoy the hunt!

Seven 4 You – “Summerize” – by Marcy Lytle

This year I took forever to put away my winter décor, my light-up snowman, and other cold season rugs, pillows and accessories. Winter seemed to linger a bit longer here than usual, and I just wasn't ready to store the cozy throws and blankets just yet. However, May is here, warmer weather is for sure here to stay for the months ahead, and a refresher in each room of the house is so fun and makes our homes so cheery! We don't have to add clutter, but we can add color...and other prettiness to “summerize” (nope, that's not a word, but I like it.)

In the kitchen: Consider setting out bowls of fresh fruit, adding a fresh tea towel over your oven door (not to be used!), lighting a candle in a fragrance of fruit or herbs, and/or a pretty tray or a fresh vase of flowers. One idea is to set out a vase and fill it full of store bought baby's breath, and then just add a few fresh flowers or herbs. Baby's breath is your staple, so just adding pops of color is fun and fresh. And pick a vase with color as well, not just a clear one! We love this pretty idea of a sea blue vase grouping from Kirklands! <http://www.kirklands.com/product/Sea-Blue-Glass-Vase/224576.uts>

In the family room: Toss those heavy throws in dark hues in favor of lighter ones...or remove some of the throw pillows and create more space! Look at your room and see if there's one pop of color you can add with one new accessory. My living area is mostly grays and oranges, with touches of mustard. However, I decided to pull out the teal hue from one of the pillows, with my new throw this season...from Target! Place fresh table runners – there are some really cute inexpensive fabric ones in the dollar section at Target, as well! <https://www.target.com/p/textured-stripe-with-corner-tassels-throw-blanket-white-blue-opalhouse-153/-/A-54085404> <https://www.target.com/p/72-x14-jungle-leaf-with-tassels-table-runner-green-opalhouse-153/-/A-54135343>

In the guest bath: This bathroom may be the only room many of your guests see, besides the family area and kitchen, so make it pretty! Keep a neutral background but change out accessories that speak summer. A fresh hand towel can be your palette, and go from there. World Market has beautiful ones! I found this fun rain boot vase on the shelves at a discount store, and I love adding in these tall stalks for height in the corner. Set out a pretty candle and fresh hand soap in one of the colors from your hand towel. And finally, wash your rugs and think about a new one! https://www.worldmarket.com/category/bed-bath/bath-towel-collections/hand+towels.do?template=PLA&plfsku=458105&mrkgcl=660&mrkgadid=3172036563&camp=ppc%3AGoogle%3APLA%2BMerke_Shopping_PLA%7CBrand%2BBrand%7CTextiles&product_id=458105&adpos=1o2&creative=166018777351&device=c&matchtype=&network=g&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI9a375am24QIVph6tBh3S7gfEEAQYAIBEGIZ4fD_BwE

In your bedroom: No one goes in here uninvited, right? But you live there daily and nightly! Sometimes, this room gets neglected the most. First of all, clear the clutter! Clear every shelf and surface so that what you place back is minimal and speaks of rest and calm. Battery operated lights are so fun in the bedroom because they can be placed anywhere, even if a plug is not nearby. There are super cute ones to be found in discount stores. Check out this navy one from Burke's Outlet, and this Edison-type one found at Marshalls. A green plant and a

pretty candle is all you need in one grouping, and a few new books for reading in another! In the evening, create atmosphere by turning off the overhead lights and opting for those cute ones you set around the room. https://www.lampsplus.com/products/libby-seeded-glass-12-inch-high-edison-bulb-accent-lamp_y9401.html

In your bathroom: This room gets everything leftover, doesn't it? Old towels, clutter of all sorts of lotions and potions, and just general – ehh. Clear your surfaces and pop in a lamp for ambience. Set out new hand towels in spring colors, and hand soap as well. That's simple...and you're done! <https://www.worldmarket.com/product/desert-home-fresh-aloe-liquid-hand-soap.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search>

In your office: My office is on a different laptop in three spots in the house! My favorite though, where I spend the most time, is at a roll-top desk in my bedroom. I love having one grouping that attracts my eye and my sense of smell just above me. And on the nearby window, I have a wreath hanging in front of the blinds. When they're open, it's such a pretty view out at the backyard. Just change up one thing, and clear out a bunch of things, so that when you're working you're smiling. <https://www.worldmarket.com/product/paddywax-lemon-and-rosemary-old-fashioned-filled-candle.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search>

In your closet: Okay, so maybe no one decorates a closet. But minimalizing and cleaning out can make it look decorated and clean and inviting! Go through your clothes and shoes and toss – donate – give away! Use your wall space for hanging pretty necklaces. Corral the shoes you've kept and only display a couple. Line up your bags so that you can easily carry that summer purse that you forgot you had! And organize your clothes by color or length...and by all means get rid of those metal hangers! Make your closet a place you want to linger instead of run from...

In March, we talked about a pretty porch for spring, and now we've given tips for a summery house for the next season. As you're out and about, take a list of the colors of your house or even take a few photos of your sofa, your bedroom, your bathroom, etc. so that if you see something – you can imagine it before you buy it. Keep in mind your color scheme, and think outside the box. If you see a pretty metal bird and you think it would accent your mantel, go for it! And finally, you can ask a friend if you're not confident in your choosing...but I bet your ideas are awesome. Let your home speak of what you like and enjoy, not what others tell you to like and enjoy.

Summerize. Coin the word. Make it happen.

Selah's Style – A Mermazing Party

Selah's cousin Ayla had a birthday last month and the theme was mermaids! She enjoyed helping her mom put together the decorations, party favors, games and food for all of her guests which included school friends, neighbors and church friends. Birthdays are a big deal at Ayla's house and her mom is quite *mermazing* herself, as a cake baker and party planner. Ayla hopes you enjoy the pictures of how the party went down...into the sea!

Ayla's friend Maddie came over to decorate Ayla's face right before she got dressed for the party. After all, what's a mermaid birthday party without a mermaid?

The cake was the star of the party in three layers of all of the colors and textures of the sea! Check out the beautiful tower Ayla's mom made that included a layer of chocolate, strawberry and vanilla flavors!

Sandwiches were PB& J, all of the kids' favorite, but they were cut into star shapes (big and small) using cookie cutters. These were not only cute but tasty, too!

It was fun plopping the sea blue jello into cups and then setting free a Swedish gummy fish to swim on top. Each kid was served one of these!

Check out the cute plates and the big life-size mermaid décor for the table – all from Target – that place where Ayla's mom finds most everything she needs for the kids!

To hold the drinks, Ayla's Ella (grandmother) found these \$5 jars at Five Below, in teal blue, and they worked great!

Ayla and her friends lined up for a game of Pin the Tail on the Mermaid, and every participant got a candy for trying. This was the main game played inside, because it was pouring outside!

Finally, Ayla and her dad enjoyed making slime for the party favors and wrapping them up as party favors for every friend as they left the party. Slime is Ayla's favorite!

Opening gifts is always fun at a party, but friends and food and family are the best, always!

In the Kitchen – Burgers and Dips – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know that International Hamburger day is the end of this month, on the 28th? I didn't either. But why not note it, and share with you some burger recipes for the warmer months ahead, when we all start picnicking, grilling, and having friends over for food! The recipes we are sharing this month are easy and so yummy. I hope you try them all!

Sirloin sliders

These were super easy to make and looked so cute – and were totally tasty! The cheese was delish! I'm not a meat lover, but these tiny burgers were just right for me...and him!

- White bread, cut into 3in rounds
- 1 lb ground sirloin
- 2-3 cloves garlic, grated
- 3-4 T grated onion
- 1 T paprika
- Salt and pepper

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Place the rounds on a sheet and bake til lightly toasted, 8-10 minutes. Combine the meat with above ingredients and form tiny burgers to fit the rounds (make a speck bigger as they will shrink when cooking). Heat a bit of oil in a large griddle pan or cast iron skillet and cook 3-4 minutes per side.

- 2 T butter
- 2 T flour
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 3 T well drained pimientos
- 1 T yellow mustard
- Several drops hot sauce
- Thick dill pickle chips

In a saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat, whisk in flour and milk and simmer to thicken, season with S&P. Melt in the cheese and stir in the pimientos, mustard and hot sauce.

Divide the patties among the rounds, top with the cheese sauce and another round, then garnish with toothpick stuck through each pickle!

Salsa black bean burgers

These veggie burgers are so tasty and hold together very well when cooking, unlike some others I've tried! They don't take long to put together or cook, and even taste good cold – when packed in a lunch. We added a dollop of guacamole to top them off!

Ingredients:

- 1 can rinsed and drained black beans
- 2/3 cup dry bread crumbs
- 1 Roma tomato seeded and finely chopped
- 1 jalapeno seeded and finely chopped
- 1 egg
- 1 T minced cilantro
- 1 garlic clove minced
- 1 T olive oil
- 4 whole wheat buns

Place beans in a food processor and process until blended. Transfer to a large bowl, and add in the rest of the ingredients and mix. Shape into four patties.

Heat oil in large skillet and cook patties over med heat for 4-6 minutes on each side til lightly browned. Serve on buns and top with guacamole and/or red onion! Delish!

Carrot Hummus

So pretty in color and so yummy in flavor, this dip is great with pita chips. You can make these at home too, by cutting pita bread into triangles spread with a bit of oil and salt, and then baking in the oven at 375 until crisp!

On a baking sheet toss and then roast at 425 degrees until tender, about 15 minutes, and let cool.

- 1 lb chopped peeled carrots
- 1 T olive oil
- ½ ground cumin

In the food processor, puree these ingredients *with the cooled carrots*:

- 1 can drained and rinsed chickpeas
- ¼ c tahini
- 3 T fresh lemon juice
- 1 small clove garlic
- 3-4 T ice water
- Salt

Place in a bowl and drizzle with plain Greek yogurt, sprinkle with paprika, toss on top a good amount of chopped smoked almonds, and cilantro leaves. (The almonds make this dip sing!)

Chunky Guacamole

This didn't take long to make, and it just might be the best tasting guacamole ever. The added bacon and grilled corn enhance the flavor so much! You'll want this for your first picnic of the season!

- 3 avocados (or 2 large)
- ¼ cup diced white onion
- ½ cup diced plum tomato
- ½ cup chopped cilantro
- Lime juice and salt to taste
- 2 ears of corn kernels cut off the cob and grilled
- 6 slices cooked and crumbled bacon
- 1/3 cup chopped pickled jalapenos

Cook and crumble the bacon. Cut the kernels off the ears and grill in a tiny bit of the bacon grease. Mash the avocados and mix in the onion, tomato, cilantro, lime juice and salt to taste. Add in the crumbled bacon and grilled corn. Serve with tortilla chips.

Tried and True - Praise of Song – by Marcy Lytle

He was SO cute. He stood up on the back of the sofa and pointed to a sign his mom had hanging on the wall that read, “God is good, all the time. He put a song of praise in this heart of mine.” Only he got a few words switched around and said, “praise of song.” I loved capturing that part on video, and hope you enjoy it as well!

When I left his house that day, I kept thinking about the phrase, “praise of song,” and realized how true that is! The praise of song is one of the best ways to offer up adoration to Him, to lift our own spirits, and to be reminded of how music can change the foulest of moods!

So, thank you, Augie!

Here are 10 songs that I hope you keep on your play list and take a listen. Some are inspirational, and others are just great lyrics to a great beat. Feel free to comment below and add your own song to the list, for other readers as they visit this page!

1. “Explaining Jesus” by Jordy Searcy – I love this simple song by this young man about the love of Jesus and how we’ve so many times misrepresented him to those around us. I think you’ll enjoy the words, the tune, and the ending...<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vydjYkZwo50>
2. “Give Me Jesus” by Danny Gokey – This singer was American Idol or The Voice, I’m not sure which. And this is an old song. However, his voice and passion bring it to new life!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbh43MGoigw>
3. “Great is Thy Faithfulness” by Sara Groves – She’s one of my favorite artists. She’s mellow, the music is amazing, and the lyrics are truth.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTLfQ05Otk0>
4. “Head above Water” by Avril Lavigne – This is a secular artist that suffered with a physical illness, and then wrote this song. I hope the lyrics speak to you if you’re in a storm. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKF6ghfcQic>
5. “Come Along” by Pentatonix – I’m pretty sure this song is not referring to heaven, but when I heard it I thought of heaven. And that’s a good thing, right? Anything this group sings is awesome, and this one is spectacular. Put on your dancing shoes!
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=come+along+pentatonix
6. “The Breakup Song” by Francesca Battistelli – Are you so over being afraid? So am I. So this song is for both of us! Enjoy. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0wpP5o7xpl>
7. “That’s What Makes You Strong” by Chris Gage and Christine Albert – not the best recording, but I absolutely LOVE the lyrics about what makes us strong – that which makes us weak. We heard this duo sing in person, and the song has stuck with me. Listen to the lyrics “lets the meek come sit beside the king!”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atpCddFzkD4>
8. “Priceless” by King and Country – I just found this one while searching for the others above. These guys are Rebecca St. James’ brothers – cool fact! And it’s a cool fact that this song is from a movie *Priceless* – watch it if you haven’t seen it!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu5HGgrskQg>

9. "Better than a Hallelujah" by Amy Grant – an oldie but goodie. She was around when I was first introduced to contemporary Christian music. We've all grown, thankfully, and I love the sentiment in this song about what God loves from us...so beautiful and simple.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm5kx3xqmg0>
10. "You Say" by Lauren Daigle sang by Cimorelli – I love Lauren Daigle sing her song, but when I heard this new group sing it, I fell in love with it again. What a powerful song for all of us to hear daily, weekly, maybe minute by minute...



HOME

Practical Parenting – Another Party? – by Marcy Lytle

I hear it now, and I heard it then, and nothing has changed. Our kids get invited to so many birthday parties that we would go broke if we attended them all. And our kids want elaborate extravaganzas for their own parties that require an extra bank account to serve! Birthday parties are supposed to be a celebration of the birthday person, not part of a demonstration of exhaustion and frustration! And yet, every weekend there's another gift to buy, and every other month there's another party to plan.

One of the best pieces of advice, before we get down to the practical, is that parties (just like weddings) do NOT have to succumb to the *pie in the sky* that our culture screams at us, "You must have!" We have to step back and away from getting on that band wagon. We also have to let go of what others think if we show up in hand with a homemade gift or just a card with \$5 in it. We have to do what works for our family and be glad about it. We just have to! And if they don't like our gift, maybe that's one less party we'll be invited to next time...

Here are some practicalities to consider in party gifting and going, planning and inviting.

The gifting and going:

It's okay to decline. Our children don't have to show up at every party. Family time comes first. If schedules are too full, we can elect to only choose a few parties to attend – not by popularity – but maybe by praying and attending those where we feel we are most needed.

It's okay that only one of your kids is invited. The whole clan doesn't have to go everywhere. We cannot expect that five year old to invite all four of our kids, ages 3 to 12. We can either take our one child, or stay home. And if time is an issue, don't stay for the entire party. We can let go of what we think others expect and demand, and do what is healthy and wise for our clan.

It's okay to budget your giving. If \$5 works for you, because you have no time to shop and no more funds to spare, then smile and give. A gift of an invite is a great idea – write in the card "You're invited to come over after school next Thursday to play," and I'm betting the kid will squeal with delight. Purchase a color by number book and a pack of markers from the Dollar Tree - \$2 – You're done. Store up a bin of these types of gifts as you have monies, and draw from it when parties near.

It's okay if she thinks you're awful because you went to that party and not her kid's party. You cannot please everyone, and remember you won't be pleased by everyone, either. We can just be polite and kind; and others can accept that or not.

The planning and inviting:

If having lots of folks and families, don't serve lunch! Have the party later and only include a few snacks that are kid-friendly. The adults can eat at home. We do not have to serve the parents! And it's perfectly fine to state in the invitation that snacks will be provided for the kids only.

If it works for your sanity, give your kids a choice: a party with several friends, a sleepover with a few friends, an outing with one friend. Decide on a budget and stick with it.

If it's a party with several friends, the party favor can be ONE lollipop from the Dollar Tree – it doesn't have to be bag full of 10 items. Snacks can be homemade or store bought, whatever works for you. And just state on the invitation what food you're serving, and let the parent decide whether or not their child with allergies can attend. You CANNOT provide every option for every child with every need – let the parent of that child provide.

Use the Dollar Tree or Oriental Trading (online) for decorations and don't spend more than you have. And if decorations stress you out, minimalize and chill! Look around your house and use what you have – beach buckets for serving, scarves for tablecloths, blankets for spreading out for picnics, bandanas for napkins or wrapping small gifts, etc. You can even string Christmas lights across the table and it will look fantastic! Bring your potted plants inside to create color!

If a sleepover is the choice, make the food simple. Each item doesn't have to be cut into shapes or covered with decorative icing. Make a plan for the evening, so that kids don't run amuck. For example, picnic on the floor, game time, dance time, movie time, bedtime reading, lights out. Hang the party schedule on the wall (and the rules.) Decide on a bedtime. And keep breakfast simple, as well. Pancakes with a few toppings, and you're done.

If an outing with one friend is chosen, give choices like an amusement center, mini golf, a movie, etc. and perhaps one place to eat like a fast food chain, an ice cream stop, or even a tea shop. Figure the cost before going so you're not fainting when you see the bill.

Above all, **talk with your children**. Don't portray "woe is me" attitudes that the family cannot afford this or that, or criticize others for the parties they throw, or compare and contrast. None of that does anyone any good! Instead, talk about the excitement of giving to others, and how God sees our heart, and that gifts are not more important if they cost more. Practice gratefulness at home with each other, so that kids are grateful at parties.

Even with all of the above, our kids are going to whine sometimes, wish they had gotten this instead of that, stomp around because they can't attend that party, or pout because they can't have 25 kids over. It happens. However, as we practice kindness and gratefulness in front of them, and talk about the goodness in our lives instead of the lack...they'll eventually grow up and get it.

At least, most of them...

(In the party pictured above – the dino board was taken from one of the kids' bedrooms and used as table décor, the food labels were made on the printer at home, and the food itself was simple and easy!)

I Don't Do Teenagers – Prom Night – by Marcy Lytle

It's that time of year, when our kids get invited (or not) to prom. I remember it well. There's shopping for the dress, the questions of how late can we stay out, where should he take her to dinner, etc. And then there are our thoughts of whether or not our almost grown children should even go, and what if they get into trouble, and all of the angst that comes with yet another one of those things we as parents have to face in raising kids. Here they sit as soon-to-be graduates, and all of these emotions and questions arise:

What if I don't get asked to senior prom, or who do I ask to go with me? Our healthy teenagers need to be assured that being asked to prom or asking someone is not the most important thing in life. Yes, it can be fun to be asked, but whether or not we are does not determine our worth or value. If he/she definitely desires to go, then encourage them to ask or seek out a couple of friends and go as a group. If he/she feels pressured to go but doesn't want to, let them make that decision. Prom night is not the queen's coronation – at all! Let them plan something equally as fun that they like to do, should they choose to skip.

What do I wear to the prom? It's got to be perfect. Talk that thought process down. Ask her what she likes, give her a budget, and encourage her to be herself. She can visit a thrift store, design her own outfit, or re-create with what she has in her closet (and borrow something from yours!). If a designer gown is in the budget, then give a top dollar amount. He doesn't have to perform up to others' standards, either. Encourage teens to dress appropriately, within budget, and to express themselves nicely. And most of all, they can dress with pride, regardless of whether or not others compliment or snub.

How late can I stay out? There is NO good reason to have kids stay out all night. At least that's this mom's opinion. Prom night is not about breaking rules or boundaries, but rather about having a fun time with others. If they want to stay out later than usual, invite a few kids over to your house for a movie and karaoke, and stay up a bit later to chaperone (discreetly, of course.) Kids have to be trustworthy, and we know if their track record has proven this. Have a conversation and listen to their pleas, but be wise and caring as parents...and safe...with your decision making.

But they're flying in a helicopter to prom! I don't know if this is still a thing, but I know that with every celebration there comes a competition to be the best. Whether it's a gender reveal, a wedding reception, or even this month's prom – our kids want to stand out and amaze others. We get it. Standing out and above is exhilarating and fun. However, talk this down too! This attitude in life will get our kids nowhere except with an ulcer and exhausted. Make their drive in the family car special, maybe with a surprise gift basket on the seat – filled with fun items for the evening of their choice. *Special* doesn't have to be seen by others; in fact, it only has to be given and enjoyed in love.

There's this pressure to perform, Mom! It's an age-old expectation among teens to push the limits on prom night, sexually, with drugs, with driving, etc. Teens will talk big and act out, just to make a show and to have a story to share the next day. We HAVE to talk with our teens and ask them about this particular pressure and how to deal. Insist that they stay in groups, walk

away at the sight of trouble, and be strong and courageous to say no. That's the real hero in any story. And tell them we are available for text, to come pick up, or for encouragement as the night wears on. Encourage them to be the thermostat and not the thermometer – to set the tone for the night and not to display the tone others set for them.

Finally, be the parent. Pray together about prom night...why not? We're supposed to pray about everything. We can encourage our kids to pray and listen and obey, out of love for their heavenly Father. We can praise them for doing the right thing, and reward them for being wise and strong.

It's hard, all of these growing-up stepping stones our kids place their feet upon. However, if those stones are settled into good ground, their feet won't slip, and they'll make it across into adulthood with a sound mind and a self-image that shines.

Tiny Living – On the Road Again – by Leyanne Enterline

On the road again,

I just can't wait to get on the road again.

The lyrics above are fitting for where we're at right now. My hubby got a job that keeps him on the road quite often now. It has been my dream to homeschool and travel with him. So that has been happening a lot! From Florida, to New Mexico, California, Houston, and (more to come), we have been on the road!

I thought the travel sounded pretty glamorous at first, but I got to see firsthand all the craziness that goes into production and it's not exactly all that I thought. Therefore, we've lessened some of the travel a bit and let him go alone. In taking this adventure, we may have added some stress, but for the most part it has been fun.

I still have not become a professional packer like I wanted to be. That is the hardest part, especially living in hotels with no washer/dryer and kitchen. Although packing is a bit difficult to me, I won't complain, because I did ask for this!

One thing I've learned while traveling is to be more specific in my prayer life and to make sure I ask if what I'm doing is God's will. What I may think is best may not be what God has in store and He knows what's best for me!

Another thing is that tiny living has gotten smaller! Our hotel rooms have definitely been less space than the trailer! So maybe trailer living was preparing us for this crazy adventure. When we get back I really appreciate our separate bedrooms, an actual kitchen and at least a laundry bin where we place our dirty clothes. Even if I do have to take them up the road to my parents' house to wash, I am okay with that! And it's nice to have something we can call our own. I just thought my trailer fridge was small, but a hotel fridge (if they have one) is much smaller! So I am beyond grateful for my tiny place!

Being on the road has really sparked an interest in our kiddos. They love the new places and new experiences. I make them journal everywhere we go and I really enjoy looking back on what they wrote! They, in fact, told us they want to take a break from baseball in the fall and just travel as much as we can. Even if it's camping everywhere, (okay, now my space will be even smaller) they want to go! We told them we would try our best, but had to remind them that we had to be adults and work some to make this adventure happen! Even if they can do school on the road, we can't always do our work on the road.

We shall see how long this lasts, but we are trying to enjoy the adventure and the freedom we have.

Remember...

Love Grows Best in Tiny Spaces

A Night to Remember – Doing Good – by Marcy Lytle

We've been studying goodness with a group of friends. In that study, we talked about how Jesus went about doing good. He healed the sick, sat with sinners, talked to the outcasts, and befriended his enemies. It's amazing to observe and see what Jesus did, but it's even more amazing to practice those things in our daily lives...with our kids!

In the month of May, let's teach our kiddos about doing good for moms that just might be in one of those categories listed above!

Preparation: You'll need construction paper and markers, and stickers, and a few gift bags with tissue, or use giftwrap and package décor you already have! Also have a big tray of homemade cookies fresh from the oven (or the store). Purchase ahead of time, 10 of the dollar toiletries from Dollar Tree i.e. lotion, chapstick, tissues, etc. Gather around the table for your devo together.

*...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power,
and he went around doing good and healing all...*

Act 10:38

Widowed mature moms – These are moms that have lost their husbands, their kids are grown, and they sit all alone in their houses. Think of at least one widow in your circle of friends and make her cards to hand deliver the weekend of Mother's Day.

Single moms with kids at home – These are moms who are raising kids all by themselves. Take the cookies you've made and decorate a pretty tray or box, and prepare to leave on her porch one evening as your family is out running errands.

New moms – These are the ladies who just had babies and they are trying to get used to crying and feeding and diaper changing! Maybe there's one in your neighborhood! Take your sack and stuff it with some of the toiletries for her, decorating and including cards of encouragement, wrapping each one with tissue paper.

That special mom – Think of a mom that's special to you for some reason. Maybe she's the crossing guard at school, or the lady at church that always gives you a hug, or even the neighbor lady that waves every time you return home. Write her a special card to deliver next time you see her. Decorate this one to the max!

Teacher mom – Think of a teacher at church or school or one that teaches you lessons, and make a poster for her that says, "Thank you for all you do!" You can tape together several sheets of paper or use a large poster board. Try to deliver this one in secret, so that she finds it by surprise!

Wasn't that fun? Doing good is always fun, giving to others is always better than receiving, and Mother's Day is just one day a year we get a chance to do this. There are so many other special days for other people, when we can do good again!

The Family Practice – Unraveled Plans - by Brandi Oman

I got on the treadmill at the gym today where I work. It has been over a year since I have attempted to use one.

In my mind, I had my morning planned. It would include: wake up early, go to the gym, get ready for work in the gym's locker room, have breakfast, and try to impress my new boss by showing up to work extra early on the first day. Typically, I plan my workouts for a couple of reasons. I like to people watch; and although I do not want to feel silly, I want to make sure I have an effective workout.

When I arrived to the gym, I drank my water, stretched my muscles a bit, did some useful breathing exercises and mentally prepared myself for the challenge ahead. I stepped on that belt, took in a deep breath, and pressed "Power On." I heard a loud clanking noise and then to my surprise the whole machine began to malfunction and totally go *transformers* on me. It hopped a bit, moved side to side and then accelerated in speed without me ever pressing the "Go Faster" button.

I squealed out loud and of course all the attention I had been avoiding was on me. My planning was very much unraveling at the seams. The guys that were around me who had just witnessed the horrible act of the demon machine contained their laughter as they rescued me and got the machine to power down. I, of course, laughed out of embarrassment and at myself for ever planning *anything* because plans never go my way.

So many times I plan and prepare, but life has a different idea. I had to change paths and come up with a different workout which felt like it was more effective than what I even had originally planned.

I believe God does this for us moms sometimes, as well. He offers us grace when we fail, he offers us help when we find ourselves in our own messes, and he gives guidance when our plans are not what were originally the best for us.

Isaiah 30:18

*Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you,
and therefore he waits on high to have compassion on you,
for the Lord is a God of Justice; how blessed are all those who long for him.*



YOU

UNDER THE INFLUENCE – The Contrast! – by Marcy Lytle

I was walking one morning, one of those mornings that was just perfect. The wind was low, the temps were cool but not cold, and I had chosen a trail I frequent after picking up my work for the day. It's just a sidewalk, really, around a big group of industrial buildings but I enjoy it, when I'm walking alone. There are trees along the sidewalk, a big field beside me, and I feel safe. I often just listen and talk to Him about life and all sorts of things...

Recently, I decided to snap a few photos of whatever I saw of interest as I walked, as I do sometimes. One scene particularly caught my eye, and that was of a tree in full glory with leaves and all, and one that still had nothing but a few short buds. Of course, the one that was full was gorgeous and the one that was still in winter mode was pitiful. The contrast caught my eye for several reasons.

As I age, I'm dealing with fears of losing my leaves and my blooms – so to speak. People of a certain age seem to fade into the background and then become a “burden” to their kids, in need of all sorts of help and attention. After losing our moms, my husband and I realized how difficult old age is, to navigate through the waters of losing faculties and abilities, while all around you there are still children being born and young people growing and lives that are thriving. It's such a contrast! And who wouldn't want to be on the thriving side of things?

I also thought of how we often compare ourselves at different times in our lives to our friends and those around us. We're in the middle of loss and starting over, when they're building another home and traveling the world. It seems they're alive in full color, and we've lost our leaves and are standing naked, wondering if we will ever bloom again.

Finally, I decided I was going to look up a few facts about plants and how they bloom, when they bloom, and why. It seems that it's rather scientific...not emotional at all...for plants! Plants have a sense about them that measures the amount of darkness around them, and how much cold they have experienced. Some flower only in short-day lengths – winter, and others only in long-day lengths – summer. And some plants are day-neutral! In other words, it's all about darkness vs. light!

Plants also know when change is coming. Trees start dropping their leaves way before the first frost because nights are getting longer, and they know winter is on its way. Did you know that when a certain number of chilling hours accumulate, this stimulates plants to sprout blooms? In other words, according to one garden columnist I read, plants have “the ability to sense the world around them and respond to it.”

I didn't really need to read any more. That information alone was fascinating. God made these plants with the innate ability to respond to the weather so that they bloom when they're supposed to show up in all their beauty. I believe he did the same for us.

We can ask him for his Spirit to give us perception (and he will!) to observe the darkness and light, and to respond to the light! We can pray and receive discernment about change, and

learn to anticipate it rather than fear it. Every plant has its season of blooms that come around every year, as the plant responds to the changes in the temperatures around it. We too know that we will continue to bloom over and over again because of two reasons – we are connected to the Vine and we are promised eternal life.

Even though my body is aging, my spirit is just beginning. Even when I feel my leaves have fallen when everyone around me is putting on new ones, I know my time is coming. I'm just in a season at the moment of observing the world around me and leaning into the changes that are coming.

I'm pretty sure that one of these mornings when I come around that side of the trail and see that same little pitiful tree, it will be covered with blooms and stand out among the green trees around it...even though it's small. It's time to bloom is coming...and then the seasons, the light and the cold will settle in again...and again. That's what makes my walk so inviting and pleasant and new, every day that I choose to take it...in the light of day...or in the heat of the summer.

Strengthening Your Core - The Color Orange – by Marcy Lytle

One thing I enjoy doing when I take walks alone is to talk to God. I think I mentioned this in another article once, but when I talk to Him I enjoy sending accolades and praise using the letters of the alphabet. For example, just this morning I started with “You are awesome, big, caring, doting, everlasting, faithful, etc.” You get the idea. It really positions my heart and mind to focus on the goodness of my Father.

I’ve done this exercise a few times and each time I feel his voice saying he wants to use those same letters to talk back to me, his daughter, telling me what it is he loves about me. When I was younger, I’m pretty sure I would have had a hard time hearing anything but condemnation and thinking it was all his voice. As I’ve grown older and learned more about his character, I realize his thoughts toward me are of love and not disdain. So if one of those condemning words enters my mind, I quickly dismiss it.

This particular day, I was happy to hear his voice repeat some of the same attributes back to me – like understanding, wise, and zealous. (I always skip the letter X!) This made me know that he sees me through his son Jesus, who makes me pure and whole because of His spirit at work in me.

However, I was quite surprised when I was walking and felt like He told me I was the color “orange” when He came to the letter O. No, I didn’t hear an audible voice, I just went with the first words that came to my mind as I walked that were affirmative, and I received them as a nod from Him.

I thought about the color orange and decided I would look up more about it, as well as think on the color orange and ask God why he sees me as that color.

One of the answers I felt he gave was that just like the sunset is the last thing we all love to see as we close out our day, he enjoys hanging with me in the same way, and loves to see my face as each day ends and another one begins. This made me smile and feel so warm inside, because honestly I hadn’t been sitting and listening to his voice much at all.

Here’s what else I found out about the color orange:

It’s made by mixing red and yellow, which I knew. But I loved that I was a mix of primary colors and not one of the primaries. I’m not sure why, but I liked that!

Orange is usually associated with amusement, warmth, energy and activity. I’d say I love all of those, and I’m happy He made me that way!

The color orange, of course, came from the ripe orange fruit. Oranges are not the kind of fruit you just bite into. They have to be peeled to get to the flavor. And the peel is a good slug repellent! I know that I have a thick skin that He has to gently peel back daily to reveal his goodness in me, and I’m so thankful to know that he does this gently and with good intent!

Orange contrasts beautifully against blue, especially dark blue – and that’s my favorite color!

In psychology, orange is optimistic and uplifting. "Those inspired by orange are always on the go," according to *Color Meanings*, by Jacob Olsen. Now, that describes me totally! I love to go!

That article also says the color orange gives us the freedom to be ourselves. I needed to read that, because I still toy with the idea that I'm not so pleasing to God because I'm so odd...

Maybe you could try this conversation with God, offering up praise using the alphabet to him, and listening back to see what he says about you! Pick one particular letter and listen, and receive all the beauty of that one word he speaks to you. It might be Brave for B, or Holy for H, or even Kind for K. Sit and think and write down your thoughts, and cultivate that word to your heart and smile...

God loves us, and he loves when we give him our praise and attention, because he knows that we're listening for him to talk back to us as well. After all, we are his creation and he is our Creator. And that makes for a beautiful sunset and sunrise, on any day of the year!

Healthy Habits – A Full Tank – by Marcy Lytle

I'm pretty sure we've all done it. We've kept running and going and doing and working until we collapse into a heap, completely spent and empty. Either we end up sick with a cold or worse, or we just shut out the world for a bit until we can stand up again and move. Sometimes, because we've let our tanks run dry we harm those around us with our frustration at how empty we feel. Oftentimes, our tanks run dry because of life spiraling out of control. But more often than not, they run dry because we don't heed the indicators.

Using practical examples, let's look at those full tanks we all need to run smoothly with longevity:

Scuba divers know they need a team above the water to monitor and be present should oxygen be needed. And yet we sink into deep waters alone and push our friends away, when they're willing to help. When we know we're sinking, we need a boat load of friends nearby with ropes, extra tanks, and supplies of love.

Landscapers realize that lawn equipment will not operate without gas, so they make sure before they start out on a big yard that the tank is full. Sometimes, we'd rather just chance it and keep going, hoping we make it, rather than filling up before we start our day with truth from his Word. I've done that with my lawn and had to leave my grass uncut and run to the station. It's not fun, and I always wish I'd filled up first.

Driving a car requires attention to the indicators and sounds that warn us that our tank is near empty. We hope we can go that extra mile, only to realize our car is sputtering and about to dry, with no gas station in sight. We too have indicators – a sharp tongue, a weary body, a dull mind – that warn us to fill up with rest and relaxation for renewal and refreshment.

In the holiday season, we know our drawers need to be stocked with batteries of all sizes for Christmas décor, gifts for the kids, electronics and gadgets. It's so sad to have a child open a gift he cannot play with, because our battery stash is empty – and all the stores are closed! When we are on full force, giving and operating and going and shining all day long every day – we have to have energy supply! And that comes with wisdom to know that we cannot operate on our own. We need His strength and His power always. He is the battery drawer!

Extra bulbs are a must for the house, or we will be caught without light at the most inopportune time! And if we don't have those extra bulbs, we have to jump in the car and shop. We can't constantly be a strong light for our homes, our communities and our families without burning out once in a while. He says we need to sit at his feet, lay down our burdens, and renew our minds – and in doing so – we can then shine again full force reflecting His glory. That rest is an extra bulb!

What other analogies can you come up with, regarding keeping your tank full, your supply closet stacked, or your lights burning? We can learn so much from everyday living about how those same disciplines and awareness and maintenance apply to our spiritual lives. Without energy supply, we all expend more than we take in, and we just end up on the side of the road hoping

someone drives by with a full gas can to send us on our way. No one likes being in that position.

I'm one of the worst at going and going like an energizer bunny. Sometimes, all I need to do to refill is to exit my house for a warm walk in the sunshine giving nothing but thanks for the day's blessings. Other days, I need to cast all my cares on him and trust that He hears my cries and answers my prayers. That fills my tank with faith. And there are other times when all I need to do is show up with a community of others whose tanks are low and sing, worship, and offer hugs to the family he's given us all to love...as we exit with full hearts for the coming week.

Look at your indicators today. Listen to the beeps. Notice the flickers. And check your drawers. Running a little low?

Life Right Now – Sit Down Next to Me – by Bethany Gomez

Written to each of you readers, as if you were sitting across the table enjoying a cup of coffee with me...while I catch you up on my life.

My grandma's funeral was harder than I thought it would be. It was a very special and beautiful mass held at her church. I will not forget it. They had this beautiful singer that had the voice of an angel. My mom and my two uncles got to share in their own words of what she meant to them. It broke my heart. I just kept thinking that she would've loved to be there with all of her family and friends all together. She absolutely loved her family. One of the very last memories I had with her was her insisting to see "the babies" meaning all her great grandbabies, since they couldn't come to visit her while she was in the hospital. Come to think of it, I know she loved seeing us all together from her seat up in Heaven. I miss her.

So you heard that I was training to run the Capitol 10K last month and that it got cancelled due to severe weather? I was so bummed, still a little bummed about it, but I still managed to run a 10K that day before the storm hit. I wasn't going to let all that training go to waste and I ran a personal best. Even though it wasn't the experience I was hoping for, it was still very memorable and kind of exhilarating outrunning a storm. I finished just as it began raining.

Work has been going great. I work with an amazing team and sweet students, but recently it has been a little crazy what with one student moving, another student that moved away back in December but then moved back, and a brand-new student starting in our class all right before the school year is almost over. Wow, I can't believe this school year is almost over.

At times I'm so ready for summer break and I want time to go by fast, but then I quickly remember what is going to happen over the summer break and I want to stop time or at least slow it down. I don't want to move out of my lovely home that I have shared with two of my best friends for over three years. It's not only because I am five minutes walking distance from my job (although, I'm not going to lie, that is part of it) but I don't want my roommate and best friend, Abby, to move away to Dallas after she gets married. Oh gosh, I am a bundle of mixed emotions right now. I'm so, so happy for her but so sad she is moving away. I'm just so thankful to God that she is not moving across states, just cities.

I feel like my life right now is on that part of the rollercoaster where it's click, clicking slowly up to the top of a steep, downward, speedy drop, where life whizzes on by at high speeds, with constant quick changes. I'm not a fan of the drop, the anticipation of the stomach-in-your-chest feeling, and it's not going to be easy moving out of our house and moving Abby to Dallas. But I know after that drop passes, parts of the "rollercoaster" can be fun, especially when I have people I love in the seat next to me and around me.

Sometimes I'm over being an adult. Sometimes I feel ready for whatever life has for me and whatever God has for me to do. Sometimes I'm over being single. Sometimes I don't mind being single. Sometimes I feel like everyone is moving on without me. Sometimes I feel like time is moving too fast and I feel like I'm forgetting to enjoy the here and now. Sometimes I'm excited about the future and what it holds, full of its never-ending possibilities. Sometimes I'm terrified of the future and all its ever changing ways, full of uncertainty.

But then there is God. I know He will never leave me. Ever since I began following Him, He never has. He is teaching me to take it one step at a time and give Him my worries and fears.

Just saying His name, Jesus, calms the raging storm of thoughts and feelings inside my head that aren't from Him. I love Jesus so much.

Did you know that I've been writing for an amazing online magazine for almost a year now? I know, it doesn't sound like a big deal, but for me it is a major accomplishment. I have never thought of myself as a writer, let alone a good one. And on top of that, I have perfectionist tendencies, I hardly ever think my writing is good enough and regretfully I'm a procrastinator; I wish I wasn't. I'm also very aware that this is not a good combination, especially when it comes to writing. It is only by the grace of God and the grace God has given to my editor that I have reached this milestone. There has been several times that I have felt like giving up, because I am ashamed that yet again I procrastinated and didn't start writing my article till the last minute for whatever reason, very rarely is it purposefully done, but yet I fail to meet the deadline. I love the verse in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 that says,

“But He said to me, my grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in weakness.
Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses,
so that Christ's power may rest on me.”

I couldn't be more delighted and grateful to be a part of such a beautiful community of writers for this God-filled, life-giving, encouraging online magazine, so I am going to commit to trying to grow in my writing skills and ask God more and more what He wants me to write.

So what is going on in your life, friend?

Created for Life - Many Marvelous May Blessings – by Ginny Hurley

May an expectation of good burst from your innermost being
May each road you travel take you higher than your dreams
May your smile brighten the way for someone today
May love gather momentum and explode around you
May songs of deliverance rise from your household
May fresh rain shower you with green growing life
May hope grow deeply in the soil of your fields
May the smell of gingerbread fill your kitchen
May you dance and twirl just because you can
May you encounter His love like never before
May your neighbors rejoice in your presence
May abundant flowers grow in your gardens
May your children rise up and say thanks
May you feel angel wings encircling you
May the you hear the sounds of heaven
May your dreams expand and explode
May your heart be overcome with bliss
May your ground be smooth and level
May you marvel at God's acceptance
May the wind always be at your back
May birds call out through your day
May friends be always at your door
May bells ring around your work
May you feel the kiss of Jesus
May generosity jump in your lap
May joy bubble up and surprise you
May you lift up your eyes to wonder
May a child lead you in your journey
May music and delight apprehend you right now
May astounding great news come your way today!



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Nothing Elaborate – by Bekah Holland

Have you ever sat down to watch a movie? Maybe a mushy romantic story of girl meets boy, boy sweeps girl off her feet with his wit and unmatched charm, maybe there's a teensy, tiny hiccup, and then they ride off into the sunset, in a two-seater sports car, convertible of course (man, what I wouldn't give for a car with no room for a car seat), for their happily ever after?

Those movies are great. I'm a sucker for *The Notebook* (or really any Nicholas Sparks book/movie for that matter), *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Sweet Home Alabama* kind of movies. I'm pretty sure I've seen them all and then some, including favorites like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Casablanca* thrown in for fun. But after I've watched them, I find myself wondering, "What the heck happened?" with my own story. Don't get me wrong, I love my story, but let's be real, not many of us have a Disney, knight on a white horse kind of story.

Our story is probably a little closer to something in between *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Groundhog Day*. Lots of busy. Lots of laundry (so much freaking laundry), and dishes and kids and laundry (seriously, it never ends). And my husband and I barely catch sight of each other. And if we don't become really intentional, this is our normal. As women, I think it can be easy to lose ourselves in this life we've either created or got wrapped up in. And just as easily, I think our marriages can get lost in the mix too.

Honestly, sometimes it's easier to stay busy. If I'm busy, I don't have to look at any issues that might have crept up in my relationship with my husband. If I stay busy, not only do I not have time to take care of me, but I don't have to make time to check with my partner and make sure his needs are being met...and that he remembers what I look like when I'm not running from thing to thing to thing.

So, we have to pause.

I'm not going to lie. Pressing the pause button can be scary. I can get so used to the constant motion, that I start to feel like that's the only way to keep our heads above water. This is where that "intentional" thing comes into play. Both my husband and I have to stop, push all of the other distractions out of the way, and find a way to remember that we're on this adventure *together*.

I used to think that the only way to do this was to get dressed in non-wrinkled clothes that don't resemble yoga pants, go out to dinner at a restaurant without kids' menus available and we'd magically fall in love all over again. Yeah....that was super realistic. It rates up there with unicorns and pixie dust. For one, babysitters are expensive. Two, non-stretchy clothing is overrated. Three, do we really need more than that?

I found out after plenty of tears, unmet expectations and uncomfortable undergarments that all we need is time. Our most valuable commodity. Some of my favorite times connecting in my marriage have been when I picked up some fancy cheese and crackers from the grocery store and we hung out on the couch after tossing, I mean gently rocking, our cherub children to sleep. Nothing elaborate, nothing involving extra money, just us, sitting, laughing, eating.

One of my most vivid memories with this kind of “date” is our first New Year’s Eve following the birth of our daughter. We were exhausted. We had no babysitter. We had no money. But what we did have was a desktop computer and a newly discovered website called YouTube. We laughed until we cried and we toasted the New Year with our sparkling grape juice in our pajamas with our baby girl sleeping in the next room. That laughter has healed a million little hurts. It brought us back to the joy of our journey.

It’s not quite as pretty, or easy for that matter, as the picture Hollywood paints for us....there are no white horses, or convertible without car seats, and most of the time, the sun sets long before we get to settle down. But we make time to find each other. And that valuable time eases a thousand fears, pauses the chaos of our normal routine and reminds us that our story, with Christ at the center, is the best love story ever told.

Date Night Fun – Discovery! – by Marcy Lytle

Maybe you think you know your town like the back of your hand, but do you really? Have you discovered all there is in every neighborhood and a few miles out of town, as well? What about discovering something new about each other? Without adventure and discovery, we'd all still be sitting on the shore somewhere near the east coast, with all of America waiting to be explored!

Here are a few date night ideas for you and yours that involve a bit of discovery:

Discover the Small: We recently had a QT gas station open near us, and we enjoyed stopping for their food which we had heard good things about. What if you planned a trek across town and discovered all of the small places you never frequent, like gas station stores, mom/pop places, tiny boutiques and small coffee shops that aren't well known? Do it, make a notebook of your adventures, and write down a review of each place. Plan out at least five stops for this date night idea.

Discover the Earth and Sky: Plan date night in your own backyard and make it a night of discovery. Start before sundown so that you can see the earth beneath you. Plan a spot for new décor or plantings, and make it happen. Have your supplies ready – like a new pot, potting soil, a piece of art for the fence, and the plants to place in the dirt. Once the sun sets, sit together all cozied up on a bench or a couple of chairs and observe the night sky. Not the constellations, but the vastness of the darkness and the beauty of the moon. Or...head to the theater or find Apollo 11 for a discovery movie.

Discover the Channel: Do you have Discovery TV? If so, plan an evening of a few shows you've recorded to watch, with snacks to go with. If you don't have that channel, each of you discover a new show the week ahead and record it, then share it on date night. If you're watching a cop show, serve burgers and fries. If you're settled in for a thriller, serve popcorn with all sorts of toppings and blood oranges for a snack. If it's a romantic comedy, then order takeout to be delivered for the two of you and enjoy in pretty dishes – discover a new place to order from!

Discover Each Other: This date night will be at each of your favorite stores – picked ahead of time. When you enter your favorite store, let him pick out five things he thinks you'd like. Tell him what you like/dislike about those five things. Then go to his store, and you do the same. No hurt feelings, here – it's a night of discovery! Maybe make a purchase or two. Try something new! Head to a restaurant for appetizers and dessert, only, and discover something new on the menu you've never tried before! Be adventurous!

Discover the Country: Head out of town, it doesn't have to be far, and stop for discoveries along the way. Blaze a new path by going down roads you've never ventured out on before. This is the time of year for your first picnics, so pack up one with a new recipe you've discovered on line, one you've not tried before. Discover beauty in the drive, by stopping to snap photos of old buildings, wheels of hay, a cow standing in a pasture, or a bridge that appears out of nowhere.

Discovery dates are really the best. We can all get stuck in a rut of going out to dinner and a movie at the same three restaurants, and the same movie theater around the corner from where we live. Venture out, dig deep, set your sights up and down and all around. Record your discoveries and keep broadening your horizons...together.

After 30 Years – Heights and Bugs – by Marcy Lytle

I'm all for women's rights, equal pay, fair treatment, and everything that women deserve and more. However, I found myself recently wondering about something. I make my husband's lunches every morning early, pack them up, and send him on his way. I share those lunch recipes on Instagram, and I've wondered, "Do people think I live in the dark ages because I make my husband's lunch?" Does it make me less of a woman because I "serve" him in that way?

I think those thoughts come because of the commercials, the films, the news, etc. that's before us constantly where women are rising to the forefront...at the expense of making men look foolish and stupid. And to use the word "serve" anywhere in connection with marriage is probably taboo in all of America! And I totally get it! Women don't want to be seen as "less than" the men they love in any way, fashion, or form.

So back to marriage. It's all about serving each other in marriage. And it's not because I'm woman and he's man and there's some sort of hierarchy of importance between us. It's about this thing called love. Love serves. Period.

My husband is deathly afraid of heights. When our family vacationed in New York for the first time, there was an escalator that was at an insanely steep angle and we all thought he wasn't going to make it. He had his head bowed and he was sick to his stomach and was so relieved, when he stepped off at the top. (Of course, we all chuckled a little.) I know his fear, and I help him out when he's in scary spaces by steering him away from an edge or just not going there at all. We didn't climb a lighthouse on a recent trip because the stairs were too steep and narrow, and that was fine by me. I stayed down with him and we looked up instead of down.

I'm freaked out by bugs when they get in the house. If he's home and I see a gecko (hate those things – they hang around the front porch) or even a small spider, I opt for asking him to kill it. It's just not my thing, to kill bugs. Or to see open wounds. He knows I will faint if I see a person bleeding, so he will call our children if he's in need in that way! Last week, one of those spindly freakish bugs entered the house (mosquito eater?) and I was so proud that I smashed it dead that I left it on the wall as a trophy for a couple of days!

My point in the two illustrations above is that we both have learned to serve each other over the years, just because we love each other, not because he's a man and I'm a woman. And if either of us ever feels taken advantage of we speak up in a nice way (mostly) to let the other one know how we feel, and we talk about it.

I get up early, I enjoy cooking, and so I make our meals for lunch to pack up for each of us. And I post the pictures because I enjoy what I'm doing, not because it's my "job" or "duty" to perform for him each morning. He makes the bed daily, first thing, because he knows that I work at my desk in the bedroom and it bothers me if the bed is unmade. I like my "office" orderly and neat.

I'm sad that so many women have been abused and mistreated and stepped on and treated as servants in homes where love should be the rule, and not rules themselves. It sickens me that women have been taken advantage of in the work place and made to feel like an object rather

than a treasure or asset. That sort of mistreatment gives rise to women everywhere demanding to be noticed and loved for who they are – strong and beautiful – regardless of how they appear to a man's eye.

And I'm also sad that this fight for approval and validation has entered into marriages so much that one can't serve the other, for fear of being taken advantage of.

Serving doesn't mean being viewed as a servant with less pay and using servant stairs. When playing the game of volleyball, all players rotate in serving, hitting, setting and assisting. Serving is not seen as a duty in that game, but rather an opportunity to score one for the team! It's the same with a couple. When we have the opportunity to serve, we do it gladly. When it's time to rotate and it's his turn to serve, there he goes! And if either of us misses that opportunity, we've missed a chance for cheering and applause for our marriage.

I just made his lunch this morning and it was an epic fail. The falafel balls fell apart in the fryer and so he's getting a salad with falafel crumbs on top. I told him if it tastes bad, just to go to Whataburger – his favorite fast food joint.

Heights and bugs, making beds and lunches...what opportunities do you have to serve the one you love?



ENCOURAGEMENT

Best of the Mess – Wonder – by Ashley Zanella

A few weeks ago i was having a great morning with my two little boys. I had just put on my favorite YouTube worship station. My 10-month old was eating his breakfast and my almost 2-year old was playing with toys. There was this moment where I looked from one to the other and saw this expression on their faces that can only be described as wonderment. They looked so happy and in awe at some of the simplest of life's pleasures.

Later that morning on our way to church, I continued to have moments like that. From noticing all of the wildflowers blooming in the greater Austin area, to what I felt was super clarity around a subject I had been praying on for a long time. I had been praying specifically, asking God, "What is the next step for me? My husband? Our family?" It was in that moment that I felt God all around me. He gave me the clarity I had been seeking. I felt his leadership, presence and direction in a way I never had before. Later that morning in church, one of my friends stood up during worship to say, "God's presence is surrounding us today. Can you feel it?" And yes, yes I absolutely could.

I consider myself a new Christian; however, most of my childhood I felt very close to God. He gave me optimism, hope and such a wonder-filled perspective. But somewhere down the road, like many people and other Christians, I turned away from Him. I became a skeptical. I believed in good energy and bad energy but I had zero confidence in a higher power or being. How I grew and changed and evolved to be in a place where I seek out God first is a tale for another time, but I felt it was important to illustrate that even through seeking God over the past three years, I had never felt his presence as strongly as I did on that random Sunday morning.

As I mentioned, for months now my husband and I have been praying for clarity - clarity for careers and finances. *Do I stay at home? Do I go back to work? Does he have a career change? And if we do start new careers, what will they be? How would they work together? Would we need childcare?* I had been applying for many positions over the past six months or so, many of which I wasn't really qualified for, some of which I had an "in" for. None of these I really wanted in my heart, but I mostly just wanted the money that would come with them.

I didn't get any of those positions. In fact, I only ever got an interview for one of them. And it's funny, because even if I had talked myself into believing that I would love any of those jobs, there was an undeniable relief when I got that denial letter. Yes, it hurt to be rejected so many times, or to not hear anything at all. Going through this, we undoubtedly ask ourselves, "What's wrong with me?" "Do I not add value anymore?" All the same, I still knew that whatever God wanted is what would be. I continued to put it into His hands. I continued to pray and try to let go of that self-doubt.

Going back to that wonder-filled morning weeks ago, and that moment of immense clarity, I heard God's direction for me so clearly. It literally felt like a stage light was shining down and he told me, "This is for you. You are going to thrive." I not only felt peace, but I recalled a profession I had recommended to me time and time again in the past but I had been filled with doubt. I never honestly considered it. So it was so odd for this idea to pop into my head at that moment, because it really wasn't something I was actively considering or pursuing. Within days

of that moment of clarity, I became connected with someone that is killing it in my future industry and she wants to be my sponsor, to mentor me and see me succeed. She works for a company that puts God first, then family and then business - values that align so well with my own. My friends and family are more than thrilled for this new direction and have full confidence in me to be successful at it.

What is more, though, is that I have full confidence in this decision. I feel so confident that this is what God has helped guide me towards. There have been so many confirmations that this is right.

I am filled with wonder, just like the wonder I saw on my little boys' faces. Wonder, because God knew all along the timing and the direction I was heading. I didn't, but He did. And I'm so excited to continue leaning into God and what his plans are for us.

Firmly Planted – Distant Rumbles – by Dina Cavazos

April and May are two of the best months in the prayer garden. It's a visual feast of colors and textures, both intense and subtle. As my eyes move from the varied shades of evergreens to scattered pops of color, to colonies of alien-looking succulents, I'm drawn into the peace and timelessness of God and the natural world I prefer. Today it's cool and still except for the sounds of birds, water, and the distant rumble of traffic. *The distant rumble of traffic!* That isn't congruent with my peaceful restful garden, but yet it's true. The world is here and near.

*I'm in the garden but the world is nigh.
My soul rests but my heart won't lie.*

The truth is I'm struggling with something right now. It's so deep that in tears and sobs I poured out my pain in a dream last night. I, and an innocent I love, am here, in this hurting place, because of circumstances beyond my control. I was in a good place—a garden so to speak—and now it feels like the desert. I never thought I would leave that place, I never thought certain things could change...but they did. You can relate because it's a problem common to man: imperfect, well-meaning people make unwise decisions that impact other people's lives. None of the options open to me now come close to bringing me back to "that place" and my choice will impact this innocent one.

How can I resolve this? Will I make the right decision? Will the long-term impact be good or bad?

I feel angry that I'm in this position, that my world crashed, that I'm dry and dying in a desert I didn't choose. I long for the secure past and fear an uncertain future. I can ignore the distant rumble of traffic, pretend it's not there...but it is, even while I'm basking in beauty. Wrestling through a jumbled mix of loss, fear, displacement and despair, my heart cries out for answers. The only sounds are the birds, water, and the distant rumble of traffic. The birds aren't worried a bit that a storm is coming, the water isn't worried that its source might run out, and there isn't a thing I can do to stop the traffic.

I so love my God who understands these fleshly feelings and listens quietly as they wash over me. They will pass as I choose to follow his way of forgiveness and trust. Nothing surprises him and he's Lord over the light *and* the darkness. He's aware of the situation, and there's purpose in everything that comes my way because I'm his child. I *know* this...do I really *believe* it? This is an opportunity to show that I do. This is a time for trusting in Christ, my Savior, my Rock, my Refuge. I can't resolve it and the answer isn't clear. I can't know the future. This is a time to pray the prayer of Thomas Merton (1915-1968):

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and that I think I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so.

But I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Be encouraged...our God is an awesome God.

Moving Forward – Redeeming – by Pam Charro

Deuteronomy 31:8

"The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you;
He will be with you and He will not fail you or forsake you.
Do not fear or be dismayed."

I like to think back to how I felt before I knew the Lord. As I grew older, I wanted to hold onto my dreams, but everything I tried seemed to only dig a deeper hole of destruction and despair. I wanted love and acceptance but all I knew how to do was make a mess of things. I knew I was meant to be beautiful, but I felt so covered in dirt, shame and ugliness.

I was a serious truth seeker, but I had no idea that the answer was Jesus. Other solutions may have felt more natural and attractive to me, but God made sure that by the time I encountered the Cross at the age of 24, I knew it was the only hope for my life. I love to look back on that time and just thank God that he rescued my soul from sin, hopelessness, and damnation.

But as amazing as that is, he doesn't stop there.

Not only am I redeemed from hell, but the process is still continuing throughout my Christian walk. I don't know what lies ahead, but he has already gone there and has been working on areas for years that I'm not even aware are broken. He has set me up for victory in upcoming battles that I have no idea I will face. He does this so that I will know who he is and what it means for my life. His love and power are always weaving throughout my journey so that, no matter how dark the valley of the shadow of death, I am never helpless or hopeless. He goes before me and his redemption is alive to straighten all that is crooked and heal all that is wounded. What started at my salvation will continue until I take my last breath here on earth.

He was for me when I was lost, and he continues to be for me every day.

He never stops redeeming.

Simple Truths - What Do You Believe? – by Erica Simmons

It is funny how the things you have believed all your life can be blown up with a simple conversation. I was having lunch with a dear friend who shared with me how her women's group is studying the Apostles Creed.

*I believe in God,
the Father Almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
He descended into hell;
on the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of Saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.*

My Christian upbringing is Methodist and we recited this creed every Sunday. There was a time I knew it by heart. It is an amazing creed, as it contains all the key points most Christians agree are important to our faith.

During our conversation, she mentioned that the first lesson that she taught focused on the first statement "I Believe in God..." As Christians, how many times do we say that? We see poll after poll that asks populations around the world, "Do you believe in God?" I listen to the statistics and feel encouraged that so many people continue to believe in a being higher than themselves. I know, with so many religions out there, that *god* represents more than the God of the Christian faith, but that is not what I want to focus on. Think about that question and what your answer would be. How important is the answer to that question for you and for your faith? Now I want you to answer the question she used in her lesson.

Do you BELIEVE God? The removing of one two-letter word takes this, not to a whole other level, but many other levels. It moves us from knowing that there is a God who exists, "I believe in God," to how we live every aspect of our lives with, "I believe God."

Let's think about the implications. For me, "I believe in God" does go beyond knowing that God exists. It has always also meant to me that I trust in Him and have faith in Him. "I believe God" just hit me. It was like not a light bulb moment, but a flood light moment. As she did in her lesson, I begin to examine how the difference in the two statements impacts my behavior. If someone had a movie of my life when I came up against the toughest situations, would they say from my behavior that I believed in God or would

they say I believed God. There is a subtle difference here that has forced me to examine myself and come to some conclusions about the way I approach my life walk.

I have always struggled with just reading the bible on any sort of a regular basis. I tell myself that I talk to God all the time and I do. I would be hard pressed to go a day without talking to Him about something, even if it is my back and forth chat about dedicating time daily set aside just for Him. But looking at “I believe God” takes that behavior and puts a new spin on it.

You see, in order to believe God I have to know what He has said. Coming up in church and participating in numerous bible and book studies, I have a wide range of knowledge about my God through the eyes and revelations of others. What has prevented me before was what I can only describe as the thin veil of resistance, of dread and mundane that turned off my excitement. Since hearing this question, I am realizing that feeling is gone, not there anymore. That is the best I can explain it.

It takes me to Jesus’s experience in the wilderness when He was tempted. The enemy attacked and Jesus overcame every temptation using the word of God. When He spoke, the enemy was IMMEDIATELY defeated. That is how our life can be. How do I know that? That’s right. It says so in His word.

*For you have been called for this purpose,
since Christ also suffered for you,
leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.
(1 Peter 2:21).*

As a former math teacher, I think about the examples I gave my students introducing new concepts. The examples were to be used as a step by step to assist students in being able to solve problems on their own. Think about that. Christ was our example on how to deal with the “problems” of life. I expected my students to be as successful when it came to solving math problems by using those examples. It’s the same concept with Christ.

The sacrifice and suffering Christ endured was not so we could believe IN the story of His life, but He did it to show us how to live our lives and how to defeat the enemy. This is not about being able to recite the story, but to reenact the story with our lives...to have the same results, to have the same victories, that He paid a great price to provide.

Real Stories – Balance – by Kamrin Wolfe

When I was first asked to write this article, I jumped at the chance. I was excited to write because I had many ideas that I desired to pen, but I couldn't seem to figure out which direction to go. I could share about my journey through miscarriage, or the joys of raising a family or learning how to trust God for provision when your husband loses his job, or even share about the exciting new chapter we are about to experience. Yet, the more I processed the more I couldn't seem to find the right words. And as the days went on, it seemed like things became busier, and there was never a quiet moment to put my thoughts on paper. Then one day, a day in which I was so overwhelmed and exhausted (which seems typical these days), it hit me. Why talk about one thing, when each moment over the past nine years of becoming a mom and learning all about mom life are all a part of who I am and who I have become today? They are all elements of my story, every mountain and every valley; a story that is still not complete, but one that continues to be written each day.

My story can be summed up into one word. It's a word that in all honesty I'd rather delete from my vocabulary because of the pressure I have allowed it to put on me. It is also a commonly used word, especially in the mom world. And if I had a dime for every time I got asked a question with this word in it, I would be rich. Any guesses?

Balance. B - A - L - A - N - C - E.

As a mom of three (all under the age of eight), a wife, a ministry director, an entrepreneur, a woman who now works part time from home, on top of all the other things on my schedule, balance is a word that is definitely in my head more often than not. I don't know how many times I get asked, "How do you balance it all?" I'm pretty sure I have been asked that at least four times this month alone. I get it - I'm crazy busy and to the outside world I seem to "have it all together." Don't get me wrong, it's flattering to be asked (as though I have some amazing routine), but the truth is I don't. I don't have it all balanced. In fact, it's more of a juggling act, a circus really; I even end up laughing at myself quite often (in between the tears). Yes, tears. Lots of them because being a mom is the most exhausting, and rewarding, journey I have ever been on.

When I first found out I was pregnant nine years ago, with the baby we ended up losing, I was so organized. I had it all planned out, the nursery, the lists of what I would need, even a "baby binder," and how my life would look as a mom. It was going to be just as I planned, all perfectly balanced. Definitely not what would come weeks later. The emotional exhaustion started then. My faith, my emotions, my lists, they were all out of

balance, and all I desired was just a healthy baby. Fast forward to now (and of course, as mentioned above), I have three beautiful amazing answers to prayer, but that hasn't been a cake walk. My oldest suffered from ear infections and eardrum ruptures until he was 6 years old and went through three surgeries. On top of him being sick all the time, we had our other two kids to raise, a youth ministry to run, and in the last year a major job change for my husband. During it all, I found myself also struggling with many fears for the first time. Let me tell you, fear is crippling and clouds your perspective.

And that's just scratching the surface. Raising tiny humans changes you physically, emotionally and for me - spiritually. No matter if you work full time, stay at home full time, or are somewhere in between, being a mom will change everything. You somehow are supposed to learn how to "be mom," yet also continue to be a wife, a daughter, a friend, maybe a co-worker or whatever other hats you might wear. Life doesn't just stop and there is no $A+B=C$ (which for this mom who loves processes would have been so helpful). And so that word - BALANCE - soon became this goal in my life I needed to reach. Honestly, I don't think that as a mom, even as a woman, that I am alone in striving towards that goal. I have asked myself over the years,

How do I "balance" the loss of my pastor, major transitions in life, say good-bye to both of my grandmothers, walk next to my friends in their darkest of days, stand firm in my faith when my husband loses his job, work part-time, keep the house clean, throw birthday parties, go on playdates & to school functions, celebrate the holidays, have family time, go on vacations, do the laundry (because it's my least favorite thing LOL) and so on...all the ups and downs of life...and still manage to raise kids in the midst of it all?

Besides that, trying to teach my kids what I myself seem to be struggling with is not easy. I have little eyes watching everything I do and how I respond to everything in life. I must balance it, right? I must balance my emotions, make sure everything is proportioned out correctly each day, so that things are accomplished, my kids get the perfect amount of attention, and there must be some routine that works! Don't tell me I am the only one who has had these thoughts...

I strongly believe we as moms, and as women, spend way too much time trying to find that "perfect routine" that keeps us "perfectly on track." We make lists, we make lists for our lists, we make schedules and buy fancy planners, create Pinterest boards all about how organized we are going to be, and we watch others on social media to see how they "balance it all." Tired, yet? Don't get me wrong, I am a list person, I live on lists;

otherwise, I couldn't keep track of it all. I even made a daily routine that would allow me to complete all my daily tasks and finish all my big projects, too. But then I looked at this routine and realized that not only did I have to get up at 4:00 a.m. every day, but I was scheduling playing time with my kids. I knew I did not have children in order to just put them on a schedule like some task list. And yet here I was doing just that, because if I don't get everything done then I am not Super Mom.

What? How many of you feel that way at the end of the day? I have felt it; I have thought it.

We live in a culture, because I have watched it with others too, that subconsciously as women, and we as moms, feel like we must run the world. We feel like we must do it all and accomplish it all and that if we don't, we fail. We must be those super women. But what good is it to be super women, when we are exhausted all the time, when we are emotionally drained, when we are scheduling things like playing on the floor with our kids, when we're doing a 100 things at 10% instead of doing 10 things at a 100%, when we no longer enjoy the things that brought us joy in the first place, and instead they are all checks on a list.

I get it, and there is nothing wrong if it works for some to set alarms and alerts as a reminder to move the laundry (because it never ends), but if we are at a place where we are having to set alarms for every little thing so we don't miss a beat on our lists, I have to wonder if we are way too busy. Then I wonder if "BALANCE" is even attainable by the way we define it and try to accomplish it? Because the way I am doing it – it's not working. And there doesn't seem to be a perfect routine out there that suddenly makes all my plates level out. And yet, as I have watched my world become more and more unbalanced lately, I realized, or more like God spoke loud and clear, that there absolutely is a PERFECT solution to my chaos - HIM. I needed a perspective shift. I needed to STOP & take a big picture look at my scale.

Imagine with me for a moment a scale with several plates hanging on it, and each plate represents an aspect of your life. Start by putting the basic everyday things on those plates like housework, children, work, hobbies, groups you lead, dreams...and now add the details. How are you feeling? What thoughts are crossing your mind as you do this exercise? Maybe if you move this here, if you take away that, if you make another list, if you just stay organized, then it will all balance out. What about the "comparison" plate that also hangs on your scale as a mom, or as a woman? That plate right there, if you're not careful, will end up guiding how you maneuver every other plate and then your entire scale will absolutely be off balance. Comparison is the thief of joy, and soon your plates will just be check-off lists with no real passion or purpose other than being better

and more “balanced” than the other moms next to you. NOW – take a big step back from your scale.

What do you see?

For me, I quickly saw that not only were my priorities off balance, but that this imbalance was affecting my emotions, my sleep, my ability to be the mom and woman that God called me to be. I had been so caught up in the details and this definition I had of what balance should look like, that I began to lose myself, my dreams, my focus, my joy.

BUT GOD,
AS HE HAS ALWAYS DONE,
HAS STARTED TO REDEFINE (IT'S KIND OF OUR THING),
MY DEFINITION OF “BALANCE.”

Real lasting BALANCE *is found when we focus on Christ 1st, allow Him to be center of that scale and our guide in all that we do.* And we can't see the center, if we are stuck on the plates, trying to balance them ourselves. Sure, it may look balanced for a few days, maybe even a few years. But if we are not centered on Christ when the unexpected comes, when things we can't control pop up, we will soon find ourselves very off kilter and possibly even stuck, hitting the same wall over and over again. HE must be our focus. I don't just mean on our plate somewhere as another to-do-list item; I mean HE is the one that holds all the plates, the one we seek as we make our lists and our calendars, HE will help us order them.

After all, as my life verse reminds me daily...HIS ways are not ours & praise the Lord for that.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.
“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.”
Isaiah 55:8-9

Now, will lists and things to do go away? No. Will the laundry ever be totally done? I wish. Does this mean you can't go after your dreams, run a business or maybe even just be mom? Absolutely, not. God has given each one of you giftings, talents and dreams, but those must align with HIM. And when you remember to focus on HIM & make HIM the center, the tasks won't be stumbling blocks or barriers anymore; they won't control your life, and you just might find yourself enjoying doing the dishes (one can hope) or being able to finally pursue the dreams He gave you. There will be days your physical scale may look off, there will be days no house work gets done, but you will know when you have found balance because there will be a peace you can't describe and a hope that is your strength to keep going.

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 4:7

“For our light and momentary troubles are
achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”
2 Corinthians 4:17

Being superwoman, being a supermom, doesn't come from doing it all, it comes from investing in our children's lives, teaching them how to follow the Lord and making HIM the CENTER of our life scale and theirs, too. In order to do that we have to STOP, learn to say NO, and take a step back to see the bigger picture. That means taking our eyes off our to-do lists, that means stop trying to maneuver every plate and make sure we have it "balanced," and instead put time with the Lord back at the top of our priorities. Ask HIM what needs to be removed from our plates and what we should say yes and no to.

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.”
Matthew 6:33

Do I have this down? No, not at all, which is why I am writing this to all of you because I know many of you can relate, and it keeps me accountable. This is a daily readjustment. I, we, must make a conscious effort every day to check the scale. I know for myself if I don't learn how to do this then I will continue to be exhausted on all fronts. I can't do it all, and that's okay. And my life scale will not look like yours and yours shouldn't look like mine. Some of you are single moms or might as well be, because of your husband's job; some of you are just now starting on your journey of motherhood; some of you have teens, some both littles and bigs; some of you mom and work full time, some of you are dealing with loss or the reality of not being able to be a mom; some are empty nesters or grandmothers, and that doesn't even cover everyone! However, the fact is we are all women with all different stories, and each one of us can find balance. It's not through the perfect planner, routine or by comparing ourselves to someone else. The only textbook for "balancing it all" is the Word of God.

The Lord is renewing my perspective, redefining my definitions, teaching me what true balance should look like, and that it is attainable. I am learning to be a Mary first so that I can be a Martha when He calls ([Luke 10:38-41](#)).

And so, I challenge you to look at your scale. What are you focused on? Then read and apply the Word, pray, and keep your eyes fixed on Christ. Take some time daily to take your plates before the Lord. Find a friend who will give you sound wisdom, will walk beside you and pray with you. Ask Him for guidance, wisdom and peace, and to fill you with the JOY of the LORD...even in the little and the mundane and see how HIS word will change your definition of balance forever.

“...so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will **not return to me empty**,
but will **accomplish** what I desire
and **achieve the purpose** for which I sent it.
You will go out in **joy**
and be led forth in **peace**;
the mountains and hills
will **burst into song** before you,
and all the trees of the field
will **clap** their hands.
Instead of the thorn bush will **grow** the juniper,
and instead of briers the myrtle will **grow**.
This will be for the LORD's renown,
for an **everlasting** sign,

that will **endure forever.**"
Isaiah 55:11-13

My story is still a work in progress, but it is HIM working on me.

So, "How do I balance it all," you ask?

With CHRIST at the center...

and a whole lot of coffee.



FRESH THYME

Mom Plans

Young mothers don't need to work out. They lift carriers, switch car seats, carry sleeping children, and move mountains of laundry. It seems that young mothers' arms must be the strongest of them all.

Mothers of teens could write books on self-esteem. Theirs has to be high, because teens are fickle and criticize, complain, walk away, talk back, appear unappreciative and know it all. One day Mom is a best friend; and the next day Mom is their worst enemy. These moms have to be strong in character!

Empty nest moms don't need a lesson in loneliness. They know it firsthand when they walk past those empty rooms and thumb through those scrapbooks, and hear the deafening silence when the chatter is gone. Moms of grown children are tough cookies, as they find themselves, reinvent their purpose, and discover their lives all over again.

Moms caring for their elderly moms and seeing them pass don't need to be told the value of life, that life is short, and to enjoy each moment. No matter the age of the mom that passed, the daughter is left with a hole in her heart that aches to be filled. She gives thanks for each sunrise and sunset and knows the value of enjoying the moments.

And yet...moms are struggling everywhere and searching and pining for love, worthiness, purpose and peace in this world that pulls on them at every angle.

Young mothers feel stressed if they can't make the gym, if that flat stomach doesn't return, or if all they smell instead of perfume is spoiled milk and poop. They look at other moms that look put together, and they feel weak.

Mothers of teens sigh and look in the mirror at those first gray hairs appearing and feel as though they've failed because he doesn't want to text when he needs to, and she no longer asks for advice except from her peers. She feels depressed and anxious and frustrated and fearful.

Empty nest moms start filling the rooms, traveling the world, or hovering over their newly married couples, grasping for something to help them feel wanted, familiar and full. They show up for plastic surgery or decide to have an affair, because they cannot take the fact that their kids are not there.

Moms caring for moms and dads start to panic, as middle age is now fading and their own solemn years are approaching. Questions fill their minds about what it will be like when they too are dependent on their own children, as they fight to be different and so independent...

Even to those who are barren and hoping, or pining and losing, he speaks to us from his heart of hope for the living.

It's a verse that we quote to graduates and young people, but we rarely read it again in the context of our lives as women. And many don't know what the verses above it say, but it's quite interesting...

From Jeremiah 29:5-6

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

We've done that, we're doing that, or we're hoping to do all of that...and then...comes that familiar verse.

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.

I love this! It's a promise not just for the young, but I read it as a promise to parents in whatever season of life they're in, and it's for all of us – the moms!

He knows the plans for us (and they don't stop at any age) and they're plans to prosper us (not to destroy or cause us to fade away) and the plans are full of hope and a future (not destitution and shame.)

Are you a mom of littles, tweens, teens, grown kids or now parenting your own mom? Are you still hoping to have children or have lost a child?

There are plans that have been drawn up by the Master Architect that include a house full of life, joy and laughter, regardless of when or how many children are present...and these plans are still being put together for all eternity. They don't end with old age and death.

Happy Mother's Day to the strongest women I know...even if you aren't aware of it just yet. And smile at the thought of how strong you are, how your house is standing firm on the Rock, and how your Father is in charge of every nail and every board upon which you stand. And marvel at his master plan.

FRESH THYME – KNEE BUDDY – by Marcy Lytle

I have a couple of friends that check on me often and ask how my prayer request needs are going. One always checks in to see how my elderly dad is faring, another asked often about my ear that had suffered trauma from airplane pressure, and still a couple more just ask how I'm doing. I also do the same for a few people, as I think of them. There's really nothing quite like having a prayer partner, a person that will go to their knees for you, time and time again. Let's call them knee buddies, because that sounds so awesome, doesn't it?

Sure, we can always keep our requests to ourselves and pray and trust, alone. And we don't have to ask others how they're doing or keep up with their needs. After all, we have plenty of needs on our prayer list! However, there's something very beneficial in having knee buddies and in being a knee buddy for someone else!

Here's the list for why having a prayer partner is awesome:

It relieves a load from your shoulders.

It allows you to rest your arms, knowing someone else is lifting you up.

It warms your heart.

It builds your faith.

It's pleasing to God.

Here's the list why being a knee buddy for someone else is awesome:

It takes the focus off of your own needs.

It blesses a friend's day when she's asked and then told that you're praying!

It renews your friend's faith in friendship.

It moves mountains.

It's pleasing to God.

I have a sweet friend whose father is struggling. All I did was text her to ask how he was doing. She stopped by later in the day just to give me a hug. But honestly, this friend is also a prayer buddy back to me. She checked on my status multiple times after my mom passed away.

I have another friend I rarely see, but we made a deal to pray for each other's kids years ago, and I know she still does. I do for her kids, as well. She often asks how I'm doing and checks in, and I try to do the same for her. It warms my heart, for sure.

One other friend I only chat with on Facebook. I know the struggles she's had in life, and they have been a lot! However, she is always supportive and praying for others with big faith! I'm

included in her list, and it makes my day when she says or asks or offers a kind word to me through a message. What a blessing!

If you don't have a prayer partner, or if you've never been one for someone else, try it. Reach out, expecting nothing in return. But then don't be surprised when He blesses you with a knee buddy out of the blue, asking about YOU.

FRESH THYME - May Flowers – by Marcy Lytle

“April showers bring May flowers.”

I’ve heard that all of my life, but never really looked into where that saying originated from. After all, we have flowers in April where I live, and there are other places that don’t get flowers until the winter chill is gone – hopefully in June!

The original saying supposedly went like this,

“March winds and April showers bring May flowers and June bugs.” Now that’s funny!

Apparently, the origin of the saying is obscure, with some saying it came from a poem, and others that it originated in the United Kingdom.

However, I would like to contend that the origin just might have come from the Bible! Here’s a few verses that I think go with that saying and bring hope to all of us, of a field of wildflowers that make us gasp at their beauty, after a soggy damp season when nothing is present but gray skies and rain.

Acts 14:17

He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons;

he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

Isaiah 45:8

“You heavens above, rain down my righteousness; let the clouds shower it down.

Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness flourish with it;

I, the LORD, have created it.

Isaiah 55:10

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,

and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish,

so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

Joel 2:23

Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God,

for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful.

He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.

Zechariah 10:1

Ask the LORD for rain in the springtime; it is the LORD who sends the thunderstorms.

He gives showers of rain to all people, and plants of the field to everyone.

Leviticus 26:4

I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit.

I hear so often that rains and storms are evil, and when we hear that, we see them as some sort of punishment. However, because of the way God set up the earth to receive showers, storms, and even floods, and then to flourish after all of the clouds have parted, makes me think he has this amazing plan of May flowers...after every April shower.

In other words, even if we are in the season of torrential downpours of the worst kind and all that we know and have and are is washing downstream...May is coming. If we know Him and belong to Him and love Him, our Father takes all of the muddiness of our lives and sprinkles amazing color into the wet ground and sends the sun. It may not appear today or tomorrow, but it WILL shine.

He promises up there in all of those verses that the ground WILL yield crops and bear fruit; that buds will flourish and appear, that the hungry will be fed, that he is faithful, and that even when it rains He is kind.

If you don't have a pot of flowers on your porch or in your garden, go get some. Look at them daily. Water them. And wonder at the beauty of the blooms after the grayness of the rain. After all, it's the month of May.

FRESH THYME - A Steady Hand – by Marcy Lytle

We love to walk. He likes trails with a bit more challenges, and I like trails that are straight and a bit more picturesque. We walk a little of both. Sometimes, I forget to wear shoes that are appropriate for walking on uneven or pebbled paths, and my feet hurt. Even when it's chilly outside, we bundle up and go. Now that it's starting to warm up, we will still go – because it feels SO GOOD after the walk is over!

Recently, we chose a trail that we had not been on before, and we didn't really know anything about it. The path at the entrance was granite and looked flat and nice, so we figured the entire path was the same. Thankfully, my husband decided to snap a picture of the map that was at the entrance, in case we needed to use it. The trail was not a loop, as many are that we walk, but rather one with lots of forks and turns.

Pretty soon, we came to these stairs made from rocks. They were pretty and easy enough to navigate. I had brought along an umbrella, because it looked like rain, but a few times I used it to steady myself it slipped! I didn't make that mistake again!

I had images and thoughts of "what if snakes are around," because after all, it's the beginning of the spring season when they start sneaking out and slithering by. A few times, my thoughts kept me from looking up at the beautiful greenery and flowers along the path.

Not too much further, we had to cross a stream. And then another, and another. I did NOT want to continue on this path, because I didn't know what might be up ahead, and we hadn't really passed any other people! Once before, we got stuck in a "forest" just before sunset and almost didn't make it out. I remembered that panicky feeling, well. And I did not, no way, want to be in this place after dark – with creeks to cross!

My husband is super patient and always offers me his hand, which I take firmly, as I step on rocks. He steps on them before me, to make sure they're steady and not slippery. I have no choice but to follow and trust him, and so I take his hand and we cross safely. Once across, he often says, "That was fun," while I reply, "I hope that was the last one."

Can you tell I'm not that adventurous?

Near the end of our trek, we came to a place where we did not know what to do. One direction was between two tight rocks and the other way was across another large stream and the path on the other side looked like a dead end! Remember, I said he took a photo of the map? He looked at it and realized we needed to go back from where we came and exit a different way. We actually ran into another walker that also pointed us in the right direction!

It wasn't long before we were out of the trees and back on the street, walking on a sidewalk to our car.

Jon was thrilled with the adventure and so glad for the obstacles and the way he had to use the map to lead us through. I was relieved and glad that it was over, although a little part of me also realized that I enjoyed the journey a tiny bit.

However, had he not offered me his hand over and over again, I would never have had the courage to cross those streams! I did not want to fall in!

My point with all of this story telling is that his steady hand helped me through a place that I would have never entered alone. And how silly it would be of me to refuse his hand or demand that we go back, when he promised I'd make it across. What if I would have left him and tried to exit alone? I also realized how futile my pointy umbrella was at keeping me upright, and how it was nothing at all like a hand with fingers to wrap my hand tightly in a hold that brought comfort and peace.

I am always learning things in the everyday journeys of life. One thing I'm still working on is to enjoy the path and all that it brings, instead of worrying and wondering and pondering and complaining about what might be around the corner, or how swift the stream might be.

FRESH THYME - The Flawed Shoe – by Marcy Lytle

There it was. Such a cute shoe and it fit perfectly. I had already imagined what I would wear with it, as I strolled through the rest of the store before entering the checkout lane. And the best part of all was that it was on sale! I always love a good comfy shoe (it has to be cute, too) that's affordably priced. Finding those three criteria together is a winner!

I pushed my cart up to the next available cashier and as I laid the sandals up on the counter, I gasped. The back loop where the strap was supposed to feed through on one of the sandals was torn loose. In fact, it was completely missing. I had only tried on the left shoe completely, and had just slipped my foot into the right shoe. As disappointed as I was, I knew I didn't want these shoes with that flaw, so I asked the lady to put them back.

As I exited the store, I breathed a silent, "Thank you," because I was relieved that I had not purchased those shoes and gotten home to discover that terrible flaw that made them completely unwearable. The shoe wouldn't have even stayed on my foot!

That scene stuck with me for a while, at how close I was to forking out my money for this beautiful shoe that I wouldn't even be able to wear because it was damaged goods.

I don't know why, but I thought of how many times He protects me like that from danger. I am unaware many times of things around me that might be unsafe or not the best of places to be, and I know he's with me to keep me from falling on my face or being disappointed with something I think looks good but isn't. He always knows best.

As kids, we have to somehow trust that our parents know best when they tell us no over and over again, when we continually place that toy or that candy up on the counter and beg to buy it. It looks so good, we KNOW it tastes great, or we just know that we must have it in order to be happy. But thankfully, we have wise parents that know that particular candy causes a stomachache or that toy isn't safe for our age, or any number of reasons that we can't have that which we think we need.

I don't know why it's so hard to trust HIM in that manner, but it is. I remember many times I've prayed for a certain outcome, even put my request in my cart and laid it before his feet asking for it now, only to be told to wait or not to receive that request at all. And sometimes, I've left his feet or presence wondering if he cared or if he even heard me.

I believe the longer we walk with Him and listen to his voice the more we will have eyes to notice flaws and danger and missing pieces in things that we at first think are must-haves. We won't demand so much to have this particular answer, but rather leave our carts empty for him to fill with those things that are good and whole and safe.

I'm thankful I didn't buy those shoes that day. I was sorry there was not another pair to buy instead, but apparently I didn't need them. Since then, I've found other shoes that are just as cute and make me smile.

His answer of no, or his gentle hand that shifts our focus to notice that which is not good for us, and his nudge for us to leave that request on the table for now are all because he loves us and he sees that which we don't see. He knows our hearts and what we need in order to be at peace and grow and be settled, not always in chaos and frustration.

The part we don't know is that if we just sigh and say, "Thank you," as we walk on about our day, He's already at work creating something fantastic that will satisfy more than that request we left behind.

It's hard to trust. It's disappointing to want and not receive. It's maddening to realize flaws when we thought there was perfection. But it's also life to realize the fall we could have taken had we gotten what we placed on the counter.



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TIPS

The Dressing – Summer Palettes – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

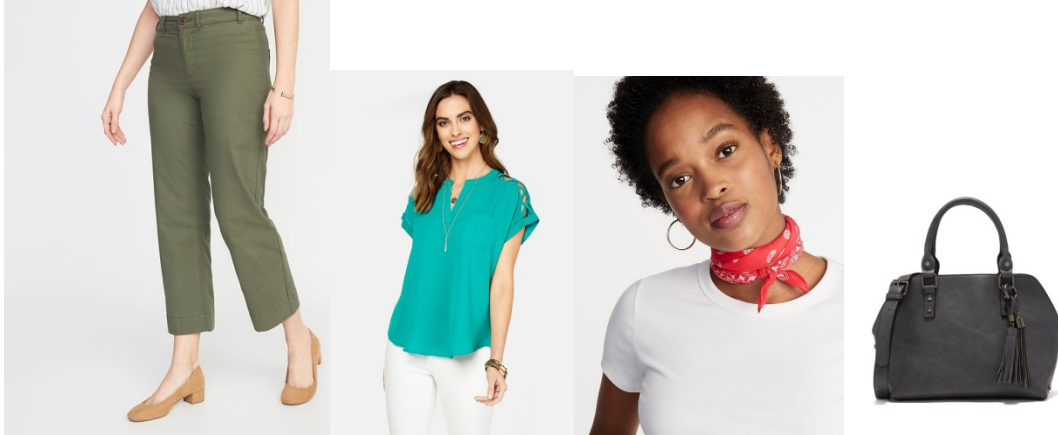


<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?vid=1&pid=381910012&searchText=chino+wide+leg+women>

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

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

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



<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?vid=1&pid=376536022&searchText=scarf>

<https://www.charmingcharlie.com/hexa-tassel-satchel/CHC101454116.html>

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/mattea-top/CHC102752131.html?dwvar_CHC102752131_color=460&cgid=&openedfrom=Search%20Results

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

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



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



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



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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Selah's Style – Leah's Looks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Butter fly dress Sam's.

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

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

Chase shirt – all Walmart

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

In the Kitchen – Thai Made Easy – by Marni Xuto

Thai Style Lamb Cutlets

Serves:1

Ingredients for marinating:

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

Ingredients for the rest:

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

METHOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tip:

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

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

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

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

Thai Fish Cake (Gluten free)

Serve:2-3

Ingredients:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tip:

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

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

Garlic and Black Pepper Lobster

Serve:1

Ingredients for seafood:

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

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

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

Tip:

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

Vegan Thai Salad

Serve:1

Ingredients:

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

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

METHOD

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

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

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

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

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

Tip:

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

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

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

Hedgehog Mango (Vegan)

Serve: 1

Ingredient:

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

Method:

– Heat the griddle pan.

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

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

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

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

Tips:

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

Marni Xuto

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Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/easy.thaifood/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/thaifoodmakeasy/>

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

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

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

Tried and True – Summertime Potpourris – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

Summertime Bliss:

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

Simmer and Smile:

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

Mint for You:

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

Lavender Herb:

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

Fruit Peels:

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

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



HOME

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

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

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

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

First the necessities:

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

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

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

Now the funsies:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Family Practice - The Race - By: Brandi Oman

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

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

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

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

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

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

James 1:12, NIV:

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

A Night to Remember – Summer Season – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Family prayer:

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

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

Tiny Living – No Plans – by Leyanne Enterline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 37:7 says,

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

Matthew 6:34 reminds us,

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

Remember...Love Grows Best in Tiny Spaces



YOU

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

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

“Why did my dad treat me that way?”

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

“Who does that? I can’t even...”

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

“Why can’t I live in peace?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Under the Influence - Nothing to Prove – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Healthy Habits – Almost Out – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

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

Note to self: Take breaks during the day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Life Right Now – Dream Big – by Bethany Gomez

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then I heard a still, small voice say,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Created for Life - FALLING FEAR – by Ginny Hurley

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Carry On – by Bekah Holland

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sweet relief!

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

Date Night Fun – Freebies! – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



ENCOURAGEMENT

Bless This Mess – All that Chaos – by Ashley Zanella

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Firmly Planted – The Call of Prayer – by Dina Cavazos

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer is keeping company with God. (Philip Yancey)

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

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

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

Simple Truths - In the Silence – Erica Simmons

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part 2 next month...

Moving Forward – Temporary Pain – by Pam Charros

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

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

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

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

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

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

producing more life and more beauty.

Real Stories – Pretty Neat – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

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

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

Are you lonely? How do you deal with that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Is God Arbitrary?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Job 42:2

Then Job replied to the Lord,

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

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

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

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

FRESH THYME – Just Like Chocolate – by Marcy Lytle

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

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

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

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

Isn't that interesting?

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

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

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

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

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

Imagine that.

FRESH THYME – What We're Missing

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

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

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

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



FEATURE STORY

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

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

There were some unique features of this dining experience:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's have a feast and celebrate.

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

he was lost and is found.”

(Luke 15:20b, 22-24)

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



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July 2019



TIPS

The Dressing – By Style – Marcy Lytle

I love to observe women and what they wear. Every lady has her own style of dressing, and when it comes right down to it, there aren't that many variations. However, the variations out there are very distinct. And so many stores cater to all of the different looks we as women want and wear. Some stores have a feminine and lace look, like Altar'd State. Department stores are overwhelming to me, because of the different brands and lines of clothing all spread out, but I know there are women who only shop at department stores and nowhere else. Regardless of where we shop, we tend to find a particular style we call our own...

This month, we've provided one look for each of seven styles. And we're of course opting for something cool. I like to switch around my look from time to time, but mostly I fall into the classic with a bit of trend on top. How about you? I chose all of these looks from Charming Charlie this time.

Ladylike and lace – Check out this white lace top in peplum style! I love the simple jewelry she's wearing with it. This is so pretty and dresses up a denim skirt or jeans so well, for date night out!

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/jonsie-lace-peplum-top/CHC102892791.html?dwvar_CHC102892791_color=100&cgid=featured-shops-shop-by-style-classic&openedfrom=Category

Country flair – Plaid is the quintessential pattern for that country feel, and this shirt can be worn now...and on into September and October. This top ties at the waist and gives all the feels of the colors of a country drive...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/cassey-vibrant-plaid-top/CHC102888282.html?dwvar_CHC102888282_color=960&cgid=&openedfrom=Search%20Results

Classic and cool – Nothing speaks classic like a simple stripe in a cool color. This top can be worn to work and then out at night, just by switching up what you wear with it! It looks comfortable, pretty, and not too much of any one thing...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/jerica-striped-top/CHC102830822.html?dwvar_CHC102830822_color=702&cgid=featured-shops-shop-by-style-classic&openedfrom=Category

Trendy and cute – Light and sheer kimonos are everywhere this summer. And it's not too late to score one for your summer swims and trips to the beach. Don't you love this red color!? I think you could wear this on into the fall...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/kaili-kimono/CHC102970657.html?dwvar_CHC102970657_color=600&cgid=featured-shops-trending-now&openedfrom=Category

Colorful and bold – Have you thought about just adding a bright color in your handbag this summer? I love this yellow/gold color, and it seriously goes with so many outfits!

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/7th-ave-mini-top-handle/CHC102866577.html?dwvar_CHC102866577_color=700&cgid=&openedfrom=Search%20Results

Simple and comfy – Do you own a pair of palazzo pants? They're as comfy and cute as they come! And I've seen them on the racks in lots of stores. This blue stripe pair is calling your name...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/perfect-palazzo-pants/CHC102871974.html?dwvar_CHC102871974_color=450&cgid=clothing-bottoms&openedfrom=Category

Boho chic – This is in the Boho category but is very mildly so. I love the stripe and the flow of the dress. That's the Boho way – loose, carefree, and beautiful!

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/anita-stripe-midi-dress/CHC102969373.html?dwvar_CHC102969373_color=200&cgid=featured-shops-shop-by-style-boho&openedfrom=Category

Don't let others dictate your own style. And don't feel like you're stuck into only one look. Venture out. Try a style or two that you are drawn too, and then shop the looks! Happy July!

Seven for You – A Little Luxury – by Marcy Lytle

This is our column for the panel question that I pose to a group of ladies every month. We just started it last month, and I'm loving the answers and the variety of input from each one! This month's question was, "What luxury can you not do without?" I wanted to know what pampering devices or experiences or items women really love to have, things they will scrape and save just to keep having them in their lives. Maybe you might need a little luxury in your life, so here are some great ideas!

The Head

- The one thing that to me is not just pampering but essential is LIP GLOSS! I take it everywhere! I'd be lost without it. AND, I definitely like it to sparkle! Anastasia Metallic Rose is my favorite! <https://www.sephora.com/product/lip-gloss-P404830>
- I get my hair done every four weeks. This is a bigger ticket item but I love my hairdresser and meeting all her cohorts. We have regular conversations that tend to lead to Jesus, and some peeps aren't believers. It's a really cool time to see how the Lord works those conversations!
- I have had beady eyes all my life. I wore mascara which worked often but I wasn't blessed with many eyelashes and I always had black circles under my eyes. Over the last five years I have experimented with clumps of 3-4 lashes, strips of lashes. I never wore them out in public because I was afraid of looking silly. A year or so ago, I discovered Amazing Lash Studio. I decided to splurge and try this new business. Oh my goodness! I looked in the mirror and saw beautiful lashes that made my eyes look "normal." Individual lashes are applied on top of my real lashes. As my own lash grows out so does the added lash. My eyelashes have filled out some but I continue to have the extended lashes applied. If I have lashes and lipstick on, I'm ready for anything! <https://www.amazinglashstudio.com/>
- I love using salon quality shampoo and pure natural soap instead of the stuff from the grocery store.
- My luxury is ... I've always paid a little bit more to get my haircut. There is something relaxing about going to a pricier hair salon and knowing they are going to take care of me 100% ... there are no worries, as I'm paying extra for them to take care of my hair. I can go without makeup, dress down, not have money to do something, but I always look forward to visiting my hairdresser every few months. It's relaxing!
- My little luxury that I would never want to be without is hairspray, which I need every morning!
- This is not expensive, but the luxury I *can't* live without is mascara. This is mainly because my eyelashes are blonde and not visible. I need it to define my eyes.
- My luxury is Mary Kay makeup and skin care. Although it is not the most expensive, it is also not the cheapest. I have tried other brands and this is the best for me.

The Hands

- I would pick my nails being done every two weeks as my luxury. Can I live without this luxury? Yes. Do I want to? No. I like how they look and enjoy seeing the end result. I feel happy when my nails are pretty. My clients also enjoy seeing what color and design I choose.

- My enjoyment currently is getting my nails done every two weeks. I did give it up when we had some budget issues but my husband was totally on board with me getting back to it!
- I'm at the nail salon right now! A professional mani/pedi is so special but it takes some maneuvering to work it into the budget. I also love to get a sugar wax but it's such a small niche that I've only found a tech that does it when I'm in Texas. I've only gotten two sugar waxes but they are AWESOME! https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sugaring-hair-removal-treatment-pain-what-is-it_n_7697128
- I love getting my nails and face done. I so enjoy beautiful nails! But they are both a luxury I indulge myself with...

The Body

- Scented shower gel from Bath & Body Works – about \$12.50 but often goes on sale. It lathers up better and lasts longer, so it's totally worth it!
- I think that my monthly massage is quite a luxury but in reality it is very necessary for me to continue to work.
- I love my bidet! It is so helpful for extremely sensitive skin problems! Our grandchildren were having this problem until their dad installed the bidet, which made a believer out of me, since I have had skin issues my whole life. Now, when we travel away from home, it's really missed!

The Feet

- Pedicures make me feel so good and pampered. I don't get them often, but I love them!
- If I could do anything, it would be a monthly pedicure (and manicure.) I feel pampered and special when I leave the salon. I get to have one with my youngest sister and Mom in a week.
- Getting a pedicure is definitely one thing that is so hard for me to give up! I wear open toed shoes A LOT and I've found that I get very self-conscious when my toes aren't painted. I'm not sure if I'm the only one, but when I look at the feet of a male all I can think of is how unappealing they are. So when my toes aren't painted it makes me feel dirty and rough, sometimes even like I'm less of a woman because my toes don't look "pretty."

The Mind

- I love books and get new ones all the time. I have a stack that I am going through and will never end as I always keep adding to it.
- Lunches out with special friends and taking vacations with our kids are a true luxury and a blessing. There were times in our life and marriage when these things would've been out of the question. We watched every penny and seldom deviated from the budget. Having been in that position definitely makes these things feel luxurious.
- I belong to The Book of the Month Club. I get a brand new book monthly, a hardbound one, with a bookmark! I look forward to each book and finding quiet time alone, to read

each chapter. It's \$14.99 a month, and a delight!
https://www.bookofthemonth.com/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI9ZbrqdTQ4gIVArbACh2h2gE2EAAYASAAEgI3MfD_BwE

The Stuff

- I appreciate driving a car that I really LOVE instead of one that just gets me from point A to point B.
- My luxury is my Mini Cooper car. I could struggle along with an old beater to try and save \$\$ but I lease the Mini and I never have to worry about maintenance. It's heavily built, made by BMW, and in the Minnesota snow it moves like a little tank. I'm happy. And that's my luxury.
- I am thankful for a new car, as opposed to a used one. We spent years and years fixing up old clunkers (for which I'm thankful we had!) but now opt for a new car every few years. My husband is tired of working on cars!

The Food

- It's a luxury having a few squares of rich dark chocolate every evening.
- I never want to be without frozen yogurt! I need it every night, and it's a luxury for sure!
- I would be hard pressed to give up my Starbucks Frappuccino.
- I look forward to my cup of coffee every morning. I use a Keurig coffee maker and like to have a variety of flavored coffee pods available. And, I use Silk Almond Milk Vanilla flavored creamer in my coffee. It is more expensive but I really like the flavor and creaminess. That's my daily luxury.
- I enjoy using Instacart once in a while, without guilt. On a particularly busy day or when I'm just too tired to go to the store and fight the crowds, I order online. It's not much extra to do so, and I'm delighted when they show up in a couple of hours with my groceries at my door! <https://www.instacart.com/store>

I don't know about you, but I thoroughly enjoyed reading about each woman's desires for pampering. There is no use in judging another friend for what she spends her money on, or her time. Each of us is an individual with individual tastes and needs. I could care less about having a manicure (maybe it's because I had a traumatic one!) but I totally agree with some of the others. We're all different. And some of these things above...I now want to try!

Selah's Style – Summer Play

It's the middle of the summer and all kids want to do is play outside or swim in the pool. And for most of our kiddos, it's quite hot outside, and we parents don't want to spend dollars on expensive clothing that will just get dirty with all the wear and tear. However, lots of kids have definite ideas when it comes to dressing themselves for a summer play day, and these three are no exception.

Augie, Ayla and Gideon siblings and each one likes to pick out their outfits for the day, for vacation play. They even pack their own suitcases before traveling! Let's peek in to see what they wore on their recent vacay away...

This bright summery, full-of-flowers, top is from H&M, as well as the yellow shorts. Ayla loves to shop, and she picked out this outfit recently on a shopping excursion with the girls. The material is soft, it moves, and for dinner this night, she ditched the hat and added a flower necklace!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0749103001.html

All three kids dressed up for a tour on vacation today, and Gideon and Ayla bought a souvenir cap from Blue Bell Creameries. He's sporting the vintage vibes, and she opted for pretty sky blue. Little brother Augie chose a stuffed cow. But look at those shoes he's wearing! They're from Old Navy, and they're waterproof!

Here, the two brothers are ready for lawn games! Gideon didn't think he liked flip-flops until he found these comfortable ones from Old Navy. And Augie has on his green water shoes, even though there are no water sports involved on this family game day.

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/search.do?searchText=boys%20flip%20flops&autosuggest=true>

One of Augie's signature styles is a button up shirt. This one is a bit big and a bit wrinkly, but his aunt rolled up the sleeves, and Augie quite enjoys the comfort of roominess. He was on a bumpy hayride so held onto his aunt's purse for stability!

Ayla also chose this top at H&M while shopping, because of the cute bunny. It's navy and white, and pairs nicely with her pink shorts! She's checking out her neck fan that her Ella gave her for keeping cool on those hot days.

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0696944006.html

Gideon is ready for July 4th with his Red, White & Blue t-shirt worn with comfy red athletic shorts. He's really great at coordinating his outfits for each day. And the game he's playing is so fun. A card is placed in a headband, and the person has to ask questions to try and guess what picture is on his head! (from Dollar Tree)

Check out Augie's shorts! He wanted jean shorts and found this cute denim pair at Old Navy. They have a drawstring waist and cargo pockets, and he loves them! They're great for playing lawn darts. Has your family tried that game?

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=393136032&pcid=999&grid=undefined_1_undefined
[_NaN](#)

Kids need comfort while they endure the dog days of summer, and moms/dads need funds for vacations and outings. H&M and Old Navy have great prices for the littles, and Target's Cat & Jack line is super affordable, as well! It's fun to take the kids shopping to see what they pick out, what they put together, and how they style it all, once they're home and packing for a weekend away...with the family.

In the Kitchen - Summer Skillets – by Marcy Lytle

I recently purchased a cast iron skillet cookbook. I use my skillet some, but not enough, and wanted some more ideas. Several of the recipes in this book looked simple enough, and super tasty. And why not serve up some of these this summer for your family and friends?

Giant Cookie

- 1 c softened butter
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 t vanilla
- 1 t baking soda
- 2 t hot water
- ½ t salt
- 2 ½ c flour
- 2 cups dark chocolate chips
- Nuts (optional – I used pecans)

Preheat oven to 350 and heat the skillet in the oven while making the batter. In a large bowl cream the sugars and the butter. Add eggs, one at a time, combining each time before proceeding. Stir in vanilla.

Dissolve the baking soda in the hot water and add to batter, along with salt. Stir in the flour, chips and nuts.

Remove skillet from oven (it will be hot!) and put batter in, spreading with spatula. Place in the oven and bake about 25 minutes (test to see if done in the center) til golden brown. Serve with ice cream, if you desire!

Quinoa Casserole

- 1 cup dry quinoa
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 ½ T olive oil
- 1 ear of cooked corn kernels
- ½ red bell pepper diced
- ½ cup onion, chopped
- 1 jalapeno seeded and sliced
- ½ t salt
- 1 cup grated cheddar cheese

In a small saucepan cook the quinoa in the broth, let it sit covered, to fully absorb the liquid.

Meanwhile, remove the corn from the cob and cook in the cast iron. While that's cooking, dice the other veggies. Add them to the corn and cook til onion is soft and peppers start to brown.

Stir in the quinoa, season with salt and combine all. Keep skillet hot to lightly brown the quinoa, about another 10 minutes.

Stir in the cheese, remove from heat and serve.

Lemon Cake

- ¾ c sugar
- Zest of two lemons
- 6 T butter cut into pieces
- 2 eggs
- 1 c flour
- 1 t baking powder
- ½ c milk

Preheat oven to 350.

In a large bowl, combine sugar and lemon zest, working them together. Add the butter, and cream til light. Add the eggs one at a time, combining thoroughly after each.

Mix the baking powder with the flour. Alternately add the dry mix and the milk to the butter-sugar mix, til thoroughly combined.

Grease the skillet with butter, and then add the batter.

Bake 30-35 minutes (insert toothpick in the middle to see if clean). Cool and cut into wedges.

This is great with a little lemon/sugar juice or fresh fruit! Even pecans sautéed in butter and brown sugar would be great on top!

Spareribs Made Easy

- 2 lb pork spareribs
- Salt and pepper
- Juice from ½ lemon
- 1-2 cups BBQ sauce (I used Stubb's)

Preheat oven to 350. Wash and pat dry the ribs, cut (if necessary) into sections to fit into the skillet. Season both sides with salt and pepper. Place the ribs in the skillet and sprinkle with the lemon juice, then put the skillet in the oven.

Bake about 90 minutes, turning halfway. For the second half of the cooking time, brush with BBQ sauce. Turn again last 15 minutes and brush again.

Tried and True – Grand Status – by Marcy Lytle

A few years ago, I wrote “On Being Ella” where I shared my discoveries about what a new grandmother needed in her plethora of goodies, if she was going to survive this new part of her life with littles around her once again. I’ve decided this subject needs a little more attention, once again. You may still be a young mom, but all of us women eventually are headed to the grand status of being a mother to our children’s children. It’s beautiful elevation, that’s for sure, but not one to be taken lightly! There are some heavy duty requirements to retain such a status!

Stamina – I suppose this is one of the biggies we all need, as moms. Little kids have energy, and our own energy is quite a bit less than it was when we were 20 or 30! Getting up and down from playing on the floor, pushing and climbing with them on playgrounds, and getting up again at night (when they sleep over) is tiring!

We keep up our stamina by trying to stay fit through taking long walks often, and by eating and sleeping as best we can.

Messy containments – Here’s what I mean by this. Little kids make messes. But we have our houses back in order now, since the kids are grown, and we really don’t want sticky hands and markers and crayon on our walls again. We have found that having a box or a little desk or an area just for crafting, coloring or painting helps contain the messes. The kids are only allowed to color or use glue in one spot, and all of the items go back in the box when we’re through.

We have time to make these little play stations, because these kids don’t live with us, they just visit us... (Plastic desks and organizers are awesome from Michaels!)

Hotel time – You’re going to be TIRED when the littles leave your house after an extended stay. In fact, you’ll be tired when they stay for a few hours! It helps sometimes to have a hotel stay right after the kids stay with you, so that you can relax and rejuvenate. For example, after a weekend at your house with your children’s children you’ll find yourself ready to leave your own premises to a place where you’re pampered and a pool is nearby. Go on, put away a little extra funds for hotel time for down time, after the chaos time.

We love taking a staycation in a hotel not far away, just to swim and rest and do nothing.

Extra monies – While we’re talking about funds, if possible, make a category in your finances for these little kiddos. Some will want to go shopping – often. Others will want you to stop for fast food or take them to indoor trampoline houses or fun parks. And they all will want to buy a toy at one time or another, something new to play with at your house. You’re going to want new things too, because your own toys and books and activities will need replenishing! Five Below is great for a stop-by to let them get “one thing.” Watch for coupons and sales, and give these little monsters a dollar limit when you’re out – teach them early the importance (but the pleasure, too) of wise spending.

When we’re out and see deals, we purchase them and keep them in a closet for that next visit.

Thick skin – Go on. If you haven't developed thick skin by now, you will suddenly have to as your grand status is often tested by these little ones. There will be days when they think you're all there is, and they'll want to sit and cuddle forever. But other days, cousins or aunts and uncles will be on the scene, and you'll be the last one they want to talk with. It happens. As they grow, they want to spend time doing other things rather than what you've planned for them to do. You did it to your parents and your grandparents. Let them grow. Don't wear your feelings on your sleeves. And don't pout and demand that they do what you want them to do. Smile, love them, and praise them. That's your new role, now.

We try our best not to coerce our kids to pay attention to us. We didn't like it as kids, and we don't want to place that pressure on them.

Lists – You're going to need ideas and lists of places to go and things to do with these little folks when they're in your care. You may want to sit on the sofa and just enjoy watching them play. That works when they're babies. But when multiple kids arrive at your house of all ages, they're going to want to go and do. So ask your friends for freebie ideas for activities, the best parks, the cheapest eats. Peruse the internet for deals in your area. Tire these kids out. You'll be glad you did come evening time, when they will be ready for bed and out like a light...quickly.

We keep brochures and lists of kids movies, we watch Facebook to see where parents take their kids, and we write down ideas of splash pads and parks, etc.

Prayer – Your children are in the throes of parenting, and you remember what that was like. You barely had time to say a prayer before bedtime, because laundry and messes awaited you, and work and spouse time, and all of that! So now you're in the grand status of no littles living with you, and you have the time to pray. Kneel down, call those kids by name, make a journal, send your kids encouraging (not instructive or critical) verses, and cover them all in faith and prayer and blessings. It's the grandest privilege of all!

We say a quick prayer before the light goes out at night and cast those burdens of our kids and grandkids onto Him...because he can handle it all and move mountains.



HOME

Practical Parenting – Shopping Sanity – by Marcy Lytle

Once kids are old enough to talk, they're old enough to say, "I want a toy!" She doesn't have to be a teenager to realize that there's a rack of clothes calling her name, and he will tell you he needs tennis shoes in every color at a very early age! They start pointing and wiggling to grab, they start asking and demanding to buy, and it can be a nightmare trying to teach and train and temper these kiddos that want everything in sight!

Here are a few ideas for moms, dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles...all of us that have shallow pockets and little hands nearby trying to empty them:

When we keep the three littles, we sometimes take them to the Dollar Tree and give them each \$5. They can carry their own basket, and pick out five items each. This gives them buying power (the basket), and if we hand them five one dollar bills, they feel rich! (We secretly pay the tax at the register).

When shopping with littles in tow, have a conversation before entering the store about whether this is a shopping excursion for just groceries, or if they are allowed a toy. Give them the guidelines and stick to it. Maybe they can buy one thing from the Dollar Section at Target. Perhaps they can choose a Slurpee OR a toy, but not both. Or if the answer is no altogether, perhaps let them bring a color book and a crayon to stay occupied while they look. They really can't help it that they don't have the patience of Job while we browse the aisles for an hour.

If it's an actual shopping excursion for clothes, talk before you go and figure out what exactly you're looking for. Don't go open-ended! She will have 30 outfits in the dressing room and want every single one! Maybe she needs a couple pairs of shorts, a pair of sandals, and then one surprise treat like a necklace. Make a list and hand it to her, and check it off when items are found. Stick to your guns...

Teach them early to shop clearance and sales items. In other words, don't let them loose to roam every rack and shelf in the store. Make it a fun treasure hunt to look for sale signs, and how to find their size, etc. If an item they really like is too much money, talk about waiting and watching for it to go on sale next time!

Start the kiddos a shopping piggy bank. It's nice to have one for giving and saving, as well! But a shopping one is fun to have for store trips. Maybe clean your purse and offer them change once in a while, or even a dollar or two if you have extra. Then once a month, let them empty it to see how much they have for that new toy they've been eyeing or seen on TV! They'll be delighted and learn the power of putting away for a later splurge...

That's five tips. Think of more. But whatever you do, don't get caught in the store with greedy children, piles of toys, and screams of "I want this!" Talk often about store etiquette, shopping savvy, and the power of a dollar – earned, given, and spent – and the pleasure of it all as they grow wise and tall!

I Don't Do Teens – Call Me! – by Marcy Lytle

I remember the first time my son went out on a date, or slept over at a friend's house, or rode his bicycle down the street, alone. It was petrifying. In fact, one night he stayed with a friend in a house behind us, in the culdesac. During the night, our son was afraid and decided to just get up and walk home, in the middle of the darkness (he was in elementary school.) Scared me to death! One of the scariest things of all is watching our son or our daughter drive away in the car without us! When we are not by their side to protect, rescue, and instruct, we worry about their choices and the others they encounter...

I don't think there are specific ages when we allow our kids to emerge out of our house without us into a friend's car, over to their house, or to that party...without us near. It all depends on our individual kids. But there are some ways to help ensure safety and peace of mind...both what we parents need on their first trips alone:

To ensure safety:

Give them an iphone. Get one that has parental parameters, but let them have one and encourage them to use it for any situation in which they find themselves afraid or unsure.

Give them an inch. Start small. If he spends the night with a friend and is responsible and obeys all the rules given, then he gets another inch. But if he's not, the inch is taken away. It's a simple game of measurement...

Give them covering. Teach them and pray with them about what is right and what is wrong, even when you're not present to see what they're doing. Teach them to also pray, to have a relationship with God, one that hears that still small voice and obeys it, when tempted.

Give them trust. As you see this wise little adult start to peek its face from behind the eyes of your teens, speak your trust to them. Offer encouragement and accolades when they obey, and speak your trust into their ears and hearts.

To have peace of mind:

Communicate with the parents. If teens are going to another house, make sure parents know they're coming, what they're doing, and will be present at all time.

Communicate with God. Ask God for wisdom and guidance as to when to say yes and when to say no, to that request to go away all alone, without our eyes behind them.

Communicate with friends. If you're afraid of letting go, or your teen has broken trust, or you're unsure of when to say yes, talk to other parents for advice and counsel. Ask them to pray with you.

Communicate with your spouse. Don't parent alone, if you have a supportive spouse. Talk with him/her and agree together on what is best for your teens. It's not a peaceful home if you let them go, and he says they should have stayed.

Kids are going to grow up, hop on their bikes and ride off to the corner store...or get behind the wheel and drive to the other end of town. We're going to want a call when they arrive their safely, and that call is important. It's important for the teen to obey and honor by making the call, and it's important for the parent to receive that call so that relief can be had. That's the beginning of it all...that call.

Teens grow up fast. And it's our job and privilege to help them leave our homes, eventually without us beside them to grab the wheel if they start to veer. It's one of the scariest jobs of parenthood...letting go. So don't go it alone, and don't be unwise by sending them alone before they're ready. Pray, pray, pray. Then get ready for smiling when they return home at night or to visit when they're grown and gone.

Tiny Living – Observations – by Leyanne Enterline

This photo of a damselfly (part of the dragonfly family) reminds me of what I write about most, trying to enjoy the little things.

This tiny creature has so much depth to it that I never knew! And if I hadn't slowed down to consider it, I'd never have known its beauty. Here are a few random facts that I learned about dragonflies:

Their life span is super short as an adult. They only live from 2 weeks to 2 months. They have four independent alternating wings that allow them to fly at speeds of up to 60 mph. They can also fly backwards, stop on a dime and head 20 feet straight up!

Such incredible, tiny creatures!

Another awesome fact is that they eat mosquitos, so I'm definitely going to look into seeing how I can order some dragonflies to live on our property! Not sure if one can do that, but we've raised some butterflies before. So, why not try?

These facts just make me think, *Wow!* If God cares so much about the intricate design of a dragonfly how much more does he care about us? It reminds me of the verse in Luke 12:24.

“Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap,
they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them.
And how much more valuable you are than birds!”

Sometimes, I feel like those birds with no storeroom. There's not much room in our tiny space and I get overwhelmed and frustrated at not having more “things” or room for all the “things” I do have. However, I need to be reminded that these are just things and I don't really need them.

God has provided us with exactly what we need and there is no need to store up any more than what he has provided us with. *Wow, again.* I'm preaching to myself! This is so hard to do, because we are definitely not living how the world expects us to live, and sometimes I get caught up in wanting all the things of this world. But we are not called to conform to the pattern of this world. (Romans 12:2)

So...I will continue to try and slow down and enjoy the little things, like admiring the dragonflies. And I'll try my best not to worry and consider the raven, and know that I don't need to store up more than is needed.

A Night to Remember – Arrghh! – by Marcy Lytle

We recently went on a trip with our kiddos and tried out something we had heard a friend of ours share that he did with his family. He mentioned three R's – Rehearse, Recall, and Remember – so that's what we did. And we added a pirate spin on it, as we did all three around the table each night of our trip away. It's not hard to get in family devo time, when the family is already together eating. So here's how it went down!

Preparation: We used a blob of silly putty for our pirate's eye, but it might be a better idea to have the kids make an eye instead! As we ate our dinner, we passed the putty for the next person to place it over their eye as they called out a pirate, "Arrghh," before sharing their part of the R's.

Recall his faithfulness:

Explain what "faithfulness" means to the kiddos. You can talk about being loyal, constant and steadfast. Talk about faithful friends, and how even the best of friends can hurt our feelings sometimes, by ignoring us or talking about us behind our backs. However, God is always faithful to hear our prayers and answer them, to be with us in every situation, and to turn bad things into good things for our lives.

With this first exercise, let each one take a turn recalling an event in their lives where God was faithful in providing, comforting, or helping. As they place the pirate's eye, they start with a loud, "Arrghh!" Then the littlest might say something like God helped him find his missing dinosaur, and the oldest in the family might tell the rest about how God provided a job when he needed it the most!

Remember his character:

Explain what "character" is. It's a person's nature, the way they are, their true selves. For example, in superhero movies it's their character to swoop in and save the day, because that's who they are. They rescue and they save.

With this second exercise, the patch goes on again with a loud, "Arrghh!" as each one shares what they know to be the character of God. You can let an adult start by saying "God is good, all the time," and so on. Perhaps one of the kids might say, "God is power and love!" Each one will encourage the other to say out loud what they know to be true about their heavenly Father. And if they can't think of something, the rest of the family can help with hints.

Rehearse his promises:

Explain what promises are. They are declarations that we will do a particular thing, but even the best of humans often cannot keep promises. Maybe we promise to tell the truth always, but then we fail. Or what about when we promise to obey next time, but we mess up again? And sometimes we run out of time or money to keep promises, too! Promises are meant to be kept, but even our best attempts are futile sometimes.

With this third exercise, place the patch and declare another “Argghh!” and say out loud what you know to be a promise from God! He will never leave us, his love lasts forever, and he will never destroy the earth by water again, and so much more!

If you need some reminders, you could even have prompts on 3X5 cards in the center of the table to help out kids when they’re stuck. They can draw a card and read it, if they can’t think of a particular R to share.

We had some good laughs at the putty eye and the pirate “Argghh” and we also had some good encouragement from all, as we recalled, remembered and rehearsed what we know about God. We are told to tell our children and our children’s children about God and what he’s done for us. What better way to do that, than to gather together and eat – where the full table is one of his blessings as well!

The Family Practice - Slug Life - by Brandi Oman

Caiden is a boy and I am not. He loves creatures such as spiders, lizards, and yes slugs. I am very opposite and believe good bugs are dead bugs.

When I was little, it brought me pleasure to watch a slug turn into slime after pouring salt on it. Caiden will rescue those slimy little things, name them, and decide that the household will love him like family. So what do boys, slugs, and compassion have in common?

When I found out I was having a boy many years ago I remember feeling excited. I knew I was going to love him until my last breath here on earth and beyond. I didn't know God was going to use him to show me so many of my faults, need for growth, my strengths, and ability to be taught.

Society has taught us boys need to be tough as mud, rough as a bull, mean as machine, and strong as a buffalo. When I see my son, I see some of those traits but (even better) I see a heart of compassion, fight, love, sincerity, and true genuineness.

I still don't like bugs, but Caiden taught me that even though the creature may appear disgusting, it is an innocent and sometimes a weaker being. He loves everything regardless of appearance or ability to disrupt our current comforts.

Rain and storms usually bring out slugs, generally speaking. That can happen a lot in our own lives when we are going through a trying time. All of the uncomfortable situations appear and are brought to light. I believe God uses our children's generous hearts to show us that there is more to the "slug" in our life. It may not appear to be pretty; it may be a little icky, but at times with compassion we can find a way to take care of the issues until they pass.

Exodus 33:19 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁹And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Robbed No More – by Marcy Lytle

We started something new when we presented our new look for THYME – it's a poll on the COVER page. Last month our first question was "What are you lacking most?" and of the choices, peace and joy were picked. In our next question we asked what robs you of your peace most often, and the answers were kids and the future. I'd have to say I would probably answer the same!

As I looked at this beautiful photo of a lady wrapped up in a warm coat, standing outside a beautiful red phone booth while visiting a foreign country, I thought of just what I wanted to write about in response to the answers given in our poll.

Look at the photo with me. And let's imagine and speculate for a moment...

It must be cold and uncomfortable there, because she's wearing something warm to cover up against the cool breezes. That's what we do as women, when life gets crazy, we feel out of control against life's strong winds, and we need something to calm us and bring us comfort. We cover up and wear heavy coats, so to speak, that often are cumbersome and heavy – even though they do the job of comforting until the winds subside.

She's arrived at a phone booth, and is opening the door to step inside out of the wind, to make a call. (Okay, I know these type phones probably don't work anymore, but let's say they still do.) She's a wise woman indeed to find a place to step away from the weather, and she's even wiser indeed to make a call for help.

Look at her smile. She knows she's found a place of refuge and that all is going to be well, because she's about to call someone that will come get her and rescue her from the cold. She's excited that this phone booth, this beautiful phone booth, is in her path and the door is open!

When I saw this photo, I thought of the lyrics to a hymn that says, "Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." And I realized that this one little act that I so often do not do is the very thief of my peace and robs me of my joy.

When I am concerned about my kids (grown, though they are) or worried about the future of growing old and what "might be," I look up and see this looming red attraction of a phone booth waiting to be used. His door is ALWAYS open and he's always there for me to call, to pour out my heart, and to cast all my care over on Him. I can only do that if I step inside, remove the coat, place the coin (my faith) in the slot, and call on His name.

There's power involved in making a call on a phone, power to reach a person miles and miles away and hear his voice as if he were standing right next to you. I'll never understand that power, but it's real.

We don't have to wander around in the cold brisk wind, wearing a heavy coat, with a frown on our face.

We are reminded by this photo that he's painted his communication booth in a bold bright color that's calling us, inviting us, and luring us in to drop the coin, communicate the need, and hang up – knowing that He's heard and is answering for our "GOOD."

It's that "good" that we all struggle with after we've made the phone call, worried that He won't make good on his promises we believe to be ours. But just look at creation and how he set in order the sunrise and the sunset – his faithfulness in the sky – every day and evening. It may be dark at the moment, but the sun is sure to rise. He's sure to care for what concerns us and bring us out of the booth into the light of day, when the sun is high and we can skip in the light, coat-free.

Under the Influence – Big and Tiny – by Marcy Lytle

This photo is among the photographer's "Floating Leaf" series of shots. He named this particular picture "Big and Tiny" and it's fitting, isn't it? There's this giant leaf and then a really tiny one nearby. In fact, the tiny one is almost unseen because of the largeness of the other leaf. However, they're both in the same water, floating in the same direction, wherever the river flows.

As women, I think one of the things that never leaves us is how we see ourselves in the light of those around us. And our size, big or tiny, seems to matter SO MUCH. It matters as soon as we reach the pre-teen phase, and it stays with us until we get weak and weary and are unable to care anymore. It's even enhanced more so with all of the social media that abounds.

However, when I look at this photo it exudes peace. It's not because the big leaf is so pretty and large, or because the tiny leaf is so obscure and small. It's what's beneath them both. That serene water on which they float, without sinking or drowning. The water that moves them, side by side, in the same direction.

They've both fallen off of a tree where they were once attached and vibrant, but now they're at the end of their life, where they are loose and carried away. All the competition and striving to be the prettiest, most colorful and vibrant, and healthiest and alive leaf on the tree are gone. They're floating on equal ground (or water).

I think sometimes about how much time in our lives, as women, is wasted in looking at our size. Oh, we look at more than that for sure – like our skin and our clothes and our eyes, etc. – but our size seems to matter so much. I'm pretty sure that 100% of this frustration with our size comes from the television, movie and fashion industry. Models are thin, actresses are fit and trim, and there's this insatiable hunger and thirst for the perfect body so that we will be admired by all who see us.

But here these two leaves of different sizes have now found themselves floating beside each other, thinking perhaps that this is the end. And in the leaf world, big is good. The bigger the leaf the more we want it for decorating and pressing and watching as it blows. The little tiny leaves get swept away and deposited in the trash. Yet, in the women world, tiny (skinny) is of value, and big (overweight) is swept away.

I wish that Tiny and Big could co-exist in respect and admiration, don't you? I love it when big women get parts in films, but it shouldn't be that we stop and note, "Oh, she's a big woman, how cool." It should be the norm. And I wish that skinny women that diet to keep their jobs could know the joy of eating without guilt or binging, don't you? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the clothing industry combined the plus and the 00 onto racks side by side, where Big and Tiny had to shop side by side, as well? Why should Big shop over there in that private space away from the huge space for Tiny?

I find myself judging myself, and others, based on weight sometimes. In my life of 61 years I've envied the waif-like girls without an ounce of fat on their bodies. And I'm sure I've wondered about those near me that have extra pounds, like why they're so overweight. I'm guilty of

standing in the mirror and allowing what I see justify my bad mood for the day, when I'm less than satisfied.

I don't know how to solve all of the problems in the world, but this one problem of Big and Tiny envying and judging each other has to end. We need to end it so that our daughters focus on academics and kindness, instead of salons and plastic surgery. We need to stop it so that our granddaughters see us stand up tall in our sagging skin and our thinning lips. We need to make sure they never ever hear us say, "I'm too fat," or "I hate the way I look," or "I can't believe she's put on so much weight."

I will end my story by saying of course, it's healthy to stay fit and trim and all of that. But that measurement has become way too narrow for the good of women everywhere. Good health is essential, but we are not created to all look the same in body size and shape...just like the leaves.

And one day, we'll find ourselves floating along beside that woman we envied or judged, and we will find ourselves with a choice. We can grab her hand and encounter that next water fall with glee together, or we can scream alone. I'd like to think we can enjoy the ride in laughter and thoughtful conversation, never seeing the size or shape difference we once thought so important...

Healthy Habits – A Clean Closet – by Marcy Lytle

One of my good friends and I were looking in her closet one day, because she wanted to show me a couple of tops she'd bought and wanted ideas of what to wear with them. She has a big closet, with awesome shelves, and yet it was packed to the max! Like we all do, she had collected years and years of clothes and accessories, some she wore and some she didn't, and was just overwhelmed with how to even begin organizing and cleaning.

So what does all this have to do with healthy habits? It does! A clean space, where it was once messy and disorganized, makes one feel so good and light and happy. When a closet is clean, we want to enter it, create in it, get dressed in it and then...we exit feeling great and put together like we can conquer the world.

Here's how we organized and how we felt so much better when the organizing was done:

First, we went through every piece of clothing and tossed whatever she hadn't worn or won't wear or didn't like (maybe it was gifted and not her style.) Gone was the guilt of parting with it, because we put it all in bags to give away.

Secondly, we emptied every shelf. There were towels and sheets that had been hurriedly stuffed on top of each other. There were all sorts of fabric and mismatched old bedding and others things that we were able to discard, because they were torn or old or never being used again. We filled lots of large trash bags!

Thirdly, we used what we had. I had brought some boxes I hadn't used from my house, and we set them on their side and bottom, to not only decorate but fill and place back on the shelves to order things.

Fourthly, we organized the clothing into categories and ditched all metal hangers, in favor of only plastic ones. She actually had enough of them, once we cleaned out the old clothes!

Fifth, we fold each fitted sheet, top and pillowcases into sets! The fitted sheet is folded first, and then the top. The fitted is tucked into the top one, so that the puffy edges are covered. Pillowcases are laid inside, as well, and then the entire bundle is folded into a neat rectangle. All towels and cloths are folded the same and organized by color.

Sixth, we tackled a couple of drawers where she had tons of t-shirts stuffed inside. We folded them in squares with the front side up (so it's easy to tell which shirt it is) and placed them back in a neat fashion, in the drawers (the Marie Kondo method!)

Seventh, we looked at what tops and bottoms needed matching pieces and made a list. We realized that if she had a denim skirt, a lot of her favorite tops would be pretty with it! Two of her new lace-wraps need something pretty to go underneath. And a tie belt would look great with a couple of blouses to bring shape. We now know what to look for, while out shopping!

All of that, and about three hours later, and we were feeling tired but good. The closet was inviting, organized, and place of rest and fun instead of chaos and clutter.

That organization brings health and happiness to any soul...so try it! Enlist the help of a friend, play music, chat and laugh. All of that will make for a fun time and beautiful outcome. Then go to her house and do it again...

Created for Life - Perfect Balance – by Ginny Hurley

Bright and early every morning we can anticipate observing a world of splendor right in our own backyards. Even though it is July, green fields still spill out upon the roadways throughout local neighborhoods. This year we have especially enjoyed the exquisite result of rainy days and nights.

Breathtaking flowers fill the landscapes while fountains shoot water into ponds and pools. Even the creeks still flow with fresh water from springtime. It is truly a beautiful place to live.

The butterfly receives its nourishment from the colorful flowers, while the flowers reproduce because of the beautiful butterflies. What a perfect plan. Hidden in plain sight all over our world, God's perfect balance is displayed for all to see.

We realize in a heartbeat that our hot sun will roast the lawns and things will begin to turn brown. Yet while it lasts, we hope for continued rain and cooler breezes.

The universe was created in perfect balance, and we long for it to remain that way forever. Our identity began in a perfect garden. It's in our DNA. It's who we are. Beauty was adorned in every nook and cranny, given to us to discover. What a joyful scene to picture! Can you see it? Each season brings new insight into the Father's heart for His family. When the leaves turn brown and fall to the ground it only brings hidden activity that surpasses knowledge. Then a time of dormancy is welcome when winter settles in.

This is just too wonderful for words! Tiny details, tiny insects, the tiniest of critters are perfected in God's perfect balance. Though men have tried to destroy what God has made, it is impossible. God is continually creating new life and bringing hope to all creatures in every land. Loss and poverty, war and darkness cannot keep God's love away.

*"Now, if anyone is enfolded into Christ, he has become an entirely new person. All that is related to the old order has vanished. Behold, everything is fresh and new."
2 Corinthians 5:17*

The purposes of God will never be overcome.

He is the Perfection of Beauty,
the Lily of the Valley,
the Bright and Morning Star!

Life Right Now – A Slower Pace – by Bethany Gomez

It's the month of July here in Texas, and anyone that has lived here for over a year, at the very least, knows that mid-summer means heat, unrelenting heat. In July, if at all possible, I can be found in one of two places: somewhere with central AC or hanging out near a cool body of water.

Who's with me?

Specifically for me, July also means one more month of summer break left which I am so, so grateful for and I have been really trying to not take this blessing of summer breaks for granted. Last month more than ever, it was a huge blessing to be on summer break. June was a busy, emotional, bittersweet month for me. Things on my to-do list for June were as follows:

Think about packing

Netflix

Nap

Marie Kondo my closet, pack a little

Work at my part time job. (about 15hrs/week)

Attend roommate bachelorette party

Pack

Help build a fence for sister's dog

Nap

Paint a guestbook tree for roommates wedding reception

Help my parents move to Brenham

Help my roommate move to Dallas

Load up my, and my sister's, stuff to move into our parents' house, that now boasts a fence

Rest

Cry, cry some more

Clean our rental house and turn in keys, maybe cry some more

Prepare for roommate wedding reception

Attend roommate wedding reception, celebrate and dance the night away

Get up, drive to Houston, attend my cousin's wedding (What was I thinking?)

Nap

This list is by no means an exhaustive list, but you get the point. I would be remiss not to mention that my sister had pretty much the same to-do list, minus the summer break. She is a multitasking queen.

Here is to hopefully slowing down to the speed of a turtle this month and not the speed of a hare.

There was something on my to-do list that was regretfully missing. What wasn't on that list was spending time with God. Over the years, I've struggled so much with having a quiet time. I sometimes tell myself,

“He already knows my thoughts. I don't want to keep repeating what He already knows.”

“When things slow down in my life, I will find the time to read my Bible and pray.”

"I get fed the Word once a week at church and I read the verse of the day on my Bible app. That will do for now."

All of those thought processes have led me lately to feel like I've merely been existing instead of living; slowly sinking in the sand. I know the only way to truly live is to put God first, which I haven't been doing. I want to be more intentional about having a quiet time and praying so that I will remain firmly planted on "The Rock," Jesus Christ, for He is the firm foundation.

While I was cleaning out my closet last month, I came across a small, seemingly insignificant booklet called, "An Adventure in Prayer." It caught my attention because in my heart I have been longing to pray more and be more intentional about becoming closer to God, so I read the whole thing right then. It was simply about this invitation to participate in this 30-day prayer experiment. I was intrigued. I had really no doubt that I wanted to commit to doing this experiment, so that is what I intend to do. It's a start.

I'm starting out on a new adventure with my sister and starting on a prayer adventure and I pray we both will keep our gaze on God and our feet on Christ the solid rock...at a turtle's pace and at a turtle's rest.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Sometimes a Mess – by Bekah Holland

I grew up in a household where we talked about “garbage in, garbage out-if you’re ugly on the inside you’ll look ugly on the outside” and singing songs like “Be careful little eyes what you see...” and “I’m going to let it shine, let it shine.” This was mostly because I was an 80’s baby born in the Bible belt and this was basically a requirement to be let inside of a church building. But when I look at my marriage, or the marriages that have inspired me (or terrified me), I wonder if this really rings true.

Living in the middle of a high-tech world, we “get to” peak inside of the lives of people both near and far, the famous and the obscure. We watch with bated breath as they show us snapshots of sweet smiling kids, how they’re involved and patient parenting moments, romantic kisses in a kitchen without a single dirty dish in the sink or sticky handprints on the fridge. Inspiring, right? Obviously that’s what our lives are supposed to look like. I mean, just look at those pictures and videos and latest Instagram posts! We must be doing something, or maybe everything, wrong.

My house rarely has an empty sink or spotless floors and counters. In fact, I have a couch that is literally dedicated to the mountain of laundry that I can never freaking get through. And while my kids are the most fantastic creatures in existence, they are also jerks sometimes, and I am not always patiently guiding them through their sassy mouths and cranky moments. Lots of times, I find myself criticizing or yelling or crying (or likely all three) at the same time.

My husband and I will go months....MONTHS between dates. We don’t even have the excuse of sleepless newborns or no available babysitters. We’re just tired and lazy and suck at prioritizing each other sometimes.

However, if you’re looking in from the outside, things look fine...great even. We have a wonderful home, great careers, cars to get us everywhere we need to go, growing and thriving kids, smiles on our faces, and the list goes on and on. But get past our pretty exterior, and you sometimes see a mess. And I don’t just mean dirty dishes and messy floors. I mean struggling relationships, hurting hearts, and spiritual dryness. If you could see inside my day, you’d see me wake up early every morning with the intention of spending time in the Word and a bit of exercise to energize me before starting my day. But what’s the saying? The road to hell is paved with good intentions? So that might be a bit dramatic, but you know what I mean.

My intentions and my follow-through are two different things, some days. I do wake up early, but what I do after that is stumble to the coffee pot, drink said coffee while checking email, read a bible verse, think about my day, play a game on my phone, and then convince myself to count walking back up the stairs as my exercise for the day. So while I look great on the outside, sometimes I let my insides fall to pieces. And while my marriage looks fine and dandy, we’ve had sometimes that we have struggled to look each other in the eye. And there are issues that sometimes we have to tiptoe around because we can’t find common ground. And while looking at my home from the street view it looks beautiful, sometimes we’ve lost the peace that once resided within those walls.

I know we all want to put on a great front and a happy face. We want to show that we’ve got it all together and paint our prettiest picture to show to the world, and even to our friends and family. But what if we were really honest? What if the pictures we paint weren’t just Monet’s?

I want my life to be transparent (okay, I want to want my life to be transparent). I want for women to see that they aren't alone....lots of us have messy kitchens and toys all over and bathrooms that smell like freaking pee because little boys can't aim (sorry, touchy subject in my house), and maybe even have kids eating cereal for dinner because we just can't any more. And that's okay. It's okay, because this life wasn't meant to be perfect and gentle. And since we messed up perfect before we even started, let's stop trying to pretend. Instead, let's encourage each other and show our scars and flaws and sinks full of dishes. Let's sit on the messy floors with our messy friends and laugh and cry together. No more perfect on the outside, faking it till we make it garbage.

I just want to do better than I did yesterday. And if I don't, then I'm not going to pretend that I did because of some silent, ridiculous expectations I've set based on the snapshots where I see into the lives of others. I'm just going to do my best to prioritize time with my husband. And by my best, I mean I'll probably just crawl on the couch near him with my book while he watches some show I may or may not care about. And then sometimes, I'll put on real clothes and we'll go eat queso and chat about nothing and everything like we used to do before life got in the way. We'll probably forget and push it off because we are fantastic at procrastinating things that require us to get out of our stretchy clothes. But we'll keep at it. Mostly because we love each other and trying is good.

But also, I want our pretty outside, to show that we're trying for a pretty inside first. Or maybe at least we'll show an example of messy people living and loving the best that they can.

Date Night Fun – The Monthly Calendar – by Marcy Lytle

There are at least four weeks in every month, they are there every year, and yet so many of us let weeks and weeks fly by without stopping to date the one we're with. We say we're too busy, the kids take up all of our time, we're too tired to go out, and everything costs too much. But in reality, we just don't plan and make it happen. Just like we make it to other appointments because they're scheduled, we have to set up appointments with each other...or date night never happens.

Here are five dates to fill into your calendar in the month of July, from a quick hour together, to an entire evening...and something in between. Read them, adjust them to fit your likes, and write them on your calendar right away. Then do it again and again, every month. You'll learn to smile and look forward to those little squares where you've scribbled "Date Night" and you'll clear other things to make it happen. We're even including topics to talk about!

One hour – If you have kids, put them to bed and create a spa time together. If no kids, stay awake long enough to make this happen. Set out lotion for a foot rub or a neck rub, or a hand massage. Spend 15 minutes on each other. The second half of the hour, indulge in dark chocolate and strawberries while you listen to your favorite tunes on Youtube, discussing the lyrics and why you like the songs.

Two hours – Meet up for appetizers early, before the crowds hit. Enjoy your favorites, as you talk over your day (No talking about money or kids!) Just listen and make sure you give thanks for at least three things that happened that day. On the drive home, if there's time, take a different path down new streets, zigzagging your way through town back to your house. Observe and laugh, with no iphones in sight. Talk about what you love about each other, as you observe the architecture of the houses you're passing in the new zones in which you're driving!

Three hours – Time for a dinner date and a walk! Start later and go to your favorite restaurant. If possible, make reservations, so that you have time for a walk after. Or go on a weeknight, when restaurants aren't so busy. You pick one time, let him pick next month. After the sun is down, go for a walk in the neighborhood where the restaurant is. See what else is nearby and make a note of stores you'd like to visit later, when they're open. As you walk, share your favorite scriptures or what God has been downloading to you, or what you'd like to study in the future.

Four hours – Make it a museum or art/library date. Check out the hours of a museum or art house and head there, to browse and observe. Don't gripe or complain about a "different" kind of date – just try it! After you've browsed, head to the library to look up more on what you read about or saw, and study it together for a bit, discussing a bit of art or history. End up with an ice cream for snack at the end of the date.

Five hours – You COULD see a movie, but let's keep the conversations and connections going! Drive across town to somewhere new, out of your circle of influence. Try meeting up with another couple, and spend the date time with them. Opt for appetizers and drinks, and really

check in to see how your friends are doing. Ask about their kids, their jobs, their parents, and their personal lives. Ask how you can pray for them. Spend the second half of the date by a body of water somewhere – a pond, a lake, a fountain, etc. Bring your lawn chairs and pack a dessert, and talk away until your time is over.

There you go...five ideas for you to try, to place on your calendar, and to make them happen. You can do these over and over again, tweaking the activity as your time allows. But use that calendar and don't let anyone else erase your date night, just because they pressure you to volunteer, guilt you into keeping their kids, or demand that you "should" show up elsewhere. Date night is just as important, so keep it and make it and enjoy it!

After 30 Years – Downtown – by Marcy Lytle

*When you're alone, and life is making you lonely
You can always go
Downtown
When you've got worries, all the noise and the hurry
Seems to help, I know
Downtown
Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city
Linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty
How can you lose?*

Those are part of the lyrics to a song by Petula Clark from 1964. I was only 7 years old then, but I remember the tune to this song. If you don't, take a listen, and then read on...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sku-1hqA5xw>

The photo above is part of downtown Austin. We live in a suburb of Austin, just north of the city, as do a lot of my friends. And when I talk to other couples, they often opt to just hang out in the suburbs instead of heading downtown to the heart of the metropolis. I get it. There's the main obstacle – traffic. It's hard to find parking. And it's just easier and quicker to stay near home, on date night.

However, when I saw this photo of 2nd Street downtown, the little lights in the trees, and the people on the sidewalks, I remember why we head down there at least every other weekend. It's quite fun, and it feels like we've exited our own little circle of a world with a small radius around our house.

Heading downtown on a Saturday or Sunday is so fun, especially when we have our day/night planned out. Here's why:

- The food is better. The burbs mostly have chain restaurants and a few locals, but downtown has the vibes and the flavors...and the food trucks! How can one miss out on that fun?
- The energy is high. Yes, there's traffic to plow through to get downtown where I live, but we sort of know when to time it so that it's not terrible. We don't head down on weeknights very often at all, because of rush hour. But we do on Saturday afternoons. There are people walking everywhere, and it's fun to get in the middle of the mix.
- The charm is still there. Downtown parts of cities have the old buildings, the older streets and street lamps, the twinkly lights, the pedicabs and horsedrawn carriages, and all sort of "old world" attraction.
- The height is rising. Along with the charm, right in the middle of it, are high rise hotels. Have you ever just dated in a hotel for a night? It's so fun to sit and watch people, taste appetizers, walk the floors and observe or catch live music in the lobby.

- It's different. Sometimes, when we stay in, stay close and never venture out, we forget there are others different than we are, people to see and meet that don't run on our streets. And that's always a good thing.
- The shopping is unique. Yes, we can stay home and visit Target or Walmart, but why do we want to always go to the big box stores? There are boutiques and cute shops that line the streets downtown. Some are pricey, but some hold affordable treasures!
- Darkness is lit. I mentioned above the twinkly lights. They're in trees, the lamps are on, the neons are flashing, hotels are bright, and they're all so inviting. It's fun to stay until after dark and walk among the lights of the night.

When we go downtown, we feel like we've really been somewhere. We enjoy all of the hustle and bustle, the flavors and flamboyance, and the coolness of some place other than our own backyard. Sure, there are wonderful dates we have when we stay local, as we stroll parks and eat fast food nearby.

And just like the lyrics of that song say, "How can you lose?"

There's always something new or crazy or busy or fun when we pack up for the day and head downtown on a date, to shop, to eat, to walk, or all of it. It's so fun. And when we grab hands and walk together at a brisk pace from place to place, we feel as though we've escaped for a while...and we have.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Bless This Mess – More Will Stand – by Ashley Zanella

When you look at this picture, what do you see? You might say a few twigs, leaves, or a flower upside down. That's not what I see at all. I see:

A plan thwarted.

A life uprooted.

Damage.

Destruction.

I can feel pain in this picture, a deep, suffocating pain. Yet, amongst the shadows I see hope. Hope that as seasons change and seeds get sewn, where one flower once stood, more will stand. Hope that persistence, time and storming the weather will eventually bring us to a place that is beautiful.

There are storms all around us. They swirl and thunder and strike lightning, hitting the very foundation we walk on. Our lives are filled with a series of mini storms and some of us experience hurricanes so strong that it peels that same foundation away completely. But in between those storms, we have the opportunity to see the beauty that is life. We can appreciate the ebb and flow of the good times and bad times because the bad times allow us to be truly thankful for what we have.

It humbles us to realize that nothing is guaranteed and everything requires work. It pushes our foundation that much deeper so that as the storms keep rolling in, we can feel more and more grounded. We start to realize how much we can withstand. We see ourselves as survivors and it empowers us all.

If you are struggling, just know you are not alone. We all go through periods of distress. If you are human, you are predetermined to experience distress. You can make it through this, whatever it is. No matter how earth-shattering your pain is, no matter how many petals you've lost to the storm, you will find a way to make something new. But like in this image, nothing in life is guaranteed. You're going to have to put in the work. You're going to have to push through the tears. You're going to have to plant new seeds.

You're going to have to grow again.

And it might be painful.

But it's worth it.

Firmly Planted – The List – by Dina Cavazos

I've never been "that girl"—you know...the cute one, the funny one, the popular one everyone wants on their team. After years of thinking I was somehow defective, I now know that I'm just fine, thank you. The false images and unspoken, or even spoken, expectations the world and well-meaning people planted in my impressionable unredeemed mind as I was growing up have been steadily replaced and nurtured by the One Who Loves Me, who places crowns on my head.

I've reached the point where I'm comfortable enough to be honest about things that used to bother me or embarrass me. For instance: one of the worst activities ever devised for school-age kids was the "pick the three people you would want to sit with" exercise. Truly this was thought up by the devil himself to give children complexes. A sheet of paper would be passed around and on this paper you were to write the three kids you would want to sit with or play with, or whatever. I remember doing this for years, even in high school, and it was devastating for me because I felt like I would never be chosen—and there was that piece of paper circulating for all to see that my name wasn't on it. Truth be told, I still have doubts that my name would be written on anyone's "favorite" list, but now I see things differently.

Getting older brings an enlarged perspective, but it's not years alone that have impacted my view. Long ago I did one thing that changed my life forever, even though I had no idea at the time of the real meaning of my decision. Like a seed that lay dormant in the desert, this decision planted Life in my personal desert, and that Life began to grow as it was watered over the years...many years. Because of that decision to give my life to the true Lord Jesus, and the years lived out with him by my side, unseen and not understood as he most often is, my vantage point enables me to see that, whether it's real or imagined, it's okay if I'm not anyone's favorite.

There is only one list that matters, and I'm on it. To all of you who struggle with not being on a favorite list.....be encouraged! All those who are his are on The List and we're all wearing crowns.

1 Peter 5:4

And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Simple Truths - The Aftermath – by Erica Simmons

We've all seen them, the pictures that emerge after a storm has hit. We see the destruction, the aftermath, after the storm has raged and the assessment begins, followed by creating a plan. The process of rebuilding lives, buildings, communities begins. That is how it works for physical storms. But, what about spiritually?

How do we handle the aftermath of a spiritual storm?

Last month, I shared how I struggled with writing my article, how I was not hearing God's voice because the storm was louder than His voice (which is easy when you focus on the storm and not God). Now I am walking in the aftermath of my spiritual storm and my assessment has begun.

It began with me taking my eyes off my circumstances and putting them on the word of God. Once I did that, what I thought was silence from God was actually Him whispering to me in the storm. I was like the guy in this video who is playing the game whisper.

[Facebook link](#)

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2181313328748922>

As I began my shift, I was unable to hear clearly and was all over the map with trying to "guess" what God was saying. I was jumping the gun on the message and trying to make it what I wanted it to be. In the end when I "got" it, I too was excited like this guy was to hear the message, but then like the grandfather when the realization of the message hit him. What God was saying to me was more than words to hear. It was a gift, one that brought joy, hope and peace. A peace that brought clarity to the words God spoke to me all those years ago.

"If who you are is getting in the way of who you want to be,
you need to change who you are. I am."

That word helped me to become more like God in my thinking about some things all those years ago, and God wants to use it again in the aftermath of my spiritual storm.

In the aftermath of physical storms, the rebuilding involves replacing the destroyed with a newer version of the old that was before. In the aftermath of a spiritual storm, God wants to replace the old destroyed wrong way of thinking and behaving with a new way, His way. If who I am is getting in the way of who I want to be, I have to change who I am.

Who I am is a mother that loves her children and wants to protect them at all cost. How I do this is by trying to say the right things that will bring those "aha!" moments. I work to lay out carefully constructed arguments of pros and cons with the hope that they see I am "right" and do things my way.

Who I want to be is a mother that loves her children and hits her knees in prayer to cover them as they walk their road. A mother who has leaned into God and will have the message He wants to deliver when and if they come to her for advice. A mother with the strength to guard her tongue and trust God, knowing He has a greater plan for them than I ever could. It starts with prayer and it ends with more prayer, not just for Jordan and Jerimiah, but for me as well.

Unfortunately, I am allowed the opportunity to put this into practice, as Jeremiah has had to move back home. He is hurt and disappointed in himself. I now have to surround him with love, which is the easy part, and help him through his aftermath. He is discouraged and I have to walk the delicate line of helping him see and understand the great things he can learn, as well as be honest with him about some choices he made. I can't do that without praying and seeking God in how to handle that. It was tough, as I just wanted to do what I could to get him home before we dealt with anything, and he got a little wishy-washy on me at a critical time. I then let my frustration boil over. But he is home now and the healing can begin.

Who I am is a Christian who gives so much of her time at her job (I love it), in a leadership position. I come home and say tomorrow I will do this or that for God.

Who I want to be is a Christian who takes advantage of the leadership opportunities for Christ. I have wanted to lead more and I have just let excuses get in the way. No more! I have stepped up and said to God, "I am here." I'm in some new situations since my last article. Even if the way I think He wants to use me turns out to be a different way...that is great, too.

Glance at the video again. Once the dad understood the real message, it was a sweet, sweet gift. He did not complain at all about the message not being any of the things he thought it was. That will be me. I will have some false starts in what I think God is leading me to do, but I will keep my focus on God and what He is saying to me. Like the grandfather in the video, I will eventually get it. The two important things the video teaches are that God NEVER stops saying the message and I am to never take my eyes off Him. The son-in-law continues to say the message and the grandfather is focused and intent on getting the message. That should be us as we listen for His voice even in the storm.

Intense focus on HIM.

There are many other examples I can give of who I am and who I want to be. Some I have already began to put into practice. The first one is to be a better housekeeper. Again, I have many excuses for letting the things I want to do go undone, not least of which is how my back gives me so much trouble when I am up and about for too long. But enough is enough.

Since I was hosting our Memorial Day family get together, I just decided to tackle some of those chores. When it says God uses everything, He uses every single thing to teach us more about Him. I spent hours up and doing on that Saturday getting chores completed and when I tell you my back was not an issue, I mean it was not an issue! I didn't have to fight through the pain or discomfort because there was none. Through rearranging cabinets, cleaning out the pantry and the refrigerator, it was amazing.

The message?

God provides, we just have to be willing to do, and He will take care of the obstacles.

This can be seen in the examples in the Bible when those God chose tried to use excuses, He overcame all of them, but what if those He had chosen had never been faithful enough to start?

This is the message for this month. In the aftermath there is purpose, there is learning, and most importantly there is God. He is waiting for us to turn to Him, to trust Him to lead the way in the rebuilding process.

Look around at all the wonderful things He has created.

There is no better architect than the creator of the universe.

Moving Forward - I Am Loved – by Pam Charro

I remember hearing a story, years ago, about a well-known Christian speaker who was getting ready to write her first book. As she prayed, she asked God, "What would you have me write about?" God replied, "Tell them I love them." She responded, "Lord, I'm pretty sure they already know that." He answered, "No, they don't. Tell them I love them." Obediently, Joyce Meyer's first book was titled *Tell Them I Love Them*. Apparently, we don't know it as much as we think we do, and...

Love is a really big deal to God.

Like most Christians, I "knew" God loved me. I fell in love with Jesus back in the late '80s when a few people explained to me who he was and what he had done for me. But, sadly, the high didn't last, as shortly after my baptism, I became swept up in a flurry of religious activity and all of the "shoulds" began to drive out the joy. I started feeling more like a slave than a beloved daughter, just like the prodigal son's older brother in Luke 15. I continually felt I had to earn everyone's approval, including my heavenly Father's. I have had to fail him pretty epically over the years to find out just how deep and unconditional his love for me truly is.

In fact, only recently have I really come to know the intensity of his affection for every fiber of my being. Not only did he send his beloved son to die in my place so that I could have right relationship with him (which would have been plenty all by itself), but he fearfully and wonderfully made me in my mother's womb and knew everything about me long before I was ever born (Psalm 139). He determined the exact time and place where I would live so that I would seek him and find him (Acts 17). He sings over me with delight (Zephaniah 3). And he will never leave me or forsake me (Deuteronomy 31, Hebrews 13). All of these are just a handful of his loving thoughts towards me, but I couldn't really receive them into my heart until I recognized the lies I was believing instead. Lies such as "My pain is small compared to others' so he probably doesn't care about it that much." Or "He probably loves most people more than me because they have it more together than I do." I didn't recognize the *orphan mentality* that I had and I had no idea that I was keeping God at a distance because I thought he expected me to go through all of my less than glorious phases (basically, my entire life) alone in my bubble of pain and confusion. It's been so very liberating to learn that he desperately has been waiting for me to welcome him into my pain bubble so that he could finally be the best friend for me that I've needed all these years.

And that knowledge has changed everything! I no longer struggle at all with insecurity regarding God's love for me; I just have to stop and apply it to my situation every time I feel overwhelmed, and then choose to trust in whatever outcome happens. I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that my Father loves me...even the deep down yucky stuff in the darkest crevices of my soul.

What safety and freedom, I have finally found in this life! What acceptance for any situation, past, present, or future. And it's so amazing and wonderful to know that he has this same intense interest and love for every single human being he created.

Real Stories - Finding My Voice - by Tanya Dorris

Livefreeandwhole.com

Are you on a journey of finding your 'voice'? Have you ever wondered how to find your 'voice' and what that even means?

In preparing for writing this article I looked up the definition of voice. I came across an article by Ginny Wiehardt entitled *Learn About Author's Voice in Fiction Writing*. As a writer, I thought her definition appropriately defined voice. Not for writers only, but for everyone. "Voice is the author's style, the quality that makes his or her writing unique, and which conveys the author's attitude, personality, and character."

In Hebrews 12:2, it says that Jesus is the Author and Finisher (perfector) of our faith and the text describes what He did for us. "Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

What does this have to do with finding my voice? Everything!

Growing up, I was the daughter of a successful football coach in small west Texas towns. Everybody knew my dad, so they recognized me as Coach Watkins' daughter. I always assumed I had a standard to uphold. I now understand that I let resentment grow in my heart because of that.

As I began my high school years, I began searching for my own identity. Unfortunately, my identity was being fashioned by rebellion, disappointment, and betrayal. It was the 70s and our country was at war. So, as the song goes, *I started looking for love in all the wrong places*.

I moved to Austin, Texas as a 19-year-old desiring a lifestyle that Austin was famous for. I worked in various jobs around the city and began to sink in a hole of escaping and despair. I am grateful that I survived those years of abusive relationships and deep addiction. The amazing part was that unknown to me, I had friends and family praying for me.

Thankfully, in my mid-20's, I hit bottom and started looking up. It took me about six years to realize I needed a Savior. I turned from my wicked ways and gave my life to Jesus, but my soul still needed a lot of healing and tender loving care.

My identity became about serving Jesus, getting myself cleaned up, becoming a good wife, and being the best mom I could possibly be. So I went to bible studies, prayer meetings, and everything else I could do to perfect myself. I became wrapped up in performance. All the while, I felt as if I was dancing on bricks that could fall underneath me at any given moment.

Then one day, about 20 years later, God gave me a very special gift. I was invited to be part of a campus ministry at the University of Texas. It was only God's grace that opened that door for me and I am so grateful I chose to walk through it.

There, I worked with three men in their 30's that saw potential in me and began calling it out. I was 15 years their senior and balked at their suggestion that I should be part of the mentoring team for the female students. After all (I told myself) I was too old to be working with college students, so they hired me as an administrator, not mentoring university students. I hadn't even graduated from college. So, what did I have to say!

My confidence was at an all-time low, but with the insistence of Jeremy, Justin, and Brent I answered the call and found my 'voice' for the first time. These girls needed to know who I was as a *woman of God* and not a secular professor. I poured my knowledge of the Word into them and listened to their needs as we took walks, ate lunch, prayed in the prayer room, and worked together on projects. It was awesome!

I am so very grateful for those 3 ½ years with Campus Renewal. I became acquainted with my ministry style, my God-given identity, and began walking in a more confident attitude, personality, and character. I grew further to know the Author and Finisher of my faith and the price He paid for me which gave me the confidence and joy to continue growing and finding my voice more and more.

I began recognizing the damage that trauma and shame had done in my life and began researching and educating myself on healing and restoration. It's been a hard, but extremely important part of my journey.

Eight years later and with a new assignment, I've been able to more confidently answer God's call to write. I found my voice in a new way and I'm growing in it day by day. I now know my voice is to help others hurt by trauma and shame to become who our Author and Finisher has made them to be. To live a life that is free and whole. And I'm enjoying the journey!

I found this sign on Pinterest from tumblr.com. It really sums it up well.

YOUR LIFE IS NOW. SEIZE IT AND MAKE IT AMAZING.

FIND YOUR VOICE.

DISCOVER YOUR PASSION & PURSUE IT.

be honest, generous, & kind.

surround yourself with love, laughter, & truth.

LET YOUR HEART BE YOUR GUIDE.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

BE BRAVE & WILD AT HEART.

take chances, ask questions.

be fearless, make a difference.

THIS IS YOUR TIME.

Picture at: https://unsplash.com/photos/s_F84X3ltu0

I am a wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, and friend. I build relational bridges in communities by having honest discussions on issues concerning race, gender, sexuality, and ways the generations can better work alongside each other in harmony. One of my passions is to equip people on how to conquer trauma and shame. I am an overcomer of both and find joy in helping others experience the freedom I now have.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – I See You – by Marcy Lytle

We have a list a mile long of friends we're praying for...for healing of the miracle kind. From kidney failure to cancer to autoimmune issues, we're praying hard for these people to be healed. They are super weary, and need to be surrounded by people that have faith and will pray. And we consider it a privilege to be among that crowd.

In addition to our friends that are suffering, they have family members that are nursing them, working double shifts, staying up at night with frustration and fear, and all sorts of things that come with being the next of friend/kin to a very sick person.

I remember when my husband had to have his hip replaced, and when he suffered electrical shock of the worst kind. I was frantic and fearful. After the fear subsided and I knew he was going to live, then came the recovery time. He had rehab, doctor's appointments, I had to help bathe him and wash his hair, make him meals, and clean up after him. He wasn't able to help, so I grew tired.

And let me tell you, I don't have a nursing bone in my body at all! And not much patience, either!

I grew tired quickly and became snappy, when he was still recovering and suffering in pain. And I felt horrible. Absolutely horrible, that I would wish he'd hurry and get better so I could get back to normal life. I felt guilty for not serving him with joy. And I even felt times of anger that he had hurt himself or had these physical problems that required surgery and money and time and healing. Somehow, there was a tiny bit of blame on him for being hurt or needing help. *What?* I must be a terrible person, I thought.

So this little story right here is to encourage all of you spouses, sisters, moms, dads, friends, etc. that are taking care of a person in need of a miracle.

- He sees you, too. He knows you're tired, and it's okay and understandable that you're tired and need rest.
- He hears you, too. He understands the weariness that sets in after days and days of serving and giving, with all the focus being on them and not you.
- He is not disappointed in you, at all. He sees the effort and the fear and the anger, and he can handle every emotion you have and will have.
- He is with you, just as much as he is with the one that's disabled at the moment. And your pain is no less than their pain, although so much of it is internal and not visible to those around you.

On the other side of years now of those panic-stricken months and months of dealing with recovery with my husband, I remember what it's like to take care of someone in need. And I remember wishing someone saw me and understood me and cared that I was tired and a bit spiteful at the circumstances. But I didn't have the courage to speak up, for fear I'd be judged or misunderstood.

If you're caring for a sick person, speak up. Talk to someone. Scream. Pray out loud. And for goodness sake, ask for a break and take it. There is NO SHAME in being tired from being worried. Weariness is a real thing, and it can settle in, even when we're doing good for others.

Don't you think Jesus grew weary of constantly being touched, asked, begged and persuaded to come here and go there, to heal every sick person in the town? Sure, he did. It's why he excused himself out into a boat or away in a garden, to cry, to pray, and to rest.

God knew the importance of rest. After all, he created a whole day for it, after creation. He said that rest was good. He tell us when we are weary to come to Him and he will give us rest. And weariness comes in all forms, but especially in the form of caring for the ill.

I'm praying for you right now, the ones I know that are caring for others, and it seems the caring will never end. And if you're not on my prayer list, leave your need below, and I'll add you to it.

I don't know if your friend or family member will recover fully. I pray that they do. Boy, do I pray for that miracle. And equally as important, I pray for your full recovery too, after your hands and feet slow down, your mind is at rest, and your spirit is renewed.

Sometimes, the best thing we can do is call out for help, whether or not others understand. He does. And he is just as excited to rescue those who are weary, as those who are sick. He's a good Father, like that, yes He is.

FRESH THYME – Light is Everything – by Marcy Lytle

We read this little book together at night before we go to bed, and we cannot see the text at all unless our lamps are on. And even then, we need more light to fully read correctly. And if we're reading in the broad daylight of sun streaming in the car window, we can both see just fine! It's amazing what light does for the eyes!

We know that it does the same job on photos. A little light from a filter changes the entire look of the image, taking it from blah and undefined, to bright and glorious with just the infusion of light! Light is essential at night when we come in from being out, and we step into a dark house. It illuminates our path, it reveals things that might make us stumble, and it enables us to get from the front door to the bedroom in one piece! Light arrives through our windows early morning, after the darkness of night, and lets us know that a new day is starting. It's cause for us to open our blinds and let its rays stream in, so that we can see the beauty of nature just outside our windows!

Light is everything!

- In the very beginning God created light and he commented, "It is good."
- Jesus states, "I am the light of the world." We are to be the light, as well.
- We will constantly stumble around unless we're reading His word, the light switch for our path.
- We are the only light to a dark world, a world that sees dimly and unclearly and not at all.
- The light He gives cannot be overcome by darkness. That's awesome to know and to believe.
- We can have relationships with each other that are healthy, if we walk in the light of love.
- Our eyes are the lamp of our body. This tells me we have the power to set the switch to light.
- When our hearts are clean, we no longer fear the light, the exposure. We welcome it.
- Light is armor. How so? Darkness flees at the sight of it.

I'm amazed when I see the sunlight emerge from behind the clouds. In the heat of the summer, that sunlight tans, it burns, it makes me uncomfortable, and I want to go in and hide away from its rays. But in the dead of winter, when it's cold and dreary, I want to bask in it, soak up its rays, and stay in it, if I'm outside all day. Sunlight is essential. It's always present. In fact, according to NASA, there is nothing more important on earth to us than the sun. Without it, the earth would be a hard ball or rock of ice.

It's the same with the light from the Son. Without him, we would live in darkness; stumble and fall, and fear every noise that we could not see. We would be of no hope to those around us, and we would be overcome even unto death. Without the Light of the World, we would be isolated because relationships would scare us, and we'd never venture out on paths unknown. Sin and all of our mistakes would keep us in darkness, because when the Light shines, all of our mistakes disappear. And without his light, we'd be open target to all of the critters that roam seeking prey in the middle of the night.

I'm thankful for the light of day. It reminds me once again that His promises are true. He set the sunrise and the sunset into motion, and they will continue until the end of the ages.

Next time you switch on a lamp or walk from the darkness into light, or lie down in the sun by the waves at the beach, think about how...

Light is everything.

And without it we cannot live effectively in this world, in our homes, or with ourselves.

See the photo above? The title of that still photo is called "Delicate devotion to the light."

FRESH THYME – Never Disappointed – by Marcy Lytle

I've been going to church a long time. And I've shared before the ups and downs of my experience. I remember loving every minute of serving, and then shaking after church was over because I was burned out. I recall lots of great relationships that I made with "church people" and then losing so many of them at an early age of 17, and being bitter for years. And finally, I've been personally offended by the words and actions of others, so much that I toyed with giving up church altogether.

I've written before on the benefits of taking kids to church, of attending as a family, of the great pluses of congregational worship and prayer and unity. But even all of that can become mundane, a chore, and a ritual that plays out over time as something on our to-do list, instead of our play list.

Today, I sometimes hear people state that a specific Sunday was blah or not that great, stating that the music was too loud, the sermon lacked power, or there were just so many out and the church looked sparse and sad. I myself sometimes look around to see who's there and judge the success of a Sunday on the number of bodies filling the seats. All of that makes me and my friends feel like we've wasted a couple of hours on a Sunday morning that we could have been doing something a lot more fun and a lot more productive!

Over the past few years, I've come to realize that there are really two things that have enabled me to never be disappointed when I step inside those doors. Seriously, when I focus on these two things, I never come away wishing I'd been elsewhere.

Here what I remind myself to do:

Come to worship. There's nothing like worship, personal, and with a Body. And it doesn't depend on whether or not the "right" songs are played, if the music or tempo is loud or slow, or who's leading. Oh, that can affect the intensity if we let it, but it can't squelch our personal worship. When songs are played, we can focus on the lyrics and the truth behind them. As we sing, we can give thanks with a joyful heart for the character of the God we serve. And respond. By all means, we can respond to the call to worship to lift up His name and praise him for all he's done. It does the heart, the body, the mind and the soul a world of good. And it pleases Him. And that is NEVER disappointing.

Come to bless others. Instead of wondering if she or he will speak to us kindly, ask about our family, or invite us to lunch, we can come through the doors only to give. We can look for newcomers, pray for those who look sad, speak to friends and ask about them, smile at everyone, and don't miss a person. And we don't have to even entertain one thought about whether or not someone is going to speak to us...instead we can speak to everyone we can. We can happily give of our gifts (encouraging words, acts of kindness, generous giving, etc.) and use them to their fullest, having prayed before church ever starts for an opportunity to be a blessing. That too is NEVER disappointing.

You see, we have it all wrong. We expect others to satisfy this need in us that they are never meant to satisfy. We want them to notice us, take care of us, and be a blessing to us, and we

also expect God to come down and answer every prayer and make our lives comfy and cozy...which of course, we all want! But the way to enjoy life and church, and a body of believers that are flawed just like we are, lies in the worship of Him and the service of others. And even a dull sermon won't be completely wasted when we're sitting there worshipping Him and praying for the one that's speaking to us all. Maybe he/she is having a bad day...and our prayers will bless their day.

It always has, and it always will be, about Him and about others.

Period.

And that is never disappointing.

FRESH THYME - Those Birds, Though – by Marcy Lytle

I was mowing this morning, as I do quite often, and there they were again. Those darn birds. There were three this time making squawking noises as they landed on the freshly cut grass right where I had just cut. As the mower neared them again, they flew away and then came back, again right where I just had mowed. This annoyed me, terribly. In fact, I realized that there are so many things that annoy me about birds:

- They're so impatient. Why can't they wait until I'm completely finished mowing and then swoop down to gather seeds or grass or whatever it is they need?
- They're so loud. I wish I could understand them, but they sure do squeal and make noise about whatever it is they're doing while swooping and landing and flying away once again.
- They're scary. I feel as though (if they wanted to) they could just dart right at my face and peck me to death (too many viewings of *The Birds* in my life...)
- They're ugly. Those big black birds with fat bodies and spindly legs – gross. I wish they'd go away. Pretty red cardinals are pleasant to the eye, but not these big black pests!
- They're messy. I just get my car washed and head out to leave, and there it is. White goop right by the door handle. It makes me so mad that they have the audacity to poop in my space!
- They're intrusive. Have you been to a grocery store where a bird has sneaked in and just roams the aisles up and down, in the air and on the ground? Gross!
- They peck the tomatoes. This is the most annoying of all. We try to grow pretty red tomatoes for our salads and sauces, and we check the garden and see holes where their sharp beaks have been...where they don't belong!

The Bible has LOTS to say about birds and our observations of them.

- We're supposed to take comfort in his provision, when we observe how he cares for the birds.
- He created them and told them to increase...sigh...so maybe that's why there are so many!
- He values the birds and brought them into the safety of the ark before the flood.
- Some of the ugliest of all birds have a purpose to clean up the dead carcasses of road kill.
- God compares his care over us to the wings of a bird over her children, as she covers them all.
- There will be birds...even in heaven.

After all of that thinking above, I think I just put away the mower and realized how annoying we must be to God, because we are just like the birds that flutter around beside me while I try to do the work in the yard. We too squawk and grow impatient, and we're messy and intrude where we do not belong. And yet...HE LOVES US. He created us in his image and gave us value and worth. Not only that, he delights in each one of us.

Next time you're going about your day and something annoying gets in your way, think about this story about the birds and smile. Be encouraged that those birds will fly away once we near them with that big machine...they always do. But they'll return again to gather and build and give birth and fill the air. It's what they were made to do. And we have a purpose, too. If we just observe and learn and grow wise in patience and wonder and peace, under the shadow of His wings that cover and protect...just like those annoying birds do when they too get their nests built and cover their young.



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TIPS

Seven for You – DIY – Panel of Women

This month's question to our panel of women was to ask them about any DIY products or projects they've used or completed at home, ones they enjoy and can share with all of us! DIY is so popular these days, especially if we can provide a cleaner product with less chemicals, save money, or just put our personal spin on something we love to eat, wear, or pamper ourselves with.

Here are a few fun ideas for you!

Cleaning:

As a cleaner, I use hydrogen peroxide. I put it in a spray bottle and use it to clean our bathroom sinks and shower stall. It doesn't have a strong odor and is not full of harmful chemicals.

I am a minimalist about cleaning supplies. I use Dawn original blue dish soap for EVERYTHING and buy it at Home Depot for \$1.96 bottle.

I use Dr. Bronner's Castile soap in foaming dispensers for all bathroom hand soaps, toilet cleaner, and sometimes shampoo.

I use only All Free and Clear laundry soap liquid, plus Borax and Fels Naptha bar for stains and I use nothing in my dryer...no dryer sheets or balls, etc! Don't need it!

Décor:

I used kitchen hand towels and table napkins in patterns that I liked over a curtain rod instead of curtains. I hung the hand towels first over the rod and then put the napkins in a diagonal pattern over them. (see pic)

I actually took a class in arranging flowers! Of course I improvise, but the things I learned were:

1. Start with greenery. I thought this was kind of weird, but when making an arrangement it actually works! Instead of filling in with greenery you fill in with the flowers.
2. This is kind of hard to explain but arrange your flowers in 3's - like 3 roses on each side and then fill in with your other flowers.
3. I try not to cut them too short to start off - you can always cut a flower shorter but you can P not make it longer once cut.
4. Then after all of this I just throw out everything I learned and starting arranging since sometimes my groups of 3 don't always turn out like I want or I just buy sunflowers and put them in a vase since they last a long time inside!
5. Don't forget to look for stuff in your yard! Especially greenery! Rosemary and herbs are wonderful!

About five years ago, I took a little course about these four disciplines. Because I'm not a painter, I decided to make me something as a daily reminder to keep these disciplines out of magazine clippings.

Yard:

The biggest thing I have done recently is take on my own garden design. I had a landscape designer give me a few tips and offer to do a complete layout for me but the price was over \$500 for just the design. So I decided to do it myself, little by little. And after talking to friends, I now have allowed myself the freedom to pull up a plant and transplant it somewhere else if I don't like it's original spot. It's a trial and error and learn-as-you-go project. I really enjoy the process so far.

After going through the drought a few years back in our area, I hate to use water in excess, especially for something like our swimming pool so I came up with this idea. I made a gutter system that runs from our roof into our pool so when it rains our swimming pool is filled. It cuts down on cost of water considerably and we have some of God's greatest natural commodity to swim in.

Personal:

As I've gotten older, I have acquired allergies to a lot of facial lotions. So for nighttime I have a mixture of about a tablespoon of olive oil with a couple drops of lemon juice. This small amount lasts me for several days. I read about this online and I'm hooked. I love the way it makes my face look and feel and these ingredients I always have on hand.

I make my own face wash: 1:1 Castile soap (Dr. Bronners) to witch hazel plus a few drops of each tea tree & lavender essential oil (Young Living). Combine in a travel size squirt bottle. Wet face and hands & pour a penny size amount in your hand. Lather on face and rinse.

Ever since I was 13, I've been waxing my own lip and eyebrows. I've never been to a salon to get them done and I can only imagine the amount of money it has saved me! It's pretty easy, too. A lot of people may be intimidated because well, our eyebrows are a pretty important facial feature. However, the nice part is that you're in control! There are all sorts of special tools to help guide you in getting the job done and with the internet there are thousands of tutorials that can show you how to do it properly. I could head to Walmart or Target and get the little at home waxing kit to place in the microwave, but if I want to properly DIY I go to a beauty supply shop. I personally like to go to Sally's; there they have a wax warmer with different heat settings, wax for all types of skin (dry, oily, acne prone, etc...), wax strips, wax sticks, cotton pads, and even a solution that removes the excess wax that you missed. However, my hack is that I just use coconut oil and it removes the wax just the same! I honestly couldn't imagine getting my brows done by anyone else other than myself and I've even done some of my friends....Who knows maybe it could be a good side business.

I use diluted Johnson and Johnson ORIGINAL baby shampoo to remove eye makeup...my dermatologist insisted. I use only coconut oil for facial moisturizer.

My recipe for bath salts is the following:

1 bag of Dr. Teals bath salts (fragrance free or other) approx 6 cups in a 3 lb bag
1 can of sea salt fine crystals 1.6 lbs
1 1/2 - 2 cups of baking soda

20 drops of Lavender Doterra essential oils
15 drops of peppermint and/or 15 drops of eucalyptus

I pick whatever scent I want, and if my sinuses are acting up either of these work well. And my muscle aches are treated, too!

I recently made rose water and keep it in the fridge in a spray bottle, for spritzing my face throughout the day. I especially like to spray my face if we go out in the evening for a refresher!

I just clipped rose petals (ones that have not been treated with pesticides) and brought them just to a steam in distilled water, on the stove. Then I covered them and let them steep for several hours.

After that, I just drained the water into a bowl, and filled my bottle! That's it!

Feels so great and is good for the skin.

Clothes:

I sew almost all my own nightgowns from tee shirts and or tank tops. I use one for the tank top style and one for the skirt...cut off the sleeve and neck and use the bottom part.

Food:

I make my own bone broth because I feel like it is healthier and I have more control over the ingredients than what is available at the store. I make it from a basic Insta pot recipe.

I don't buy much in the way of convenience or prepared foods, I make most everything from scratch including bone broth. Even if I buy a rotisserie chicken I boil the carcass for soup.

I love to make my own hummus. To me, it tastes 10 times better than any store-bought. I've tried lots of recipes and this is one of the best and most clean. And one thing I didn't have was tahini, so I used sunflower seeds and pepitas instead, and they worked!

- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 cans chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- 1 t sea salt
- 1/3 c tahini
- Juice from 2 lemons
- 1 T olive oil

Place all in food processor, pulse till blended but still coarse. Adjust seasonings to taste.

Hair

I cut my own hair. I went to too many salons and came home upset, and dissatisfied. So I purchased a pair of haircutter's scissors and a hand mirror (for looking at the back) and I observed the stylists, and now do my own! I have wavy hair and I like texture and variation, so it works! I snip all around, not too much at one time. Then I wash and dry and look at any places that need attention, and snip a little more. That's it.

The Dressing – Early Fall – by Marcy Lytle

I know, it's August and cool temps aren't coming to most of us for a while. However, one of my favorite things is to look through my closet for summer pieces that I can transform into fall pieces. I like to think how they can be transformed and what I need to make that happen. Let me share with you what I'm talking about.

Sheer blouses – Maybe you have a blouse that's sheer and summery, but it can be transformed and worn under a jacket once cooler temps arrive. Here's a cute jacket for this fall that you might want to hang in your closet next to that blouse. Or (see photo) add a scarf and your suede booties and carry the look into September with long shorts!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0721270005.html

Flowerdy tee – Those summer tees you've worn all summer long will look stylish and slide right into the next season worn under a cardigan. Check out the fall hues in these cardigans and wear them with your summer tees.

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0679854002.html

Sundresses – Perhaps you bought a couple of sundresses that you wore to summer weddings, or maybe you still have one coming up this month! They too can be easily transformed into a fall outfit with a longer sweater that drapes over to cover your shoulders in the fall!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0793137008.html

Those cropped jeans – If you've got cropped jeans/pants that have been your staple all summer long, don't put them away come September. Pair them a short jacket and a tee. Add flats, and you've got a great look!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0713533002.html

White jeans – Don't fold them and tuck them away in a drawer just yet! Leave them hanging up and pair them with a heavy sweater. Seriously, this is a cute look!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0448509020.html

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0738882001.html

Sandals – If they're brown or black, still wear them in early fall! They will look completely fine with any of the outfits above! It's no longer a no-no to show your toes after Labor Day, if the sun is still high and temps are still soaring. But if you do want to cover your toes, check out this cute pair of sandals that make for a great transition to fall!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0606710003.html

Pastels – Maybe you have a few pastel shirts hanging in your closet. Especially if it's a button up shirt with a collar, keep it alive. Wear it under a darker shade of that same hue in sweater. It will look elegant and pretty!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0695632003.html

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0693917003.html

Obviously, we probably won't be wearing our bathing suit or carrying our straw totes on into the next season, but we can definitely get creative and wear our summer clothes bit longer in new ways that even surprise us!

Selah's Style – Sadie & Josie – by Marcy Lytle

Sadie and Josie are Selah's cousins and they just moved back to the mainland from Alaska, with their mom and dad. They got to stay and visit a bit with some of their other cousins a few weeks ago, and enjoyed a bit of swimming, shopping and playing – all the things kids love to do together! Playing with cousins is the best! And so is sharing a little fashion sense as you do...

Augie and Sadie were at Target with the family and discovered this cool group of sunnies (that's sunglasses, for short!) While Augie tried on several pair, Sadie turned toward the camera in her cute and comfy dress from Old Navy. Check out her choice of necklace – it just compliments her dress so well! Sadie will be 3 next month!

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/products/dresses-toddler-girls-12m-6t-C1017759.jsp>

Poolside, Sadie and her little sister Josie (almost 1!) are enjoying some Texas heat and working on their stateside tan! Josie's cute suit and float device is from Target and Sadie's stylish suit is from Old Navy. Their mom was thrilled to spend a little time walking the aisles of Target, something she hadn't gotten to do in a long while!

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/category.do?cid=54738&#pageld=0&department=165&nvt=Left%20Nav&nvt=Baby%20Girls&nvt=Shop%20By%20Category&nvt=Swimwear>

Shopping at Altar'd State with her mom and great aunt, Sadie found herself going back to the jewelry over and over again, looking for accessories to go with her ensemble. Check out her cute pigtails and that winning smile! Especially note the hair ties worn high up on the arm as bangles – what style! I think it's a great idea! Her shorts are from Target and the shirt – maybe one she received from an older cousin!

https://www.altardstate.com/as/accessories/hair-accessories/clarissa-scrunchies/001078_109144.html

Josie thoroughly enjoyed shoe shopping with the family at Tyler's Outlet in Austin, Texas. She sat for a long while in her slightly used dress (from another cousin!) and tried on sandals and looked for the perfect shoe! Josie could have browsed for hours...never tiring of all those choices!

<https://www.tylerstx.com/>

Old Navy has lots of cute graphic tees for toddler girls, and Sadie likes this one because – YES – she is a strong girl! She and her cousin Ayla have that “messy hair don't care” look because they're all about playing at Catch Air – an amazing indoor playground for kids! These two cousins are having a blast together!

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/category.do?cid=36374&#pageld=0&department=165&nvt=Left%20Nav&nvt=Toddler%20Girls&nvt=Shop%20By%20Category&nvt=Graphic%20Tees>

In Alaska, Sadie's mom says she mostly shopped at Old Navy because that's all that was there, and their prices are so affordable. But once she returned back home, she missed Target so

much and loves their clothes for kids! Lots of choices and they're all so cute. Especially when they're worn with family to all sorts of fun places before summer is over!

In the Kitchen – Friends’ Recipes – by Marcy Lytle

I saw a friend post the most amazing photo of something she’d made and I asked her to share the recipe with me. Then I asked if I could share it with you! That made me realize I’d love to share several of my friend’s amazing tastes, so I asked for more submissions. August is a great month to try out something new from the kitchen of a friend...or two.

Tomato Tart – by Milissa Jenkins

I had extra tomatoes from when my dad went to East Texas, so I made this yummy tart, in fact this recipe makes two!

Heat oven to 350 degrees.

- 2 large tomatoes
- 8 oz grated sharp cheddar
- ½ cup or more of mayo
- Black pepper
- 2 pie crusts

Lay one pie crust in the bottom of each pan. Sprinkle the cheddar (mixed with mayo and black pepper) along the bottom, leaving enough of an edge to fold. Layer sliced tomatoes on top, sprinkle with kosher salt, and fold over the pie crust.

Bake until pie crust is browned and cheese is bubbling up between tomatoes – about 15-20 minutes.

Authentic Street Tacos - Lindsey Fultz

This is a super quick meal, as it can be prepared in 30 minutes. You’ll just need a large skillet or wok for the meat, and a small skillet where you can warm the tortillas. Enjoy!

- Mission street tacos Mini corn tortillas
- HEB Mi Tienda Seasoned Diced Beef
- Half white onion, diced
- Cilantro, chopped
- Lime wedges
- HEB That Green Sauce - salsa

Place about half of the seasoned beef in a wok or large skillet, heat on high, and sear the meat. (You don’t want to do all of it at once, because it won’t sear with the whole package.) Set aside first half, and sear the second half.

Once all sides are browned, return the first half to finish cooking for a few more minutes. It shouldn’t take long, since the meat is diced. Test cut one piece to check to your desired doneness.

Warm the corn tortillas in another skillet to cook them thoroughly, flipping on each side on high heat until brown marks appear lightly, and tortilla is more flexible.

Assemble your tacos with the seasoned beef. Squeeze juice from 1 lime wedge over it, top with onion, and then cilantro. Top with green salsa, to your own taste.

PULLED PORK PASTRY PUFF

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 (17.3-oz) package puff pastry, defrosted
- 3/4 pound pulled pork
- 3/4 cup BBQ sauce
- 1-1/4 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 Tbsp water

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat oven to 400°F. Line baking sheets with parchment paper. Set aside. Unfold pastry sheets. Cut each sheet into 9 squares. Toss pulled pork with BBQ sauce. Arrange pulled pork and cheese down center of the pastry squares. Fold two opposite corners of each square over the filling and press edges to seal. Place on prepared baking sheet. Combine egg and water. Brush each pastry with egg wash.

Bake 15-18 minutes, until golden brown. Serve warm or at room temperature.

My tips:

- make sure you don't cut the squares too big; mine tasted great, but ended up being rather large
- I also used the pastry wash to help seal the edges together
- buy pre-cooked packaged meat that you can easily heat up; this will cut the time in half
- add peppers or other seasonings of choice to pulled pork for added flavor
- be sure you roll these up tight or they will flatten out and sink slightly after you pull them out of the oven

Tracye's homemade lasagna

feeds 8-10 people

takes all day (wanna let that sauce simmer as long as possible)

pre-heat oven to 400 degrees.

Use a 9X13 pan.

Ingredients for both sauce and filling:

2 pounds of ground beef

2/3 cup of sweet onion minced (i only mince because I have a picky eater and if she finds onion she will stop eating)

5 cloves + of fresh garlic minced (we LOVE garlic so I actually use around 8)

1 can of 28 ounces crushed tomatoes

2 cans of 8 ounces each tomato sauce
2 cans of 6 ounces each tomato paste
1/2 cup of water
2/3 cup of red wine (I prefer a cab sav or merlot)
3 tablespoons of sugar
1/2 to 2/3 cup chopped fresh basil
1 teaspoon of salt (I probably use more as I just "eyeball" it)
4 teaspoons of italian seasoning
2 teaspoons freshly ground pepper (again I don't measure I just "eyeball" it).
1 big container of whole milk ricotta
1 bag of shredded italian three cheese blend
1 bag of shredded mozzarella
1 bag of shredded pizza blend cheese
1 bag of grated parmasan cheese
1 egg
garlic powder, onion powder, salt, pepper
1/2 cup of freshly chopped basil
Either homemade noodles (Super easy and inexpensive) or 1 box of SKINNER oven ready lasagna noodles.

For the sauce which I personally think tastes best when allowed to simmer all day. brown the ground beef- I also add the chopped onion and minced garlic to the meat while browning. Once browned drain off all fat/grease and put back in pot. Now add the crushed tomatoes, both cans of tomato sauce and both cans of tomato paste. Now add the water, wine, sugar, 2/3 fresh basil, salt, italian seasoning and ground pepper. Stir thoroughly. Put on low and stir about every hour. I really do start this about 9 am and then let it simmer ALL day till about 4:30. It's so yummy!!!

Ok, now, once you are ready to assemble your lasagna to put it in the oven to bake, go ahead and make your yummy ricotta concoction :) Place entire container of ricotta, 1 egg, 1/2 cup of freshly chopped basil, 1/2 cup of three cheese blend, 1/2 cup of mozzarella and 1/2 cup of pizza blend cheese, salt, pepper, garlic powder and onion powder in to a bowl and mix well. I don't have measurements for the salt, pepper, garlic powder and onion powder. I just put in what i know my family likes.

Make sure to pre heat oven to 400 degrees

Take 9x13 pan and put just a dab of your ricotta mix on the bottom so that your noodles can stick to it and not slide while you are trying to cover them. Place one layer of noodles on bottom, then smear some of your ricotta mix on your noodles, then sprinkle with a bit of all your cheeses, now put a layer of your meat sauce and sprinkle with your cheeses. Place another layer of noodles then ricotta, cheeses, meat sauce and cheeses. I find that I can only get a total of two layers of ricotta and meat in my container.

Place in the oven and cook for 45 minutes to an hour (depends on your oven). I do allow my lasagna to cool for up to 30 minutes after removing it from the oven in order for it to have time to set.

ENJOY!!!!!!!



HOME

Tried and True - Paper Calendar – by Marcy Lytle

I see so many friends checking their phones when they're asked if they're available for lunch next week or to attend an event. Their calendar is on that little device, so that's where they go to look at their availability. However, I still use a paper calendar that I hang on my refrigerator! Am I mad? Apparently, not. I asked readers about their choice of calendars and it seems there are still some of you out there with me – you like paper, too!

What a crazy thing to write about, you may think. But in reality, my paper calendar is one of my favorite things I have and attend do. And let me tell you why:

- I absolutely love getting a new one each year. My criteria is that it has to look good with the décor in my kitchen and have nice large squares for filling in. If there are stickers that come with it, that's fun, too. I search and shop for just the right one, as one would for a piece of art!
- I also love turning the page to a new month. I am surprised with the new image, and I love the new empty squares waiting to be filled in with anticipation and fun for the coming weeks. It's one of the simple pleasures in life that brings me joy, just like biting into a fresh peach from a roadside stand on a hot August day.
- It helps my marriage! I try to write any activities coming up on the calendar and remind him to look at it, note it, and that way he doesn't have to ask me questions! It helps so much when he's looking ahead and realizes what's coming up, without me having to say a thing.
- I love to plan and anticipate. If we have a road trip, a vacation, a picnic, a date night...it's all filled in so that I know what's coming up and can say no to requests that might take away necessary fun time. I'm a firm believer in down time from duty, so scheduling in fun makes sure that chores and life and people don't interfere.
- It's availability at a glance. If we are needed to assist someone, to attend a party or event, or just to be open for helping someone or visiting a friend, it's nice to glance and see what squares are open...and to make sure there are some! Too much filled in only makes us both tired; but just the right amount gives a good balance to our pace of life.
- I can keep for reference. When the year is over, I usually file away that calendar at least for a while. If we wonder when that was that we went on that trip, we can look back and find the date! So helpful!
- It helps me keep track of birthdays. At the beginning of the month, I fill in family and friends' birthdays so that I can remember to get a gift or send a note or pray a prayer. If the calendar comes with stickers, I like to place a birthday on the square!
- It's great for long-range planning. At the beginning of each season, we pull it off the fridge, sit down together and look at the season at a glance. We go ahead and write in road trips and vacation times, and even special chores like fence-fixing or garage cleaning. If we don't fill them in, they won't happen. Life gets too busy.
- It's the same point of reference for both of us. Like I mentioned above, not only does he know to look at the calendar instead of asking me questions, but...he too can schedule

in date nights for us, find out if he's available to serve somewhere, and fill in his own ideas for fun things to do. It's a win/win pack of paper for us both!

Do you still hang paper calendars, or have you totally gone electronic? I know lots of people use their electronics for scheduling business related events and activities and that makes total sense. Carrying a phone is a must and having that info at hand is necessary. But for home and family and couples and fun, nothing beats the smell, the look, and the feel of a paper calendar to hang up and display, to turn and fill in, to read and enjoy...

Hint...wait until after January 1 to shop because they go on sale 50% off!

Practical Parenting – Save on School – by Marcy Lytle

It's that time of year to start shopping for back-to-school clothes (those must-haves!). However, just purchasing school supplies can for sure break the bank! Depending on the ages and temperament of your kiddos, there may be one that is super picky about what he wears, and another that could care less. I remember being so sad when I could no longer pick out my kids' clothes and bring something home to surprise them, because they had opinions of their own. Imagine that! I also recall being stressed out over the cost of everything, from clothes to shoes to backpacks and more!

I'm a pretty practical person, so here are a few pointers if you too are a stressed out mom/grandmom/aunt or friend in the throes of helping the littles in your life transition into the next season and come out with dollars still left in your account for after school ice cream and evenings at the movies.

Target Cat and Jack – Surely, you've heard of this brand. I'm so pleased with Target for this line of clothing for children because it's super affordable and super cute – a great combo. This summer, we were able to snag shorts and tops for \$4-5 each.

<https://www.target.com/b/cat-jack/-/N-qqqgm>

Ross and Marshalls and TJ Maxx – I sing the praises of these two stores all the time. You definitely have to look and you have to revisit again and again, but you can't beat the prices on clothes for the kids. While you're there, toss in a shirt for yourself! I'm a big fan of their shoe selection – so many to choose from!

Dot Dot Smile – This company is owned by my daughter's friend and she sells the most sensory friendly twirly dresses ever. They're not cheap, but if your daughter has issues with the feel of things, a few of these dresses might be worth investing in. And they require no ironing or buttoning or any such attention!

<https://www.facebook.com/dotdotsmile.janetthill/>

Old Navy – The sales Old Navy has are super. Especially end of the season. But they also run sales, and they give away bucks for future use. I really like their packs of pajamas for the little ones. Super comfy and cute for the cooler months ahead. Also check out Burke's Outlets for super cute and affordable sleepwear for the kids.

<https://www.burkesoutlet.com/search/?SearchKeyword=girls+gowns>

H&M – Have you been to the kids section of this store? H&M is known for offering affordable women's clothing in trendy styles, and they do in kids as well! The styles are simple and on a recent shopping excursion there, 6 year old Ayla picked out about eight pieces of clothing in 15 minutes time! A record! Check out their racks of simple dresses at simple prices, and jackets for the boys and the girls.

https://www2.hm.com/en_in/kids/campaigns/4210d-say-it-with-sequins.html

Secondhand – I know lots of young moms that only shop at thrift stores for themselves and their kids. I'm personally not a fan, but I'm sure it's a good thing to recycle old clothing from previous owners that barely wore them. So if you're into that sort of thing, go for it! You most probably will have to spend time and effort finding all that you need, though, if you've got a bundle of kids to buy for.

I personally stay away from department stores. They overwhelm me and I don't care for their styles, usually.

I know how much I can spend per child and I try to stick to that limit. You can do the same. If you only have \$100 right now, only spend \$100. Buy the essentials like socks, underwear and shoes. Then see how the kids can transition their summer clothes on into the first month of school.

- Buy them both a light jacket to wear over the summer tees.
- Have leggings on hand for her to wear under her sundresses as the temps start to fall. (Cat and Jack!)
- Reuse the backpack from last year, perhaps allowing them creativity to embellish or decorate. Or check out Burke's Outlet – they have really cute backpacks – cheap!
<https://www.burkesoutlet.com/search/?SearchKeyword=kids+backpack>
- They probably need shoes because feet grow! Maybe let a family member that's asked take over buying one item of clothing, like shoes!
- Label so that your kid doesn't end up losing their jacket for good the first time they wear it and leave it. <https://www.amazon.com/Sharpie-Permanent-Laundry-Marker-Black/dp/B00387BTJS>
- If she likes bows and jewelry, let her make her own. Maybe have a jewelry swap just before school starts!
- If he insists on those particular shoes in that particular brand, have him work for the money, honey.
- Pajamas for her can be simple little nightgowns (have you ever shopped Burke's Outlet?) and he and she can wear dad's and mom's old t-shirts and may love these the best!

Finally (or first) pray. God promised to provide for our needs. If funds are low and your kids need clothing, ask your Father to provide the money, the coupons, the discounts, the sales and the friends that are just waiting to give. He will do all of that...and more. I have two grown kids as proof that they never lacked for anything that they needed. Ever.

I Don't Do Teens – Be Aware – by Marcy Lytle

I remember back when my kids were teens, Facebook was gaining popularity and my kids were on it. I too got an account, just for the sheer purpose of keeping up with what my kids were doing, seeing who their friends were, and as a little guard – they knew Mom was on their social media account. Moms have that right, you know, to be aware and be there. Now fast forward just a few years, and there are even more concerns as our kids begin a new school year, especially the teens in our family.

Here are some things to be aware of, as you parent and pray and teach them to stay...close to God and all things safe:

- Phones are a privilege, not a necessity. Yes, we like our kids to have them for safety purposes, but be aware of the dangers you know that lurk, and the temptations they are easily swept into. Guard your kids' minds and hearts and eyes, in any way that you can.
- Streaming platforms – like Youtube. Ask your kids what they're watching and watch it with them. Any time they're hiding away or shying away from showing you, it's probably not a good thing. Ask for a list of videos they watch and be interested in what interests them, always. Don't let it go, in favor of your own interests.
- Self-image and self-awareness is high – This is why your teens will be drawn to stories of celebrity teens with eating disorders, the singers that write lyrics about thoughts of suicide and issues with boyfriends, etc. Pay attention to the lyrics of songs that are popular. Take time to google the artists on your kids' playlist. Don't be the parent that says, "I never knew she liked that." And by all means, affirm your kids in every area of life, and affirm yourself so that they never hear you too say, "I'm too fat," or "I feel worthless." Get help, be a positive role model.
- Gaming Rules – I don't mean to know the rules of the games they play, but rather know that gaming itself rules their time and minds! Teens are interested in gaming, and gaming can be addicting and damaging. Encourage your teens to go outside, get active, write music and stories, interact with God through reading and youth group, etc.
- Bandwagons – There are trends everywhere, and once school starts up your teens will be called to jump on bandwagons from the latest food craze to the latest dumb prank craze. Train them, talk about standing up and being different and unique, and not blending into a band full of clones, just to appear cool.
- Pizza or Sushi? – Whatever foods your teens crave or talk about, teach them. Let them start cooking and deciding on healthy ingredients, and creating. A creative mind is a great mind, instead of one that wanders or follows. Let them create in the kitchen.
- Movies and Books – Probably your teen likes one or both of these. If they're drawn to dark stories with dark characters with sinister, evil tales...talk about it with them and see why. If they insist on seeing rated R movies or films with sex scenes, talk about the dangers and offer alternative activities. What they see and what they read imprints their minds and hearts, sometimes forever.
- Vaping and suicide and drugs and alcohol – It's all out there targeted at your teens, and their friends are going to offer it all, say it all, and beg your child to go down that path of destruction. Experimentation is a dangerous thing when it comes to addictive behaviors.

And negative thinking is a slippery slope. Surround your kids with love and family, take them to church and find healthy friends. Be a healthy family...together.

Talk to your kids. Listen to your kids. Pray with your kids. Affirm your kids. Those four things provide a safe boundary of protection and freedom that make for a healthy and happy family. Then cover the whole arena with prayer.

Will your kids get into trouble this school year? I don't know the answer, and it's up to the choices they make. But our job is to pray, be there, be aware, and care. Then all the rest, we have to cast over on HIM, because he loves these kids more than we do. And he will never stop chasing after them with His great love, because he's that kind of Father.

Tiny Living – Humbly Thankful – by Leyanne Enterline

Living tiny for almost three years has definitely been a humbling experience.

At first it was exciting and fun to go against what most think is absolutely crazy. But as time has gone on it's become a little frustrating with the odd looks we get when people ask,

“Where did you say you live?”

“Why haven't you started building?”

Many obstacles have come in our way of building, so it's just not happening with our planning. We continue to wait on God's timing.

One never knows what someone is going through and why they live the way they live, but I've learned to try my best not to judge.

1 Peter 3:8 says,

“Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy,
brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.”

Just like the verse states, we are all in this together and I want to have sympathy and love others through whatever they are going through.

It's easy to jump to conclusions and think, Oh, they don't know what they're doing, they can't handle their finances, or they need to be doing things a certain way. It's easy to judge but much harder to love.

We lived in California for a couple of years and owned a nice house, had nice cars, and traveled but we got into \$40,000 in credit card debt. One would never know on the outside by the way we lived, but the debt destroyed us on the inside. Finally, with lots of fasting and praying we were able to sell our house for the exact amount we owned in debt with just enough for us to move back to Texas.

I am thankful for what we went through to learn to try not to judge, and instead have sympathy for others going through their own struggles, as well. At the time it was a very rough ride, but what God brought us through has been so amazing!

So living tiny it still is for now! We will wait on His timing and enjoy the tiny living blessings.

Remember Love Grows Best In Tiny Spaces!

A Night to Remember – Sundaes are for Sharing – by Marcy Lytle

We recently had a sundae bar with friends, and I thought afterwards why not suggest that idea to families, with a lesson to go with? The sundae bar was so fun, because we had ice cream for supper! What's better than that? I love that we have the freedom to enjoy life, without the confines of legalistic boundaries that stifle us from enjoying who God made us to be, and this life he gave us to live. This month, as the family enjoys the sundae bar, the talk will be about freedom to live and have fun...and to share that with others.

Preparation: Purchase vanilla ice cream and several toppings you know your family will love (crumbled cookies, chocolate syrup, strawberries, chocolate chips, etc.) Set out cute bowls and even decorate the table with twinkly lights, if you have them. Surprise the family one evening by announcing you've chosen to have ice cream for supper!

Ask these questions or read these statements, and then chat as you enjoy your sundae bar together.

Why aren't we having a normal supper? Isn't it bad to skip a healthy meal and eat ice cream?

Sometimes, it's okay to indulge in a few treats and take a break from all the rules...if it's safe and okay with mom and dad. School is about to start, and teachers will have rules. If she says today we're going to close our books and play a game, then go for it. But when she says open the books and let's learn; we must obey.

- God's word is there for our guidance and safety and life, but so is his freedom to be who he made us to be and enjoy this life.

Everyone's sundae will look different, depending on what each one likes on top. Some might like crumbled cookies and others just want chocolate syrup! But we can each enjoy our own creation!

When school starts, there will be kids in our classes that dress differently, talk a different way and even learn in different ways than we do. That's what makes the classroom so fun – all of the differences!

- God's word says we are to love others as we love ourselves. And that means those who are different, too.

Vanilla ice cream is what we chose for our base for our sundaes. It's plain, but then we can make it decadent with all of the goodies we pile on top.

When school starts, some days might seem plain ole vanilla, and other days might be so exciting like all the toppings piled high. And still other days might seem like our ice cream has melted and ruined! But he has promised to be with us in each situation, to make good out of it all.

- God's word is like vanilla ice cream. It's the basis for a good life, a good school year, and good things.

Sundaes have to be eaten right when they're prepared or they melt. Ice cream is delicious but if left out in the sun it will ruin quickly! No one wants a soupy bowl of hot cream!

When school starts, we will have lots of chances to do good for all of the kids in the classroom, including our teacher.

- God might whisper in our ears to play with that kid, or speak a kind word to that girl, or help out the teacher. His whispers are like ice cream. We need to obey quickly, or we will lose the opportunity to bless a friend.

Sharing is the best, around a table full of toppings and ice cream. If one person takes it all, then someone will be left missing out!

When school starts, there will be lots of chances to share our smiles, pass around kind words, or pour on happiness when someone looks sad.

- God's word is best when it's shared. We know that Jesus loves us, but do our friends?

I Corinthians 16:14 says "Let all that you do be done in love."

John 15:12 says "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you."

God is so creative, and he can help us think of all sorts of ways to bless and love our friends, just like the way we feel blessed tonight, eating ice cream for dinner!

The Family Practice - Summertime Madness - By: Brandi Oman

Our summertime has included sunshine, heat, sunscreen, anything that includes water, and lots of fun.

Recently, Caiden and I went to the Typhoon Texas water park. We played, laughed, ate, and relaxed. It was a perfectly hot Texas day, there were a lot of families, and waterpark chaos was definitely happening. After being there for about four hours, I told Caiden it was time to go. I turned around for a moment and that is when my panic set in.

Caiden was nowhere to be found. I looked around for a moment and then began to yell, "Caiden!" "Caiden!" and there was no reply. I started a perimeter search of the area where we had been. My heart was beating in my throat, my body was shaking in a panic, and I was seeing red. In what felt like hours, but in reality was only a minute or two, I found him. He was safe, he was playing with other kids in the pool, and nothing was wrong with him.

When I got to him, I explained to him the importance of communicating with me about what he is doing and where he is going in such a crowded busy place. I told him that for him - he was having fun and enjoying himself, but for me - I got scared that something awful could have happened to him.

We all have these moments in parenting where we lose sight of our child for a moment and panic. We beg our children to listen to us because we understand the dangers of the world more than they do.

I see so many times in my own life where I know there is risk in my own decisions, have heard people counsel me on the decision I make, but then I choose my own way. I don't think God panics like we do, but I think he feels the complete devastation of our refusal to follow simple instructions because he knows the dangers and the consequences of not doing so.

Thankfully, Caiden was fine and I didn't have to get authorities involved, it didn't me a long time to find him, and he now understands the lesson of following instructions the first time. We still had a marvelous time and we plan to go to the water park again...before fall arrives and another season begins.

Luke 11:28 "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."



YOU

Under the Influence - Turn on a Dime – by Marcy Lytle

It may depend on how old you are if you've heard the above phrase or not. To "turn on a dime" means to make a quick change in direction, super quick. It originated when talking about boats and how a boat could maneuver and turn sharply. And since the smallest U.S. coin is a dime, thus the phrase came to be.

It has since come to be used in talking about relationships. When we have a close friend that gets mad and dismisses us with a flash, she can be said to turn on a dime. She once liked us and now she doesn't, all over something we see as being small. However, she saw it as being huge! And the phrase can refer to our own self when we too "turn on a dime" when someone has offended us. Maybe we think she's our best friend and she acts or says something that hurts, and our first and quickest reaction is to think, "I'm done with her!" Even though we've had years of good times, we can turn on a dime and forget all the good in a flash – with one wrong move by her!

I've had people turn on a dime with me and I never knew what happened. I asked, and they didn't answer. I thought we were good, and then they were gone. But I too have turned on a dime with others. And it's all because of these things:

Anger – maybe an injustice takes place and she was the one responsible, so judgment spews out of our mouths and she's "outta there" forever – out of sight and out of our mind.

Hurt – maybe she accused you of something that is untrue and you cannot believe it, so you decide to throw away all your years of kindness because of her one sentence directed at you.

Disappointment – perhaps you're always doing the asking and she never reciprocates anymore, so instead of talking it over and finding out why, you ditch her. Done and gone.

Abuse – maybe you were once close, but now she's using and abusing your time and friendship because she's changed and in so much need...always.

Gossip – someone told you what she said, and she admitted that she said it, so now you are appalled at what she said, so you say – that's it!

Even in a marriage relationship, years of loving and commitment can go right out the door in a moment's action of infidelity. The faithful spouse turns on a dime and sends the unfaithful one packing.

I get it. And I think God gets it, too. He knows when we feel anger and hurt and disappointment and all of the above. He totally gets it. He too had friends turn on a dime on him – in the garden when he asked them to pray – and at supper – when one of his followers betrayed him for gold. These guys had committed to being in a relationship with Jesus and yet when life was tough and temptation was strong, they failed in a split second to acknowledge Jesus as their friend and Lord.

Jesus was wise. He knew when to withdraw and when to leave the company of the crowds and friends that hurt him. But he never withdrew to dismiss or forget those who betrayed him. Once he rested, ate, and felt better, he prayed. John 17 is a great prayer by Jesus to his Father, where he mentions all those that the Father gave him.

Yes, there are abusive relationships that won't ever be restored because of safety and mistrust, etc. However, there are many relationships that we dismiss too early in a fit of rage, because of one mistake, and because we refuse and cannot forget.

I don't have the answers to how long it takes to heal from someone leaving our lives quickly, when we were with them forever. And neither do I have the answer to how long it takes to get over someone that's hurt us in a moment of weakness.

The lessons I'm learning are these:

I need to be careful of what I say and do on a whim, when someone in earshot or eye level might hear or see and repeat it to someone I love.

I need to aware that when others say hurtful words to me or fail to respond as I wish, there may be a reason and I need to wait, pray for them, and let time and wisdom rule.

It's hard to turn on a dime, in a boat, or a vehicle, because sharp turns require skill and expertise. If the driver lacks either, the boat will capsize and many lives will be lost. This is probably why turning on a dime is not the best way to react, especially when there's wide open water to take time to sail and think and heal...and there's a Father up above that's waiting for us to cast those huge cares over on His shoulders so that we can run free.

Strengthening My Core - Too Odd for God – by Marcy Lytle

I know I'm not the only one that feels odd at times because I hear others say it as well. I have lots of quirks and feelings and likes/dislikes that don't match my peers...in the least. And especially if we've had others comment on our oddities or "weird" qualities in a negative way, we come away wondering if we're so odd that even God raises his eyebrows in wonder.

However, have you visited a zoo lately? There are so many odd animals and creatures in the cages. Some have huge pink butts, others ridiculously long tongues, and still others are just awkward-looking. And we know that God made them all! So if we feel odd in the way we look because we're too short, too tall, a little plump or have skin that's freckled...we should strut around with our heads held high because of our uniqueness! The animals certainly do!

That's just one way that we can feel odd – in the way we look. But there are so many other ways we feel odd, and I want to focus on our feelings. We might think we're the "odd man/woman out" because we don't feel the same way as others do about subjects, relationships, food, etc. And if literally everyone in the room likes and enjoys a particular activity or train of thought and we absolutely feel different altogether, we can wonder again, are we THAT odd?

Recently, I did wonder if I was too odd for God. I was dealing with old issues that I've dealt with for decades. I was struggling in my faith and really annoyed at people, and I really just wanted to get off the planet! (At least for a while) I had thoughts and feelings that I knew weren't "normal" and I just wondered one day what God thought about me. After all, shouldn't I be over some of my annoyances at this age in life? And what defines normal, anyway? I knew better, but just felt weak and vulnerable.

We've been watching a lot of movies lately with gay/lesbian themes, and in every one of them these folks feel odd or out of place, they struggle with their identity, they look for love and affection. And in almost every film, we get a glimpse back in their childhood life with their parents...where because of their affinity for music or dislike for the "norm" they were treated with disdain and disapproval. Their oddness made them feel unloved.

It's so important in those formative years that we get affirmation and love for who we are, regardless of whether or not we turn out like all the other kids. If we don't, we struggle the rest of our lives with fitting in, feeling accepted, and frustrated in not knowing if we're "okay."

This particular week I was especially low. And I began to review what I know. Couldn't that be a rhyme to remember?

"When you are low, review what you know."

- I know that I am created in the image of God.
- I know that I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
- I know that Jesus loves me.
- I know that he wants a relationship with me, as I am.
- I know that He hears every cry and every prayer.

- I know that he knows my thoughts before I ever speak a word.
- I know that He works everything (even my highs and lows) together for good.

I'm pretty sure many of those who followed Jesus felt like they might be too odd for God. Maybe they had evil ways (cheating tax collectors) or were unfaithful (adulterers) or were weak (sank into water when they were told to walk) or even crazy (those possessed with demons.) Jesus never passed by one odd person because of their oddity. In fact, he spoke to them and revealed to them their deepest needs and then he met those needs. He sought out the odd in society to love them and never to shun them.

When I'm down and low and feeling odd and out of sorts, I'm thankful for the reminders I read about in his Word about how much he loves me and cares for me, in all of my oddities and more. And if the odd stuff is bad stuff, he'll work it all out. But if the odd stuff is good stuff, he'll let me be and teach me to thrive.

Healthy Habits – And Now Another – by Marcy Lytle

I was driving in the car the other day and became so annoyed with Siri. Have you ever done that? She wasn't understanding my directives, and I was losing my patience with this voice without a face! So I decided to tell her so. I said, "Siri, you're so frustrating!" And guess what her reply was? "Take a deep breath." (pause) "And now another." What? That just made me even more annoyed with her!

However, I took a deep breath and then I laughed at the absurdity of the conversation I had just had with a nobody.

That experience made me think about this column and how there are some really simple and real ways to relieve tension and frustration, if we can remember to take five and heed the directives, even if they come from a source like Siri.

Breathe – That's what she told me to do. And that's what I did. There's really something quite healing about breathing deep. It's like the tightness in our chest is relieved when we breathe in deep and then exhale slowly. We forget this simple exercise that works so well.

Read – Some days I just steal away from my work and sit in the sunshine or shade and read a chapter in a book. It's not a deep thinker type of book, because that would just require more intense focus. Rather, I choose a book about characters that are remotely different from my world, so that I can escape to that era or part of the world for 15-30 minutes. And it works! I feel better for doing so.

Mow – I have suggested a few times that we get a gardener to take our yard maintenance work from us. But then we keep going, and every time I'm through mowing, I feel good. Not only have I walked and sweated, but I've accomplished making an overgrown piece of grass into a beautifully trimmed block of green! I feel elated!

Garden – Maybe mowing's not your thing, but gardening is. Even if it's August, you can plant succulents or herbs or indoor plants. In fact, take a succulent planting class in your area! There is something so healing about digging in the dirt!

Walk outside – There are days when I've been working all day inside, and I'm a grouch come evening! However, if we step outside and walk a mile or two, I feel like a different person! I may have to push myself to do it at the end of the day, but I'm always glad I did after the mile is up. The wind is necessary to blow away the stress...

Nap – Not possible, I know, for moms of littles unless they nap, too. And then you want to clean the house and get things done! But for those who can, a little short nap does wonders for the soul and the psyche!

Play – So if you're surrounded by littles, then stop and play with them. Stop the laundry and the dusting and the list-making and play. Get wet in the splash pad with them, build a zoo in a shoe box, laugh at a funny kids' video they're watching. And that leads me to the last one...

Laugh – A good belly laugh is healthy! If you find nothing to laugh about in your day, then ask a friend to tell you something funny. Make yourself laugh at the mishaps of the day. Listen to the laughter of children and make yourself join in, and see if the laughter doesn't then come easily and more frequently.

What else can you remind yourself to do? We all know the things listed above, but we get caught up in living life and forget to do the simplest one of all, that directive that annoying Siri told me in the car.

Take a deep breath. And now another...

Life Right Now – Sisters – by Bethany Gomez

I can't believe that another summer break is coming to an end for me. My older sister and I are trying to settle into our new place. As my sister put it, "Our new normal doesn't feel normal yet," but I have no doubt it will. I have this feeling that it will start to feel more normal as I say goodbye to my summer break and get back into my full time job routine.

Lately, I've been so thankful for my older sister even though the dynamic is a little different when it is just the two of us. We are sisters after all. When it's just the two of us I think we feel less self-conscious about griping at each other a little bit more than normal. I've made the statement a couple of times that we basically resemble an old married couple. We fight, usually over small things, but then we are always quick to forgive each other and move on.

We are incredibly close. The fact that we are only 18 months apart may make it obvious why that is, but I think one of the main reasons we are so close is because we are so different from one another. We each have different strengths and weaknesses that balance out somehow. But we are not so different that we don't understand each other. Does that make sense? Whatever the case, I don't know what I would do without her.

There is a song by Taylor Swift, called "I'm Only Me When I'm With You" and there is a particular part in the chorus that I think kind of sums up our relationship. It goes like this:

Well, you drive me crazy half the time

The other half I'm only trying

To let you know that what I feel is true

And I'm only me when I'm with you

We do drive each other crazy sometimes, but what I think is great is that I can be myself around her. I don't feel any pressure to be anything other than who I am when I'm with her, and that is truly a freeing feeling.

My relationship with my older sister has not always been so strong. At one point when we were younger, I allowed a seed of jealousy to take root. I almost let it grow out of control. I resented my sister for a long time. She got everything I thought I needed to be happy. While I struggled with acne, she had a clear complexion. While I grew taller, bigger, and wider eating the same things she ate, she had this petite, slim frame with a high metabolism. While I had small, round eyes with straight eyelashes, she had these big, beautiful almond shaped eyes with naturally curled lashes that went on for days. While I struggled with being shy, she was outgoing and made friends easily. I had very low self-esteem in those days. At the time, I knew I shouldn't be having these jealous thoughts, but I didn't know how to break free from them. Thankfully, through the Holy Spirit my mom was able to discern what was going on with me and she sat me down, talked to me and prayed with me. In that moment as I sought forgiveness, I remember almost instantly that the feeling of jealousy left. I realize that had I chosen to let that seed of jealousy stay I wouldn't have a close relationship with my sister that I have today. I was set free to love myself and in turn love my sister with all of my heart.

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just and
will forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness.

God is so, so good! He loves each of us the same. I'm so thankful for His love and forgiveness.

I don't know what God has in store for my sister and me as we travel down the road together for a time. Could it be He wants to strengthen our relationship? I hope so. Does He want to use one or both of us to help each other or help someone else? Maybe. Whatever it is, I want to make sure I don't take for granted this time that we have together.

My sister wrote a post about our time that we spent living together with our best friend. In it she said that her "life hasn't exactly gone the way she had planned...but God always has a plan and works all things out for his good." I couldn't agree more.

I trust that His plan for each of our lives is going to be wonderful, not easy, but better than anything we can imagine.

Created for Life - Uncovered Mysteries – by Ginny Hurley

Mysteries have always been one of my favorite genres. Delving into secret stories and hidden agendas appeals to my sense of adventure. I can read a book and transcend into the time and place in my imagination. Movies are great, but I find that reading the author's original intent is much more satisfying and exciting. Besides, today's movies can be so graphic and disturbing, while a book leaves the pictures to your own imagination. I'm also stealthy at cutting a violent scene or skipping a part in an exciting novel that I know bothers me. Creating in my mind what the characters look like gives me joy as my favorite fiction characters become heroes or heroines in the stories. When humor is mixed with a great mystery, I can seldom put it down, laughing with a sense of foreboding as the character clumsily stumbles upon the answer or culprit. In most cases, when a book I've read or author I love makes a movie, I am usually disappointed in the actor or actress chosen for the main part.

As I was reading in my favorite version of the Bible, *The Passion*, I was again captured by God's mysteries that He has hidden for us to discover. I love how He hides things to be revealed to us when we search and seek. As I was reading in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, I was again captivated by the words spoken by Paul and realized how the true mysteries are hidden in another world. I won't write the whole scripture here but will give a portion of what God spoke to me through...

I Corinthians 2:6-11

"It's wisdom that didn't originate in this present age, nor did it come from the rulers of this age who are in the process of being dethroned. Instead, we continually speak of this wonderful wisdom that comes from God, hidden before now in a mystery. It is His secret plan, destined before the ages, to bring us into glory.... Vs 9 Things never discovered or heard of before, things beyond our ability to imagine—these are the many things God has in store for all His lovers. But now God unveils these profound realities to us by the Spirit. Yes, He has revealed to us His inmost heart and deepest mysteries through the Holy Spirit, who constantly explores all things. After all, who can really see into a person's heart and know his hidden impulses except for that person's spirit? So it is with God. His thoughts and secrets are only fully understood by His Spirit, the Spirit of God."

This message quite overwhelms my ability to perceive, yet I know it is true. My understanding of these mysteries is only revealed by my acceptance and revelation of His Holy Spirit. As I allow His spirit to dwell inside of me, His mysteries will continually be unveiled. I cannot, in my own wisdom and study, uncover things hidden from ages past. Only as I join His Spirit within me, will I be able to uncover true jewels and treasures from heaven. I love this, yet it leaves me trembling in the kind of awe that surpasses worldly mysteries and agendas. This kind of fear is what we were created for, the kind that is from another world, a higher one, revealed for those who search it out.

We were literally made in His image, created for a life of adventure and mystery. What a good and perfect Father! He knew us before we were born!

I can almost see His smile as I discover His rich blessings and favor! Right now as I ponder these thoughts, I can't help but laugh at His fun and joyful Spirit!

What an adventure, and there's so much more to come!



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Little Joys – by Bekah Holland

Get comfy, y'all. I've got a story to share. One I heard not long after I found myself married and in a similar place.

This couple was young and newly married, completely in love and ridiculously poor. When their first anniversary came around, they knew there wasn't going to be romantic candlelit dinner with white tablecloths and 5-star service. The woman was feeling a bit disappointed, knowing that the things she had dreamt of were closer to a silly fairy tale than reality, and the man was struggling with his confidence as he couldn't give his wife something beautiful to celebrate their first year together. They rose the morning of the big day, got ready and went on with their days and jobs, both wishing they had some grand gesture to give to show their love. Later that evening, after a dinner at home, with handmade cards and words of love, the woman walked in to her bathroom. Waiting for her was a bathtub with drugstore bubble bath next to it, several tea light candles and a bowl of red hots. Immediately, her husband started apologizing that it wasn't fancy chocolates or expensive bath oils. But this act of love moved her. He did what he could with what he had. They both found a moment of joy in the smallest of acts.

I'll be honest, this story moved me in a big way. Because I was definitely that girl. I had these ideas in my head of what my marriage was going to look like. These pictures played out in my mind, full of unrealistic expectations, and I never once thought about anything marring that cozy little life I imagined. And in case anyone was wondering, that played out exactly the way you think it did...not at all. We hit bumps right out of the gate. Sinkhole sized bumps. And we celebrated our first anniversary, a month after our daughter was born, so we were sleep deprived and I might have cried. Twice. Before we even left the house. I mean, it was lovely and the time together was great, but it was a far cry from the visions I had when I was young...er.

Our first New Year's Eve together was anything but glamorous. My past NYE celebrations consisted of sparkly jewelry, pretty dresses and stupidly high-heeled shoes. But on December 31st, 2007, things were a bit more low-key. With our baby asleep in the next room, and wearing our finest t-shirts that may or may not have smelled like spit up, we toasted with the finest champagne available from the nearest gas station. Don't be jealous. And we sat around our computer to check out this newfangled website called YouTube, watched funny videos and laughed until we cried. It is, to this day, one of my favorite memories.

As years rang in and ended, sink holes arrived and left, struggles came and went and came back around again....we had to learn to find joy in the little things. I learned my husband's favorite snacks and candy and he learned my favorite authors and wildflowers. We would write notes encouraging each other and find ways to give in small ways. But as we did those things, we found more and more that all of these "little" things were actually not so little. The sticky note on the mirror meant more than the diamond earrings. The candy bar on the night stand said I love you more than the newest gadget (well, maybe not more, but it said it almost as well). And we've had many date nights curled up watching a favorite television show with cheese and crackers because going out was just too much.

We loved those times!

Funny enough, on our 10th anniversary, we got all dressed up, went to a very fancy restaurant and ordered very fancy food, only to have most of it boxed up, run home, put on our pajamas

and eat the leftovers laughing on the living room floor. It was, by far, my favorite part of the night. In our 13 years of marriage, we have found the joy in the little things:

The small gestures that have great impact.

Words of encouragement.

Long hugs in the kitchen.

Getting takeout after a rough day so I don't have to cook.

Finding joy in the little things helps me find contentment on days when things are good, and even on days when I just want to hide under the bed until it's all over. It's helped me on days that I need to remember how much I love my husband, even if I don't particularly like him at the moment (come on, you know it happens sometimes.) And, it's helped him remember how much he loves me, even when I've lost my keys for the 14th time in the same day, regardless of how many times he's tried to get me to leave them on the danged hook he put up just for me.

Sometimes, we all need to stop and smell the proverbial roses, love the ones around us and see the beauty in being right where we are.

Date Night Fun – Summer Drives – by Marcy Lytle

It's August. Back to school is happening, those summer projects are still waiting to be completed, maybe there's one more trip to be had before we say good-bye to summer, and so much more to fill our calendars! However, date night awaits us all as well! And this month we're presenting to you five summer drives to take, so that date time with him is fun and different and a summer event you won't soon forget...

Drive across town – Make it a point to get in your car and drive to a part of town you've not been to before. Drive through the neighborhood, visit a coffee shop in that area, and even check out a community park or pool there. Make sure you're out away from your little circle of homes, and into another area to explore. Exploration together is invigorating and the best fun ever.

Drive in the country – Head out of town. Pack a cooler, stash a few books or a newspaper in a bag to read, take a game, toss in your chairs and some sunscreen, and head out with no particular place in mind. Just go. Decide on how long you'll drive. Expect and look for beautiful scenes, country homes or abandoned places, wheels of hay, or late summer fruit stands. Stop and take photos. Pull over under a shade tree and nap. No map, having no agenda, is relaxing and needed for the best fun ever.

Drive to the beach – If you have a coastal beach, go. If you only have a beach at a lake, go. If there's only a man-made beach at an amusement park nearby, go. Browse the stores for sales on beach buckets or other games for the sand, even if they're generally for kids. Purchase some clearance water shoes! Pack up snacks. Being a kid in the sand and watching the sun set over the ocean (or lake) might make for the best boost for your marriage ever.

Drive to the hills – Maybe you live in flat lands. Surely there's a hill SOMEWHERE for you to find or create or imagine. Hills cause us to look up, to climb, and then to ascend and descend. It's all about noticing our surroundings and giving thanks for the beauty in creation. This time pack binoculars. Look at wildlife, sketch what you see. A little looking out beyond to the hills reminds us to give thanks and that makes for a romantic ever after.

Drive to the stands – Fruit stands, farmers markets, vendors that sell their wares, etc. Make a list and hit a bunch all in one day! Fresh produce, something homemade, a bite of one last summer peach, do it all! Keep your marriage fresh just like the freshness you encounter at each stand. It might make for a date you'll want to do over and over again...forever and ever.

Get the picture? You want to make memories with date nights, you want to relax, enjoy each other and the beauty around you, and you want to get away together...and remember those vows and that fun...forever.

After 30 Years – Keep Walking – by Marcy Lytle

We neither one really want to, sometimes. It's too hot, or we're too tired, or we just ate, or we don't have on the right shoes, or we are sleepy. You name it. We can easily come up with excuses not to go for a walk. We all do it. Or we'd rather just exercise alone in our own way, at our own pace, and at the gym away from him, and away from home. That's good too, but there's really something about walking outside together that invigorates both of us physically, mentally, and in our marriage.

Just yesterday, it was 97 degrees and mid-afternoon, not a prime time to take a walk. However, we had been driving for hours, we had a movie scheduled later, and I could feel myself become irritable and restless. I needed to walk.

He, however, was tired and looked at the temperature, and was sure it would be dangerous to walk in the heat of the day. And, of course, it can be. He wasn't sure he had the right shoes, and he just wanted to pull over and nap (which we did that, too!)

But here's the deal. We both feel SO MUCH BETTER after we get out of the car, put on our walking shoes (I keep a pair under my seat at all times), grab a water bottle (we take these with us, too) and start moving. We choose places that have shade and a breeze, if possible.

This particular Sunday we chose Mueller Park, one of our favorite walking trails. It's around a pretty body of water with a fountain, there's always a little man selling frozen treats, there are birds and rocks and ducks and turtles, and oh yes –beauty!

We pulled up and noticed that not many were on the trail – duh. It was 97. Did I mention that? We told each other we'd go slowly and return to the car if we felt the least bit overheated. We filled up with water, stopped at the bathroom, and started walking.

Nope, we didn't hold hands. It was too hot. But we observed the people we did pass. Jon made noises like a pigeon at the pigeons on the ground near us (way too near us). He stopped and bought a frozen treat that he ate quickly, before it melted. We talked about the beauty of the trees and how we wished we'd gotten there earlier for the farmer's market. I even did a "summer shuffle" where I skipped a little, because I just wanted to.

And when we came around back to where we parked, we looked at each other and said, "Let's go again," and we did.

We were burning hot and sweaty at the end of this walk, and we fell into the car and turned up the AC on full blast, as we backed out to head to the movies.

Every single time we walk, I feel better. Stress goes away, my heart is pumping faster, I feel like smiling, and all my grumpiness is elevated to pleasant words for me and for him. Now, how could that ever be a bad thing?

It's hot in August, at least for most of us. And we can walk in a mall (yes, we've done that) but we miss that sunshine and breeze. Did I mention those two things? They're vital. We will opt for earlier or later walks when we can, when the temps are at least below 90. But no matter the

time of day, if we can find a body of water, a trail, some water, and a frozen treat nearby – we're good to go – to keep on walking.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Best of the Mess – Poop on the Window – by Marcy Lytle

Our writer of this column is a young mom with two little boys and was in the process of looking for a job, when the kids got sick, and life just got messy...as the title implies. This past month she was extremely busy and wasn't able to get her story written, so I'm covering for her. As I began to think on a subject, I decided to write about how when life is messy, it's okay to say no, to step away, and let someone else...

Here's what I mean:

- When our calendar is too full, it's okay to decline yet another invitation, even if we're worried we might offend. Keeping our sanity is not selfish, it's wise.
- When our minds are racing with all sorts of destructive or fearful thoughts that clutter up and crowd out the truth, there's nothing wrong with texting a friend and saying, "I'm a mess. Please pray." Gathering our scary thoughts that are spiraling downward is a healthy thing to do.
- When the house is literally and visibly messy, it's okay to not beat ourselves up and allow ourselves grace to clean when we feel better, after we've played with the kids, or when we've slept better at night. A clean house is great, but a messy house shows life has occurred.
- When what we're wearing is dirty, stinky and too tight because we've given birth, had kids climbing all over us, or nothing is clean in the laundry, we can burst out laughing at the absurdity of trying to be perfect. Perfection is way overrated.
- When our faith is weak because that friend is dying, our mom is ill, our children seem depressed, or our husband just lost his job, we can cry out to God in anguish with moans that cannot be uttered in words. He can take it. He understands. And he doesn't judge us. He loves us.
- When the car smells like dirty diapers all the time, the slime is now part of the décor, and the floorboard is not visible because of toys, socks and empty drive-through bags, we can ask for help...yes we can. We can insist that everyone take a bag and grab 10 things and empty the car for Mom. We are not super woman, and never will be.
- When our fridge has sticky jelly outside of the jar, leftovers with no labels that are now growing mold, and when the door swings open the whole family holds their nose, we can purge and throw away everything without guilt. No, we don't have to eat every last bite, explain why we tossed that carton with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of milk in the bottom, or cry over the carton of blueberries we forgot we had that have now gone bad. Messy fridges happen.
- When we arrive back at our house from a play date where her house was perfect, her sofa was white, and her kitchen boasted a bowl of pretty fresh lemons, we don't need to step inside our front door and wish we were like her. Comparison is a joy killer, and we all need joy to be strong.

Are you getting the picture? I'm sure I haven't hit on every mess that comes to our life at times, sometimes because of our neglect, but mostly because we're moms, wives, and women that breathe and live.

For all you young moms reading this article, let me tell you this. I'm 61 and just this year, I finally have my pantry and fridge somewhat organized like I saw in a magazine decades ago. But even with no kids living in the house any more, nothing stays pristine or perfect or organized, even with just the two of us. We still get messy in all areas of life and have to ask each other for help, and call on friends to pray.

It's the best of the mess that makes this life worth presenting to others. Presenting perfection is like trying to keep a car window glass clean when there are storms blowing through, African dust settling in, and birds flying by that poop right after we exit the car wash. We do the best we can, we clean as often as our lives permit, and sometimes those who see us take a finger and write in our dirt...but so what?

When we open our doors, there's laughter to be heard, cries to be consoled, and the smell of something cooking in the kitchen...even if it's a smell of something burning. Life is happening right now, and we're blessed to be a part of it, mess and all.

Simple Truths - Keeping It Real – by Erica Simmons

Note: My son and I talked, and he gave permission to share this story. My reason for sharing is for all of you that also struggle with real life at home with real kids. This story is for all of us, to speak up, share, and be real...on the road to healing.

Have you ever watched one of those time-lapse videos where people are drawing, painting or creating something? In the beginning what they are creating does not look like much; but as they continue to do their thing, a transformation takes place into something amazing and beautiful. That's how the work of God looks in someone else's life. Since we are not the artist or (in God's case) the creator, we can't see the potential in the canvas, lump of clay, piece of wood or stone or the life of another. What we see from the beginning is something we can't find any value in until it is complete. Since we can't see, understand or comprehend the value, we dismiss it, belittle it or attack it...especially when it is in the lives of those we love and care about.

The month's story is not going to sit well with some readers. However, there will be someone out there that my unashamed revealing of the truth with help.

One of the things I have so often wished as a parent is that I had someone to go to and share my struggles and my children's struggles, their choices. I wish I had someone who had similar experiences. In hindsight, what I really wanted was a quick reference guide as to how to deal with it all and make the struggles go away as quickly as possible. Secondly, through all my years of writing for *A Bundle of THYME* I have made it a point to protect my boys from judgment, so I shared what we were going through in generalities. This month, I am going to violate my rule of protecting my child from judgment so that I may be the first point for someone else. After all, our life is our testimony and our testimony can be someone else's strength. I am going to keep it real and trust that those who need this will find renewed strength in an area of their life where they may have started to falter.

So, off we go...

Three years ago Mother's Day weekend is when I found out, and I will never forget it. At work, we had come to the end of the arduous testing season and were going out to have our year-end celebration. I decided to run home really quickly and when I pulled into my driveway, my son Jordan and his friend were acting weird coming from the side of the house. I told him what my plans were and noticed his eyes were red. I went in the back gate and didn't see anything until I turned to go back out. In the corner of the gate I saw it, a makeshift bong made out of a Golden Peak bottle. I lost it, told his friend to go home and that he was not welcome here anymore.

I am hurt and I am angry and I am ashamed. I call and tell my co-workers I can't make the celebration. I will say what so many parents have said before me. *I NEVER thought my son would ever do drugs.* Here is where I pause and share what I have learned in the years since this discovery.

The single biggest reason I thought Jordan would never do drugs was because as a 5th grader after he graduated from the D.A.R.E program he came up to me and said "Mama, I will never do drugs." That's right. I took the words of an 11-year old child to be the deciding factor of whether

or not for the rest of his life he would use drugs. I did not follow that up at any time with a conversation about drugs, even knowing that my sister, niece, and nephew all smoked marijuana. This is not a how-to article. This is simply the truth. Take from it what you will.

It has now been three years and I wish I could tell you that Jordan no longer smokes marijuana, but I can't. It has been three years of counseling, shouting, crying, anger, threats and learning to listen. He also listens to me about my fears and concerns of the impact of drugs. His dad had a drug issue that eventually destroyed any chance of us being together as a family. So much of the research talks about marijuana being the gateway drug to harder more illicit drug use, not to mention the risk of getting caught with these drugs and having this on his record. I am learning to understand some of his issues with anxiety, stress and later grief of losing his friends in a deadly car crash. In the course of things, we have learned to talk openly and honestly about his smoking. It is not always easy or comfortable, but it helps. Especially after an incident that happened with him and a group of friends a few days ago.

They all went to an Airbnb. The group was mostly current and former members of our church youth group ages 16 to 20. Jordan thought that it would be okay to smoke marijuana while there. Well, it was not, and of course it got back to all of the parents. Jordan and had a heated discussion about understanding the appropriateness of this behavior. I told him that as hard as it was for me to accept his using it, that it was understood that this behavior would not leave this house.

There are some conversations that have to be had and there has been trust and opportunities lost, but it is not all bad. At this point, if you are still reading, you are probably thinking, *this woman is crazy*. She is out here putting her business out for anyone to read. Yes, I am sharing something that is very private and personal. Something I would not have had the courage to share a year ago. But this takes me back to when I started the article with about God being the creator and seeing the potential in the midst of the ugly, messiness of human living.

Even though I don't know the final outcome, I do have faith that God who started this work is Jordan is going to also finish it. That is not all. As we watch the videos, there is a point where even we began to see the progress from where the artist started. That, too, can be seen in Jordan's marijuana use.

As stated above, one of my concerns was that his marijuana use would lead to other more dangerous drug use. Even though I found out about his drug use three years ago, he has been using for four years. How could he have been using for a year and I not know it? Having never used or been around drugs myself, I did not know what to look for. My sister said she saw smoke around him and his friends, so I started smelling him and keeping my eyes open. I later learned that smelling his hands is where the evidence of smoking would be.

Not only has my son not progressed to harder drugs, he is now using less and his emotional mood swings are fewer. When people who have not seen him for a while see him now, they can see the changes in him to the more positive fun-loving guy that he is. His aura is back and he continues to teach me things.

I have always known that Jordan will do great things for God; he has always had this undeniable wisdom about him. This is even true, now. Also, only one of the youth participated with the marijuana, and she also was already using. The biggest issue is that there were others around, and it is not my child's place to expose other people children to his drug use.

That said, after talking to him about this past week's activities, he shared with me a few things I think are insightful. You may say I am just trying to put lipstick on a pig, and that is okay, but I know his story is far from over. This is but a glimpse of yet another frame in the work of His creator.

My job is to keep the lines of communication open, keep praying, and above all have faith.

His life will be God's testimony.

Firmly Planted – Bits & Pieces – by Dina Cavazos

Seven birdfeeders scattered through-out the prayer garden—seven gifts of abundance, safflower and millet seed free for the taking. Every day the birds come and feast on what God has provided them through my hand. But, as much as I'd like to pick and choose, the birds aren't the only ones that enjoy the gifts. There are rats lurking. Early yesterday morning I looked out and saw what I loathe to see...not one, but *two* rats feasting in one of the feeders, their long tails hanging down.

Of course there's going to be rats! A gourmet meal is served up nearly every day. If only they would stay out of sight—but they have the audacity to appear in broad daylight, no invitation needed, flaunting their escape skills. There, on the patio, is my grandson Austin's BB gun, no BB's. Even if I was able to hit one rat, I doubt a tiny BB would do much damage. But it would make me feel better, and maybe it would sting enough to discourage all of them. *Note to self: get some BB's.* I went out quietly and threw rocks, sending them scrambling up the long S-hook into the tree, no doubt laughing at me. Several of the feeders have baffles to make it harder for squirrels and rats to climb onto the feeders, but not this one.

My disgust compels me to take immediate action, so I start thinking how to make a quick baffle. I have bits and pieces of things saved that sometimes drive me nuts (because you know my mission is SIMPLIFY not COLLECT), but sometimes they're actually useful. I found a round metal plate with a hole I'd drilled some time back. I used a washer at the end of some wire to attach it to the suspension hook but it tipped way off balance. In my collection of bits and pieces I found a decorative metal piece I'd saved from an old birdfeeder. I added it on top and the weight helped balance the whole thing. The bird feeder now has a one-of-a-kind Rat-Keeper-Outer.

As I was putting together this functional and purposeful item from leftover cast-off bits and pieces of things, the wind stirred in my ear...or was it the water gurgling in the fountain? No, it was more like the light changed. It's hard to tell, sometimes, what happens in the prayer garden. All I know is I felt a peace settle over me, a *knowing* that, because my heart belongs to the One Who Makes Something Out of Nothing, he's got me. He has incorporated all the bits and pieces of my crazy life, including mistakes, failures, and best laid plans gone wrong, into something functional and purposeful. My ability to put pieces together is only a shadow of what he is able to do, and *that, is a gift!*

Moving Forward - I Love My Life! – by Pam Charro

Is your life awesome and amazing?

Do you feel that you walk in power and the atmosphere changes when you walk in the room?

Are you aware that God is constantly bringing you new favor?

Do you feel like a strong world changer?

If you're like me, you can't always answer "Yes!" to this question.

I get tired.

I look at circumstances.

I lose perspective.

Life can really be difficult.

And I get worn out.

But recently I've become aware of the power available to us as God's people when we speak that we love our lives, even when we don't feel like it or can't see it.

Why would that be true? Because when you say that you love your life, you are agreeing with God that he is good and that he knew what he was doing when he put you here. You're reminding yourself that there is always something new and exciting around the next corner. And you're speaking faith that God will give you new strength, your trial will pass, and things will get better.

God is faithful in making your life and mine into a masterpiece. Let's adore him for all that he is and all that he will do by deciding to love our lives, no matter what. Victory and power are ours!

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk among mine high places.

Real Stories – Summoned to Trust – by Stephanie Moon

“Do you trust God?”

I had a really vulnerable moment with a friend recently who asked me that question. I was surprised by my reaction as tears immediately welled up in my eyes, and ashamedly I answered,

”No.”

Typically, encouraging people to trust God because He is good and faithful was my M.O. Being raised as missionary kid, I had countless moments in my life where I experienced God’s faithfulness. For example there was one time our old minivan broke down in the middle of a desert on a 22-hour road trip to Houston and a complete stranger literally just gave us his car. *Unbelievable, right?* After experiencing several similar stories like that, one would think by this point in my life I would trust God more easily!

So what was holding me back from trusting God in that moment?

A few years ago, God put on my husband’s and my heart to start a ministry under the non-profit organization A.C.T. Intl., called One29 Ministries, to proclaim what John 1:29 says, “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” We do that through three avenues- worship, missions, and justice. The more we walked in creating this, the more and more our hearts grew specifically for missionary care. We became increasingly aware of the many needs that missionaries all around the world have. The mission field can be a lonely place, and our aim is to offer true community and walk alongside missionaries as they navigate unique challenges. We want them to know that they are loved, not forgotten, and are being covered in prayer. We also want to serve in practical ways like leading worship and caring for their youth and children as they gather to be poured into, as well as building and maintaining relationships with these people who are laying their lives down for the furthering of the gospel.

Serving missionaries in this capacity requires a heavy load of work and resources, and recently we have been feeling the Lord asking me to step down from my full time job in order to take on more responsibility to operate One29 Ministries. As exciting as that sounds, this requires me to raise support for our ministry, of which our goal has not been met yet, as well as my income.

And I must say that taking that leap of faith in obedience is overwhelming and scary. It is my nature to look inwards at my capacity and think,

What if I fail?

What if I can’t find the support we need?

What if I can’t handle the times I feel rejected?

What if...

I was processing all of this with my friend who asked me that simple question that revealed the condition of my heavy and fearful heart.

“Do you trust God?”

All of the fear I had about moving forward, about being obedient to this calling, about leaving a steady income, about starting a role that I knew would make me grow and step out of my comfort zone was overwhelming.

The next morning on my drive to work, in an effort to find some relief for my heaviness, I opened an audio Bible app and I begged God to speak to me. And He did, showing me His faithfulness. This passage read in my car, and gave me the words of life I so desperately needed.

Isaiah 45: 2-5

I will go before you and will level the mountains.

I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.

I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places,

so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel,

who summons you by name.

For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen,

I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor,

though you do not acknowledge me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.

I will strengthen you,

though you have not acknowledged me,

so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men

may know there is none besides me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Wow. How easy it is to focus my fears, my ability, my capacity, and my comfort. I know that I am not capable of accomplishing this great task on my own, but He reminds me time and time again that He can. He always has. He always will...because He is faithful and good.

I wish I could tell you how this story ends, how we've met all our funding goals, and how now I live without any fear. But I can't.

What I can tell you is that as we continue to walk in obedience, our trust in God and our understanding of living by faith increases. I can tell you that in moments of desperation, God draws near and always come provides what we need. And I can tell you that living a life continually being desperate for Him is so worth it.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – August Observations

I was watering my garden this weekend and observing. It's something I do every time I water. I look to see what weeds need to be pulled, I notice whether or not bugs are eating our roses, I look to see if leaves are drooping, and all the things a good gardener does. Except, I wouldn't call myself a good gardener at all because I let my plants get way too thirsty before giving them a drink! As I was watering, I realized that August was coming, so we needed to get ready for the heat and the lack of rain.

I began to think...

Lots of my flowering plants will not bloom in intense heat, but they still need watering. Lots of watering. In fact, they need more watering more often, and deeper watering, so they don't wilt and die.

Some of my plants will die, because they're annuals. In other words, they need to be replanted each year if I want color in my garden of that variety.

The grass will need attention, because heat can burn the grass and cause dry patches.

Mulch might need to be added to the garden, to help cover the tender roots and the ground, so that the water stays in, instead of evaporating.

I will have to schedule for more watering times. I cannot just sit and allow spring rains and sun to do their jobs. The rains are now scarce and the sun is too hot.

Some plants will thrive in the heat, like okra. Do you plant okra? I haven't in a while, but it grows great in the summer heat – and tastes so good when it's coated in cornmeal and fried!

As I thought about August heat and its arrival, I realized that sometimes I just give up and let things die because I myself don't want to stand in the heat, either. My husband never gives up on the grass and has a set watering schedule, attends to dry patches, and makes sure our grass thrives even when it's 100 degrees-plus outside.

All of the above observations came strongly, because I was feeling the heat of life at the moment. As I stood there watering, I stood there weeping as well. I was tired of building up my faith, I was weary in well doing, I was out of words to offer to friends who were hurting, and I was just exhausted, much like the leaves on the Turks Cap that look so pretty when perked up but so pitiful when that perk is gone.

I didn't even feel like watering my soul, replanting my faith, paying more attention to His word, or any of the "gardening" things that make color and beauty thrive. Every summer, I'm tempted to just run inside and stay, and let it all wilt and die. It's just too much work!

I'm SO THANKFUL that our Father doesn't give up on us when the heat is on, and we're standing wilting in the heat. He's always an amazing gardener that shows up with buckets of water, fertilizer, wings that offer shade, plant food that makes us grow, and so much more. He never gets weary or tired.

I find that amazing.

I find that comforting.

What observations are you making this month, in the heat of the summer, when the sun is too hot and raindrops are too few?

Consider writing them down, then stepping outside to water your own plants this season, and observing some more. Learn from nature, receive peace from the way He's made the world and its beauty to respond to care and attention, and then soak in His presence and thrive.

In the middle of the hottest part of the year...

FRESH THYME – Bad Memories – by Marcy Lytle

Not too long ago, I came home to find our front door ajar. It seems my husband had left in a hurry and failed to pull the door so that it latched. All at once, I remember decades ago coming home to find my door open and my house a mess, because burglars had entered and taken everything of value. Of course, I panicked and stayed on the phone with my daughter while I walked around to make sure no one was in the house, or anything was missing.

Why don't bad memories leave us? I can still recall lots of things that happened to me as a kid that were hurtful, shameful and embarrassing. I have a hard time putting out of my mind the time my mom spent in the hospital, and other traumatic events. I even struggle with forgetting past wounds and hurts from things said or unsaid, when I needed a helping hand and instead got a judgmental finger.

I was thinking about memories this morning and how I absolutely love recalling the memories made from vacations with my kids or Christmas time together as a family, around the tree. Those are sweet memories I never want to forget! But those memories that were hurtful, I so wish I could forget them!

The bible says that He forgets our faults when he forgives our sins and remembers them no more. However, we don't forget them. The cool thing is that even when we remember them and call them up and talk about them, our Father has erased them from ever having any sort of effect on our standing with him. We are clean, free, and loved.

But let's just think about what would happen if we didn't remember certain events, even the bad ones:

- We'd forget that stepping in that ant hill brought bites and pain. And we'd step in it again.
- We'd forget that sitting for hours in the sun burned and made blisters, and we'd literally die.
- We'd forget that we were abused and how Jesus rescued us and saved us and loved us.
- We'd forget that dark clouds mean rain, and rains can be stormy, and umbrellas should be taken.
- We'd forget that we're allergic to peanuts and we'd eat them again, and swell up over and over again.
- We'd forget that we stumbled and fell because of disobedience and we'd continually have skinned knees.

Get the picture? I got it this morning. Memories are not meant to weigh us down or shame us or cause us grief, even the worst of memories. They are meant to help us recall the faithfulness of God, to remember what we learned from those mistakes we made or those made against us, and to rehearse all the good recollections so that we stand firm and know the truth – that He is with us always.

When memories of the bad surface, stop and think for a moment, and then move on. If it's a scary memory, like the one I had when the front door was ajar, move on through it. Face it, and realize that today is not that day. But if the memory is a good one, recall it, write it down and share it.

I don't like having bad memories pop up, but knowing now that they don't have to rule my day but rather only serve as a reminder, I'm able to categorize them and file them away. There's such freedom in that knowledge.

Are you recalling all of the bad things you've experienced today? Don't sit in that pool of stagnant water where flies will soon collect and bite. Step out of that pool and over into the flowing water that washes the bad away and reveals the smooth stones that remain, glistening in the sunlight of today.

FRESH THYME - Every Day – by Marcy Lytlle

Every single morning I wash my face, I rub lotion on my body, I spray on perfume, etc. etc. It's this morning routine that I do before I head out the door, without fail, over and over again. As I was rubbing lotion all over my dry skin one morning, I thought about how there are so many things we do that require attention every single day. And I realized that even if one day goes by without doing them, our lives suffer. And yet, we ignore the everyday and opt for the pain. Why do we do that? I don't know. Think about these things with me...

If we don't keep our skin hydrated daily, we become itchy and scaly and begin to break and peel.

If we don't keep our hearts softened through forgiveness and love, we become hardened and wounded.

If we don't brush away the filth from our teeth daily, I cannot imagine the stench and the infection!

If we don't cleanse our mouths from degrading and self-abasing declarations, we can't stand ourselves!

If we don't discard our bed clothes and put on our fresh outfits, we aren't presentable to anyone!

If we don't open our eyes to others and the beauty of the day, we miss what He's presenting daily!

If we don't fix ourselves something to eat, our stomachs growl and we become ravenous and mean.

If we don't digest his Word when our souls "growl;" we become anemic and weak, unable to stand.

If we don't walk and move about briskly, we come feeble and brittle and lethargic and sick.

If we don't step out of our comfort zone into others' lives, we become self-focused and die on the vine.

I could probably type about this all day, thinking of daily physical activities we make sure to never skip, because we want to feel good, look good, and appear good to the world around us.

But really, so often, we skip out on the second half of those groupings above way too much. And then we wonder why we feel bad, look bad and appear bad to the world around us.

I'm about to start that morning moisturizing routine right now, and I'm hoping I remind myself once again to keep up the heart and soul routines every day, as well. It's easy to want the "escape to another planet" when we're weary and want an "out," but he calls us back to himself and says eat, drink, and then go and be...a blessing to those you know...today and every day.

FRESH THYME – To Give or Not to Give – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever given of your time or effort or money and then totally resented it afterwards? I have.

For example, maybe you give your time to help someone move, you spend hours packing and sweating, only to have that person sit there and tell you where to place things and what to do, without lifting a finger. It happens.

For example, perhaps you put forth the effort to show up and attend an event a friend is hosting; only to find out the event was a bust, there were people there who were rude, and in fact your friend didn't even recognize that you were there. What a wasted evening...

For example, there might be a time when you gave sacrificially to help a person in need only to realize later that they squandered what you gave them, never said thank you, and totally didn't need the money you gave in the first place.

I've experienced all of the above and ended up resenting the time, the effort and the money I expended to help another.

I remember telling my kids years ago, when they became youth pastors, to realize who they were serving at ALL TIMES, because HE was the only one that would reward them. I have to tell myself that own advice at times, as well.

Resentment is not a nice piece of luggage to tote around on one's shoulders. It's heavy, it's unsightly, and it's full of all sorts of things like regret, judgment and bitterness. Not one of those is becoming on our faces or our backs... And yet, that's what happens when we give and realize that our giving wasn't appreciated or we weren't treated with respect and love for our giving.

However, we set ourselves up for a fall when we don't remind ourselves at the very beginning, before we ever lend a hand, show up, or empty our pockets that it only matters that He sees, and He has promised to reward us for our giving. In fact, he says he gives us back more than we can ever dole out.

Oh yes, there's wisdom to be gained from giving lavishly on those who don't steward well. We should always give with wisdom.

But when we've prayed and decided to give, we need to realize that:

- Giving out of a heart of obedience and love is all that's required of us. It's not our job to then judge the recipient of our gift.
- Giving because we feel we are supposed to give is the joy in and of itself; not whether or not that person thanks us or appreciates what we do.
- Giving joyfully out of the abundance we've been given is right and good and holy and wonderful, and when it leaves our hands we're done. God is pleased, period.

I don't want resentment in my heart for anything I've ever done, but I do have to stop and take inventory of that backpack on my back. So often, I realize that I do have a few heavy stones of

bitterness because of love or sacrifice or giving unrequited or unappreciated. People will always disappoint; in fact, we will be the ones who disappoint sometimes. His word says He loves a cheerful giver, and giving cheerfully is only possible when we give out of obedience and love, expecting nothing in return. Not even a thank you.

That's hard to do. For me. For you.

But the answer to the question posed in the title "To Give or not to give..." is always to give. Never stop giving. Proverbs 11:25 says, "A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." It has nothing to do with whether or not our giving is reciprocated, but it has everything to do with whether or not our giving is generous. And it is when he says to give, and we do.



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TIPS

The Dressing – A New Season – by Marcy Lytle

Fall trends are fun to watch and observe. I'd love to attend one of those runway shows up in New York sometime, but in all reality, most of us aren't going to wear those clothes in our everyday life. However, I think it's mad fun to look at the trends and pick out a few ideas to spice our wardrobes, just like we change our spices in our kitchen for cooking! We pull out the nutmeg, the pumpkin and all the aromas of fall, so why not pull out a few key trends and pieces to give our closet a fresh aroma as well? It's so fun, and we have done the looking for you...and picked out these spicy ideas for you to consider:

Dark florals are in. Not spring colors, but the dark hues of the new season. This blouse from Zara is under \$50 and is really pretty in the detail – look at the gathers and the high collar. It looks great here with black pants, but it would pair with jeans, as well.

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/floral-printed-top-p03440250.html?v1=25806957&v2=1281662>

Knit on knit – Knit sweaters are in, and you can even wear them with a knit scarf when the breezes turn cold. I really love this feminine slouchy sweater, and the half tuck brings a bit of shape to it. Wear it with your jeans and nice brown leather belt; and you've got yourself a cozy look for fall.

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/textured-knit-sweater-p05802005.html?v1=13482564&v2=1281662>

Plaid is back. I've chosen these ankle length pants from H&M for the price...and the fact that they have elastic in the waistband. There are several options, and these would look so cute with an oversized sweater and a pair of loafers!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0783346006.html

Square-toed heels are a new look. I haven't tried these on yet, but I can imagine that they're comfy since they're not pointed! I love this heel, and the sleek look of this pair of shoes. They would be so pretty with pants or a dress or a skirt, or any outfit at all.

<https://www.aliexpress.com/item/32959368061.html>

Pocket Bag. I love this purse. Scroll down to see the inside and how flexible it is. I'd love to find a pair of boots and a long coat in the same hue, for fall outfits. This is called a shopper bag, and I like that name! I'd slip my phone in the outer pocket and go!

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/flat-shopper-bag-with-outer-pocket-p16056004.html?v1=14197563&v2=1281705>

The Trench. This is always a classic. And after I wrote what I did above about finding a coat to match that purse, here it is, on the same site! You might not like the ensemble, but check out the back of the coat. The bag and the coat – a great combo!

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/flowy-trench-coat-with-belt-p05071225.html?v1=25011475&v2=1281595>

Dress it up. A new dress is great for fall weddings, lunches with friends, a night out with coworkers, and more. And I love the different options of prints in this one, and the way it looks with boots! It looks so comfy and yet can be dressed up in so many ways.

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0764514002.html

Once you start smelling the scent of fall, start shopping for something new as well. Try it on, take a photo, and share it with us! Or even shoot us an email and be featured with your own fashion page if you'd like to share one month!

Seven For You – What’s a Hostess Gift? – by Marcy Lytle

I once watched a show on TV and the presenter stated a few things you’re never supposed to take to a friend’s house, when they’re serving dinner to guests. He said never to bring an extra dish that isn’t asked for. This messes up what they have planned, and your dish may not fit in with the décor. I hadn’t really thought of that, but it makes sense. If someone is hosting a party, they usually have a plan. However, I’m not so sure that’s always the case these days!

I asked our panel about hostess gifts, if they take one to friends’ houses when asked over to a party, or if they receive gifts. If so, I wanted to know what makes a good hostess gift. Do our children even know what a hostess gift is? I know that it’s completely not necessary, especially for just an informal gathering. But once in a while, if we know our hostess has worked really hard, it’s nice to show up with a treat in hand.

I’m the world’s worst about not hosting at all because I don’t have the time or don’t want to clean house, or any number of reasons. However, I say let’s invite friends over! Let’s just sit on the porch and drink tea, or enjoy a dessert, or a cup of ice cream. Nothing has to be formal or fancy, and neither do our gifts when we’re invited to their house! They can just be thoughtful and fun.

Flowers...(or bullets)

My husband and I invited my cousin and his family over to our new house for dinner. We had a good laugh, because they brought me a beautiful bouquet of flowers...and some ammo (bullets) for my husband. They knew what a gun fan he was. We loved it!! I thought it was super thoughtful of them.

I have been given a bouquet of flowers as a hostess gift.

If it is a special occasion or I just feel like it, I'll usually take flowers or a seasonal plant.

My favorite one I received was a pottery pitcher that was filled with flowers. It was the thoughtfulness of this gift, not the money spent...

(The same presenter above said if you do take flowers, be sure to take them in a vase. Otherwise, the hostess has to stop what she’s doing, find a vase, and arrange... I’m not sure we have to be that picky, but it’s something to think about!)

Homemade or What You Have

I love homemade gifts the best, whether a sweet or something artsy. My daughter-in-law made me a wall hanging with a beautiful saying about her prince (my son) being raised by a queen (me). Very special to me. My other daughter-in-law makes THE WORLD'S BEST chocolate chip cookies and shares them when they come over. I'm making my sisters a set of pot holders, because they saw mine and really liked them. Just because...

Someone brought me a homemade dessert as a gift and I loved it!

Since I like doing crafts, perhaps I should make some things to have on hand. Then, I don't have to run out to purchase something.

Yesterday, I went to a Korean household. I knew I didn't need to bring anything, but I was feeling playful so I just grabbed what I had on hand, and it turned out to be a "bouquet" of green onions! The people I was visiting were left-brained engineers and they cocked their heads trying to follow my logic which made me laugh, because I'm anything but logical! Luckily, my Korean hostess was also gracious, and said, "We make pancakes outta these." Then I cocked *my* head! Life is fun, if you let it be. But seriously, I like to bring something because people just aren't thankful enough anymore!! And that's a major trait of being godly.

Dish Towels

I like the gift of new dish towels tied with a ribbon. This is a practical gift that can be reused for a long time!

I think a fun dish towel from World Market would be great. I love receiving these, especially if the person remembers the colors of my kitchen and it matches!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/green+and+pink+fern+print+kitchen+towel.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search>

Candles or Lotion

Candles are fun to take to friends. Especially one that fits the season. I love finding great fragrances at World Market and with their coupons that show up so often, I usually can get one on at a great price! Paddywax brand is my favorite!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/paddywax-tobacco-and-vanilla-old-fashioned-filled-candle.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search>

Bath and Body Works – I love anything from there (including candles) so I give and love to receive these gifts, as well!

Chocolate

Chocolate. Period. Barnes & Noble has tiny boxes by the checkout counter!

The only thing I can think of that I have received as a hostess gift is chocolate. I guess I just don't think about it because my get-togethers are usually casual. Or, they are a party like a shower or birthday where people bring gifts for the guest of honor. In that case, the guest of honor gives hostess gifts to the hostesses.

Wine

I have given a bottle of my favorite wine - from Duchman winery in Driftwood, Texas - their Sangiovese.

<https://www.duchmanwinery.com/>

Book or Gift Cards

I give gift cards to Starbucks or Chick Fia or Ulta or Target...and have received as well. I love giving...and I love to receive!

It doesn't have to be a special occasion. I have given devotionals to friends.

A good book you've read that you want to pass on, if she's an avid reader, is a great idea.

*If you are asked to bring a dish, here's what one lady suggested:

I really haven't done a hostess gift other than taking food in a long time, but I do try to take the food item I'm bringing in a new reusable plastic container that I don't want. That way, I can leave the food and it's container with the hostess for them to have the next day.

One lady shared the following, which I think is probably the way many feel these days...

I don't really take a hostess gift to parties very often. I will bring food or drinks to contribute to the meal, but not a specific hostess gift. I don't really ever recall receiving one, either. Usually, they are just casual get-togethers, so it's not really something I've seen our friends do. Of course for a special event, like a house warming or holiday party I would bring a gift...

<https://www.gourmettexaspasta.com/>

Sometimes during the fall there are cute spatula sets, tea sets, or even a tiny grater that would be fun to stock up on, to have on hand. Or what about some gourmet pasta?

Hostess gifts may be long gone, but I hope they aren't. They should never be expected and we should never feel the pressure to take one. However, on those occasions where we remember and we think of something, maybe there's a reason to take one...and bless their day.

Selah's Style – Back to School – by Marcy Lytle

By now, the kids are back in school and we're back into routine, supposedly. What are your kids wearing, and what backpacks are they carrying? These days, the supplies are no longer personal pencil bags and notebooks and crayons, but rather the entire classroom shares what is brought. And many schools require uniforms, so personalization even in the way our kids dress is gone! I have my own opinions about such things, but this isn't the place to share. What is fun to share are the styles and attitudes and love that kids bring to our world through what they do wear and what they do buy...when given that option.

Gideon, Ayla and Augie are siblings. Gideon is entering 2nd grade, Ayla is entering 1st, and Augie has one more year to go of staying home with Mom. However, all three got to enjoy the back to school treats of new pj's, new clothes, and new packs and lunch boxes. Each one has their own expression that suits them perfectly!

Their pajamas are from Target, as well as the Descendants and Paw Patrol backpacks. The Bumblebee pack was ordered from Amazon. Ayla's dress is from a dressmaker in Georgetown, Texas.

<https://www.facebook.com/dotdotsmile.janetthill/>

We'll start with Augie first, because he was the most interested in posing for the pictures. He loves his new pajamas that are comfy and soft. They were a three-piece set that included shorts AND long pants – the best! And check out his choice for backpack and lunchbox. The lunchbox even lights up! He will be accompanying Mom on outings and errands, so he'll need a place to stash his toys and snacks for safekeeping. He's ready!

Next, Ayla shares her new pajamas. The shorts were a tad big in the waist, but Ella (her grandmother) stitched them up so they fit nicely, now. Ayla is all about comfort! And one of her most comforting breakfast choices is a waffle, cut into squares, spread with peanut butter, with syrup on top! Ayla also loves dresses, especially ones that are soft and twirl. We love this print...and those shoes! She's not a "bow" person so her hair – plain and simple – is as pretty as pretty can be. And, can you tell she's a Descendants fan?

Gideon is the big brother of them all, and was the most hesitant to get dressed and pose. He'd rather lay around in his comfy pajamas than to don stuffy shorts and a shirt, and put on tennis shoes! But, he's rather handsome in his complete outfit, while holding his lunch box. He chose the Bumblebee set. Gideon loves toys that transforms, and as pictured above, he loves his siblings...at least most of the time.

In the Kitchen – 7 or Less – by Marcy Lytle

It's fall, schedules are busy, the weather is changing, and we've got too much to do to stand and cook in the kitchen all night! Easy dishes are what we need to feed our families so that we can spend more quality time together reading, walking, or enjoying each other's company! This month, we're sharing quick and easy meals with few ingredients so that we can be in...and out...of the kitchen in no time, with our bellies full and more evening time to enjoy.

We've tried to include 7 or less ingredients, not including seasonings, of course!

Easy Pizza

Naan bread is an easy choice for individual pizzas. Just line them up on your baking sheets and start topping! You can find packages of Naan in the fresh bread section.

- Naan bread
- Tomato sauce and/or fresh tomatoes
- Fresh mozzarella
- Fresh basil
- Your favorite topping
- Garlic powder and Italian seasoning

Set your oven to broil. Place the Naan bread on the sheets and spread with the sauce and/or fresh tomatoes. Sprinkle with garlic powder and Italian seasoning. Add freshly sliced mozzarella and fill in the gaps with torn basil. Season with salt and pepper.

Broil for about 5 min till bubbly with browned edges. Add a bit more fresh basil and a drizzle of olive oil and serve immediately.

(You can totally add pepperoni or meat if you wish)

Mexican Brown Rice

This is a super easy dish and so tasty. The picture here was made for eating later, which is a good idea if you have time to cook earlier in the day, and just want to pull out the meals when you get back home.

- 1 ½ c frozen or fresh corn
- 1 15oz can black beans, rinsed and drained
- 3 c cooked brown ready to serve rice
- 1 cup salsa
- 1 T chili powder
- Garnishes like cilantro and avocado

Heat corn and black beans til corn is tender, about 3 minutes. Add the rice and chili powder, stir to combine. Cook and stir about 3 minutes. Stir in salsa and cook another 2 minutes.

Remove from heat and let cool, then garnish with toppings.

(Again, you can add seasoned ground meat or chicken if you like)

Chicken and Pineapple Tostadas

We love these tostadas – so full of flavor – and so easy to put together!

- 1 lb chicken cutlets
- 1 grated garlic clove, 1 T chili powder, $\frac{3}{4}$ t kosher salt, juice of 1 lime
- Pineapple rings
- Salsa verde
- Red onion
- Shredded lettuce
- Tostada shells

Toss the chicken cutlets with 1 T olive oil, the lime juice and garlic, and chili powder and salt.

Grill the chicken over med-hi heat about 3 minutes per side and toss with 1/3 cup salsa verde. Grill 3 pineapple rings until charred, about 2 minutes per side, and chop.

Divide among six tostadas. Top with sour cream (optional), lettuce and red onion.

Sheet Pan Fajitas

If a meal can be made all in one pan, I'm in! Easy clean-up! No real measurements given here; just make enough to fill your family's tummies.

- Chicken cut into strips
- Red onion
- Yellow, red, and green peppers
- 1 pkg taco seasoning
- Avocado
- Lime juice
- Tortillas

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Mix Taco Seasoning with lime juice and olive oil, and toss with chicken and sliced peppers and onions.

Cook in the oven about 20 minutes, turning halfway through.

Serve in tortillas, top with avocado.

Sesame Popcorn

Who doesn't need a snack on a busy night while the kids are doing homework, or we're settled in and watching a new fall TV series?

- 6 T butter
- 2/3 c sesame seeds
- 1 T sugar
- 1 t kosher salt
- 16 cups hot popcorn

Melt the butter with the sesame seeds in a small skillet over medium heat until the seeds are toasted, about 5 minutes. Stir in the sugar and salt. Toss with popcorn and serve.

(The original recipe called for 1 T salt but we found that to make this snack way too salty.)

Tried and True – Bring it Back – by Marcy Lytle

Etiquette rules, are there any? Or is it just “whatever you feel” at the moment? I’m thinking that most of our etiquette rules are not rules anymore, and that a lot of us have forgotten those niceties our grandmothers taught us, or demonstrated in front of us!

I know that when my kids were small, we had party favors for every kid in attendance. That seemed like the “nice” thing to do, but it can be so expensive! It’s nice to thank kids for coming, but at \$5 or more a kid, plus the party expense, we might go to bed with a headache! I also know that many of us were raised to send thank-you cards – the handwritten version – to anyone that gave us a gift. I have one family member that thinks if he’s said “Thank you” in person, there is no need to offer a second thank-you by mail.

I get it. Times change, and we evolve. However, when I’m out and about, noticing and grimacing, I see some things I’d like to see return, or maybe appear, because we’ve quite grown into a selfish society, in my opinion. I’m including myself in these observations. My daughter told me that when she recently went on a business trip, every person sitting in the airport terminal had earbuds in, so apparently they wanted no interaction or conversation at all!

So here are my observations and my own wishes that we’d see these simple niceties return, because kindness makes the world a better place, doesn’t it? If I sound old, then maybe I am. But I’m thinking maybe we all might enjoy these reminders and smile or take note...just maybe.

IPhone:

Don’t chat on your phone when in the aisle at the store. Shoppers are trying to get by you, and you aren’t even aware...

Don’t text on your phone when you’re at a stop sign or red light. The other drivers are hesitant to go...or to stay.

Don’t play games and scan social media when out to dinner with friends, family, or anyone! It’s just quite rude.

Clothing:

Take a look at the back of you in a mirror, when you slide into those shorts, and make sure your derriere is well covered. Please...

No one wants to read your bad attitude on your shirt, where you state that you hate the president or love to get drunk. Graphic tees can be fun and not foolish, can’t they?

When shopping, even at the discount stores, please hang up that which you knock down, those shoes that you didn’t like, or put away that toy that your child played with. Make the world a better place, even down the aisles of Ross and Target.

Gatherings:

Please RSVP and let the host know if you're attending or not. Don't make them guess and provide food when you have no intentions of showing up. You can respond, yes you can.

Compliment the host and her home and her goodies and her hospitality. You'll make her day.

If it's a wedding, don't bring extra guests, don't let your kids run amuck, and don't show up late without a good excuse. Just don't.

In the City:

If you're going to ride a scooter, please say something before you approach a pedestrian on foot, because you're scaring us all.

Smile, why don't you? If you're walking a trail, or strolling downtown, make eye contact with humans and smile. Smiling is a mood and face lifter!

Don't honk, scream, or throw up your hands because someone is slow. Your blood pressure will thank you.

In a Public Restroom:

Flush the toilet, for goodness sake.

Don't sit in the stall and scroll on your phone while a line of ladies is out the door. Sigh...

Take your child with you into the stall, and make sure they clean up and then wash their hands.

Around the Elderly:

Speak up. They can't hear you mumble, and they feel bad that they can't. But they want to.

Don't call them "sweetie" or say "you're cute." They have importance and value. Look for it.

Call or visit. It doesn't take five minutes to call and say hello and listen to how they're doing, and a short visit might make their day.

At Church:

Don't gossip about the leaders, their kids, or that lady over there. In fact, don't gossip ever.

Don't show up once a month and complain about what you see or don't see. Maybe you just missed the greatness while you were out...

Don't ask for more programs and activities, unless you're willing to help out.

Do I sound bitter? I'm not. I can be very selfish and self-focused at times and I need the reminder, as well, to look up and out at others and give a smile and attention. I'm talking to myself, and to all of us, to pick up some niceties once more and show up at the door...ready to give, to notice and to be...a blessing and not a burden.



HOME

Practical Parenting – Without Worry – by Marcy Lytle

We set our alarm every night to wake us up, even though my husband tells me over and over again, “You always wake up, I don’t know why we need to set the alarm.” And it’s true. I usually, over 90% of the time, wake up on my own, BEFORE the alarm sounds. But my reply to him is always, “Well, I won’t sleep well if I know I have to wake up, and the alarm is not set.” He quietly nods, knowing me so well, and clicks the button and off we go to sleep.

What does this have to do with parenting? Everything!

That alarm clock is there as my safety net, it gives me security, and allows me to sleep soundly without any worry that I might accidentally one day sleep past my normal routine and miss getting up on time! And this made me realize how important it is for our kids to have safety nets, boundaries, alarms, limits and “fences” in order to make them feel safe and secure.

It’s not true that giving our children “free range” to express and do and go and come as they please makes for healthier kids. It’s our job to train them, and that includes setting alarms for them so that they can “sleep soundly” knowing all is well and tomorrow will start on time.

Here’s what I mean:

We need to **set a time limit on electronics**. Maybe a timer of one hour per day, or whatever we feel will work best with their schedules. All kids need down time and relaxation, just like we do. But they don’t have the skillset to stop when healthy, unless we train them with the timer. Hey, maybe we need a timer for ourselves as well!

We must **provide a safety net without holes** through which they can fall. Our homes have to be safe places where they can talk about anything, be themselves, and seek refuge and help from those who love them the most. If we’re messed up and have nothing to offer them, we can get help and mend that hole in the net. If our home is chaotic constantly because our schedules are too busy for order, we can clear our calendars to make peace. And so on...

We can **set limits on staying up late and eating** too much or too little. Kids don’t have a lot of wisdom in these areas until they’re grown and gone, but we can train them with the wisdom we’ve been given. We can set bedtime so that they get enough sleep, and we can stock our pantries and refrigerators with good snacks like fruit, nuts, and veggies. Free range eating and sleeping will create headaches and tummy aches for the entire family!

We can **build a fence of protection** around the minds, eyes, and ears of our kids. They’re curious, so we need to close the blinds to what’s lurking outside. Kids will say mean things to them that are not true, so we need to fill our kids with truth. Their eyes will be tempted to wander to sites on their phones, and their ears to listen to lyrics that harm. A fence guards them, and enables them to love life and jump, play and run like kids should do, with joy.

We can **teach them about setting an actual alarm** by which to wake up, sharing with them the importance of good etiquette of arriving on time and not making others wait, the benefit of a good routine, and the way alarms are helpful in making life good for us...and others.

I'll always set my alarm, because I enjoy sleeping without fear that I won't wake up. It settles my heart and my soul, to know it will go off, even if I'm in deep sleep. I don't want to miss that early flight for vacation, the wakeup to get dressed and pick up work, or an alarm to get out of bed and smell the roses...

Do you? And you certainly don't want your kids to live in fear of any kind, either...

I Don't Do Teens – Hearing His Voice – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when my son was a teenager, he often told me that he tried to listen to God but heard nothing, and it quite disappointed him. I realized then that I hadn't really taught him what it's like to hear His voice, how to respond, and how to know when it's NOT his voice. The Bible says the sheep know the shepherd's voice, so that tells me that if our kids know Jesus then they can know his voice, IF they have practiced learning it, knowing his character, and responding.

Here are some good things to talk about with your almost adults, but not quite yet:

Hearing his voice comes from knowing his character.

Your kids need to know that when they have self-degrading thoughts, that is NOT their Father speaking to them. They can turn from that immediately. He will always speak gently to them, with a good outcome in mind... Tell them that the Father's voice encourages and speaks of love and understanding.

Hearing his voice comes from knowing His word.

If your kids hear a thought that says to cheat, to lie, to even take their own life; that is NOT his plan for them. He says to be honest, to put others before ourselves, to give, to live, and to thrive. Help them develop a plan for reading the Word on a daily basis.

Hearing his voice comes from listening to those that love Him and love us.

Sometimes others speak what He's saying, and we need to listen. A grandmother, an aunt, a dad, or a friend that we know loves and knows God can sometimes offer insight that is life-giving if we just listen!

Hearing his voice requires realization.

Sheep know the Shepherd's voice because they realize He's their provider and their guide. Remind your teens that God is what they need and He has every good gift available, and they do not need to graze in some other pasture.

Hearing his voice is stifled when we sin, because sin separates.

We can talk about sin, how it's when we know to do good and don't do it. It's an attitude of the heart or a deed that manifests because of that attitude. Hating a sibling or harboring a lie is like stuffing cotton in our ears and saying, "Blah blah blah." Repentance is a good thing. He loves it, and He loves us. Forgiveness is amazing!

There are other ways to help our teens hear his voice, but these are good starters. Above all, pray for them. Pray in faith, knowing that your heavenly Father pursues his children and desires a relationship with them, where dialogue and intimacy exist in full measure.

Column title: *An Adage a Day*
By Carole "Lisa Lynn" Gilbert

Forever Saying

Do you have a phrase you say often, a cliché, a saying, a quote, or an adage? Whether it's an old axiom or a present day proverb, I bet you have one you've said yourself. I grew up within ten miles of three sets of grandparents all taking care of me and spoiling me. They also taught me a lot about everyday life situations and how the grass wasn't always greener on the other side and how pigs don't fly. I learned how to not put the cart before the horse and that counting your chickens before they hatch doesn't help you aim for the stars. I'm sure by now you're wondering, but I heard every age old adage, as these sayings are called, many times as a child and later I repeated these to my children. Unfortunately, I believe these are forgotten expressions and need to be redeemed.

Join me through this column in refreshing or restarting these age old adages, present day Proverbs, and superficial new sayings to memory so their truths and lessons are not forgotten in time. We'll look at one saying per month and to get this column started let's look into their meaning. Proverbs, not the proverbs in the Bible, give advice whereas adages give a common truth. Both are well known sayings and each individual one will have its' own origin.

Interestingly, Ben Franklin, a self-made business man, renowned civic leader, and inventor of several daily used items such as bifocals and the lightening rod, which began the invention of electricity, is attributed to writing many of these well-known adages. He wrote under the pen name "Poor Richard" and published *Poor Richard's Almanac* from 1732 to 1758 which included his sayings and more that we still repeat today like "a penny saved is a penny earned." This particular adage actually started long before Ben Franklin. In 1640, George Herbert wrote in *Outlandish Proverbs* the quote "A penny spar'd is twice got" and the advice seemed to go on from there being published and requoted until Ben Franklin and still is today. No matter who said it first the meaning remains the same. For each penny saved, your worth grows. I can't tell you how many times I've said this one to my children while they were growing up.

And for one more saying to get this column started, the title "An Adage a Day" is derived from "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." This is actually a proverb and started in 1860 in Wales as "Eat an apple on going to bed, and you'll keep the doctor from earning his bread." It was meant to promote healthy eating therefore healthy living. I think having daily advice in our thoughts also promotes healthy living.

These old sayings hold dear to my heart. I raised my kids hearing them and they need to be passed on. Join me as we look on the brighter side and send Grandma's and other sayings along with their meaning, origin, and stories of how they've been used "to infinity and beyond!" I hope to be like my grandmothers and be forever saying.

Tiny Living – Thoughts and Questions – by Brian Enterline

When I asked my family about how they feel about tiny living here is what I got...

From the kiddos...

Likes:

- BB gun shooting
- persimmon eating
- washers
- swinging
- the star on the trailer
- love the bunk beds...

Dislikes:

- too small
- not enough space for their own personal things
- cleaning the poop tank...it stinks!
- Endless amount of projects on the land

From Brian...

Likes:

- affordable
- simpler
- able to leisurely travel more

Dislikes:

- not enough space
- cleaning the poop tank stinks!

From me...

Likes:

- less to clean
- can talk to anyone from whatever room I'm in
- no need to buy any furniture or décor, ever

Dislikes:

- it's tiny!
- miss having a washer, dryer and dishwasher

Tiny living definitely has its pros and cons. While we still enjoy the coziness and closeness together, we are also getting tired of being too cozy and too close! Going on three years with the

tiny living, this is really all the boys know. I think they are still fine, although when we go to friends' houses and see those kids' awards and artwork and space for all their toys, that space becomes a longing for my boys. The boys have started to ask, "When will we have a home for our stuff and room to spread out and play?"

We are constantly on the go because I feel the need to escape the tininess and plus we have to go somewhere to wash our clothes! As the boys get bigger and the toys get bigger so does the pile of stinky laundry. As I mentioned before, the walls are closing in!

As I write this article, we are on our way to New Mexico. I definitely enjoy the flexibility to just get up and go. I start to think, though. While having this time for freedom, what is our purpose? Just merely to travel around and just survive?

I'm trying to start looking at each place we go and see how we can help others. I'm trying to stop being so selfish and see what we can get out of our visits to different places for us, and really see what we can do to be a servant. Just having a self-realization moment!

We will continue to live tiny and see the goodness on this crazy journey, and then share it with you...and see if our "like" list grows!

Remember Loves Grows Best in Tiny Spaces

A Night to Remember – What is a Steward? – by Marcy Lytle

We recently played a fun game with the littles, all about being a good steward. Since they didn't know what a steward was, we used the word "keeper." The definitely knew what a zookeeper was, the one who takes care of the zoo and the animals in it! We began by reminding us all that God has entrusted certain talents and gifts to our care, and we must be good stewards, or keepers, of these things!

Preparation: Just create a word document and copy in clip art photos of about a dozen things like: money, toys, ears, eyes, food, dogs, clothes, etc. Let the kids cut them apart and spread them out on the table.

Below will be an example of how we played the "game," all the while learning how to be good stewards of our gifts.

Each kid selects a picture and answers these questions,

Example 1:

"What would it look like to be a bad steward of your pet?"

Answers might be: not feed him, never play with him, punch him...

"What would it look like to be a good steward of your pet?"

Answers might be: feed him, be gentle when you play with him, take him for walks.

Example 2:

"What would it look like to be a bad steward of your eyes?"

Answers might be: watch bad things on television, cheat on a test, etc.

"What would it look like to be a good steward of your eyes?"

Answers might be: read the Bible, watch good videos and good games on iphone, etc.

Example 3:

"What would it look like to be a bad steward of our clothes?"

Answers might be: leave them on the floor, never wash them...

"What would it look like to be a good steward of our clothes?"

Answers might be: put them away, try not to get them dirty, share them when we outgrow them.

The kids really enjoyed answering and listening to each other's answers. It might be fun to provide a light snack, and then play charades afterwards, using those same photos.

Consider reading Matthew 25, at least one of the stories in that chapter. You could even play this game and do this lesson in the dark, by lantern light.

God wants us to be great stewards of all that he's entrusted us with, so that he can entrust us with more!



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Prayer Visuals – by Marcy Lytle

The other morning I woke up feeling heavy. I have list a mile long of friends that need healing miracles. I'm betting that some of you do, as well. I reached up and took out each "stone" or burden from my "backpack" and threw them. I've talked about casting our cares before, but I'm finding that I have to do this daily. Every darn night I end up with heavy stones that weigh me down, because of worry and fear. So every time that happens, I have this choice to empty them and cast them over to Him (which involves some throwing muscle, by the way) or to carry them around until I too become sick.

That visual of the heavy backpack and casting our cares on Him helps me. There are other visuals I've had before, that have helped as well. If you're like me, you sometimes need a visual. After all, our kids are taught all the way through school with visuals like chalkboards, diagrams, pictures, maps, etc. It's a good avenue to get things from our heads into our hearts.

Here are some great prayer visuals to use when you need help processing, praying, and putting down all of your worries and your fears:

- If you've suffered a traumatic experience, close your eyes and imagine God with you in that room or space. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us, so ask Him to help you see him there with you. Allow his comfort to sweep over you like warm water from the ocean, as you lay back in the sand.
- If your kids are top on your list of worries, think of placing them like you would images into a grid on a website. Copy them and paste them, caption them "God help her/him" then click off and leave them be. He is aware, and He cares. When that grid goes haywire, then copy and paste again.
- If you're just plain weary from the heat that's been turned up too hot in your life, find a shade tree and take a chair and sit there. Observe the shadows and the breezes that offer a respite from the hot sun, and begin to give thanks for his goodness. Physically find this place, or just think on it until you feel the breezes blow. Drink a cool glass of whatever your favorite drink is, even if it's not available. Imagine the coolness as you swallow down into you thirsty soul.
- If you've lost sight of who God is in his glory and majesty, close your eyes and see this – or better yet – step outside after dark and view it in person. Look up on a clear night as the sun sets and watch the stars appear, one by one, and remember that God calls them to march across the sky – everything in His order and His time and under His control. Sigh, and breathe at how huge He is and rest in his power to do the impossible.
- If you've got a headache that won't end because of worry, stress or anxiety, imagine a bouquet of balloons. Inside each balloon is a small piece of paper with your worries written down, one by one. Imagine holding the bouquet and letting one balloon go at a time, releasing it into the atmosphere until you no longer can see it – but HE can. Seriously, he asks us to let these burdens go, lay them down, and he will carry them for us.
- If you're weighed down with some sin you cannot overcome, whether it's something damaging to your body, a foul attitude, or hatred or whatever – imagine a great deluge of

water falling from the sky. There's no lightning or thunder, just a deluge of gentle rain and you're called outside to play. You stand there with your mouth open wide and drink, feel the cleanse, and the soak. That's what he does when we sin, he washes us and erases all the dirt and makes us clean.

- If you've given and given in caring for someone, meeting financial needs, spending time helping until you're so tired and can barely move, imagine a big can where you toss all that you've done and given into the can, only to see another can where He's tossing in 10 times as many blessings back to you. He says when we give, we shall receive pressed down, running over, blessings from above... So get a good glimpse of Jesus heaping his blessings into that can, then standing inside to make room for more.

What visuals do you use? Ask God to help you see a picture of His goodness and grace when you pray, when you're tired, and when life is too much.

His word is true, and reminding ourselves with pictures that calm our minds and souls is a good exercise to bring us rest.

You – Upper Quadrant – Here We Are – by Marcy Lytle

The upper quadrant is usually a good thing, right? Finding out that we are in the upper quadrant of our academic class feels good. The upper quadrant of a race is filled those who might have a chance of actually winning. And the upper quadrants just sounds like a place we all want to be...except when it comes to age. I decided to use that description recently because of where I am on the spectrum of life. If I'm given 80 years on this earth, then I'm in the upper quadrant now. I hope to have more years, if quality of life is mine, but who knows...*right?*

Some of you that are reading are right here with me. Some might be ahead and some of you may be way behind me. But all of us are either in it, know someone in it, or we're close.

What I do know is that being in the upper quadrant of life is actually quite daunting in so many ways:

- You're the oldest ones in your family line. No more leaning on the wisdom of the aged...because you're becoming that group and you're now supposed to have gleaned some wisdom out of the years you've breathed.
- You're thanking God every day for your health and praying that you can walk, climb and have fun with your grandkids for years to come. So you're out walking daily to keep your heart strong.
- You're watching your grown children build their own lives without you at the center of things, not because they're mean, but because they're busy growing. Boy, are they busy.
- You and your siblings are all aging and wondering what happened to the decades of the 20's and the 30's. How could we be twice that age now? I mean, seriously, how?
- Your body is changing, your nose is growing (at least it seems to!), your hair is thinning, and your feet are hurting. But you don't feel old at all on the inside! You still giggle at bubbles.
- You're realizing the value of friendship, the necessity of laying down the rest of your burdens and fears you've carried too long, and the beauty of every sunrise and sunset. Life is too short to keep grumbling and whining.
- You're panicking on some days, because it really does seem like the earth is spinning faster and the months are rolling way more quickly than they used to...how can it be September already? And didn't Y2K just happen?
- You're planning and going and doing and living, because there's SO MUCH more life you want to live before you end up...well where your parents did...alone and sick and in need. Those memories are still too fresh and sad.

I could continue writing for another hour about all of the changes that come with entering the upper quadrant of this race called life. And I could be a cheerleader for all of us and do nothing but shout winning phrases, vocalize ways we can all score one for the team, and shake pom-poms in our faces to make us smile. There's a place for all of that, because we for sure need encouragement. So I will always try to offer that.

But this column is going to be real and raw, so that you can relate and cry with me, maybe realize that someone else is feeling your pain, and even roll your eyes at the crazy thoughts I think on any given day in this ring of the track on which I'm running.

My purpose in changing this column name and in writing these stories is to empty my heart, my mind and my soul onto the screen, in hopes that we can indeed hold our heads high because we've made it to this point. We may have shin splints and our sides may ache from dehydration, but we're here beside each other, still walking...

I'm extremely grateful to be alive and well, because my list of friends in need of miracles is growing longer and longer. That scares me and haunts me. I've learned so many things in my walk with God that I must now really practice and decide if I believe, or if I don't. I can no longer wonder if he's really faithful, question if his promises are true, and worry that he is going to leave me or forsake me. It's time for me to quit wondering and start stating my faith in my Father, to start proving to those behind me that I will finish well and not weak, and that my confidence will not wane but instead grow stronger...

Are you with me? Here we are and here we go. Each month until I run out of things to say, I'll be sharing all about the walk in the upper quadrant of life. I welcome your comments, your questions, and your suggestions if you have a topic you'd like me to tackle. Or if you have a story to write, please email and let me know.

Healthy Habits – Skin Care – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not a skin care specialist, by any stretch of the imagination, but I learned early on from my sweet mom to never go to bed with makeup on. She insisted that I clean my face nightly, no matter what time I got in. She also instructed me to work gently under my eyes, never pulling the skin, only patting it. I remember lots of cool things my mom told me to do, and I still do them today! And as I've used products and thrown some away, I have a few that I really love and am sharing with all of us this month. Hope you'll consider trying a few, or commenting with your own skin care routine and what works for you!

For the face – I recently purchased a trio of products from Gruene Witch Apothecary. It's a small soap bar, a toner, and a moisturizer. I've been using the trio for almost a year now, and am sold on it! I got the set at a festival, but they sell the individual items on line. The smell is amazing, and my face feels 100% better and fresher, after I use all three. If you live in the Texas area, they even have a calendar of where they'll be so you can purchase in person!

<https://gruene witch.com/>

For the feet – I have the world's worst heels – or at least I did. They were really a bother to me, as they are to lots of people – with cracked dry skin that peeled and itched. My daughter sells a Nuskyn foot lotion that has changed my world. I use it every morning (and every night is recommended) and it works! My heels are no longer rough, but instead they're smooth. I could not believe it. Normal lotion just didn't work, but this one is made specifically for heels. It's a winner! You can order from Kamrin Wolfe on her Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/OhtheJoy/>

For his hands – Last year for Christmas I ordered my husband a lotion from Duluth Trading Company and he loves it! It's grapefruit scented, which is one of our favorite scents. It's a big bottle, looks great by his sink, and works for his rough hands. Smells great...did I say that? I like Duluth – check out all their products for him!

<https://www.duluthtrading.com/spit-and-polish-honey-grapefruit-lotion-16-oz.-78803.html>

For the lips – You may laugh at this one. I was at Dollar Tree recently, on the phone with my sister, and she told me to be sure and get Palmers Cocoa Butter lip balm. If your dollar store doesn't carry it, you can find it on line. It's the smoothest, silkiest butter for your lips, and I love using it over the top of lipstick. It's a great stocking gift and a must-have for your purse for the coming cooler months!

<https://www.dollartree.com/bulk/Palmers-Cocoa-Butter-Lip-Balm>

For the body – There are many good lotions I've tried, but I keep going back to Sunshine Farms out of Montgomery, Texas. Their products are so good, and you might want to order Christmas gifts from this site. We actually visited the site and toured the farm, and were so impressed. Check out their body lotion and the fragrance and the ingredients. All of their products I've tried are amazing...

<https://www.goodcleanlivin.com/product-page/skin-lovin-lotion-single-8-oz>

For your makeup – I never used to use primer or setting spray. Maybe you have been using both for years. However, since I started using them I love them and feel they really help my skin after it's made up, to stay! Both products I purchased from the Elf line of cosmetics. The primer goes on silky smooth right before I apply by foundation or BB cream. It smooths out the face to make an even palette for the makeup. After my makeup is applied, including bronzer and blush, I spray it to set it with Elf setting spray. Both really do seem to work for keeping the makeup in place and fresh all day long...

https://www.elfcosmetics.com/poreless-face-primer--large/83409.html#q=primer&lang=en_US&start=10&sz=24

https://www.elfcosmetics.com/matte-magic-mist-and-set/300090.html?dwvar_300090_color=Small&cgid=#q=setting%2Bspray&lang=en_US&start=5

For sleeping – I love Nuskin's night cream. I even have my husband using it on his face. It goes on smooth, not oily, and feels great. I've used lots of night creams and used to be a fan of Oil of Olay for years. However, I've switched over to Nuskin, not only because my daughter sells it but because it seems to rejuvenate while I sleep. I never go to bed without it, and now that he's using it too, we will have to stock up!

Need link

For bathing – We splurge here. We both love scented natural soaps that fit the season. Maybe it sounds crazy, but when I open peppermint soap near Christmas time, or pumpkin scented soap soon for the fall, I breathe in deeply and sigh. These natural soaps from World Market, or we often buy them homemade from markets around town, lather so nicely and feel so fresh. I have sensitive skin to many soaps, so it's why we switched a long time ago. But we are hooked, now! Here's a link to one of our faves...

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/aaa+grapefruit+and+tangerine+bar+soap.do?sortBy=ourPicks&from=Search>

Have you tried microfiber wash cloths for bathing and cleaning your face? It took some getting used to, because they're so soft...but boy do they lather! We both prefer them now. They are great for removing makeup and they clean so well, and dry out in a flash! Just an added tip...because we love them and have switched to them...all in white! I cannot recall where I bought them, but look for them and get a pack. You'll love them! They're so soft, they're hard to hold!

Life Right Now – Never Alone – by Bethany Gomez

A recent trial provided a growth moment for me. I believe you can choose to either go through trials or grow through trials. At the time, I wanted to be upset and just get through it, but I was presented with the choice to change my attitude and grow through it, even though it was a struggle. My choice: grow.

It was a Sunday, and my sister was at work. I've gone to church by myself before but for some reason, I was not too happy with having to go to church alone this time. Satan picked up on my discontentment and decided to take full advantage. As I was driving to church, having begrudgingly convinced myself to go, I started crying out to God about how tired I was of going to church alone. And yes, a few "why" questions managed to escape. I knew how ridiculous my thoughts were, but I didn't care at that point to take my thoughts captive and allow some truth to come in and replace the lies swirling around in my mind. I was intent on feeling how I was feeling.

When I arrived at church, I absolutely put on a "mask" to hide what was going on. I had a feeling the only people I would converse with at church anyway would be the greeters, and I was right. Well, I was almost right. I did share a few words with a friend that sat with me; however, she had to leave early. But that was about it. I walked out feeling so alone and unseen.

I got into my sweltering hot car, blasted the AC and started the long trek back home. Normally, I would've taken a few major, busy highways to get home, but instead I went a route home that I'd never taken before. In the moment, of course, I had no idea that taking that route was a total God thing. About halfway home, I started getting hit with warm air blowing from my vents. Concern immediately set in, because I thought my AC had just broken in the middle of summer and the temperature was almost 100 degrees outside. Then my eye caught the needle on the cold and hot gauge, which was slowly rising. Common sense kicked in and I immediately turned off the AC and watched the indicator go down a little, but then it continued to creep back up. For the most part, I remained calm. This was partly because I didn't see any smoke or steam coming from my hood. I knew I just wanted to get as close to home as I could before the needle reached the H. I knew I had a better chance of doing that if I didn't get caught at any lights. The light I was coming up on thankfully turned green, and I slowly made my way into downtown Round Rock where I turned down a side street and shut off my car.

Looking back, I'm surprised I kept it together because I could no longer call on the one person that would know what to do, my dad. He had come to my rescue so many times when car problems arose. He now lives almost two hours away. I couldn't call my sister, either, to come pick me up. I knew my brother wasn't nearby and usually worked on Sundays, but I called him just to get some level-headed advice on what I should do. He was at work and would be for a few more hours, so he gave me some options on how to get home and said when he got off maybe he could help me get my car home. I made a few phone calls to some of my closest friends, and thankfully one of their husbands was on the way home from church and gladly picked me up. I have some amazing friends!

I wonder if you can guess what I did when I got home to an empty house. Yup, I cried...a lot. To quote one of my favorite movies, I was in the "depths of despair." I could barely muster a single prayer.

When my brother arrived, he noticed the state I was in. He took me aside and told me everything would be okay. He told me stop worrying because I did not even know what was really wrong with my car and it does no good to worry about anything when we serve a mighty God. I didn't want to hear it, but every word that was coming out of his mouth was true.

"Has God not ever taken care of you and provided everything you need?" He asked.

He then shared a testimony of how God came through financially for him and his family on a recent trip they went on. I couldn't deny anymore that I needed to change my mindset and trust God. And the answer to that question he asked me was no. God has always provided everything that I need and I knew He wouldn't stop now. The peace that came when I finally chose to put my trust in God was a wonderful feeling. My thoughts were still on upcoming car repair costs and wondering how I was going to be able to afford everything, but they were no longer in this hopeless state full of worry.

Matthew 6:27 says, "Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?"

In the end, it was my radiator that busted. My dad was able to come that next Saturday to install another. He has saved me so much money in car repair costs, it's utterly unbelievable. I don't know how I will ever repay him. I know he doesn't expect me to, but I hope one day I can give him something for all the man hours he's spent on fixing my cars.

God had it all taken care of the moment it happened. He guided me down that less busy route home, gave me friends that picked me up and took me home, and gave me an older brother that was willing to help me figure out what was wrong with my car. Above all, He gave me an amazing earthly father that loves me and is always willing to help with anything that he can, one of them being the ability to do major car repairs. I was never unseen, and never alone.

John 16:33

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

Created for Life – Ancient Keys – by Ginny Hurley

Last month, I wrote about mysteries. However, I feel that there is so much more! This month, I decided to study about ancient doors that have been locked long ago, and the ancient keys, lost.

The term *ancient* means old, long ago in the past, before the fall of the Roman Empire, beyond time. I've seen pictures of ancient castles and traveled to places like Ephesus where crumbling ruins stand in all their ancient glory. Now the people that lived there and the things surrounding their lifestyles have flown away, leaving rubble and stones. Memories of past victories are in history books where few travel. Such cultures and ideas are long lost.

Yet, there are ancient treasures submerged in darkness that are coming to light, hidden for kings to uncover.

*Isaiah 22:22 says,
"I will place upon His shoulders the
key to the treasures of David's palace. He will open doors
that no one can shut, and He will shut doors that no one
can open."*

The Passion translation says that the doors He opens are doors of revelation, treasures, favor, and opportunity. When He closes those doors, no amount of human striving can open them.

Human authority is always temporary; therefore, when Jesus took back the keys to the Kingdom that were lost from sin, there were ancient doors still waiting for His people to discover and open. Clearly, in Matthew 16:18-19, Jesus said He was giving the keys of heaven's realm to Peter and His church.

Treasures hidden since ancient days are still there for light to uncover. In Matthew 5:14, Jesus also told the church that we are lights, just as He is THE Light. Darkness will never overpower light. The least flicker illuminates a large cavern.

As I was searching through pictures of ancient doors, my heart began to awaken to finding the specific keys that open these doors. Revelation is to reveal our identities, but ultimately for the sake of others. A word of wisdom, a still small voice, a word of knowledge can change the direction of a lost and hurting friend. Favor, shown by God to us, brings joy and generosity to hopeless and fearful neighbors as we recognize the source of our favor. Problems are solved by heaven's strategies. A nation without water has a problem. God has given His people a key. Cancer, Alzheimer's, and other sicknesses are a problem. God has given His people a key. Jesus said He would give us the keys of heaven's realm to forbid on earth that which is forbidden in heaven, and to release on earth that which is released in heaven.

Our job is to find the right key, search the darkness, listen to His voice, become intimately acquainted with Him and open these ancient doors, benefitting people and nations. He came to earth for people. He shed His blood for people, all people. Because Jesus loves all people, He yearns for us to look for keys, dig for clues, call on Holy Spirit

to reveal the treasures set in place just for His children to discover. They will change the world, one person at a time and whole nations together.

I believe the earth is groaning for answers and freedom. Every problem has an answer. Jesus has that answer for everyone. He grieves when others are hurting and loves to share His secrets. A spirit of wisdom has been given to us, and just as Solomon asked for wisdom, so can we.

Recently, we had Drew Neal speak at our church, and he called us *Solutionaries*. I love that! We are God's answers to a world in need. Poverty is a problem that God cares about. Greed is a problem. We can complain continuously about problems. Jesus is the answer and He has given us the keys. We are God's *Solutionaries*.

Let's ask heaven. Let's shine our light in dark places. No more hiding in fear from sin. It's our honor as sons and daughters. It's our heritage as kings and queens. Treasures are for royalty and we are a royal priesthood. Salvation includes everything about us, not just fire insurance. God cares about our lives in every detail. He is personal. Jesus said that when He walked by, the Kingdom was here. Fullness in every way walked by that day.

They missed it, and so have we. Let's gather together for God's full victory. He is reforming our culture, and transforming minds. Nothing is left out of His finished work. He broke out of the grave clothes and then told us to...

GO!

Tell the world!

Be ME on the earth through My great Comforter.

Spread it out to the ends of the world.

Colossians 1:27

*To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles
the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – The Sandwich – by Marcy Lytle

“Lord, help me be nice.”

It’s a simple prayer that I have to pray multiple times a day...sometimes. I can get busy, in a dither, or just feel blah and just start being short, mean, and sarcastic to the one I love so much – my husband. Can you relate at all?

Just yesterday we ate lunch at a place where he was satisfied with his meal and I was completely disgusted with mine. The food was inedible and left a bad taste in my mouth. So you can imagine that I was complaining as we got in the car to leave, and I really wanted an ice cream cone or “something” to remove the bad taste and make me happy.

We turned down a street where a Sonic sat on the left hand side. I wasn’t too thrilled with that choice, but we pulled in and looked at the menu, where all of the desserts were listed – but NO ice cream cone. They just had these blast things that I don’t care for. (Yes, I’m super picky with my eating!) I was still irritated, and upset that he pulled into Sonic because I had told him they didn’t have cones. I know, I sound like an ogre, and I was being one. I admit it.

As we were about to back out, he saw the screen change images and said, “Wait!” I think I saw an ice cream sandwich. (I do love those...)

I snapped back and said, “No! There’s nothing on that menu that I want. Let’s just go.”

He was insistent and pulled back up, and there it popped up, stared us both in the face – an Oreo ice cream sandwich.

Right then, I was disappointed in myself for not listening and being “nice” to my husband who was only trying to help me become satisfied in my dissatisfied state.

I was very happy, we ordered the treat, and I began to eat.

Right then, I felt that little twinge of guilt for hounding him, griping so much, and being such a toddler by throwing an adult tantrum.

That prayer surfaced onto my whispering lips again,

“Lord, help me be nice.”

It’s like a tumbleweed; that attitude and disposition of mine. It can be content and still, sitting in the shade, until the wind blows. Something happens that is irritating. I’m tired and should have rested. I feel blah and want the world to offer me joy. It can be any number of swirls in the atmosphere that come behind me and push that tumbleweed attitude right out of the restful shade into the hot sun, tumbling and tossing around, all the while screaming, “Bet you can’t catch me!” as my poor husband is running beside me with a fan and a net, trying to corral me once again back to solitude and peace.

Now, that's quite a confession, isn't it? I can be rotten to the core, some days. I can be just like my kids when they were in their car seats in the back whining for another piece of candy, or wipes for their sticky hands, or that toy that fell into the floorboard that they cannot reach.

Thankfully, my husband forgives me over and over again for those words of ugliness that escape from my lips that need a good smack – and I'm not talking about the romantic kind!

What prayer do you whisper that calms your soul and readjusts your attitude?

He hears us all, and He's so patient and longsuffering, because He knows we get tired and irritated and frustrated over little things that pile up into big things that send us reeling...

That ice cream sandwich saved the day. And my persistent husband caught the screen and insisted on pulling back up, and he too saved the day. My taste buds were happy, I said I was sorry, and we ended up downtown hand in hand, strolling in the heat of the day as happy as can be.

"Lord, help me be nice."

In This Together – Either Way – by Bekah Holland

Why don't we celebrate more?

Of course we celebrate the big things...birthdays, anniversaries, births. But what about the other days?

As I write this, I'm waiting (and waiting and waiting...) to hear back about a job I interviewed for. It's one I've wanted for quite some time, and I've put off other opportunities in order to wait for just the right fit. And in my mind, this is it. This is what I've been working toward for months. But in the meantime, until the powers that be decide to share their decision, I'm in this weird (okay, awful) holding pattern. I want this, but I also want what God has planned for me, even if this isn't it. However, waiting is THE WORST! I can live with a no. I can live with a yes. But *wait* is not high on my list of personal strengths. But I also know from experience, sometimes God says, "Wait," too.

Thankfully, I have a great husband who supports my goals and dreams and wants God's best for me too. So while I (not so) patiently wait for news, I got this text from him. "Hey babe, please let me know as soon as you hear something. ***We'll celebrate either way.***" Those simple words were like a cool breeze on a hot Texas day. He didn't care if I got it, other than that it was important to me. He wanted to celebrate not only my successes, but also my attempts, whether I succeed or not. Where has this been all my life?? Why haven't we been doing this all along? His simple text made me feel so understood. Because I stepped out of where I'm comfortable...and that's hard.

In case you don't know this about me, I really, really like to be comfortable. I wear t-shirts and flip flops. My life goals include making my bed the most comfortable space in existence and finding stretchy pants that don't look like stretchy pants. And when I get good at something, especially in my career, I like to stay there. Forever. But I was willing to get uncomfortable. And my husband noticed and wants to celebrate with or without the promotion. That makes me want to celebrate each other more. Not just big moves and big days. I want to celebrate life and love and all of the everyday normal stuff in between. I want to celebrate good tries as well as good grades. I want to celebrate when I get off my butt and exercise three days this week.

Because, I'll be honest, I need more celebrating in my life.

Apparently my husband has seen and heard this without me saying the words. Or really even realizing it myself. Because his words set something off in my heart! A reverberating YES in my soul. That's it! That's what I've forgotten. I've forgotten to be proud and excited for all of it. My husband reminded me how important it is, not only to celebrate life, but also how it feels to be understood by someone. How vital it is to my heart to be seen...good, bad and all the junk in the middle.

So take some time this month. Listen. Don't listen just to respond. But truly listen. Watch. Pray. Find something that someone you love is saying, even if it's just a whisper. Because often, in our quietest whispers comes our deepest needs. To be seen. To be understood. And ultimately to be loved...without condition.

After 40 Years – The Sandwich – by Marcy Lytle

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"Lord, help me be nice."

Date Night Fun – Music to My Ears – by Marcy Lytle

We recently spent a while doing something before we went back in our house, after returning from a walk, and it was quite refreshing and fun. I thought it would be fun to incorporate that activity into date night ideas this month. What was it? Just look below and see, and then try one of these ideas in this month of September. September marks the start of a new season where temperatures finally start to fall a little and we look forward to all the new scents and sights of autumn. It may as well be a new season for time together while you enjoy a bit of listening, too!

Playlist – I frequent YouTube more than my husband does and recently, I had saved quite a few songs that I love. In fact, my son had sent me a song by Tom Walker called “Leave the Light On” and it is one of my faves, so we started with it. For this idea, go out for the evening to a neighborhood near your own and take a long walk, observing the houses and their yards and their décor. Stop for an ice cream cone or slurpee, then pull up in your driveway and sit in the car and go through your playlist, as you listen to tunes together. This activity calmed us both, brought a few tears to our eyes, and it resulted in us praying together. A perfect date!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCntEnZD3NE>

Vintage – For this date idea, search your area for thrift stores and decide ahead of time what you can spend. Look for old band tshirts from groups that you love, and also purchase an album or two. If you have an old record player, play these when you get home and enjoy a snack together – like biscuits sprinkled with sugar and strawberries on top. If you don’t have a turntable and love this idea, consider buying one – they’re not that much (under 40 bucks on Amazon.) And make this regular date night idea that you do over and over again.

https://www.amazon.com/Victrola-Bluetooth-Suitcase-Turntable-Turquoise/dp/B00UMVVUOC?ref=Oct_BSellerC_3003611_0&pf_rd_p=4c77e881-d48a-556c-ba85-cd68cb17bcb9&pf_rd_s=merchandised-search-6&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_i=3003611&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=SH4BRVESPOM1TA1PFWKJ&pf_rd_r=SH4BRVESPOM1TA1PFWKJ&pf_rd_p=4c77e881-d48a-556c-ba85-cd68cb17bcb9

<https://www.pillsbury.com/recipes/grands-strawberry-shortcakes/cd2f11bd-5038-447c-85f5-f944a2e4b14a>

Competition – If there’s a musical show on television that you both like and enjoy watching, like The Voice or American Idol, or other musical themed shows, make it a date night in and dress up for the occasion as if you’re going to the actual show itself! Make appetizers and fun drinks, set a large tablecloth out on the floor and make it a fun feast. When you’re done, pull out your old trivia cards and only ask the music or entertainment questions of each other, until one of you has answered at least five correctly.

<https://www.tasteofhome.com/recipes/tune-a-piano-sandwiches/>

Double the Beat – Invite another couple to join you cruise your town, listening to unknown musicians. Find one playing in a couple of coffee shops, stop on the street if there's a musician or singer performing, and settle in a jazz club, if you can find one near you. Put together your dollar bills and purpose to give a tip to each one, and maybe purchase a CD. Pull up where you can overlook your city and observe the stars and the moon, and sing a few tunes together before heading home.

Splurge – Look at the performances near you for a musical, a symphony or a concert and save up to go. Outdoor theaters have probably closed for the summer season, so save up to go to an actual indoor musical performance. You pick out his outfit, and let him pick out yours (if you dare.) Before you go, stop for a quick bite to eat at your favorite fast food (yes, in your dressy clothes). It will be fun! Oh, and wear one of these new hairclips – they're everywhere this season!

<https://www.rue21.com/store/jump/product/2-Pack-Gold-Pearl-Studded-Hair-Clips/0117-001811-0008174-0077>

Music is that universal language, isn't it? Find your common interests, or let him choose and then you. But incorporate tunes, lyrics, and movement into date night often. It will lift your spirits and make you smile...together.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Best of the Mess – Peaceful Waiting – by Ashley Zanella

I look out and I'm standing on a dock - the water is still around me.

It's early morning, fall, some fog is gathering around the edges of the water.

It's peaceful here and in this season where everything stands still, I feel a tender giddiness knowing that soon, the sun will rise, the air will warm and the fog will slowly dissipate into the trees and bushes that surround the water.

Ever since I was a child, I have absolutely loved foggy mornings. My bus stop was approximately one mile away from our house. Childhood was such a traumatic time in my life, so walking alone in the fog, wearing my fall boots for the first time and listening to Avril Lavigne was something I craved and looked forward to. It was a promise that tomorrow would be better. I didn't know where I would go in life, but I knew that if I took the right steps and was patient, things would brighten up a bit.

Fast forward to now. This week, I finally heard back about a job I have been interviewing for, during the past month. The position has been put on hold until at least September while they go through something internally within the business. No feedback was offered when I asked. They said everyone enjoyed their time and conversations with me in each interview.

It would be a lie to say that I didn't feel disappointment to not get this position, but at the same time there is also peace. I had been praying for peace on their decision and whatever happens from here, and one of my friends happened to pray over me. While he was praying with my husband and me, he said that I would get an unexpected offer and that it would fulfill all of our needs.

I still don't know what that means. I have no clue if that position will be re-opened in September and if I am the primary candidate for it. I have no clue if I am going to find an even better opportunity in the meantime. I have no idea what will happen today or tomorrow.

However, I do know that I am at peace.

I'm sitting on that dock, and now my feet are fully submerged in the crisp water, patiently waiting for that sun to rise and warm the waters. And in the meantime, I think I'll enjoy the view for a little while longer.

Firmly Planted – Hold on, Hang on, Let Go – by Dina Cavazos

The scorching heat of late summer has me holding on to the fact that it will end and fall will come. After all, every year of my life so far, fall has followed summer. Whether the cooler weather arrives in September, October, or November, eventually, it comes. Right now I'm holding on, but if 100 degrees lingers too long, I may have to *hang on*. I'll remind myself that I don't really want to relocate and I really *can* make it without a pool, and the winters are really pretty nice, as winters go.

My plants are holding on too. June and July were unusually cool and wet for our area; otherwise, they would be hanging on to life about now. As it is, the less heat tolerant plants wilt under the death star, but perk up by morning. A cool drink of water helps them revive so they can hold on for another day, to repeat the cycle once more. This exercise of holding on and hanging on is one I'm well acquainted with, and I'm guessing you are too, because we all come from the same Garden. In my life journey I've held on to a lot of things, both positive and negative. I've held on to expectations and "the way things should be," struggling to enter an evasive peace, struggling with forces that opposed every attempt to make good things happen.

My children were raised in the midst of a dysfunctional relationship. I used to think he was the dysfunctional one, and he was, but I've come to see my own dysfunction and accept responsibility for my part in it. During those very difficult years, I not only held on, I *hung on* to survive—not physically, but in every other way. Back then, I was holding on to emptiness. I didn't have a solid foundation of truth, so my desire was for a life the "world" had held out to me. It was a good life I wanted: a lasting marriage with happy healthy children, and basic needs met—nothing wrong with that. However, the problem was that I wanted the life without the Life-Giver, and I was totally unaware of it. The life I was trying to hold on to didn't fit together—it was like making a picture from a mixed bag of puzzle pieces. My inability to create a cohesive stable life for myself and my children finally led to *hanging on* in desperation. By this time, I was reaching for the Life-Giver. Part of me was hanging on to the dream that had become a nightmare, and part of me was hanging on to promises I could barely understand. The moment came when I had to choose: hang on, or let go.

In the years since that letting-go breakthrough, my focus has been more on the Life-Giver and he's taught me more about holding on, hanging on, and letting go. It's taken more than a few lessons, and, of course, it never ends. Thankfully, my life isn't a never-ending cycle of desperation and revival, and hasn't been for a long time. Other than the arrival of fall, the object of my holding on isn't a thing I want to happen or a life I want to live. I hold on to Life itself, which is Christ, the living Word that has Life **in Himself**. I hold on to his words that bring truth to my soul. Until God's Kingdom is manifested on earth, as it is in heaven, I will always be holding on to a higher truth than my eyes are able to see. Because in this world we have tribulation, I will sometimes have to desperately hang on until that higher truth takes hold of me. It's then that will I find the peace of *letting go*, and fall into the Living Water.

Moving Forward – Even in Loss – by Pam Charro

I was thinking a little too hard a couple of weeks ago about love and life.

I thought about loving a pet for 15 years and losing it to death. I thought about raising children and having them grow up and leave. And I thought about loving a spouse for many years who was unable to return that love. In all of those scenarios, an investment of love was made that ended in pain. And I wondered,

Where does all that love go?
What do we get for all of that giving?

At work the next day, I was talking to a friend who had just adopted a puppy. She was frustrated because she wasn't getting any sleep, and was considering giving the puppy back. I said, "You know, people with pets live longer."

And that was when it hit me. Asking where the love went was the wrong question. What I should have been asking instead was,

"What did that love accomplish?"

Because love is never wasted, even when it doesn't end well.

Yes, it hurts to lose a loved one, when a relationship changes, and when love isn't returned. Ultimately, it would be great if those we love never left and always loved us back. Losing at love can feel absolutely devastating.

The truth is, though, that even in loss, love has created something beautiful: US! We are the ones who benefit by loving because the love that was in us changed us. We became softer of heart, more selfless, more patient and forbearing, more like our Father who created us.

Simply more beautiful.

What could be more valuable than that? No wonder people with pets live longer. The love inside of them just may have created more years of life!

God, make me a vessel that reflects your love. Give me wisdom to remember that love is always worth it because of the work that it does.

Even if it's just in me.

Real Stories – Puzzling – by Shellie Cleveland

For many years, I was NOT a puzzle person. My sweet mother-in-law often has a puzzle out on a card table in their living room and she invites her family to work on it with her while they visit. I would sit down with her and pretend I was trying to put in pieces, but I was mostly enjoying the social time with all the folks at the table. I just didn't get the allure of puzzles. It did not seem like fun to me – it was work.

Then last year at Christmas time, I sat down to play with my 6 year old great nephew, Rhett, and he wanted to do a puzzle. My sister had some 48 piece Christmas puzzles among the toys for her grandkids, so we picked one and got started. Rhett was very good at putting together the puzzle and in a short time we had it done. He spotted another puzzle he wanted us to do next, but it was considerably more difficult – 500 pieces and they were small. I was skeptical about our ability to complete it, but he was very persuasive, so we dumped out the puzzle and started searching for edge pieces. It was a lot harder than he realized, and he lost interest after a little while and left me alone at the table.

I am not sure why, but for some reason, I decided I would finish the puzzle instead of putting it back in the box. I felt a little challenge in the back of my mind. *Could I do it?* We were staying at my sister's house for a few days for Christmas and I worked on the puzzle whenever I got a chance. My 87 year old mom helped me a little bit, and I realized that her eyesight had deteriorated more than I thought. She had a very hard time putting pieces together. My sister, my niece, and my husband Andy all helped too. I enjoyed connecting with each of them while we sat at the card table and worked on the puzzle. Rhett would bounce in every now and then and put in a piece, too.

I noticed that the puzzle pulled in all the different generations. We got about three-fourths of it completed but then it was time to pack up and head to my in-laws for Christmas with that side of the family. Oh well, maybe we would get it done next year.

Not surprisingly, when we arrived at my in-laws, there was a puzzle out, and I sat down and really worked on it this time. We had it put together pretty quickly, and I was a little disappointed it was done so fast. Something had changed, and *I was actually having fun doing puzzles.*

The following week when my sister came to see me she said, "I brought you a surprise." Her husband went out to their car and brought back a large square piece of plywood wrapped in foil and laid it on the table. I pulled back the foil and there was my almost finished Christmas puzzle laying on a poster board. She laughed and said, "You and Andy were having so much fun working on the puzzle, I thought I would bring it to you. So I slid it off the table onto the poster board and wrapped it up on the plywood. Now you can finish it." It sounds crazy, but I was really excited she brought it to us to finish. We worked on it during the rest of our holiday time and put the last piece in on New Year's Eve.

I don't exactly understand it, but I really had a great feeling of accomplishment completing that 500 piece Christmas puzzle. Maybe that is why we have intentionally started puzzling.

We went to Andy's aunt's house on New Year's Day and she just happened to mention she had some puzzles she wanted to get rid of, so I went upstairs to the game room with my mother-in-law and sister-in-law and I picked out two puzzles to take home. I found out there is a whole puzzle network among our family and friends that I didn't know about! They share and trade puzzles. And now, I was in the loop. I wasn't sure if this trend of liking puzzles would last, so I thought to myself, I will do these two and see where it goes.

The first one – a snowman theme was done by Jan 5th and I posted it on Facebook. The second one – a wildflower theme was done by Jan 13th and I posted a picture on Facebook again. I am glad I have been taking pictures and posting them when we finish a puzzle, because it is very easy to lose

track of which ones we have done and how long it took to complete them. We have already passed several on to other people in the puzzle network, and Facebook friends who puzzle are now dropping bags of puzzles on our door step!

To date, we have completed nine, and we always have a couple waiting in the wings. We average about two a month, although we did one per week in January. We don't have any official time line for the puzzles and no pressure, but I think the cold weather contributed to our faster pace in the winter. We just work on them when we feel like it, in the evenings and on weekends, sometimes individually, but often together.

Andy will come up to me in the kitchen or while we are watching TV and say, "You wanna puzzle?"

So we go to the dining room and sit down at the table and work on it together. We have different approaches to puzzling, which I think is funny. I feel that you **MUST** start with the edges first. I mean, how can you figure out where the other pieces go, if you don't have the edges in place? Andy, on the other hand, will pick up a piece and scrutinize it closely, very thoughtfully comparing it to the picture on the box.

He will then place it on the table in the middle of my carefully constructed edge ring, with no connecting pieces and say triumphantly, "It goes here."

I always say, "You don't know that!"

But often he is right and I am dumbfounded. I look to match the shapes of the pieces and he matches the colors in the pieces. We do it differently but we each have our strengths, and they complement each other, much like most things in our 37-year marriage. We have found that puzzling is very relaxing, even if the puzzles are hard. Sometimes we talk as we puzzle, but often we sit in silence, quietly working side by side. When we get down to the last few pieces, Andy always lets me put in the final piece because I enjoy it so much. I have gotten up in the morning and found the lone, final piece waiting for me to put it in and complete the puzzle. That is love!

We have gradually worked up to more difficult puzzles, the hardest one being the hot air balloon puzzle pictured here. 1500 tiny pieces!! It was beautiful and hard but very fun and satisfying to finish. It is one we will keep and do again. Nowadays, we have a puzzle out on our dining room table all the time.

We are officially puzzle people. And it is puzzling, but also very fun and rewarding.

Simple Truths - It's A Wonderful Life – by Erica Simmons

The film with the above name is without a doubt one of my all-time favorite Christmas movies. In it is one of my favorite actors, James Stewart. It's full of romance, humor and is a powerful story. But on to what I have to say...

In last month's article, I decided to boldly step out and share a tremendously personal story about my son. Writing the article was easy because it was a story of struggle and of hope. The day I finished was the Sunday after Jordan made a not so smart decision while spending time with former and current member of our church youth group. That day I made the rounds to a few parents and the youth leaders sharing how I handled the issue with Jordan. As in my story, I was open and honest about Jordan's marijuana use. I know where we have been on this journey and felt that where we were was a better place. After talking with one couple, I started to doubt that after one comment and the look on their faces. Let's just say that spiritually things went downhill from there.

One of my favorite authors, Joyce Myers, described in one of her books how we have these faith gardens. This is just a paraphrase of the main idea. We patiently sow our seeds of faith and just about time we are going to get our breakthrough, the enemy attacks and we start pulling up all our seeds in an emotional fit. Janice Seney said it this way: We are driving down the highway of life in the right lane headed towards our breakthrough and something happens, and we move out of the lane we need to be in and miss our blessing.

To say I was discouraged after that conversation mentioned above would be a huge understatement. I had been so hopeful, because Jordan's marijuana use had decreased and he had not moved on to more dangerous drugs. However, the question posed to me was about how long he had been using, which I believe is now four years. I asked myself, "Am I just looking for excuses to make myself feel better about this and to give myself false hope?" By the time I had driven home from church, I was done with Christianity, I was hurt because I knew how I raised my children and felt that God did not protect them. I was done and had made up my mind to leave the church. I spent the rest of the day solidifying my decision.

I was tired. And this brings me back to *It's a Wonderful Life*.

I love a lot of things about that movie and on Monday I got to add another thing to that list. In the movie when George is at his very lowest, the Creator of the universe went into action to show George how important he was and how much he was loved not just by those around him, but by the Creator of the universe as well. He sent a guardian and JUST for George. This was not someone on his way to help someone else and had a little extra time to help George. This angel was sent for the sole purpose of saving George, of encouraging him at his lowest point when he felt like no one else even cared. That was how I went to bed that night.

Monday morning, I woke up to an email from the editor of THYME. I was having doubts about the article and was not sure I wanted to let it go to print. We went back and forth via email that morning, not just about the story. She shared some wise, kind and encouraging words with me. It was just the beginning of the encouragement God had in store for me.

When I bought my house a few years back, the realtor was a dear friend and fellow church member, and a few months ago he started sending out what he calls Monday Morning Coffee. He starts with an update on the state of the housing market and then goes into an inspirational story. This one started with this quote.

“Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass... it’s about learning to dance in the rain”. – Vivian Green.

That alone blew my mind. The story went on to share the story of a minister who was getting ready to preach at school conference. The minister was not feeling well and had been invited down early to hear the performer they had scheduled as well, and shared the impact it had on his life. The performer had an amazing story of his own; his name is Patrick Henry Hughes. I don’t have time to share the story here, but if you take the time each month to read the stories in this magazine, please take the time to look up his story. It is an amazing one. The minister went back to his home and shared his experience with his church called...

Simple Truths

Did you just get goose bumps? (Read the name of my column). I hit reply back to my friend and said, “I needed this!” You see? This is what God always does, simple things, small things, to encourage us and to keep our faith going. It was these things that I started to doubt, the simple truths. These are the things I wondered if by grasping onto them that I was desperately trying to make ugly situations look better than they were. If told to someone who was not walking the Christian life, they could easily be brushed off as coincidences. Isolated in one-on-one situations, they can, but I have a lifetime of these small encounters with God.

When I was at my lowest point, discouraged and hurting, God showed up.

I think about the opening scene in the movie and of all the people praying for George, many of them because of the things George did for them, things some would say were simple and small, but for those involved they made a big difference. Clarence asked if George was sick and the voice of God said, “No, worse. He is discouraged.” Being discouraged is worse than being sick. In sickness you have hope that medicine and treatment will help, but when discouraged we have crossed the line and let go of or lost our hope. That was me on that Sunday in July. I had let go of my hope, the one thing that I had that was allowing me to dance in the storm. The enemy wanted to tear up my garden of faith that I had been patiently sowing. He was trying to force me out of my lane where my blessing awaited me, but my God was having none of it. All (and I mean all) the areas I was having doubts about - God addressed.

By the end of Monday, I was starting to see how some of the psalms can start out so deep, dark sad and end with such praise for our God. I discovered that life truly is wonderful, not because it is perfect, but because I don’t have to walk it alone. I can choose to dance in the storm. And if that is putting lipstick on a pig, then bring on the pig. I’ve got plenty of lipstick.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Above the Shots – by Marcy Lytle

What the world needs now is love sweet love...it's the only thing...

You probably can sing the song that goes with those lyrics. And it's a good song, and so true. The world needs love, not hate. Hate causes mass killings, like we've been witnessing in the past days. And mass killings incite fear and anxiety among all of us. What is this world coming to?

Lately, I've been thinking about all the things we promote that are good. Things like positive thoughts, good vibes, random acts of kindness, and yes even love, sweet love. We promote love for all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, economic status, and more. All of those things are wonderful...and yet hate persists and people are dying.

People are dying in their sin. Yes, I said the word sin. There is such a thing as sin. And what the world needs now to eradicate sin among us (all of us) is the love of Jesus. Human love is flawed, fickle, and fabulous all at the same time. We're in love with one spouse today and another in a few years. We are smitten with our newborn baby and she loves us, and then that same child can't stand us when she's a teenager. Human love can only go so far, because it's human. It's limited. It's dependent on mood, feelings, hurts, and wounds, and whether or not we can overcome hurt and trauma and all of the things this world inflicts upon all of us, including mental illness.

I don't think it's trite or a cliché to say what we need is Jesus. His name has been pushed aside and only heard as a curse word in a movie, it's only used in anger when we're mad at our children, and we only see a picture of him on Catholic candles in the Dollar Store. Jesus is not represented and lifted up as he should be, so our world either doesn't know who he is, or doesn't have a clue of his character and power and authority and love on this earth...to change us all.

- At the name of Jesus, darkness flees.
- In the name of Jesus, people are healed.
- With the name of Jesus, inherited tendencies toward destruction let go.
- At the sound of Jesus' name by those who love him, demons run the other way.
- As we share the love of Jesus that took him to the cross, the chained are set free.
- With the proclamation of the name of Jesus in worship, He is exalted.
- When the name of Jesus is exalted, all men are drawn to Him.

It's then and only then that we will see change on this earth, when his name is taken from the pages of the bible and demonstrated in love, joy and peace to those around us as we share with them the character of the God who so loved the world that he gave...he gave his son...that son's name is Jesus. That son, the perfect holy sacrifice, died on a cross to make a way for us to have relationship with a holy God that is over all, knows all, and can heal all of our wounds and all of our diseases.

But if we, the ones that know his love and forgiveness and power, never say his name, because we're ashamed or afraid, they will never know.

We don't have to apologize or explain Jesus. We just have to know him and represent who He is, not who he's not. He's not an accuser. That's the enemy that's whispering lies into the ears of the killers. He's not a legalist, imposing laws and restraints upon people, but rather offering freedom to live. He's not a mean Father, sending people to hell because of wrongdoings, but rather One that offers grace to live eternally and never die.

Jesus. Jesus.

You makes the darkness tremble.

Jesus. Jesus.

You silence fear.

Do you know that song? If not, look it up. Sing it with your children, sing it to your own soul, sing it loud and sing it clear for all the world to hear...so that what they need, what the world needs now, can be heard above the all the deafening and deadly shots...

Jesus

FRESH THYME – Eco-Anxiety – by Marcy Lytle

Have you heard of this? I hadn't until recently. It appears that many people, probably of the younger generation, have this anxiety about the future of our planet. From plastics to waste to global warming and extinction of species, it's a real concern for those who plan to live here for many more decades. In fact, there are those that are telling us to "panic" so that we will get on board and do something about all of this!

We are told that glaciers are melting; we have about a dozen years until our lives are vastly affected by climate change, and other scary things are occurring that can certainly cause panic.

I was talking about this with my husband recently and we recalled how when microwaves came out, we were told by some media sources that they caused cancer, not to stand near them when we cook, and all sorts of things that kept us from buying one for a long time. Fast forward decades and we're still alive and kicking.

We began purchasing bottled water, because we were told that tap water was full of toxins and that bottled water was the best way to go, to stay healthy. However, we now are told to abandon plastic water bottles altogether and carry metal or glass bottles, to save from dumping the plastic into landfills.

I'm not necessarily comparing apples to apples, but I am talking about the media and news sources that we listen to. I think it's wise to be aware of our surroundings, and certainly smart to take care of the planet on which we live. That's just common sense.

However, I'm not sure that listening to the panic stricken environmentalists is the healthiest manner of living, especially if it brings on anxiety.

Spiritually speaking, I recall as a child being told often that "Jesus is coming back!" "You better be ready!" Those warnings also made me panic, that somehow if I wasn't doing good things, thinking great thoughts, and living a holy life, I might be left here to die when the rest of the "goodies" go up there – to heaven.

My point in writing this piece is to just comment on the state of things in our society. News and media brings with it all sorts of stories of doom and gloom. Just this week, there were shootings in public places where innocents died, all for no good reason at all.

I guess what we need to do in all of these cases is take affirmative action, but then rest in peace, while we live. Hopefully, there's a balance to be had with all of the anxious thoughts that are sent to our brains via our ears, on a daily basis.

We can:

Live realistically. We can do what we can, by recycling, not being wasteful, etc. But we don't have to go to sleep at night wondering if we've done something horrid to contribute to our demise.

Pray fervently. God says we can live in peace, and that he has not given us a spirit of fear. So we can ask for peace, listen for his words of wisdom, sigh and relax.

Listen sparingly. It's great to be informed, if our sources are true. But how many of them are? How can we know for sure? What are we supposed to believe? Listening is good, but living is better.

Give always. Giving is always a great way to save our planet and our future. We can't take anything with us but His spirit that resides inside, so we can definitely share all that we have with all that we know.

Focus fairly. We can't focus on a dozen issues and create change effectively. But we can focus on something that is dear to our own hearts. Maybe the dying critters in the ocean are something we want to give to, learn about, and educate on. That's one thing we can do, when we cannot do a million things.

Rest reverently. God hasn't told us when the world is ending, but it is. We don't even know if we have tomorrow, but we have today. And those attitudes inside us need changing, as much or more than the outside world actions do. So, we can reverently obey his word and then rest in his promises of peace, a future, and a hope.

I don't have eco-anxiety, and I'm not planning on picking up that worry. I feel like if I focus on what I can, do my best with what I've been given, and pray and trust Him to guide me if I need to do more, I can settle in at night and sleep...in heavenly peace. Even if I just drank a coke with a plastic straw...

FRESH THYME – Gotta Interact – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know (you do, if you're on Instagram) that you have to interact with other people on social media in order for them to see your stuff? It's true. You cannot set up your account and post every day, hoping the world will see what you've written, the beautiful photos you've taken, and think you're all that...unless you look at their stuff and comment and notice, as well. That's just the way social media works, and the creators were geniuses in making it that way.

Did you know that (you do, if you attend church or have friends that meet up) that you have to interact with people in order for them to interact with you? You cannot show up at church or your friends' houses for gatherings and hope everyone there will notice your new shoes, ask you about your job and care about your stuff unless you care about them. That's just the way humans and communication and friendships work.

We would rather just post our stuff and have all the world love us and praise us, show up and have friends gather around to be near us because we're great, and go home and bask in that attention and light.

We gotta interact!

Here's why we don't:

It takes time and work to comment on social media on others' posts, and we may not find them that interesting. It's the same with our friends and their lives, if they're different than we are.

It takes dying to our selfish needs of adoration and looking out to adore others and what they have to say and share. Interest is a two-way street, not a one-way corridor to blissful living.

It takes vulnerability to put ourselves out there in the first place, and it's pretty easy on a screen because no one's in our room. But when we meet with people, they're in our space and we get uncomfortable and withdrawn.

Here's what we must do:

We have to be friendly, if we want friends. It's that way on Instagram, and it's that way in life. Sure, there are people that we may be friendly with that won't ever reciprocate, but there are many more who will.

We have to learn to love the different in her, to see the real in her to appreciate the value in her, and that won't happen if we're always waiting for her to see the value in us.

We have to be vulnerable because how can we love her, how can we win him, how can we be a friend that shows His love if we aren't known and choose to know?

Everyone has different personalities from introvert to extrovert and somewhere in between. He knows that. But we also have a great big God that can move us forward to connecting with others, when our main reason for not connecting is selfishness, pride and fear. He can help us do what we can with those near us, so that...

Our posts, or life pictures, of the good life he offers us are seen and appreciated and people want more, because we've seen their life pictures and commented and appreciated and want more, as well.

We gotta interact!

FEATURE STORY - The Enforcer

We attended a huge outdoor concert, with thousands of other people in our city, called Blues on the Green. It was the last one of these for the summer, so you can imagine the crowd. We had no idea it would be so huge! On line, in the description of the event, it clearly stated no alcohol and no smoking, as this was a family friendly event. However, how could one enforce such rules in such a large area with such a crowd of people, with no entry and exit points?

They couldn't. They didn't.

We set our chairs mid field, quite a ways back from the stage, and watched people fill in around us, within inches. There was a girl and her friends (and her tiny dog that was hyper), sitting just in front of us, pouring drinks into cups, just as it was getting dark. There was another set of friends on a blanket to the right of us passing around a smoke, with the vapors wafting across our faces. We looked around and saw lots of people doing just what was said NOT to be done.

But there was no enforcer. So rules and courtesies were broken.

As we left that night, I thought about this world and comments I hear from time to time about God and one of the main questions I hear is, "Why doesn't he step in and stop the madness?" referring to shooters and disasters and abusers. We all want a God that enforces the rules, so to speak, especially the rules that are being broken that hurt us, and those we love. We want his mighty hand to save, the one that he talks about in his word. "God, come and save us!" is our cry when terrorism threatens our safety.

However, we don't want God the enforcer to step in and monitor our lives and how WE live. We don't want to follow any sort of rules, and we certainly don't want to be told how to live our lives. We want to disobey all the guidelines he laid out for us in his "rule book" – the one laced with love and safety and blessings – and then we want him to obey our command to show up and fix what we've broken.

Imagine how silly it would be at the concert if someone there, one who was drinking and smoking and ignoring the rules, complained to the event planner that people were drunk and unruly, or they became ill from inhaling the smoke, or other such maladies associated with breaking the rules. Wouldn't that be unreal to complain about evils and atrocities that were brought on yourselves by your own actions against your own fellow concert-goers?

By now, you maybe raising your eyebrows and thinking, wait a minute. We didn't do anything to bring on haters and killers and crazy people and storms. Oh, but I beg to differ. We, as a whole of humanity, continue to disobey the rules to love God with all our hearts, minds and souls and our neighbors as ourselves. We, as a group, don't want to repent of any wrongdoing of ill will, gossip, slander, or hatred in our hearts. We have rights, after all. We, as a whole, don't want to be told in any way or form how to live our lives. We want to live and let be, love when it feels good, and promote self above all else.

God doesn't bring evil into this world, and he for sure is the Enforcer who will end it all one day...because he said he would. But until that day, he said there were be trials and tribulations.

All because of sin. Because we read the signs and we decided to sneak in the concert with that which we were told to leave behind. And when we light up and blow that proverbial smoke into his nostrils, his hands are tied. He cannot be both the Enforcer and the passive one that allows demise.

Which kind of God do we want? He's been all about restoring that relationship that was broken from that fateful bite long ago in the garden. He wasn't the Enforcer then, but rather the Father of lights that warned and waited...for obedience. Obedience did not come, but rather defiance, and the whole of earth has groaned ever since.

But, wait! Because of his great love and mercy and longsuffering and promises, he's giving us all a chance to come and say yes, I want to follow. I want to obey. I want to live.

We can't have it both ways, a God that steps in and enforces when we think he should to protect us all, and then a God that sits by and says do whatever you want and go to hell while you do.

The signs are clearly marked. If we're going to show up at His concert and hear His music, then we've got to leave selfishness at the door, along with all of the evil in our hearts. And the only way to do that is to humble ourselves and give it up as we walk across the field to take our place when the music starts...willingly and lovingly...to the God that only has our best in mind...and always did.



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October 2019



TIPS

The Dressing – Centerpiece Creations – by Marcy Lytle

Rather than talk about clothes or shoes or accessories this month, we're going to talk about dressing up our tables with easy tablescapes that won't break our budgets. Halloween is the end of the month, and perhaps you're having kids over for fun. Thanksgiving is next month and maybe you're hosting the buffet. And Christmas is coming, where you're sure to spread a table of goodies! There are cute ways to make a focal point for each occasion!

Halloween:

Often, the Halloween table is full of snack trays. Try filling clay pots of different sizes with candy corn, and decorating the top rim with ribbon. Just place them around the table. You can set them on tiny mirrors if you have them, and add tea lights.

You can fill a vase with fall flowers (fake or real), add some spider web netting and tiny spiders. You're done!

Use three painted or decorated mason jars and paint the letters B-O-O on them. Fill with battery operated lights and insert cutlery and straws for your guests!

Thanksgiving:

One simple idea is to take a large clear vase and fill it with small pumpkin gourds. Gather branches from outside and place them in the vase. You can paint them, or leave them natural. Place a bowl of nuts nearby, and you've got a simple but elegant look around which to place your savory dishes!

Take that same large vase and insert a large candle, fill the bottom two-thirds with tiny pinecones.

Do you have an outdoor lantern that you can bring inside? Place fall candles inside, and affix fall foliage to the outside, and set in the center of your table.

Christmas:

Do you have some old vintage books? Stack them up and place a small plate with a candle on top for an old world look!

Line your table full length with a burlap runner. Purchase small succulents and place them down the center. Add tall red candles in between! And sprinkle pine cones all around.

Do you have a wood cutting board and a few mason jars of different sizes? Place them on the board, insert votive candles, and decorate with ribbon or Christmas foliage.

Of course, you can scan the internet to find any number of ideas for tablescapes. But then look through your garage, your yard, and your cabinets and see what you have. Then just arrange what you have in a group of three, add light and color and fragrance if you wish! Invite your friends over and enjoy...

Seven for You – Purse Essentials – by Marcy Lytle

Our panel question this month was “What do you carry in your purse?” I wanted to include some ideas for all of us, as we approach the holidays and start thinking of stocking gifts. I always start buying these early, so that as Christmas nears, I’m not stressed over the bucks that add up in trying to find all of the small stuff that ends up costing a lot! I love what these women shared, and I hope you will too!

Lip Therapy

I love my EOS brand lip balm that comes in a large sphere. There are times when I don’t want lipstick and I just need moisture. And because of the unusual shape, I can always find this quickly in my purse.

<https://www.walmart.com/ip/eos-Organic-Lip-Balm-Sweet-Mint/15136069>

I have to have my chapstick! I really like either Softlips because it's easy to carry (long and thin). Or I like EOS...it's also easy to find in my purse due to the round shape (like a ball). (This must be a great thing, since two ladies cited the same reasons for EOS!)

I love having lipstick and some kind of lip moistener. I’m so fair skinned that I need a bit of color.

The single most used item in my purse is Blistex Silk and Shine. I am allergic to lipstick...even the plant based ones. I gave up long ago trying anything else. This product is my tried and true go-to.

Chapstick with SPF for me!

Mango sunrise by Chapstick!

I can’t go anywhere without my Lipsense Lip Balm and Rose Gloss.

I am loving NYX Butter Gloss in the shade Praline. It’s a great nude color and not sticky at all. Sticky glosses are the worst!

In my purse is my PowerLips Polish from Nu Skin, and my personal favorite color choice for now is Tenacious. It gives just a subtle hint of color and shine and lasts for hours.

A Fresh Mouth

I carry the GUM interdental brushes. They are small, plastic, disposable, brushes about the size of a toothpick. They come in a small plastic case so they always stay clean in my purse. As I get older, it seems that more and more stuff gets stuck in between my teeth. These are perfect for just a quick on-the-go clean-up to get all those food particles out from between my teeth. I don’t have to worry as much that something is visible and my mouth feels so much better.

https://www.amazon.com/GUM-Proxabrush-Go-Betweens-Interdental-Brushes/dp/B07F3CT3FN/ref=zg_bs_8297644011_1?_encoding=UTF8&pvc=1&refRID=POS55R62H01JM52224AH

I must have mint or gum...I always need it and so do my husband and adult kids when they are with us – my purse is always the go-to for all of us, so I stay stocked up. Trident spearmint gum and Tic Tacs or Icebreakers, and Wintergreen or cinnamon Altoids are our faves!

Smooth Hands...and nails

I have to carry lotion in my purse. I am not particular to any brand as long as the scent is not too overwhelming. If we stay in a hotel. I will usually swipe the lotion because it's the perfect travel size.

I like hand lotion, Bath and Body Works warm vanilla sugar...because the scent doesn't make my nose itch! And I love antibacterial hand gel, since I'm kind of a germophobe.

I always have to lotion my hands. I have one container that looks like a paint tube – love it as it makes me think of using my artistic side whenever I can! It's called Seeds For the Gardens of the Imagination - www.libraryofflowers.com a handcreme bottled by Margot Elena
I love love love this lotion!!

https://www.amazon.com/Library-Flowers-Handcreme-Linden-2-3-FL/dp/B00BTLEK6Y/ref=sr_1_6?crd=21KZ3ZM739O15&keywords=library%2Bof%2Bflowers%2Blinden&qid=1567537174&s=gateway&sprefix=library%2Bof%2Bflowers%2Blinden%2Caps%2C165&sr=8-6&th=1

In my purse is always an emery board, since my nails are thin and break easily.

An item I love in my purse is my glass finger nail file that my sister gave me as a holiday gift. Game changer! I've since ordered them as gifts for others and more for me...for my husband, for the bathroom, etc. There are different brands on Amazon, and I ordered the medium size that comes in a full metal case. Love these!!

<https://www.amazon.com/Glass-Nail-File-Manicure-Fingernail/dp/B00TDDI6IS>

I like to carry a nail file, cuz a broken jagged nail that snags your new blouse needs to be put back in its place..

I also LOVE bath and body works hand sanitizer that is Gingham – smells so good! And so clean after use – no stickiness

Gold Bond Radiance Renewal hand lotion is super hydrating and inexpensive. I have really dry hands and go through a lot of hand lotion so I was glad to find a great cheap option.

Avon Intensive Healing & Repair Hand Cream with hydra boost technology for my extremely dry hands is a new item I'm adding to my purse!

Writing Space

I carry a small cute notepad with a matching pen. I never know when I might need it!

In my purse is a notepad and pen to keep the littles busy at events where they have to be still!

I carry a journal/notepad where I make lists of things to do, events to remember, and my grocery lists, with meals on one page and grocery list on another. I love having all my info in one place! A friend makes the cutest journals ever.

https://www.facebook.com/OhDearOhMyCreations/?_tn_=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARDnyKNeXtSnTf5_je_eo-mWUvqk3SjUuFYRLwMN_c0LtejgkbdUz-n3iNCgxH8Aqx9iiYDYOakkYU2

Key Spotter!

My car has a keyless open and start....as long as the key is nearby. Because I've spent 4+ months at the hospital this year with my husband, I've used their free valet parking service a lot, which means I have to leave my key with them. It is hard to remove the key from the main ring, so on AMAZON I ordered a bright green leather wristlet type of key holder, which easily clips on/off the main keychain! Because it's brightly colored and fits over my wrist, it's always easy to spot in my purse or in the valet's pile!

https://www.amazon.com/litymitzromq-Wristlet-Keychain-Fashion-Bracelet/dp/B07XJPJ8H9/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=green+wristlet+leather+keychain&qid=1568313794&s=beauty&sr=1-2

The Eyes

I always carry two identical pairs of prescription reading glasses in my purse, but in two very different cases. I use the glasses in the bright green with tiny pink pigs on it ALL the time if I'm out and most of the time at home, because I can find that case so easily no matter where I am and I KNOW it goes back in my purse. The other pair is mostly a spare, but are in a dark, sedated animal print case.

My purse has a first aid bag, but it is what I put together in baggies. This has been invaluable for about any situation I might encounter. Advil, Clartin(adults) Claritin(Children) eye drops, ear ache drops, benadryl pills, benadryl cream, neosporin, bandaids, splinter out, Emergen C, alka seltzer night time for colds & coughs the only thing I am out of that I always carry is Lotriman (my 22 year old grandgirl needed it at our vaca (but I had it) lol!!!

I have carried this ever since my grands started walking!!

For the Kids and Shopping

I carry snacks for littles. These have been awesome for kids in church & events.

I carry a small hairbrush for my own use, and for when I have the grandkids with me!

I carry store coupons, so hopefully I'll remember to use them! Here's a cute carrier...

I love this tiny bag that folds into a pouch, to have on hand for farmer's market stops. Or any kind of random shopping. It's so small, it barely takes up any room at all...from IKEA.

My purse is a mix between mommy necessities and toddler snacks, which if we're being honest turn into mommy snacks quite often.

Extras...

Two of us said we keep safety pins in our purse, you know, for those mishaps that occur! They are cute in these little boxes!

My Apple earbuds find a home in the zipper pocket of my purse in case I'm waiting somewhere and need a song break.

Doterra touch roller in Motivate is another must have. It smells awesome, and is a great mood booster and pick-me-up when I'm dragging. I've even used it as perfume when I forgot to put some on!

Flawless by Finishing Touch hair remover is quick, gentle, and great for those stray facial hairs that are only visible in the car visor mirror ha!

Within whatever bag that I carry I always have many little bags to organize my necessities. I found that too often I was rummaging through my purse looking for a lip gloss or my keys so I thought, "Why not organize it?" I have two bags, both from Old Navy, that I love. However, you can find small tote bags at any store like Target and Walmart. Inside each bag I truly have all the things you could ever need all the way from lip balm, bobby pins, hair ties, gum, tissues, and floss to lotion.

I carry my White Barn Concentrated Room Spray (my favorite is Georgia Peach), but that varies from time to time. I'm very sensitive to odd smells and carry it with me to use as needed.

<https://www.amazon.com/Bath-Body-Works-Georgia-Concentrated/dp/B07MYW37H6>

Selah's Style – Cute Cypress – by Marcy Lytle

This month we're featuring the style according to Cypress. Cypress is in 1st grade with Ayla (Selah's cousin) and she loves fashion as much as Ayla! In fact, they are best friends!

Cypress says she loves her kitty cat shirt from Justice so much! She has two cats, but she says two are enough! This picture is in front of her mom's best friend's herb garden with tall sage and rosemary behind her.

Halloween is this month! Cypress is so ready, but wishes it was a little cooler outside! She wants to wear her favorite jacket that her Grammy gave her.

Texas Allstart Cheer is Cypress' favorite place to go! And she's wearing her favorite unicorn shirt. She says, "Gymnastics makes me feel like a unicorn!"

Buddy is with Cypress, as she tries to show off her cute, black, sparkly shoes she just got! However, Buddy has other plans, and Cypress comments, "Oh, Mommy, people love dogs more than shoes!"

In the Kitchen – Mostly Veggies – by Marcy Lytle

Over the years, we've watched a few movies about eating more vegetables, with the most recent one being Game Changers. We decided to step up our veggie eating, although we've always incorporated them into our meals. This month I'm sharing a few of those recipes I've designed and ones I've used from cookbooks, along with an apple pie. It's the easiest apple pie, ever. After all, it's fall and color and taste and smell is what this season is all about!

Broccoli with Cashews:

This is a simple recipe and oh, so tasty. I packed it in a thermos for myself and had it while I was out, stopped under a shade tree, reading my latest Book of the Month. This was completely filling and satisfying for lunch!

- 9 oz Broccoli florets, cut into smaller pieces
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 1 T olive oil
- ½ c cashews (I added a little more)

Heat oil in pan, add the garlic and nuts. Stir over heat about 2 minutes, then add in the broccoli and stir fry for another 4-5 minutes til just tender. Serve hot. (To pack and eat later, I'd recommend removing the cashews, as they will soften in a thermos.)

Triple Layer Veggie Sandwich:

I made this for my husband and it looked so pretty, but it was piled so high! I wrapped it in press-n-seal and placed in his lunch. His comment later was, "It was really good!"

- 1 bagel, cut into thirds
- Red pepper sauce (I used Newport Creamery)
- Broccolini
- Carrots
- Red onion
- Cucumbers
- Kalamata olives

Chop and/or slice the veggies (I grated the carrots). Lightly toast the three sections of the bagel. Layer the veggies and a bit of sauce, then add the middle bagel, layer again, and add the top.

Cast Iron Skillet Apple Pie

This recipe caught my eye because it looked so simple, and I love using my cast iron skillet. The pie looks pretty in it, so you don't need a pie dish. The skillet is the dish! This simple pie tastes soooo good. And yes, apple pies need to be refrigerated so that they last more than a day or two...

- 2 pie crusts
- 5-6 chopped apples
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 t cinnamon
- 1/2 stick melted butter
- Cast iron skillet

Preheat oven to 350.

Place one pie crust in the bottom and up the sides of your skillet. Peel, core and chop the apples into small cubes. Mix the sugar and cinnamon. Place half the apples in the skillet, sprinkle half the sugar combo, then apples and sugar combo again. Pour the melted butter over the top. Finally, place the other crust on top, pinching the two crusts together. Make slits or cut out shapes in the crust to let the steam escape.

Place a piece of foil in the bottom of the oven to catch any drippings. Place pie in the oven to bake about 20 minutes. If needed, cover the edges with foil to prevent them from burning and bake another 20 minutes til crust is golden brown. (I didn't need to cover the edges.)

Fall Veggie Bowl

I found some fun Halloween pasta on the shelves at Marshalls, so I bought it. I love whimsical touches to meals! Pasta makes a great base for any veggie bowl, and then you just top it with whatever you have on hand. And I found this Salty Steer Seasoning at a festival, but you could use any seasoning you like.

- Small pasta
- Veggies (I had broccoli, carrots, red onion)
- Slivered almonds
- Kalamata olives
- Cherry tomatoes
- Seasoning
- Lemon juice

Boil the pasta til just tender and drain. Stir fry the veggies in a little olive oil and butter. (1 T each). Add the cherry tomatoes. Cook until the tomatoes start to pop and the veggies are tender. Squeeze some lemon juice over top, and season lightly (the olives will add a salty flavor.) Add the almonds in near the end, just to toast.

Arrange the pasta on the bottom of the bowl, then arrange the veggies separately around the bowl to make it pretty...or you can just stir them altogether...either works! I added the olives in last.

This tastes good warm...or cool...if you place it in a lunchbox.

Tried and True – A Drawer Full – by Marcy Lytle

Bandannas. I have a drawer full of them, in all colors. I watched an episode several years ago of Pioneer Woman and she said bandannas are “sweeping the nation.” I’m not sure about that, but I did stock up (they’re so cheap!) and I’ve used them over and over again. They wash up nicely, don’t have to be ironed, and they’re the best! They’re especially nice to have for the holidays...or all year long.

Here’s why you need a drawer full:

Napkins – It’s nice to have cloth napkins for guests, or for special occasions, or to pack in a lunch box, instead of a paper napkin. We use these often when setting up our dinner to watch a show at home, or by the fire in the backyard. They are just warm and cozy, and this time of year the orange/blue/green colors are great!

Tray liner – Having a buffet or party or setting out snacks? Line your plain or used tray with one bandanna, and you’ve got yourself a color palette for decorating and charm! I use one all the time to line my tin tray with handles.

Purse handle – If you carry a plain black or brown purse, why not tie a bandanna on the handle to add color? Or if you carry a bright colored purse, opt for a gray/white bandanna. I think this one might be my favorite.

Hobo adventure – We recently took the kiddos on a walk to a creek where we tossed in sticks and stones. We purchased the stones at the Dollar Store and gathered sticks from the yard, tied them up in bandannas and affixed to a long branch! It was so fun.

Kids at night – Do you still rub your kids’ chests with Vicks? I always have and I had mine rubbed too, when I was a kid. Fold a bandanna in half and tie around their necks to keep the Vicks in place, and to make the kiddos smile, too!

Scarf – Bandannas make great scarves! Fold in a triangle, roll, and tie around your neck with the knot in the front, on the side, or in the back. Wear a simple necklace hanging out from underneath, if you wish!

Wrap – Did you know a bandanna is cheaper than a gift bag? So if the gift is small, use a bandanna to wrap it and tie it, and the recipient gets two gifts in one!

I love having a drawer full of these in all colors. I feel like they go with every style, for every occasion, and last a very long time! Is your drawer full?



HOME

Practical Parenting – Packing Lunches – by Marcy Lytle

I've read and seen so many articles on healthy snacks for kids (most of which I don't know any kid that would ever eat them), cute little ways to pack food (who has time for that?) and so much more that I'm thinking might be quite overwhelming for moms! I'm a very practical person, and I'm thinking most young moms (and even us older ones that still pack lunches for fun!) could use some hints that actually make packing lunches easier, not harder...

Here are a few tips you might enjoy trying...

Buy the thin ice packs. They don't take much room and they fit nicely under a sandwich. Add a napkin on top if you're afraid of moisture.

Vary up your sandwiches by presentation. Place that turkey and cheese on plain bread, in a wrap, on a roll, or on a skewer. Same food, different look.

One way to keep apples from turning is to slice it into fourths (and keeping core), then placing the pieces back together and wrapping with plastic wrap – supposedly this works!

Clementines are a great fruit that requires no prep – the kids like to peel them!

I heard that wrapping a sandwich in parchment paper (just fold it over) is great, because you can then unwrap and use the paper as a placemat!

If kids like dip, consider disposable portion cups – found at the stores (tiny cups with lids).

Collect unused packets from fast food (cutlery, napkin, salt and pepper) and keep a stash to throw in the lunch box!

Hard boiled eggs made at the beginning of the week are great and easy to toss in, as well.

And from a mom of three, here are some simple ways to keep sane and healthy while packing:

- 1. Schedule & Plan Lunches:** Each week I plan out the kid's lunches and they go on a meal plan calendar on the fridge. **I can better track what we need and don't need for my grocery shopping. This is a huge help not only for time and list, but for my budget. If things are not planned out I tend to stress at store, forget items or overspend.*
- 2. Portion Food:** After planning the lunches & buying the items, I portion into baggies (chips, snack items, cookies, etc.) **This has cut my time in half in the mornings.*
- 3. Organization Bins:** I recently reorganized my fridge and pantry, and sorted out breakfast, lunch and dinner items. The kids now know what they can grab for breakfast, snacks and options for the lunchbox as they learn to start packing their own. ** I can keep an eye on how much my kids are eating (because we all know that kids will just eat and eat and eat...) It's important for me to pay attention to how much and what they are eating. It also keeps them, well us, from wasting food and running out of food in between budgeted grocery trips.*

Happy lunch packing this fall, chaos and all!

I Don't Do Teens – Fun with Friends – by Marcy Lytle

Your teens are really too old to go trick or treating, but I'm betting they will want to do something fun with their friends for Halloween. There's all sorts of mischief to be had if they roam the streets with nothing to do, so why not offer up a few ideas for the kids and help them make the night a fun one for all? Maybe they can invite a few friends over, or perhaps it can just be a family affair. Either way, Halloween fun doesn't have to end just because our kids aren't welcome to carry bags for treats anymore!

Five ideas for the teens in your house to still be spooked:

Help them to create a maze in the yard. We have a neighbor that does this. Collect boxes or large pieces of plywood, and allow them to create a simple pathway that zigzags to the front door. They can decorate the maze with spider netting and set out lanterns (battery operated for safety!), to make the night fun for the trick or treaters that come to your front door.

Help them throw a small party. Let them come up with a menu, allow them to pick up the items at the store, and let them create! If the weather is good, let them bob for apples out back, and make smores with tealights set among small stones, or if you have a fire pit, use that! They could even play hide and seek (if they're still young teens that don't think that's goofy!). Give the kids bags, hide wrapped candy outside in the dark, and hand them flashlights! Great fun!

Help them set up a pumpkin carving table. If you don't want a mess, just set out all sorts of craft glue guns, pipe cleaners, googly eyes, stickers, etc. for decorating the gourds. If you don't mind the mess, provide newspapers and pumpkins, and let them carve the night away! Just provide lots of snacks and end the evening with Halloween charades.

<https://buggyandbuddy.com/halloween-games-kids-charades/>

Help the kids find a spooky movie, let them decorate the room and set up the food. What about the 1933 version of King Kong? I bet none of you have seen it! They could totally set up pillows on the floor, light candles around the room, and make popcorn with all sorts of Halloween toppings like candy corn, caramels and dark chocolate chips! Serve them in cute Halloween bags you can find at the store.

<https://www.amazon.com/King-Kong-Fay-Wray/dp/B001R6AW18>

Help the older teens by providing a way for them to "trunk or treat" with their (your) cars. Wouldn't that be fun? Maybe they could park in a circle in a parking lot nearby, and serve a buffet of food/games from one car to the next. Each teen could bring a part of the food array, and one game. And each one that participates decorates their own trunk. Provide flashlights for all, and encourage them to visit and have some good clean fun in the dark...teen style...supervised, of course.

Halloween fun doesn't have to end for the older kids, or for us parents, either! I love to think up spooky fun, fall colored foods, and have a scary good time – without all the gore. And our kids

can, too! They don't have to hibernate when darkness is near, they can be the light and bring good cheer!

An Adage a Day - Counting Chickens – by Carole Gilbert

As a child I would often spend the night with my great grandparents. They lived in a small coastal town and I loved the slow pace that went along with visiting them. I also loved the rocking chairs on the front porch and Grandpa's old car with the hole in the back floorboard that I would drop pebbles through while riding in it, but what I was most fascinated with at their house was the chicken coop in the backyard filled with chickens. Grandma had me go pick eggs for breakfast, and of course, Grandpa would go to supervise. That's where I first heard "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." Grandpa told this as I picked the eggs and laughed. I always wondered if the eggs might actually hatch as I picked them up. As I got older, I learned what this saying really meant and remembering Grandpa's laughter as he told it gave me such sweet memories.

This saying is a proverb, an expression that gives advice, and is used to caution someone to not make heavy future plans on something happening before it actually does. It is believed to have originated from the Greek fable writer Aesop, who lived from 620-560 BC. As the story goes, a milkmaid had milked the cows and was carrying the pail of milk on her head all the while daydreaming of where the money was going that she would earn from the milk. Items like buying chickens for eggs, and the new dress she would buy from her riches selling the eggs. Unfortunately, through her daydreaming and not paying attention, she fell and spilled all the milk, therefore having no way to fulfill her dream. Hence the phrase from Aesop's fable becomes the proverb, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch."

Since I grew up hearing this proverb, my kids did too. As I said it to them I would think of Grandpa and the chicken coop. When my eighth grade son asked if he could raise chickens for eggs I was excited! We already had goats that my daughter raised and I thought it would be fun for my son to learn about chickens, and we loved to eat eggs. So off we went to buy chicks. We didn't really know how to pick chicks or even if there was a way, so my son picked six cute ones and we bought a small storage building and made a chicken coop. It was fun, enlightening, and turned out to be expensive! And my son was getting big ideas on what to do with all the eggs he was going to have. All the while, we never thought about that old proverb and how it might possibly apply to what we were doing.

The little chicks started growing, but it didn't take long for three of them to die. The other three continued to get bigger and we couldn't wait until they were big enough for eggs! As they grew, we began to see the prettiest colors in their feathers! Colors I didn't think chickens had or at least none of the ones I had ever seen. Then one day we noticed (or maybe they just got big enough to tell) that they weren't chickens! They were roosters! And they didn't want to sit in the nests in our chicken coop and they definitely weren't going to lay eggs! All they wanted to do was wake us up, and our neighbors, every morning with a wonderful "cock-a-doodle-doo!" I had long before learned the meaning behind "Don't count your chickens before they hatch," or so I thought, and now it was my son's turn. Actually, maybe, we were learning it together. If we had only remembered and applied that insightful proverb earlier!

Tiny Living – Squished! – by Leyanne Enterline

We just added to our tiny space!

Two adorable Australian Shepard Collie mixes were gifted to us!

Now, these are some big pups to have in a trailer! Yup, we're nuts. The boys have been BEGGING for a dog and of course we didn't just get one, because each needs a friend, right? Oh my, our lives have been changed for a bit! We thought with living on two acres with outside dogs would be perfect...plenty of space to roam.

It turns out, puppies don't like that idea. Day one of outside in a super nice dog run that we set up, they decided to have a 10-hour disappearing adventure. However, by a miracle from God they were found by a sweet lady on her back porch. Thankfully, these three month old pups decided to go the wooded route on their journey rather than take to the streets. It was truly a blessing from God that these pups were returned unharmed from all the critters out here, cactus, and thorns...so inside they came!

We now have a giant crate and all! I see why full-timers that are usually a bit older than us have small dogs inside their trailer. Large animals and four humans don't fit all that great. And the giant dog food is inside of course, because the ants wanted to have a treat outside. To say we are squished is an understatement!

We literally have to squeeze by the crate to get to the front door (we don't have a back door but for reason I can't not say "front door") and the dog food is on top of our kitchen counter because the pups found it on the ground and had at it!

Any advice on tiny living with large animals would be very helpful! I do not have this down. I feel in my heart that the giant pups coming into our lives are a symbol of change that's about to take place, maybe a sense of settlement or consistency or maybe a larger space coming.

Tiny living has its ups and downs for sure. We are definitely in a constant state of learning.

Remember, loves grows best in tiny spaces!

A Night to Remember – Tempted...to Evil – by Marcy Lytle

Halloween is this month, and it's a great time let our kids dress up, eat candy, and enjoy all things a little bit spooky and fun. I just recently found some cute decorations at the dollar store for the 6-year old in our extended family, like a black spider web with a huge pink spider glue to the middle! She wants to "freak out" her brother (he's the ripe old age of 7.) I always remember loving this time of year, especially because of the fun involved.

What a great time to use this time of year to talk about evil...and good...and the way to shun evil and run to the good! It's a good time of year to sit down with the kiddos and talk about the dark, scary images and people, and what to do when we're afraid. It's also a good thing to talk about the difference between fun and scary (hiding and seeking and "Boo!") to scary and evil (hiding and seeking to harm.) Discernment can be taught, if we take the time to do so!

Preparation: Print out a few clip art images of the items in bold below. Cut them out and lay on a table face down, allowing the kids to turn over one at a time as you discuss. Provide candy corn and popcorn for treats while you gather and learn. Set out a box of Kleenexes, a flashlight that works, and you could include fries with ketchup if you want! Provide tiny pumpkins and markers for decorating at the end.

Halloween images:

Witches: While witch hats and costumes abound, our older kiddos need to be aware that there are really people that "cast spells" on people and seek to do evil. We do not have to fear that, because we belong to the Good Shepherd. And we are to have no part in seeking to place evil upon anyone else.

Read Psalm 23: 4 *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;*

Ghosts: Little friendly ghosts like kids dressed up in sheets with holes for their eyes are funny and fun! But ghostly stories of evil spirits lurking in the dark to harm us are not something we need to listen to, or entertain. Ghosts cannot harm us! (Toss the Kleenexes at each other!)

Psalm 34:14 *Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

Dark Corners: Sometimes at night when the lights are off, we become afraid of shadows and noises, because we cannot see. However, darkness is as light to Jesus, because he is the Light of the World – and he lives in us! (Turn off all the lights before reading the verse with your flashlight.)

I John 4:4 *Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world!*

Skeletons: Did you know that under our skin we have bones that look just like these skinny, bony guys? He's nothing to be afraid of, although these skeletons are used to spook people. Think of your funny bone (that one in your elbow that hurts when you bump it!) and just giggle out loud and see if that silly skeleton doesn't make you laugh a little, too.

Proverbs 17:22 *A cheerful heart is good medicine.*

Blood: At Halloween, people will wear masks and gloves and costumes with fake blood dripping down them, to scare us. However, the blood isn't real, and bleeding isn't funny. We can turn away and think about how blood brings life! Jesus' shed his blood for us on the cross, so that we could live...forever! How's that for turning away from evil and seeing something good?! (Squeeze ketchup on those fries...)

I John 1:7 *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

Black Spiders: Little and big, there are spiders everywhere, tangled in webs, and placed around to scare and spook each person passing by. These can be fun to use to scare our brothers and sisters, because they're not real. They're just plastic bugs! However, if they scare us at Halloween, we can remember that bugs and spiders are just a part of creation, and they can spin their webs, but we are bigger and mightier than they!

Romans 12:21 *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Jack o lanterns – Carving pumpkins is fun, but there will be some pumpkins that look so scary to us, either with scary faces or weird stuff stuck in them and coming out of them! Pumpkins are great, and carving them is a super fun activity, but we don't have to be afraid of the ones we see with scary expressions. (Let everyone put faces on their tiny pumpkins!)

II Tim 1:7 *For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.*

There are all sorts of things in this world that are fun, funny, and enjoyable, and because of evil in the world, they will be presented to us in evil ways. However, as children that belong to God, we can know that what God has created he will show us how to enjoy in good and healthy ways, in ways that bring us joy and not fear.

Evil is in the hearts of some people, because they don't know the love of God. We can pray for them, be kind to them, but when we're tempted to do evil with them...we can turn away and follow peace and joy in Jesus!

In God's hands, intended evil becomes eventual good. – Max Lucado



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – How Honest? – by Marcy Lytle

He doesn't want to be told if he has bad breath, and I do. I'd rather be told and be embarrassed for a second, but be pleasant to others around me. I guess he'd rather not know...ever. Everyone is different, right? So how honest should we be with our friends? Being too honest can ruin a great friendship, but never being honest at all is not friendship...is it?

Let's look at common areas where honesty, and how honest to be, arises...

She's texting while she's driving, and you're riding in the passenger seat: Shouldn't this be a place to be honest? After all, your safety is involved! If she is offended and refuses to put away her phone, then perhaps we'd be better off driving or riding with someone else. If she gets offended by our request, isn't that her problem?

Her kids are not behaving in your home: This is a sticky situation. Maybe her kids are carrying around their juice boxes and dripping grape liquid onto your rug. It's your home, and you can most certainly be honest and say that you do not allow carrying drinks or food away from the table. Be honest. It's better than being resentful when she leaves, and never inviting her over again.

She's always frustrated and in a dither, but you see ways she can organize her life: Some things are better left unsaid, unless we are asked. If she asks for help, then a door is open. But just offering up honest suggestions (although good ones) unsolicited, makes for a possible hurt that may be hard to mend. You can always pray for an open door, or pray for God to help her. He's great at things like that!

Her dogs are in your face and on your lap when you visit: My daughter has two dogs and she knows the larger one of the two scares me and annoys me. I told her this, and she politely puts her in her kennel when I arrive. I appreciate that I was able to tell her, and she nicely attends to my needs, even though her dog doesn't bother her! That's a real friend! We should totally be kind with our request, so as not to offend, but speak up when we're bothered by unwanted "pests," (I mean, pets.)

She constantly gossips about others in your circle of friends: One way to be honest without being offensive is to change the subject, speak only nice things about those same people, and to avoid nodding or agreeing with every accusation. Gossips won't stay near non-listening ears. She will either stop, or ask you why you're not agreeing, or find something else to talk about. Sometimes being honest is just being nice. And the other person gets the picture.

You've heard a rumor about her, and she's unaware: Rumors are best to be left un-spread and dead at the door. There's never any good in spreading rumors to others. However, if we know a friend well enough and know that she'd rather be told, we can offer the info, without revealing the source. Or better yet, we can tell the person that started the rumor to stop, go to that person, or seek counsel.

You are the one annoying the heck out of someone: What? How can that be? Yes, we can sometimes be the one that talks too much, whines too often, or has stinky breath. We have to

decide whether or not we can handle others' comments on our behavior. The best way to be (which I am NOT, most of the time) is to carefully consider comments made, and discard them if given in a hateful manner, or change our ways if we see that we're wrong. A good idea is to ask a family member if that comment about us is indeed true.

There's a huge difference between being honest with good intentions and being honest because we're annoyed and want to "fix" our friends. From my experience, most of the time, I opt for praying first before I speak. And I hope others do the same with me. Many times, God speaks to that person or to my own heart, and my words become unnecessary to voice. However, when others have had to be honest with me, or me with them, it often goes well when the attitude is filled with humility and grace. We offer grace, and we receive grace. At least, we can hope that's the case.

Honesty is always a must when safety is at risk, when space is violated, or when we feel uncomfortable. But it's usually a waste when it's just our opinion that she needs to change, or she's just different, or she's not open to any feedback at all.

What's your opinion?

Upper Quadrant – Something Died – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when my kids both left home. My son was the last to go, and he had spread out to use both his and his sister's rooms when she got married, a few years prior. So when he left, two bedrooms were cleaned out and empty – it looked like death had occurred! Fast forward another decade, and my mom passed away. These are just two events, big events, where I felt like something also died in me, when these family members moved away to another physical...and heavenly location.

Can you relate?

It happens so fast, just like “they say,” the maturation of our children from baby to toddler to teen and beyond...until they're gone, forever, out of our homes. We have approximately 18 years with them, and then we're back with our spouses, or left alone, and they are no longer under our thumb, our rule, or our management. And they have lives to live, apart from us. It stings! It's a grief like none other, when their beds and clothes and toiletries are taken, and when their chatter on the phone late at night and their messes that use to annoy us now become fond memories and wishes to experience again. Something's dead.

It's such a sad time to lose a parent, no matter their age. All of their annoyances or even the frustration of caring for them is gone, because now they're physically not here. We can't call them for advice, lean on them in times of trouble, or count on them to come through when we're in a mess. They've died. They're gone. And there's this gaping hole in all of us, because we're no longer a child to anyone, any more. It's a feeling and realization that only deepens as the time goes on and we realize we'll never see them or hear their voices ever again, on this earth.

Wow, all of that is depressing, isn't it!? I felt quite depressed when my kids left. Some moms I talked to were glad to see their kids go, but most felt as I did...lost. I immediately refurnished the empty rooms, to bring life back into our house, and I redecorated their bathroom. This helped. I went to bed at night and longed for their presence to come through the front door, to enter our room and plop on the bed to tell us about their date or the movie they saw. But they didn't. It was just him, my husband. And me.

One day, I caught the expression on my husband's face that said something profound, although he never uttered a word. It spoke, “I'm still here.” I realized that even though something had died inside of me as a mom, when my kids left, I still had a husband. I still had friends. And I still had my kids to talk to (thank God for cell phones!). Life was not over. I was still very much alive, and although it would take time, I would learn to enjoy life without the kids down the hall, and look forward to their visits when they called.

One day, I remembered my mom without falling apart and weeping deeply, although those times still occur. They are less frequent and I find myself saying aloud, “Miss you Mom,” with a smile on my face and thanksgiving in my heart at the gift I was given, and the gift she's now received, of a complete and whole body, restored hearing, and joy unspeakable.

Something's going to die again. We live in a world where death occurs. My garden suffered greatly this past summer because of the heat. But this fall I'll plant new flowers and water them,

and they'll grow and provide beauty to our yard. Winter's freeze will kill the annuals, but the perennials will dig deep and stay present. It's so cool how looking at and observing creation brings us hope that though death occurs, seasons change, and pain too hurtful for words happens, life is still there. It's there beside us in the form of a husband, a puppy dog, a succulent, a friend, a cloud blowing by, or the breezes of another seasonal change.

In response we can either, open our windows and allow the stench of death to be replaced by the fragrance of autumn, or we can keep those same windows shut and miss out on the beauty around us.

It's hard when something dies. No denying that. And it's hard being of the age when you're closer to death than you are to your birth. But He said that nothing is too hard for Him, and that includes bringing us back to a life well lived, with joy and fun and friends and peace.

Healthy Habits – Worship Wonders – by Marcy Lytle

You've already read the title and are probably wondering, how is worship part of developing healthy habits? Sounds a bit odd, I know. But worship, I'm realizing, can mean all the world in whether or not we stay healthy in our attitudes, our heart, and our spirit, all of which affect our mental and physical health. I've been studying and learning about how worship is a common and eternal thread throughout every book of the Bible, and it's so much more than we usually realize that it is!

- When we are questioning whether or not God cares, worshiping him for what he's created and establishing that truth about who he is – the God who set the sun rising and the moon setting – this settles a heart that's unsettled, one that causes angst and worry.
- When we lose our way and wonder what real truth is, worshiping God through speaking his words of truth over us (He loves us, He cares for us, He lives for us and has good plans for us), this calms the storm that rages and sends us reeling into the darkness, and guides us back to the light. Our weary feet can walk and run again.
- When we feel weak and weepy and all things teary, we can leap and dance for joy. He says the joy of the Lord is our strength. And just how do we get that joy? By sitting in his presence soaking and listening, just like we soak our feet or hands in a bath full of soothing oils and fragrance, we are rejuvenated and healed. In his presence is joy. And joy makes us strong.
- When we remember the hope beyond this life and begin to sing about heaven and all of its glory and how we will be healed and all things will be new, we just might erupt into praise that causes us to lift our hands and offer a shout or a clap out loud! Shouting out praise is powerful in lifting a droopy head that's been hanging down way too long!
- When we make a decision to trust Him even though we can't see, it's like making a decision to walk a marathon even though we don't want to. We've trained for it, we're wearing shoes and clothes for it, and we can do it. We can trust Him to enable us to leap over hurdles, run that extra mile, and make it to the finish line. He's a perfect trainer!
- When we give thanks for His mercy and grace by singing songs of thanksgiving or writing our gratitude out on paper, we unleash the heavy weight of sin and shame caused by failure and wrongdoings. His grace is just like being let loose out of a pen that has held us captive, and we then are allowed to run free in praise and adoration for that freedom!
- When we declare that our faith is in none other than God, that he alone is our rock and our shield and our deliverer, we can move mountains! Those are some strong biceps, right there! Faith comes through hearing the word of God, and when faith arises, obstacles move. We can look back in wonder at what faith has done!

Worship is one of those wonders in the bible that not only is wonderful, full of wonder, and part of praising a wonderful God. It produces wonderful results in the air around us that we breathe, and in the air inside us in our lungs.

“It’s His breath in our lungs, and we pour out our praise to You only” is a line in a worship song. And when we pour out our praise, it does our bodies and souls just as much good as running and working out, and more...

Try it. Worship, respond, dance, and believe, with all your heart, soul and mind.

Life Right Now – That Waiting... - by Bethany Gomez

I uncovered, I guess you could call it, a pattern when I was writing my article last month. I'm surprised that I didn't notice this pattern sooner because it has occurred quite a few times since I have been writing every month for *A Bundle of Thyme*. Of course it doesn't always happen the exact same way every time, but very similar. I get writers block so often that I never really paid attention to why this so often happened; that is, until last month when it happened again.

I would say 9 times out of 10 I don't really know what to write about each month. I may have an idea, but the majority of the time I don't have a single clue. When that happens, I often say a simple prayer that goes something like this,

"Lord what do you want me to write about this month?"

And usually what follows goes something like this:

I begin writing, but nothing too revealing or vulnerable. I write a few lines. Backspace. Try again. Nope, nothing sounds right. I get a little frustrated. God gives me a "be more vulnerable nudge" and a "write about this" idea. I hesitate. I basically tell Him, "No, I can't write about that," not even realizing that He just answered my prayer that I had prayed a little while ago. Then I go back to writing what I want. Nothing comes forth, sometimes not even one word. A deeper frustration sets in as God keeps lovingly nudging away.

Finally, I say, "Oh, alright God!"

And just like that my writers block almost instantly vanishes (save the "exhausted writers block" moments and the "perfectionist tendency moments") and the words start flowing and a feeling of peace sets in.

I came to realize that often times I get writers block because I let fear dictate my writing. I have this bad habit of worrying too much about what others might think, so I stay pretty guarded a lot of the time, mainly in my daily life, but I've come to learn it happens in my writing. And yet I have been so encouraged by others' vulnerability countless times that I don't want to keep letting fear stop me from sharing what God wants me to share. I want to share my stories and what God has done for me, so that hopefully others will be encouraged and at the same time realize they need more of Jesus in their lives because He is life. With that being said, I'm going to try to always be more vulnerable no matter how scary it is. I'm learning that if I balk at writing something it's probably because God wants me to, so here goes.

I rarely write much about being single mainly because that is not who I am, it is just the season I'm in right now and also because it calls on me to be vulnerable. Sometimes I feel like this season has gone on long enough and I find myself again asking, "God, what is the hold up?" I thought I would be married by now with 2.5 kids. Although, recently I have had fleeting thoughts of maybe it's just not meant to be. Then the desire to get married and have children takes over and those thoughts vanish. Even though I turned another year older last month, I think what I desire more than ever right now is to continue to wait on the man that God has for me. I have this strong feeling that it will be worth it.

Growing up, my dad told us girls to make a list of some of the attributes that we wanted in a husband even though God knows who it will be in the end. I believe that having a list is just a step of faith, so here is mine:

He has to love Jesus, first and foremost, love others, love kids, love to laugh and make me laugh. He must love adventure, and (let's be honest) having kids is an adventure, right? And finally, he has to love me and desire to serve God together side by side till death do us part.

My prayer mantra as of late has been simply, "Let go and Let God," and always "Trust God," no matter how difficult it gets in the waiting. He will always be worthy of my trust.

Romans 15:13

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Created for Life - Trending Now in Waco and Pawhuska – by Ginny Hurley

Two completely delightful families have changed the atmosphere in their hometowns. Where once crumbling buildings fell into disrepair, transformation has occurred within city streets. Ricketty sidewalks along with their dusty storefronts have been given life while keeping the integrity of their history and culture. Undesirable eyesores are now glorious family gathering places. I want to compare these two transformations and highly recommend a trip to celebrate both destinations.

The first one I want to describe is in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, created and developed by Ree Drummond, commonly known as Pioneer Woman. Starting with a simple blog, she began to gather a following that turned into a cooking television show. Her popularity gained momentum because of her genuine demonstrations in the kitchen and humorous tales about her life on the ranch. She is the quintessential accidental country girl. With descriptive and lively humor, she describes life with her gentle cowboy she refers to as, Marlboro Man. The enormous cattle ranch is filled with daily hard consuming work and everyone is always hungry! You can't help but smile as she creates incredibly delectable treats and main dishes for her cowboys and cowgirls. Ree Drummond's joy in celebrating family and caring for neighbors is contagious.

Before Marlboro Man, Ree was a vegetarian who spent most of her time shopping for the latest styles and enjoying her late night friends. What a turnaround! Ree has recently bought the old Mercantile on Main Street in Pawhuska, which houses a beautifully huge shop, café, bakery, and coffee shop. Every nook and cranny is filled with joyful colors, delightful gifts, cowboy items, and lovely ranch décor. My favorite things are the children's books written by Ree! The food is indescribable and to me, unrivaled. Then, if you want, you can drive out to the Drummond Ranch Lodge, where she cooks and films her shows. Upon arrival you are amazed at the vastness of everything! Even the ranch dogs greet you with licks and wagging tails. The television show, *Pioneer Woman*, doesn't even come close to portraying the beauty and reality that is the Drummond Ranch. The most impressive thing about the visit is the generosity and hospitality of Ree and Marlboro Man. You can actually open the cabinets, refrigerators, climb into the pantry, stir her dishes, and enjoy every minute of this magnificent lodge. The deck, flowers, lawn chairs, and the view take your breath away! Upon returning to town, you can enjoy Ree's ice cream shop created in honor of her beloved basset hound, Charlie. There is a pizza place directly above Charlie's Ice Cream Shop, too. The entire area is now beautifully renovated with friendly shopkeepers and happy people. It was a delightful visit, and I hope to return.

The second place, transformed by an incredibly creative couple, is one you are probably familiar with, where most of you have already visited. It is Waco's Chip and Joanna Gaines' world of Magnolia. They began with real estate renovations on a national television show called *Fixer Upper*. Making dreams come true is their specialty. Chip's antics and Joanna's creativity have captured America's heart. They bought the old silos in Waco and developed an entire destination for whole families. Food trailers and outdoor games for children and dad's are brilliant, creating a place for everyone while shoppers wander inside the enormous buildings. The latest purchase, at least as far as I know, is the old Elite Café, which they have transformed into a destination itself. Lively outdoor conversations, superb coffee, and friendly staff scuttle through the swarms of customers, making sure everyone is welcome.

Being a Baylor girl with a Baylor husband, we have been astonished at the brilliance produced by the Gaines to the Waco area.

To compare these two renovators brings me great joy, as I love both of these towns and greatly admire such innovation. The similarity is in the wholesome family atmosphere, service, and enjoyment for everyone. The differences are in the personal tastes and styles of the families. The Drummonds are generations of ranchers with hearty appetites. Ree uses lots of bold colors and animal themes. The Gaines are builders, decorators, and renovators of homes with a farm touch while keeping clean minimal touches. Both have their own line of items they have created. Both are lovely and enticing. One of my favorite things about Ree is that she has kept her prices down and affordable. One of my favorite things about Joanna is her value of family and destinations. Both of these families have created jobs and livelihoods for many people in their hometowns. To me, the crowds only make it all the more festive! It's amazing how popular and busy they are, even out in a little Oklahoma town in the country. So I hope you choose to visit both and applaud such creativity.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Light and Darkness – by Bekah Holland

I hate to jump head first into a touchy topic....but this is me jumping head first into a touchy topic: Mental health.

Your initial reaction may be to immediately stop reading this and run to the nearest feel good article you can find. I get that. I am the queen of hiding as far away from the uncomfortable as humanly possible and drenching myself in all things warm and frosting covered. However, there are people in my life. People that I deeply love, that suffer with mental illnesses. And that was a catalyst for me to jump into the river with them while they navigate the waters.

While this is slowly becoming a topic that's peeking out from the rugs we've swept it under for the last few thousand years, it still holds a stigma. *Especially in the church.* I was very privileged (I know, as Christians we like to say "blessed." And while I am that too, I also recognize that I had an advantage to grow up in a home that didn't make me feel like my emotions or feelings were something I needed to be ashamed of. But on top of having wonderful parents who loved me enough to do things differently than their parents did, I was a girl. And there are, more often than not, double standards (that touchy topic is one I'll tackle another day.) But no one expected me to hide my tears. And my genetics and makeup didn't include a brain chemistry that made me susceptible to depression or severe anxiety. Truthfully, I didn't know much about it.

In the last few years, thankfully, more and more brave people have started speaking out about their reality. A reality that includes self-harm, depression, crippling anxiety, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and many more that I don't have time or space to even touch on. These people have been hiding in the dark, out of fear of judgement and shame. And let's be real for a second...we (*as in the church*) really excel in the art of judgement, so in all honesty, they've been hiding in the dark from us. But little by little, as people begin to find the strength to come out into the light, we have an opportunity to bathe them in love and acceptance. We have an opportunity to open our minds and our hearts and learn about things that we may not understand.

I haven't always gotten it right. In fact, many times, I've gotten it completely wrong, inside out and backwards. But I'm still trying and I hope learning in the process. If you're still reading, I hope and pray that you have never experienced the overwhelming, destructive, pain filled reality that mental illness can bring. But chances are that, even if you haven't lived it yourself, you know and love people who do.

What, you may be wondering, does this have to do with marriage?

Well, here you go...did you know that in marriages where one partner has a mental illness, the divorce rate increases almost 80%? EIGHTY PERCENT! If you have been in or are in a partnership where one of you lives with chronic depression or eating disorder or a bipolar diagnosis, I promise that this statistic makes sense...on both sides of the line. The struggling partner may feel pain and hurt from not being understood by the person they love the most. And the other partner may feel afraid, helpless lonely or resentful. So this is where the marriage piece comes in....you can't do this alone.

Let me say this loud enough so you can hear me in the back of the room.

YOU CAN'T DO THIS ALONE!

Because this is so personal and so raw, we tend to just keep it close and hide it from the world. But God didn't create us to do life alone. He created us for community. We know (whether we act on it or not) that a person with mental illness needs to meet with a therapist/psychiatrist to work through coping mechanisms, medication, etc. If that's you, get yourself an appointment. STAT. Your life can be drastically different, better even, with a bit of guidance and lots of hard work. If your spouse is struggling, get yourself an appointment. Yep. I said it. Go. Talk. It. Out.

It's hard to be in love with someone who's hurting in ways we can't fix. It can feel very personal. You may try to take responsibility for things that are in no way in your control. You may rate your "success" as a husband or wife based on your partner's mental health status at that moment. You can even begin to experience some depression and anxiety yourself. This is not your job! Your job is to love, support and be a safe space to land (and you need to be healthy to do that). Your job is to pray. And when you've prayed all you can, pray some more.

I know this is a lot. I've basically verbally vomited all of these words and barely tiptoed into the water. That's okay, I think...because this is an ongoing struggle. We don't just get to talk a little about a hard topic and then go about our business like that's the end. Although some days, that sounds like the kind of plan I'd like to adopt. But we're barely scratching the surface of the hard stuff. The ugly stuff we like to pretend doesn't exist. Especially not in our neatly laid out Christian lives.

So we have some choices. Do we start being honest and vulnerable? Do we start being the hands and feet of Jesus and love those who are hurting? The best way to answer that and all of the other questions that may surface is also the easiest (albeit slightly cliché thanks to 90's pop culture)...What would Jesus do? Do that. And then do it some more. Wash, rinse, repeat. But please please please, if you don't remember anything else, remember this...you are not alone.

You are more than the chaos you feel.

You are loved.

You have purpose.

So take another step. Walk a little farther into the light. We can walk together. That's what Jesus would do.

"The most precious light is the one that visits you in your darkest hour."

Date Night Fun – Fall is in the Air – by Marcy Lytle

October, at least where I live, is full of weekend fun in my town and all around! There are so many festivals and events to attend, it's hard to fit them all in! In fact, we can't, but we can find some to attend and call it a date. Just where does one look to find festivals and events? I thought this month, instead of citing specific events (which won't necessarily be where you live), I'd share how we plan and find events to attend, and things to do!

Check your local newspaper. Even if you don't subscribe, pick up one on the weekend and browse what's happening in your area. Our paper lists art events, musicals, movies, eating fun, and more. Pick one, be brave, and plan your date night.

Check the internet. I often google "Central Texas festivals" and a few websites pop up. So google your area and see what you find. There are usually pumpkin festivals, scarecrow festivals, and all sorts of hayride opportunities during the month of Halloween! If you have kids, you can take them with you. But there's nothing wrong with going on a date to one of these events, without kids! We do!

Check your neighborhood news. We have a paper called Community Impact, and it has pages of coupons, a calendar of events in the park or movies, and all sorts of things within a few miles of our home! Sometimes we just call our date night a *community impact night*, and head out to do all things new that we've discovered in our area.

Check Pinterest. Google "food bars" and create one, and invite another couple or two over, to enjoy! Search for "date night ideas" and see what pops up, then be inspired to readjust to your liking. Search for "fall date ideas" for specific activities related to the season.

Check Facebook or other social media. Follow date night bloggers. See what others are doing and what events are posted, and look them up. Often, these bloggers will offer money saving tips. Others will comment on the places they went, whether the experience was good or bad. This is good information!

Once you've done the above, here are some good pointers:

- Be sure to check the cost, the parking, and all the details for events you might choose to attend.
- Be sure to make the idea your own, tweaking and changing, and creating as you would like to enjoy it!
- Be brave and venture out to try something new, a place you've never been, and have fun!
- Be diligent to write down and keep a running list of date night ideas that work, ones you love, so you can do them again!

October is a busy month for most, so get a few date nights scheduled and written in, so that you have that needed time to get away and enjoy and breathe...before Thanksgiving and Christmas roll in!

After 40 Years – He Was There – by Marcy Lytle

We all have events in our lives that changed us, for the better or for the worse. For some of us, it's a catastrophic death, or a divorce, or loss of a job, etc. And we also have markers in our married lives that we live through, coming out closer together or drifting further apart. For me, not too long into our marriage we were burglarized. Not once, but three times. We lived out in the country on a couple of acres, and there weren't a lot of houses nearby, so we were an open target...for thieves. A lot of other things happened in that house as well, and they have haunted me for decades.

Several years ago, I finally decided to seek counsel because I felt like I was unprotected, even though I had prayed for God to ease my fears. After being violated three times, I felt abandoned and often questioned, "Where were you, God? You say in your Word to cast my cares on you, but seriously? Three times?" I had it in my heart and mind that He doesn't protect, and he isn't always present, and that peace after intrusion was impossible.

During that counsel, I was asked to close my eyes and picture God with me in the house, after each burglary. I tried, but I just couldn't do it. Every single time, I only saw blank space – where God should have been standing at the window or the door – but he wasn't. I left the counseling, distraught again, and without hope of ever moving past my hurt. I had moved past some of the fear over the years, but still had hurt at my Father.

Fast forward another decade or so, and I was thinking about that exercise I was asked to do. My husband and I were out on a date, we had gone in to a restaurant, and it was so cold! He offered to go to the car and get my wrap, which he did and brought it back to me. I was covered, I was warm, and I was so thankful for his attentive heart to my needs.

As we left the restaurant that evening, I remembered something about those intrusions. Each time, I cried at night and my husband held me close and told me not to worry. I remember feeling totally afraid but leaning into his peace, and riding on that. Have you ever seen a father ask his tiny daughter to step up on his feet as he dances across the floor with her? It was sort of like that. I wasn't able to rest or have peace, but I leaned on the peace that my husband carried, and I slept.

A light came on, and I realized something. God was with me...in the form of my husband. No, He didn't reach down and stop the intruders from coming in and stealing, but he did provide me comfort when they left. My husband was the peace that He sent, when I thought He left me vulnerable and naked, open to being stolen from again.

When I thought about this, I didn't say anything to my husband, as we were walking across the parking lot to our car. However, I did grab his hand and give thanks for the hundreds of times over the years that he has been my covering, my help, my comfort, and my ear...when I felt robbed and taken advantage of. God gave him to me, this precious gift, and I had overlooked His presence in him.

I'll never quite understand why God "allows" thieves to steal from us...or does he? However, he did say that in this world troubles would be present. He also promised to never leave us or

forsake us, and to work all things together for good. And sometimes that presence and that good is standing there in bodily form wearing the ring that signifies we belong together, as he steps in and demonstrates the Father's love to a scared little girl.

Thank you, God, for reminding me that you were there, and you are there, all the time. And thank you, God, for a husband that sees and believes...even when I don't.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Best of the Mess – All in My Mind – by Ashley Zanella

As the holidays roll in and the summer slowly creeps to an end, my mind is already in preparation mode. From the time I conceived, to the time I gave birth to my first son, I had gained 70 pounds. I was able to work off about 30 pounds of that within the first three months and by four months postpartum, we had successfully conceived our second son.

Yes we planned to have them so close. Yes, we are crazy. Back to the weight loss journey--

It has now been about 13 months since I began working off all of that baby weight. I had gained 29 pounds back during my second pregnancy and had set a goal for myself that was a few pounds more than where I was pre-babies. After so much hard work and so many ups and downs with how I approached food, I am thrilled to say that I have reached my personal fitness goal a year after having back to back babies!

There is a catch with fitness goals though, isn't there? Reaching your goals is like getting massage on your mind. You feel accomplished and complete. That is because with most goals, once you're done, you're done. But with fitness that just isn't the case. You're never done until you're dead. You are always going to have to take care of your body and your health.

So, YAY, I hit my goal. But that just means I now have to set a new goal. This is imperative with the holidays coming up.

It's so easy to say, "Oh, it's Halloween. I can eat this bag - and that bag - and another bag of candy. It's okay, I'll get back into the gym on Monday."

It is so much harder to say, "As much as that candy looks amazing, I look and feel even better. I don't need to eat that."

So in order to help keep myself motivated and stay on track with my fitness goals, I wanted to share with you how I've approached this past year and share some tips and recipes over the next few months. Breaking it down into three components, here the first step towards how I lost 60 pounds since last July:

#1 - It's all in the mindset. In order to get really excited and focused, I had to have an end in mind and I had to have something really exciting to look forward to. For me, that was setting a goal weight and a reward for hitting that goal. I knew that persistence was EVERYTHING when it comes to health goals, so having a tangible goal I could see was important for me. The goal may be inches lost, fitting into an old pair of jeans or getting that cholesterol down to a certain level. Whatever it is, it helps if that goal is crystal clear in our minds.

The reward is very motivating to me. My reward was that I would pay to have a professional cut and color for my hair. Usually, I cut and color my own hair because I don't like spending money on something I can do myself. Also, I have very long hair and it's always been a habit of mine to change my hair when I don't feel good in my own skin. And I was tempted - boy was I tempted - to make some drastic changes over the past year. But I stuck to my goal and restrained myself. I knew that at some point I was going to need some extra motivation to persist through this

journey and it definitely came in many many times over the past year. To top it off, now that I've hit my goal I could care less about my hair. I think it looks fine how it is right now and that's because I feel comfortable in my own skin again. Go figure!

If there is a goal you are striving towards whether it be fitness related or not, I am a firm believer that you have to get your mind right first. Get clear on that goal and get clear on what success looks and feels like. You can do anything you set your mind to - as cheesy as that is to say - so clear your mind and focus it on that goal!

*Next month I'm going to share how I was able to make it to the gym 3-5x every week with a 1 and a 2 year old. In the meantime, to help stave off those sugar cravings, here is one of my favorite green smoothie recipes. Give it a try and let me know how you like it!

Green Smoothie

- 2 cups kale
- 1.5 cups water
- 2 T ground flax seed
- 1 cup your favorite greek yogurt (the less sugar, the better)
- 1 cup frozen strawberries
- 1 cup frozen pineapples
- 1 medium banana

First blend the kale and water until fully liquified. Then add all other ingredients and blend until smooth! I usually share half of this recipe with my kiddos and they love helping to make it and enjoy it!

Firmly Planted – Worth it – by Dina Cavazos

A garden is never “finished.”

It’s always evolving.

Plants die from stress or need to be moved to a better spot, leaving space for something new. Trees grow, creating more shade, or trees die, letting in sun. Over the last nine years I’ve planted a gazillion things, some with success and some not. I have a box full of plastic sticks and tags that identify the plant and tell how to keep them happy. In a somewhat haphazard way I try to keep track of where I bought them and when I planted them. I have *many* plant labels with no living plant to testify that I ever planted it. These, obviously, weren’t happy. Fortunately, I have enough happy plants that form the main body of the garden, and each year I add or take away; each change, brings me closer to what I’m working towards.

My goal is a mostly evergreen garden that can take Texas’ heat, short-lived sporadic freezes, and unpredictable rainfall—a garden that doesn’t need constant pruning, with plants I don’t have to protect and cover, which is too much work. That eliminates a lot of plants, including most succulents, which I love! But, because I love succulents and they give me so much joy, I make an exception. I have several planters with a variety of succulents that I keep trying to coddle along. Ghost Plant has been the most hardy, and I have a couple of sedums that grow at will in various places in the ground. But I want the gorgeous combos spilling over the edge in glorious array of color and form...without moving to California.

I’ve tried so many varieties, always with an eye for those that have a chance of making it outdoors. If the container is light enough I’ll bring it in when it freezes, but that’s a lucky few. The perfect loose potting mix (hand-mixed by me), the right location, just enough water but not too much, guarded against pecking birds and slimy snails—my little exotic specimens of botany are well-loved and cared for. I often have to move them around to find their happy place. Often they just shrivel up and die and I don’t know what I did wrong. They are higher maintenance than my other plants.

But when plants grow and bloom and cohabitate in that pot so beautifully, it’s so worth it.

I wonder if we’re the succulents in God’s creation. We humans can be so finicky, so temperamental, so difficult. We always want things “just right.” Yes, we’re high maintenance. But just like I’m not giving up on my succulents, God won’t give up on me, or you. The moments when we grow and bloom and cohabitate in that pot so beautifully.....He must think we’re worth it.

For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Ephesians 2:10

Simple Truth – Avoiding Total Eclipse – by Erica Simmons

Yes my title is a word play of the song “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” I don’t want you pondering that question the entire time you are reading my story and being distracted. Now on to more important things. If you follow my column with any regularity, you know that the last two months I have shared some very personal struggles that I’ve had as a parent. I can spend the remainder of this column telling you about new and amazing things God is doing in both my sons’ lives, but instead I will share the most important lesson God reminded me as I was going through this storm. The enemy HATES it when we operate in truth!

As I spent time reflecting and sharing my story of the roller coaster that I went through in a matter of days, I wanted to know what the heck just happened. This is when the Holy Spirit nudged my spirit and revealed the attack was a result of me being open and honest about an issue I have for the most part dealt with in secret. I started to use the word “private,” but that would convey that we should not ever have things going on in our lives that are private and that is NOT what I want to communicate. You see, keeping secrets is what we do when we don’t want anyone to ever know those things that we have attached shame and fear to, and so we work hard to keep them a secret. Secrets are things we try to keep in the dark, and you know who thrives in the darkness... So whenever we make the bold decision to take our secrets out of the dark, the enemy knows he is losing authority over those things and attacks. The enemy will do any and every thing to keep us from operating on truth and faith.

I have learned over the course of this Christian walk to recognize when this is happening. As soon as we do what is right, all hell breaks loose around and in us. This brings me to the point I want to make, in my column this month...

We as Christians have to make sure we never ever let the enemy get us in a total eclipse of the truth. According to dictionary.com one of the definitions of eclipse is any obscuration of light. We have learned over the course of our lives as Christ followers that His truth is light and the enemy wants to use lies, deception and other tactics to block that light in our lives. He knows the importance of that truth. We see this demonstrated to us when Jesus was taken into the wilderness. It is the ONLY thing that defeated ALL of the enemy’s tactics.

In my case, God needed to rally around me as I was allowing the darkness to set in. Yes, I said I was ALLOWING. I was discouraged and tired from trying to deal with my secret. It had worn me down, so when I finally dragged it out into the light I was not as strong as I should have been. This was because I let the lies of the enemy about my prayers start to take root. I have written about being a prayer warrior in a previous column and my desire to be fierce in my prayer life. I did have cycles of time when I was focused and dedicated to it and then drifted away because I felt like my prayers were ineffective. I mentioned this to a friend over lunch a couple weeks ago and she recommended a book on prayer that she was reading. So I pulled up Amazon right then and purchased the kindle version. As I started reading, the author made a simple statement that vibrated through my soul.

This is a paraphrase:

We will never be able to separate our good from our bad, our flesh will always be a part of who we are and our flesh is imperfect.

After reading it I had this revelation:

He whispered in my soul "You are never gonna get it right." That is not the goal, it is not why Jesus died on the cross. In fact, it is the opposite, because we were never going to get it right. He had to die in order to pay the price for us never being unable to get it right. So what is the point? The point is to do our best. Live our life in what we know about His truth. That truth as we seek Him more will be even clearer a year from now more than it is today; and more clear two years from now than that! What we know of God is as a grain of sand on a beach of knowledge about Him. The goal is not to know all there is to know about Him; it is to continue to learn more about Him. The first one is impossible, the second one will provide us all we need to withstand the fiery darts of the enemy and not allow his tactics to obscure our light, God's truth.

We need to keep up the good fight of faith, seek God's truth and not allow the enemy to eclipse our truth. Make no mistake about it. He is on the hunt seeking who he can devour. Case in point, just this week it was revealed that Drew Brees did a piece for Focus on the Family on their "Bring your Bible to school" campaign. Turns out, Focus on the Family sponsors a gay conversion camp. To say the vultures came out would be an understatement. Drew Brees released a video on his Instagram account stating he did not know about the group's beliefs in this area, which only made things worse. You see, he was attacked from the one side for being a coward and not standing up for his beliefs and from the other for being irresponsible and NOT knowing. We are in a time in our society where no matter what he said he was going to be attacked. Gone is the ability for high profile people to be able to stand up and simply say I am a Christ follower, I freely made that choice for my life, I look at the Bible as the word of God. I don't get to pick and choose which parts I think are right or wrong, because I know that my desires would dictate those choices. Therefore, I accept all of it as truth and that is what I use to live my life. It is not a measuring stick that I use on those around me, that is not why Jesus died on the cross. I respect every person's right to live their life as they choose, and I ask for the same respect.

As for Focus on the Family, it is an organization that does great things, it does not kidnap people who declare themselves gay and force them into their camp. They provide a service that parents are choosing to make. If we think that every organization we support and every business we give your money to does 100% in line with our beliefs and values, I have a bridge I want to sell you. I believe Christians should be allowed to bring their Bible to school if they want to. This is what I believe and I am not ashamed of it and I will not allow your beliefs to supersede mine. We all can coexist if we give to each other what you are demanding from me, respect and acceptance of the choices I make for my life.

I know that was a lengthy speech I will never give on a platform anywhere near as big as Drew Brees, but it is one that I am passionate about. I was reminded of Peter when he denied knowing Jesus, he panicked and had a knee jerk reaction to a situation he did not see coming. I wonder if Drew will be better prepared to stand on God's truth the next time around.

The enemy is trying to push the narrative that both can't be true. I can be a Christian and respect and accept others choices that run contrary to the word of God. It is what he is using to divide us and keep us with our truth away from those who need to hear it.

At our church, we have a mission to relationally love others to Christ-centered wholeness. It is hard to be in relationship with those who think we are the enemy, distrustful of our motives. Let's make the enemy out to be exactly what he is: a LIAR. Don't let him eclipse us from our truth one situation at a time.

You see, I was not prepared a few weeks ago when he attacked, but shame on me if I am not the next time. I had allowed the gradual eclipse of the truth, but God in all His goodness did not allow a total eclipse of His truth.

But boy it was so close...

Moving Forward – Disappointed – by Pam Charro

I was completely wiped out. It was taking all of my energy to survive work each day, and the days I had off just weren't enough recovery. I felt my body was full of glass shards, and each less than perfect interaction with another person shook me daily, over and over again, and left me bleeding on the inside. I didn't understand what was wrong and I wasn't sure how long I could keep going.

I was so puzzled. It had taken me years, but I had finally obeyed God and gotten out of a miserable situation, absolutely certain he had such great plans for my life. Now this new beginning, which I was sure was finally my chance to shine, seemed just as painful as the life I'd left behind.

Why was everything still so hard?

Where were all of his promises of good for me?

It wasn't until recently that I began a bible study that explained what was plaguing me: Disappointment. And somehow (once I had a name for it) repentance - and tears - seemed to flow fairly quickly. I hadn't realized how unfair my expectations were and how much weight I'd placed on these past few months to make up for not only the pain of many years, but also the difficulty of transitioning into something new. Yes, God's promises for me are certain and they are good, but rebuilding a life takes time.

One of the exercises in this bible study was asking ourselves what we thought adult life would be like when we were kids. If you are like me, you assumed you would outgrow all of life's difficulties once you were all grown and powerful. Someone would love you and you would have children who love you and your job would be perfect and nobody would ever die or leave and everything would be perfect. Except life didn't turn out like that, for any of us, and no one has taught me how to process all of it. So if I'm really going to rebuild, I need to build on what is true.

I was made for heaven, but I'm not living in it yet. I must accept hurts as a part of life here or those deep disappointments will continue to be a daily thing. But there is incredible beauty in the struggle. *Why?* Because I can still choose to believe that life is worth it because of who God is and what he has in store for me.

Is it really true that all of these troubles are light and temporary?
Is he really good all the time, no matter how bad things seem?
Does he or anyone really care about how unfair life has been and how much pain I'm in?
Is what lies ahead a million trillion gazillion times better than anything I can ask or imagine?

Each time I say yes to these questions, I get a little braver and a little stronger. Faith and love show up and put my life into perspective. My hope returns.

And suddenly all of that crushing disappointment just doesn't seem so powerful anymore.

Real Stories - Crafting the Nights Away – by Abby Garcia

The first time my family and I went to Disney World was in 2015 with my high school band. We instantly loved it. There was fun and magic at every corner, and we felt like little kids again! We have been going there every year since then. We even joined the Disney Vacation Club! Mickey Mouse ears quickly became my favorite Disney accessory, but after a while, I wanted some that were different than the ones everyone else had. I figured why not make my own? After making my first pair, I made another, and another, and another. I must have made over 30 different pairs of ears!

And so...Pinblossom was born.

Pinblossom opened in April of this year, but it has changed so much from when it started. For example, like the name suggests, I initially wanted to focus on designing enamel pins. I did make one floral Snitch enamel pin, but since then, I have ended up making more Mickey ears. Additionally, I originally opened Pinblossom just to make my medical school application more diverse. However, Pinblossom has become an instrument to connect with people. My customers are the heart of my business. I don't even really like to call them customers because the purpose of my business is not making a profit, but instead its purpose is to share joy with others. And I feel joyful in return, when I see pictures of my fellow Disney fans wearing and enjoying my ears because I feel like a part of me gets to have that fun with them! I also have the opportunity to practice an important lesson.

In Matthew 22:35-40, Jesus explains that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, and second to that is to love your neighbor as yourself. So the purpose of my business is to do just that: Love God, Love Others. I am still learning how to share the love of God through Mickey ears, but I think the most important way to do so is to stay open and willing to do what God wants with Pinblossom. I like to share encouraging words and verses on my Instagram stories. Also, I hosted my first fundraiser for the El Paso Children's Hospital Foundation. I didn't raise as much money as I had initially wanted, but I'm learning to surrender and accept that it isn't about what I want. It's about God's plan. I'm learning that God loves even the small victories, and I'm learning to trust that God is going to use that money exactly how He needs to. I hope to continue doing fundraisers like these, and I am staying open to using my business the way God intends me to use it.

In addition to sharing truth about Jesus, I also love designing new and different ears! I work on my living room floor in front of the television. Most of the magic happens at night after I have finished studying for the day. I keep all my supplies in little organized bins, and my tool of choice is my mini hot glue gun. With my supplies, I always strive to make ears that are new and different from everyone else's. One thing I've noticed about other ear shops is that their products are exclusively made out of only flowers, only fabric, or only foam. Knowing this, I wanted my ears to be easily recognized and different from what is out there. With Pinblossom, I have tried to incorporate those elements together to create an entirely new look to my ears that other shops are not doing! For example, with the Halloween season coming, I have designed some spooky ears with all of the previously listed elements—fabric, florals, AND foam—incorporated together so that you can get the best of everything. Another example of my efforts to create ears that are different is my Mashup Collection which features colors and designs from one Disney movie and a quote from a different movie. The purpose of this collection is to celebrate diversity and how we can come together to create something beautiful.

My business has allowed me to strengthen current friendships, but also curate new ones. For example, my existing friends have graciously modeled for me which has also let me discover a love for photography. Through Instagram, I have connected with new people from all over—Kentucky, Missouri, California, Florida, even two lovely ladies from the United Kingdom! We've been able to bond over our silly love for Disney and Harry Potter. Additionally, I've made friends with other online shop owners through trades. This is a fun activity because we then promote each other's shops, and we can form a little community of shop owners that support and encourage each other. I also get to connect with people through doing custom orders. I get to work one on one with my fellow Disney fans to create the pair of ears or crown that they envision. Usually, they have a celebration that they want special ears for. For example, one person contacted me that she wanted customs for her and her fiancé's honeymoon to Disney World! She told me their favorite characters, and we worked together to make the perfect ears and ear hat for her and her future husband. Making these allowed me to share and encourage their creativity and add my own artistic touch to the final products. And I am excited that a piece of me gets to celebrate with them on their trip to Disney World!

I will continue making Pinblossom a positive example of a Jesus-loving business. I truly love what I do, and I am grateful that God gave me creative talents that I can share with everyone. My business has allowed me to celebrate my creativity by designing unique ears, and I am humbled at the opportunity to use my influence in the Disney community to share God's love with others. It seems silly that making Mickey Mouse ears would lead to sharing the love of God with others, but it has.

God can work through anything and anyone, including a kid with a hot glue gun making mouse ears on her living room floor. I can't wait to see what he does with Pinblossom in the future!

Pictures:

1. Floral Snitch Enamel Pin

2. Ashley, my beautiful friend and model, wearing the Mod Mickey Ears
3. Catherine, my beautiful friend and model, wearing the Aurora Flower Crown
4. Alaska, my beautiful new friend through Instagram, wearing the Galaxy's Edge Dark Side Ears
5. Ashley, my beautiful new friend through Instagram, wearing the Galaxy's Edge Light Side Ears



6. Alex and her mom, Helen, lovely fellow Disney fans, wearing their custom ears.

7. The custom ear hat featuring Agrabah and Genie

8. The Boo To You Pumpkin Ears for Halloween



9. The Stranger Trick or Treat Ears for Halloween



10. The Little Dory Mermaid and Tangled Up Ears from the Mashup Collection



11. The Coco Skellington Ears from the Mashup Collection and for Halloween

BIO:

Abby Garcia is the owner and artist of Pinblossom which was inspired by her love for Disney, crafts, and design. She is a native Texan and a senior undergraduate student majoring in Biology. She has too many favorite characters to count, but she does especially love Winnie the Pooh. She is also a proud Hufflepuff, and her favorite class at Hogwarts would be Care of Magical Creatures. She hopes to one day become a public health physician in preventative care to promote wellness at a population level. She also wants to live close to Disney World, become an annual passholder, and maybe even work for Disney one day. When she isn't studying or working on her business, she loves taking care of her plants, sewing backpacks, and spending time with her friends and family.

FRESH THYME – The Farmer’s Market – by Marcy Lytle

Do you go to the farmer’s market? I love to, but often don’t, just because of time...or perhaps I’ve already gone to the store. Some say the market sells their produce at higher prices, as well. I don’t know about that, as I’ve never compared. However, I do know that they often have produce and items I don’t see in the store, at all, and I absolutely love going and coming home with fresh ideas...as well as fresh produce!

Here are a few tips for shopping at farmers’ markets. They are so fun to shop in the fall months, especially, when the temps aren’t quite so hot while you shop!

Take a bag. Over on the TIPS page, I mention a small pouch I carry with me when we go to the farmer’s market. In that pouch is a huge bag that tumbles out and it holds so much! These bags are from IKEA. But you can totally carry a canvas bag, or a plastic grocery bag. It’s just fun to show up with your own bag, designated just for marketing!

Take a cooler. You might not be going home right after shopping, so in case you pick up fresh tamales or eggs, you might want to keep them cool until you do arrive home.

Try something new. We recently tried micro greens, little pads of tiny greens that are so tasty atop so many foods and sandwiches!

Take cash. You can use a card, for sure, but if you decide before you go that you’re only going to spend say \$50, then take the cash and stop when that cash is gone. This will keep you in budget.

Take a card. If the vendor has a card, pick it up and keep a folder or pouch with all of them inside. You’re going to discover a jelly or honey or lotion that you LOVE, and you’re going to kick yourself if you can’t remember who sold it.

Taste samples. If they’re offering, take them up on it! Fresh salsa is fun to try, along with those fresh breads and cookies that are offered. Sometimes, if you go early, you can taste and buy a treat for breakfast while you shop!

Treat yourself. Pick up a fancy bar of homemade soap, or freshly poured candle, one that will fill your home with fall scents and smiles.

Those are just seven little tips for shopping at the farmer’s market. If you add in a walk before or after, a stop at a coffee shop, and a country drive, you’ve got yourself an entire date or experience that you’ll want to do over and over again.

FRESH THYME – New Reality – by Marcy Lytle

I've been studying *worship* this year, looking at the word and the concept through all the books of the Bible. Verses I've read multiple times came alive in new ways. That's the cool thing about His word, it's always alive for each season of our lives, with new blooms and beauty to enjoy and take in. The verse that caught my attention this time was a familiar one:

Cast all your anxiety on Him, because he cares for you.

I had been reading about how obedience is part of worship. It's hard to have real fellowship with a holy God if we're being disobedient to what we know to be right and true. For example, if we hate our spouse or a friend at the moment, it might be a bit stifling and quite impossible to lift up a song of praise, thanking God for his greatness. Not because we're a bad person, but because hatred isn't something we're supposed to carry around!

Back to that verse. I hadn't really read the verse before it. It says this:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

I began to ask myself, "Is holding on to my cares and not casting them over on Him being disobedient?" In other words, I felt that perhaps a bit of pride (and frustration) was keeping me from casting my cares on Him. I felt the need to humble myself under his mighty hand and surrender those things to which I held such a tight grip.

What? I'd always assumed that God had grace for my weakness in that area, and He does. However, I'd become accustomed to keeping my anxious heart and mind to myself, because in reality – I didn't trust him and I was disappointed in His ways. His ways don't always include removing the things that cause us worry, but rather showing up in the middle of it all to bring us peace. My insistent stomping of my feet at why in the world would this be His way had made me hold tightly to my anxious heart.

I don't know how to relay this realization, except to say that I – for the first time – feel as if maybe I can now move forward with some of the anxieties I carry with me daily. I'm barely beginning to understand these two verses coupled together, but I'm getting there.

I need to approach my Father in humility and realize that his hand is indeed mighty, that the truth is that he DOES care, and I can release my cares over to him, and let them go off of my weary shoulders.

It's never his intent for us to walk around with heavy feet, because of fears on our backs. In fact, carrying them just might be an act of disobedience. Ouch. That really hurts...his heart...and mine.

So just how do we actually cast those cares over on Him? I think we read His word and see these truths, ask Him for his help, and trust that He will gently unroll our fists and loosen the ties so the heaviness slides into his hands, and we are free...

He's great like that, our God. So longsuffering with us, our entire lives, as he reveals more and more of who he is so that we can truly worship Him in freedom.

FRESH THYME – Not in the Bahamas – by Marcy Lytle

We had a wreck last month, two days after our daughter had a wreck, and the other days of the week weren't so wonderful, either. However, we weren't hurt, and for that we were so grateful! It seems that in the middle of the chaotic and traumatic week, we were still so incredibly thankful to be alive and uninjured! Sometimes, wrecks end in all sorts of bad outcomes, sick people don't get well, and we feel there's nothing to give thanks for...not one thing!

I posted on my social media about the crappy week, because that's the way it felt, and how we were thankful for no injuries. Someone posted a comment that said something like well, at least you're not in the Bahamas. The commenter meant nothing bad, and nothing bad was taken from it, but I did think about that comment for days to come.

When a friend is suffering, no matter how small or little we deem the suffering to be, it's not very helpful to start a comment with "at least you're..." I remember when my mom passed away, after a very hard three weeks in the hospital with her, someone told me, "At least she didn't suffer long." And although that statement was true, it didn't ease my suffering and pain. And although I wasn't in the Bahamas losing everything in a hurricane last month, I was scared and traumatized by the rear-end collision and the collision my daughter was in, with her three kids.

On the flip side (isn't it a darn annoyance that there's always a flip side?) when we suffer a loss, it is good to realize the blessings in the middle of the loss. It is true that we were not in the Bahamas, and with that comparison our little collision was like a bump in the road. We still have our health and our home and our family and so much to give thanks for, even with a torn up rear-end on our car. But so often, we don't want to think about the blessings, because the pain is too present.

At first, I was a bit irritated by that comment, and by the comment that person said after my mom died. I'm sure I've made inappropriate comments to others as well, in their time of loss. And there have also been times I haven't known what to say at all, so I say nothing. That too can hurt.

The main thing I've been thinking about since our wreck is that everyone experiences life differently.

Those of us that have experienced hard lives as children can often be non-sympathetic toward others as adults and judge their "minor" troubles as insignificant.

Those of us that have had it "good" most of our lives, often react to fender-benders as if they're hurricanes.

But all of us can be tender towards the hurting, be kind to ourselves when we are the one hurting, and of course remember the good in the middle of loss.

No, I wasn't in the Bahamas and I'm so glad I wasn't.

Yes, I was in a wreck and it wasn't pleasant.

I hope I remember to keep my eyes from rolling when others complain about what I call a trivial disturbance in life, and that I only say kind things to them when I speak.

I hope I remember to give thanks when my disturbance is really trivial in life and that when others are less than sympathetic, I can laugh and move on.

Are you in the “Bahamas” hurricane of life? I’m so sorry for your loss, and I’m praying for total restoration and peace.

Were your fun plans ruined recently, but everything is now okay? I’m so sorry about that, too.

At least we weren’t...

FRESH THYME – The Rehearsal – by Marcy Lytle

I'm one that rehearses.

Let me explain.

After we see a movie, I come home and while I'm getting ready for bed I rehearse every scene of the movie, even sometimes talking out loud about it in the bathroom. (My husband hears me sometimes...but he still loves me.) When we've enjoyed a particularly wonderful vacation, I rehearse our activities in a journal and in my mind, when we return home. I love to have good memories and stories etched into my brain so that I can recall them and relive them over and over again...because they're so great!

But recently, I realized that because I'm a "rehearser" I also have learned over the course of my life to rehearse the bad. Old wounds sometimes resurface in my mind and I think back over the situation and recall every detail. Thoughts and fears sometimes bombard my mind and I rehearse all of the what-ifs and "what happened last time" and I think back on the things that have occurred and start wondering and questioning and fretting, until I'm spiraling into the pit...of despair.

I just recently thought about this and how "rehearser" is really a great adjective to describe me. And while it's good that I rehearse the great memories and experiences, it's detrimental to take up that same practice with the bad stuff.

I'm sure that's why that verse about thinking on good things is in the Bible. In fact, those verses go on to say not only are we to think on what's good, but it should be noble, and lofty, and praiseworthy. This type of mind does not occur naturally.

Especially for we women that are moms, wives, sisters, daughters, ladies that carry burdens, nurture, give and love without limits. We will mostly likely always rehearse the sweet times with our kids, the wonderful visits when they stop by, the beautiful stories that we experience in the movies, and the lives of those we read about in books. However, when times are hard, worries are many, and our lists of concerns about kids and life and family and friends grow long, we tend to rehearse the bad. That rehearsing nature takes over, and sits on our shoulders like a load of bricks. When we've been hurt or disappointed or failed by those in our circle of friends, we make mental notes of those looks, the words that were said, and the actions taken, and we rehearse them, too!

The problem with rehearsing the bad is that the more we rehearse, it's like spreading mortar between those bricks on our shoulders until they become a permanent fixture of who we are, and a wall over which we cannot see.

The good about rehearsing the good is that those memories become rays of light that shine through every cloud on a dark and dreary day, even when storm clouds threat and downpours occur.

I hope that I can stop and ask myself daily, "What are you rehearsing?" And I hope that I can train myself to remove the bricks and look towards the light.

After all, rehearsals are scheduled so that the opening act of the play is engaging and amazing. And I'm pretty sure rehearsing the good will make for an excellent production with beautiful music and dancing that will be enjoyed by us all...



FRESH THYME



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TIPS

In the Kitchen – All the Snacks – by Marcy Lytle

You're going to need snacks this holiday season, lots of them. There will be hungry guests, kids that want "something to eat," and you yourself are going to be hungry from all that shopping and wrapping and going here and there while you enjoy the holidays! Oh yes, maybe you'll have turkey and a fancy meal...or maybe not! There's always the option to set out a buffet of snacks you've put together ahead of time, so that you have them to pull out when you're too tired to stand.

Here are a few faves, not necessarily fallish or Christmassy, but oh so tasty.

A huge bowl of trail mix:

- 5 cups Multigrain cheerios
- 1 cup Craisins
- 1 cup Honey roasted peanuts
- 1 cup Semisweet chocolate chips

That's it! Make a large bowl of it, and have it ready for guests to nibble on as they walk buy. Set out cute little plastic cups for them to dip and then dispose, after they've eaten their fill!

The best hummus:

You'll want a healthy treat during this season to grab and eat on the run, when you need a break from all the rich foods of the season. This is the best and most simple hummus recipe I've found. Just set out pita chips and carrot sticks, or make to-go containers ready to take to the theater or in the car, as you head out in the holiday madness.

- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 cans chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- 1 tsp sea salt
- 1/3 cup tahini
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 1 T olive oil

Place all in a food processor, pulse till well blended but still coarse. Adjust seasonings.

Cheddar pecan spread:

This is a great spread to have on a pretty tray with savory crackers, nuts and olive, if you wish. Have those things ready to arrange with this spread, when unexpected family or friends stop by. Or invite someone to stop by!

- 4 oz cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup butter, softened
- 8 oz sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- ½ cup pecans, toasted and chopped

- ½ tsp minced garlic, roasted

Beat cream cheese and butter til smooth. Beat in rest of ingredients. Serve. (This will last in the fridge up to three weeks!)

Note: I mixed this in the food processor, just pulsing a little at a time. I also added more pecans than called for, and I toasted them and the garlic on a tray in the toaster, just until fragrant.

Smoky red pepper dip:

Another great addition to your snack table, should guests or your family need some nibbles! It makes such a pretty color, especially when you add the red pepper strips!

- ¼ c sliced almonds
- 4 sliced garlic cloves
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1 ½ tsp smoked paprika
- 1 cup mayo
- ½ cup roasted red peppers
- 2 tsp red wine vinegar
- Red bell pepper sticks, carrot sticks

Cook the almonds and garlic in the oil til browned, about 4 minutes. Stir in the paprika. Puree in the processor with the mayo, the red peppers and the vinegar. Season with salt. This is great served in small clear cups with the sticks inside.

Almond butter:

I LOVE THIS SO MUCH. It's so easy to make and so delicious! Great to have on hand for the ones with the munchies.

- 2 cups almonds
- 2 large pinches kosher salt
- 3 T vegetable oil
- 2 tsp honey
- Whole wheat crackers

Blend the almonds and salt in a food processor for five minutes. Pulse in the oil and honey. Spread on the crackers. (I found that I needed to pulse in a bit more honey and oil, but do it sparingly, pulsing each time, until you have the consistency you like.)

Smashed Chickpea Avocado

- 1 med sized ripe avocado
- 1 15 oz can chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- 2 T chopped parsley
- Salt and pepper to taste

- Juice of two limes
- 1 t garlic powder
- Red pepper flakes (optional) and pita bread or chips

Add all of the ingredients except pita to a bowl and mash until combined. Season and taste. Scoop into pita bread or eat with chips. Super yum.

Selah's Style – The Boys – by Marcy Lytle

Shopping with boys. I didn't think it would be as fun as girls, but it really was! I recently shopped with a 7-yr old and a 4-yr old, each separately, and they had strong opinions about what they wanted to wear, and went into the fitting rooms excited to try on their choices! One wanted only jeans for winter, and the other wanting everything BUT jeans. They each chose a few outfits, a new beanie, and shoes too! It was all from Target...

These two guys are brothers, their Selah's cousins, and they like individual attention. I mean, who doesn't? Of course, we started out with a toy, and then the rest of the shopping was easy. Our excursion included lunch from Chick-Fil-A, human watching, and cloud shape discoveries...after the bags were full.

Gideon went right to the shoes and picked out this gray/red combo sneaker. The cool thing is that the laces are elastic, so he can just pull on the shoe without having to undo and tie again! And these colors are great for winter!

My favorite outfit Gideon put together was this camo pants paired with this wolf shirt (well, it's a bear, but he says it's a wolf!). I think he looks so handsome and youngman-ish in this outfit!

There were several beanie options, but since Gideon loves green, he went for this Minecraft beanie. Just a few days post-shopping and it was cold enough to wear it!

Jeans were his pant of choice, and we found these nice ones by Cat n Jack with a flexible waist for that perfect fit! There are these little elastic bands and buttons inside the waistline that can be pulled and cinched, so that there's no gap in the back. A genius fashion hack, for sure!

Augie (August is his real name) didn't want anything to do with jeans, so he opted for comfy drawstring pants that looks sharp and feel good. He chose this colorful sweatshirt to go with, and it's such a cute combo!

Isn't this sweatshirt with a slice of pizza so cute? Any tops with food on them are a hit with the boys, for sure! And the Cat and Jack sweatpants fit like a glove!

Of course, we had to get the one that caught his eye first, and that was the Ghostbusters tee! He can wear it over a long-sleeved tee for a cold winter's morning.

Boys and girls are different and fun, all wrapped up in one big blast when shopping for clothes! Stick to your budget, shop sales, go with a list, and of course...pick up a toy first!

Seven 4 You – Simple Pleasures

November and December are the months that are packed full of food, frantic shopping, and on yes – fun. But that fun stuff seems to get marked off our lists first because of that mean chaser – time! However, if possible, for our health and the health of those we love, we need to make time to sit still and enjoy the pleasures of life. Even if the table doesn't look perfect, we don't get to bake that dish, or the wrapping isn't happening...our souls can still sit still in the simplicity of pleasure.

We asked our panel of women to share their simple pleasures. I hope you find time to try one of them, or make your own...

Escape:

My favorite thing to do when I need to get away from it all is retreat to my small private area and watch *Escape to the Country* on YouTube with a warm drink by my side. I love the presenters and it's always set in a beautiful, restful spot. The English people are quirky and they love quirky houses, so it's the perfect show for me. When the episode is over and I feel relaxed and ready to get up and make plans to go to that beautiful place!

We love to take a country drive, and it doesn't have to be far. We just get in the car and go, stopping to take photos of wheels of hay, dilapidated buildings, and stately trees. We look for a cute place to junk shop and fun place to eat. Then we drive back home. Half a day outside of town does wonders for our souls.

The one thing that comes to mind is to do a Christmas devotional or some type of advent reading each day. Last year I enjoyed Richard Rohrs "Preparing for Christmas" and it was very helpful. But I must confess, whatever I am reading...I never get very far past December 19. That last week all of my reading usually goes by the wayside. But it is helpful for those weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_SioF0JRBg

On the tellie:

For my relaxation, I sit down at night and watch TV with my husband. There are only a few shows we enjoy, other than the news, so I watch for movies to record. It might take us two to three nights to watch one movie depending on how late it is when we sit down but we do enjoy it. This may not seem very exciting but during this time my husband will massage my shoulders and back, so I get total relaxation!

We have only two shows that we record and watch, together. One is *New Amsterdam* – it's about a medical director of an inner city hospital that's radical in his approach to healthcare. And then, of course, there's the drama among the staff. The other is *A Million Little Things*. Oh my, you'll have to start this one from the first episode... Both are crazy, but we like a little crazy to make us appreciate our normal.

Friends and Fall:

Every year during the fall I like to have fall days with my friends. We watch Harry Potter and old Disney movies like Halloween Town while we paint pumpkins and drink hot chocolate! And if we're lucky and it's cold enough, we even like to light a fire!

I love to host or plan something fallish with friends – like a popcorn bar or caramel apple making fun. I love the tastes of the season, so it's fun to just get together and choose all sorts of toppings for a snack. And oh, we eat this instead of dinner!

Outside:

My simple pleasure is escaping to our enclosed patio and sitting and reading a magazine or just listening to my water fountain. I have not been able to do this in such a long time because it's been so hot! I am looking so forward to being able to do this when it cools off. I also like have my quiet time outside, but that too went away when it was hot! So until it cools off I go for a walk in the mornings and just try and relax and think about the day. Walking gives me time to just think and not be disturbed by my phone or computer. So I may just keep doing it!

Some days when I am at the computer all day long, I just need to step outside in the sunshine. Or...I sometimes take a lunch break, grab a book and a snack, and park somewhere under a shade tree and read...and eat...all by myself. It's delightful.

The Porch

My simple pleasure is...sitting on my front porch, plain and simple. Before living in the home that I do now, for years I dreamt of a front porch large enough for a myriad of potted plants of many varieties from succulents to roses along with comfortable, welcoming chairs. I have that now. I sit in my large wooden rocker, surrounded by hanging plants, potted flowers, and beds with bushes that attract butterflies as well as bees. I grab a good book and a large hot café latte. I don't tell anyone where I am going. I shut the front door and I sit. I get to look out on a front pasture full of luscious grass and oaks where my horses contentedly graze. It's my place of peace, my place to meet my Lord, my place to simply be me away from it all. It's my dream come true...my porch.

Our back porch is tranquility. There are plants, we have a fire pit, little yard decor, and even lights for ambience. It's my favorite spot when the temps start falling and the leaves do too!

Tutorials:

I enjoy watching makeup tutorials on YouTube when I need a quick mental break. They completely distract me from whatever is stressing me out, and I find it kind of soothing to listen to the descriptions of the products and how to use them. Plus, I learn some cool tips & tricks!

I love watching IGTV – Instagram television – especially the styling tutorials on how to put together outfits – my fave!

<https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/06/20/welcome-to-igtv/>

A Sip of Something:

To relax I like to get a Frappuccino and watch a “feel good” TV show. The sweetness of the coffee comforts me. The TV show has to be something that is not suspenseful or scary and it should have a happy ending.

We purchased a huge tin of flavored teas last year for Christmas from World Market and enjoy them, especially as the temps get cooler. We even bought a cute teapot. Sipping one of these specialty teas in front of the fire (if it's cold enough!) is calming and cute...especially if it's served with a cheese board or a few snacks!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/search.do?query=christmas+tea+tin>

The Dressing – Coats to Wear – by Marcy Lytle

How many coats do you have? I'm sure it depends on where you live. But even here in Texas, I have several coats. It can be really cold or just cool, or breezy, or any kind of weather at all, on any given day! I enjoy having short and long coats, one for damp or rainy weather, and fashionable and casual and dressy! Why not? I have a few classic coats that I've had for years, and then the trendier ones I tend to just shop for at discount stores at an affordable price, since they probably won't be worn more than one or two seasons.

Here are a few coats I'd recommend, if you're out shopping for one!

I LOVE this **plaid coat** from Target. I've seen it in the store several times. The colors and the style are so stylish and trendy! At \$48, it seems like a great buy for this season's winter breezes.

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-plaid-long-sleeve-oversized-button-front-wool-coat-wild-fable-brown-pink/-/A-76556612?preselect=54641002#lnk=sametab>

I just bought a **lavender coat** from J. Crew and one like it is on sale on line. I love it, because it's different and I found a fun teal/navy/lavender scarf to go with, at The Gap!

https://factory.jcrew.com/p/womens-clothing/coats_jackets/woolcoats/boiled-wool-topcoat/AB477?color_name=smoky-wisteria

Maybe you like the **trench coat** look, but want something a bit different. I think this cute one from Urban Outfitters with the plaid panel down the back is SO CUTE! The contrast of the two different fabrics is unique and fun.

<https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/urban-renewal-vintage-flannel-back-trench-coat?category=SEARCHRESULTS&color=031>

Are you a fan of the **puffer type jackets**? Nordstrom Rack has several choices in several colors! This one has a removable hood, and check out the back view – so pretty! I like the navy, as it contrasts well with so many fall colors.

<https://www.nordstromrack.com/shop/product/2912787/via-spiga-quilted-hooded-coat?color=PEACOCK>

Gray classic is always a great choice in a coat. It goes with the nicest of outfits, and also complements a casual day of jeans and a tee. I love this single breasted choice by Anne Klein, found at TJ Maxx. Did you know you can order online from TJ Maxx?

<https://tjmaxx.tjx.com/store/jump/product/women-clothing-coats-jackets/new-arrivals/Wool-Blend-Notch-Slant-Side-Seams-Coat/1000545411?colorId=NS1172809&pos=1:10&N=842114098+654950445>

I had to include this **pretty in pink** coat with the high neck collar. I think it's so classy and pretty, and just the coat for shopping or going out on a date! It's from Zara and so chic!

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/inverted-lapel-frock-coat-p08148813.html?v1=30237025&v2=1281618>

If you prefer **cozy**, you might like this Teddy coat from Kohls. It comes in a few colors, and the reviews are great for comfort and fit. It looks like a coat you might want to live in all day...

<https://www.kohls.com/product/prd-3827294/womens-popsugar-teddy-coat.jsp?color=Zephyr%20Pink&prdPV=22>

Look for sales, comfort, and style when you purchase a new coat. And also check the label for washing instructions. I love a good coat and I'm so excited that winter is nearing, so that coats and scarves and hats – oh my – can be worn for all sorts of seasonal fun!

Tried and True – Why Celebrate? – by Marcy Lytle

Some people don't care for holidays, they'd rather "celebrate" all year long and give thanks to their parents, enjoy friends every day not just on their birthdays, and date regularly not just on Valentine's Day. I suppose there's some sense in that way of thinking, but what I've often observed is that without a celebration planned, months and even years go by with a celebration taking place!

Christmas is one of those celebrations that's debatable among many:

- To give or not to give gifts, because this world is full of needs and charity can be offered to those in need.
- Should we really spend that much time and effort to get together, when we're tired afterwards and the house is a wreck?
- Christmas Day is just a date on a calendar, and we can just enjoy the season and sights without a huge fanfare.
- Our kids don't want gifts; they'd rather have cash to spend, so why labor to think of the presents?
- Family shows up that we don't like, so let's just stay home alone and not get together.

I've heard all of the above, and more, haven't you? And while there are some valid reasons to at least rethink and reevaluate our priorities, to not celebrate should never be our conclusion! Celebration is what life is all about! Let's look at each one of those sentiments listed above, once more:

Giving gifts to our kids and their kids doesn't have to drain our accounts dry, but they need to see us give, they need to learn to receive, and they need to be taught to be thankful. It's not the gift giving that makes for spoiled rotten kids. Giving (even in time and homemade things) is a beautiful act of love, and celebrating that giving on Christmas morning can be beautiful as well, if we choose to make it so. When we say, "Thank you," our kids hear it and smile. So husbands, wives, kids and all...let's give! Charity giving? Yes! Do both, either little or big...but give!

It takes time to shop and wrap and think and make lists, but we often make it more burdensome than it needs to be by the pressure we place on our own shoulders to be perfect. If it's stressful, trim it down. Dole out and delegate. Ask for help in cleaning. Don't try to be a super Santa. Create a celebration that's within your range of comfort. And enjoy. Keep it simple and sane.

Every day IS just a date on the calendar. But all of the holidays and celebrations are just reasons to smile and do something for someone else. It's what Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Christmas, and more are all about – giving in thought and time and love – to others. How can those reminders be ignored? Instead of grieving over the commercialism, just look forward to the next time to show him/her/them a good time and some love!

Giving kids just cash at Christmas – not a fan of that. There's something to learn and to mature from, in the opening of gifts on Christmas morning with the family. We learn to be grateful, even if it's not a practical gift we'll ever use. We are allowed the privilege of blessing someone with a surprise that shows we thought of them deeply. We experience the beauty of unwrapping a surprise. We give of ourselves and our love, instead of just emptying our pockets. Cash can be part of the gifts, but please not all!

Families can be the most annoying people we know, which is so unfortunate. I get it. But if the elders call the family together and you are asked to show up, go by and be gracious. Maybe that cousin is despicable, or that older family member talks unfiltered, or that little kid is out of control. Let your kids see you show up, be kind, and love others that are different in the family – so that they can then love others that are different outside in the world.

There's a lot to learn and to enjoy from celebration of any kind, every day of the year, yes. But there's also SO MUCH to be said for making it a point to celebrate on specific days, because we all know we need a prompt to make things really happen. After all, that day that HE was born was pretty special – it was God's gift to us all – and now we have the privilege of giving to others.

Christmas Day is coming. Celebrate.



HOME

A Night to Remember – A Family Thanks-Giving – by Marcy Lytle

Thanksgiving is this month, where we gather and give thanks for food, family, and life around a huge table...at least that's the Norman Rockwell view of a "perfect" Thanksgiving. But whether or not your family gathers this way traditionally, you can call your kiddos together for a bit of family thanks, in a fun way, for a night to enjoy forever...and maybe a new tradition to start and keep!

What if...you all gathered and gave thanks just for each other? Let's see how that might come together.

Preparation: You'll need to print out a sheet of paper with the five questions below on it and give to each one. Little kids that don't write will need a partner to help them answer and participate. Also, set out candy that is a favorite of each one. So if you're a family of five, you'll need five bowls of candy (or fruit or chips!) You can decide ahead of time what type of snacks you want to share. And it might be fun to let each participant pick out his/her favorite bowl to hold the candy - and share why they chose that bowl at the end!

Here are the five questions to print out. As you answer, let each person take turns passing their bowl of candy around for everyone to taste and enjoy.

1. What item in our house are you most thankful for and why? (examples are clothes, food, bed, pet, etc.)
2. Think of a family memory from the past year and pick one of your favorites and tell us why you enjoyed it so much.
3. Pick the person on your left and give thanks for one special thing you love about him/her.
4. Think of the last kind thing someone in the family did for you, and give thanks to that person.
5. Using the letters in the word T-H-A-N-K-S, go around as many times as you can, using those letters in order to give thanks. For example, the first round might be: Toys, Home, Apples, Neighbors, Kind friends, and Snacks.

After the family has given thanks and shared their candies, hold hands and give thanks as a family to God for all good things, and pray a blessing on the holiday season to come...on your family and families that you know.

An Adage a Day – There is a Time – by Carole Gilbert

It's fall, y'all!

It's the time of year of autumn skies and pumpkin pies. Leaves are turning, football has begun, and we are all anticipating the holiday season which is upon us. What is your favorite time of year? I'm a summer loving girl but I do enjoy the changing of the seasons. After all, who doesn't enjoy autumn time in Texas?

One of my favorite all-time songs I often heard as a child tells all about the seasons. *Well, sort of*. It tells about everything having a reason, a purpose, or a season and includes the popular adage, "To everything there is a season," as well as examples to explain it. This song was written in the 1950's by Pete Seeger and titled *Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)*. It's been recorded by several groups, and first released by the Limelites, a folk group, in 1962 and then by the Byrds, an American folk rock group, in 1965, which is the group I first heard it from. It became an international success. Have you heard it? I love singing it, even if I don't know all the words. But I do know the main words, "To everything, Turn, Turn, Turn, there is a season, Turn, Turn, Turn," and the song goes on.

This phrase did not start as an adage, idiom, or proverb, and I find it very interesting that we hear it in so many different places. It is not just the main theme to a well-known song, it has become a way to think about life, a comfort we can have when something (when anything) changes because that's what IS going to happen. You know, when it seems like something's not going to work, you think, "to everything there is a season." And when everything's going great and you know it's got to change, you think, "to everything there is a season." We don't have to "turn over a new leaf" and we don't have to go "out on a limb." In other words, it's all okay, because to everything there is a season.

I asked if you've heard this song. Even if you haven't, you've probably heard the words. They are also found in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and that's where Pete Seeger found them. He said in an interview,

"A beautiful melody will help tie this world together, and sometimes, extraordinary words will. I didn't realize when I improvised a melody to a short poem in the Old Testament that these few words would be some of the most important words I would ever latch on to."

What I love about this is that Pete Seeger didn't set out to write a Christian song, he set out to write a song that would bring beauty and togetherness to the world. This song did just that! And the words for this song just happened to come from verses in the Bible.

These are the words in Ecclesiastes 3 that Pete Seeger wrote from:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

The song goes on to say there is “a time to every purpose under heaven.” I have been through most of these times and know it’s quite comforting that each had a purpose. Isn’t it interesting that several quotes from God’s word have made it into the world of adages? And another quote from Ecclesiastes has also become an everyday proverb. It helps us know that for all these changing seasons, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

Happy fall, y’all!

I Don't Do Teens – The Days After – by Marcy Lytle

What better time to allow your teens into the kitchen to train and teach them a thing or two that they can take with them to college, or when they leave home, than over the holidays! Maybe your teens already know how to cook, but if they don't, invite them to start with using up leftovers! They will be out of school with nothing to do but be bored and fight with their siblings, so why not give them a fun assignment?

For example, after Turkey Day, let them come up with three ideas of how to use the leftover turkey in other dishes. Tell them you want them to come up with the ideas, make a list of what they need, and go with you to purchase and prepare (or they can go alone, if they drive!) The weekend after Thanksgiving, let them give you that much needed break from the kitchen, and prepare a couple of meals for the family! They can look up turkey wraps or sandwich ideas, or they can put together a turkey bowl, or even make a turkey salad!

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, offer them chances to make other dishes that you might need. Maybe you're going to need an appetizer, a dessert, and a side dish, for gatherings you're going to attend or host. Or perhaps the family will need some fun breakfast items on Christmas morning while opening gifts! Tell them now to start looking for say...recipes with no more than 5-6 ingredients...to keep it simple.

After Christmas, you're going to be tired again! And those kids will still be home for another week giving you grief if they're bored! Let them peruse your pantry and fridge and see what all you have left from all the hoopla associated with the holidays. Ask them to put together two different food trays for the family. Ask them to include fruit, cheeses, nuts, meats, spreads or jams, etc. all arranged nicely and pretty on a cutting board, or a pretty tray. They can look to Pinterest for ideas.

As your teens start to make and create, give them a notebook where they can write down their recipes and ideas, for future use. This way they can have it when they become an adult, and it will be full of ideas for them to use on their own! In fact, give them the notebook now and let them fill it up until 2020 begins!

Teens want to be given responsibilities and like it when we affirm them as they show us their skills and smarts. They may not like the idea at first, but make it fun, make the notebook cute, and hand them some cash (limited) to get a few things to get started. Here are a few guidelines to get them started:

- Use up leftovers first
- Present the idea (to mom) before you make it
- Make it simple, yet tasty
- Clean up afterwards
- Record your work

Be sure to applaud their efforts and ooh and ah over their creations. Who knows, you might have a teen chef on your hands that will help you out from now on! Wouldn't that be grand?

Practical Parenting – The Christmas List – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when my kids were small, my mom gave them big catalogs and newspaper ads for them to take a pen and circle what they wanted for Christmas. The little kids circled everything, and the bigger ones were more selective. However, I recall those memories and my kids do too, as being one of the favorite things to do once the holidays rolled around. The kids were never disappointed at what they got or didn't get; in fact, they didn't even remember what all they circled. The fact that they were asked what they wanted and got a chance to dream was fantastic!

There aren't really big catalogs much anymore and most people don't take the actual paper newspaper either. But there are other ways to let the kiddos look and dream and circle and choose what they'd like to get for Christmas. It's not evil to want fun toys and play things. I think it delights our Father when we ask him for things, and it's his good pleasure to grant them if they bring us some good! So why not sit down with our kiddos and explain that we want to know, so that we can give within our budget, something off their dream list this year...if we can.

Here's how it might work:

Actually buy a weekend newspaper full of ads. Collect them for a couple of weeks and sit down one night as a family and pass them around, with markers in hand. Circle and wish. Place initials by items. And names by things we might want to buy for others!

As a family, walk the aisles of Target or Walmart. Give each kid a notepad if they can write, or little ones your phone camera to snap pics! Walk each aisle as a family, wishing and dreaming and noting and snapping.

Collect all the junk mail from your box for a couple of weeks, with all the ads for toys and more. Sit down for a family snack and pass them around, with scissors for each person. Let them cut and paste their wishes onto a large piece of construction paper! How fun would that be!

If kids are older and know their numbers and how to round them, etc. Tell them what the Christmas budget is per kid. Maybe it's \$100. Let them sit with an iPad at night and come up with choices and wishes that fit within that budget.

One night, make it all about stocking gifts. Make a list of categories, like gum, candy, toiletries, socks, etc. and let them place a check or description by each of what they like. For example, by gum – Trident bubble gum, by candy – Snickers, etc. That way you have a stocking wish list too!

Another night, you can plan as a family what you will give to others like grandparents and friends, or each other. Talk about budget and being thankful and how giving is so rewarding. Make a list of people and ideas, as you talk about those people and what you've observed about them. Maybe the grandparent likes to read, so a kid might suggest a book. Perhaps a cousin loves animals, so a cylinder of dinosaurs might be just the right thing! Use a big white board with names, and let the kids draw what they'll be giving each person. Take a photo of it and keep it for shopping, later.

Let the kids dream. You can dream, too. If funds are tight, then dream together about family outings you can plan or fun experiences you can have at home over the holidays, and plan those. But never squelch dreaming...even when it's just wishing and wanting. It's okay and it's fun and it's something they'll never forget...

Tiny Living – They Did It! – by Leyanne Enterline

Well I'm ready for a New Year! 2019 has not been my favorite.

I don't think I'm usually one to focus on the negative, but this year has been a bit rough, from health problems to financial issues and so on. I'm ready to move on! I won't go into detail of all the negatives but there are some positives that are coming out, as a result of the pain. We have definitely been a family that has been praying and seeking God more than ever before. And the boys have been in on this! They are seeing God work in amazing ways as He takes us through all of this drama.

One huge event that just took place was my mom unexpectedly having a triple bypass last week. This was a huge shock to all of us, including my mom. We had no idea, and she had no symptoms. But in the light of it all, what a miracle that she was going in for a regular doctor's visit and he was able to catch the problem before something major happened! She is still in for a long recovery but we are truly blessed that she is back at home healing up great!

So how does this all apply to tiny living?

I have pretty much taken on the stay-at-home mom role (even though I do work two days a week outside our home). With my mom being in the hospital for so long, I was gone a lot. My hubby has continuously told me I need to let the kids take on more responsibilities. I was not ready for that because, truly, if it didn't go how I wanted it to, I'd end up having to fix it or spend more time on something that was just way faster for me to do! And really how many chores can one have in 325 square feet?

With me out of commission for quite some time, boy did our boys learn some responsibilities! So much so that when I got back into the swing of things here, they basically tattled on daddy and said how much he made them do!

So for those living tiny, there are many chores your kiddos can do (at the appropriate age):

- They helped fold and put away laundry, stripped their sheets off their bed and put fresh ones on.
- They were able to make their own snacks and lunches.
- They blew leaves off our outdoor mat and vacuumed my car.
- Their school and bible work was done way ahead of time.
- They set out their own clothes for the morning.
- They helped with all the doggie stuff, which they generally do anyway.

I've been listening to some podcasts that have focused on having our kids do more so that we can train them to be healthy, happy adults and this gives us back time. Well now with these new things the boys can do, I feel like I bought back a lot more of my time! I'm not super excited that we had to go through the craziness of my mom's surgery, but I am grateful that goodness came out it!

Tiny Living may mean smaller chores, but still there are chores to be done and its super nice to have my tiny helpers pitching in!

Remember love grows best in tiny spaces.



YOU

Thankful Bells

Thankful bells ring near and far
Throughout our city streets

For God has canceled every debt
The enemy doomed defeat

Harvest comes with sweet delight
Come gather where you may

The crops are in, the cattle snug
Our barns are filled with hay

One so grateful looks above
With wonder in her eyes

Surely God has overcome
Breaking barriers and dark lies

So join us in this merry dance
Bring friends and kin along

Let's laugh and sing with great applause
Do tell Redeemer's song

Raucous play transforms the day
The lights are always bright

For Jesus is the Morning Star
In Him there is no night

Thankful hearts bursts out in bloom
Forever our Delight

The rescue of our lonely lives
Transformed throughout the night

It's written on the winds of time
Full blown throughout the spheres

That Jesus is the King of Kings
And loves us all our years

So listen now with open ears
Wait patiently to hear

He'll whisper mysteries fine and true
Removing all our fear

Deep darkness flies when He's around
And that's just what He'll do

Rout the fog and frightful mist
Open heaven and shine through

Thankful bells ring through the land
The Harvest's here right now

Grace abounds, love explodes
For Thanksgiving we will bow

Healthy Habits – Read to Rest – by Marcy Lytle

I get it. There are some seasons of life when there is NO time to read for pleasure. Especially while raising kids, the only thing you have time to read are medicine bottles, school papers, and labels on kids clothing and food when you shop! But then there ARE seasons when you might want to pick up reading again, or squeeze it into your routine, because you long for an escape and time to yourself...into another world. That's what happened to me about a year ago...

Oh, I read before. But I mainly read magazines. I hadn't read a good book in a very long time. I joined a book club and now receive a book once a month, which makes me find the time to read, and I like it. I feel it has helped find a bit of rest this year.

So here's a how-to and the what-and-why of getting back to reading a good book...if you've got that hankering to do so:

Why:

Reading stimulates brain activity, and keeps our minds active and learning.

Reading is relaxing when we stop our hectic lives for a bit and experience the life of those in a good story!

Reading is fun. And who doesn't need a little fun in this frantic world in which we live?

Reading enlightens the mind and inspires creativity...or at least it can!

How:

Keep the book in the car, and read for 10 minutes in the car before you go in to shop, or back into the house. Pull it out like a treasure, to read and to enjoy, before you exit your car.

Keep the book by your bed, if you're a reader at night. Make it a point to read one chapter per night so that you look forward to seeing what happens each evening, before you drift off to sleep.

Keep the book in a bag that you tote everywhere, just in case you have the time to read. Perhaps a friend you're meeting will be late, you might incorporate reading time into date night, or a coffee shop stop might also include a time to put on your reading glasses and finish another chapter.

Keep the book reading time on your calendar if you know you need the schedule, or otherwise it won't happen. For example, maybe Tuesday/Thursday during lunch, you'll read for 30 minutes while you eat. (My favorite is to find a shade tree, eat my packed lunch, and read!)

What:

Make your book choices stories that you enjoy. I tend to like mysteries, dramas and sometimes odd or unique stories. I also like some historical fiction. I don't care for sci-fi or hot romances.

Make your book choice fit your lifestyle – either a hardback, a paperback or Kindle, or however you want to read. I suggest getting a good book where you can smell the pages and turn them! Nothing beats that!

Make friends that love reading as well, and swap books. How fun would that be? Or join a book club that holds you accountable and provides discussion!

Make a stop at those little neighborhood box libraries in yards, and find a treasure there! Be sure to put one back, after you've finished your good read.

Reading is one of those activities that moms/women often push aside as a low priority on our lists of to-do's because of laundry and life. However, sometimes just that little daily or every few days of escape onto the pages of another's story makes us a happier and healthier woman when we're done...

Life Right Now – Sweaters, Words and Pits – by Bethany Gomez

I don't think I have mentioned how much I enjoy crafting and painting. It is one of those things that I love doing and wish I did more of. I could give you a list of reasons why I don't do this one thing that I love more often, but let's just say I am still working on managing my time to do all the things that I need to do and still have time to do some of the things I enjoy doing! Despite all that, throughout the year I have many project ideas in my head. However, it is not until this time of the year that I get a very strong urge to start and complete some of those projects. I think it's mainly because cooler temperatures are more compatible for making things, especially if the project requires it to be done outside. It's also because the fall season inspires all sorts of cute decoration ideas. Let's not forget that Christmas will be here before we know it, which provides the perfect opportunity to make Christmas decorations and handmade gifts!

I am happy to say that I have already started a few craft projects, mainly fall themed ones.

First, there is the sweater pumpkin craft. I got sucked into the Pinterest vortex one day and came across a pin for "Easy DIY Dollar Store Fall Decoration Ideas." One of the ideas was, you guessed it, how to make sweater pumpkins using orange Styrofoam pumpkins from the dollar store. You simply paint the pumpkins white if you don't want the bright orange showing through, then take an old sweater, cut the sleeve off, and wrap the pumpkin in it and with a little bit of hot glue, you're done. You can use them to decorate a table in your house or a mantle. This is my kind of project - cheap, easy, and cute.

The next fall craft project kind of found me. As I was walking down the aisles of Hobby Lobby, practicing self-control, I came across this cute, blank, wooden board that I couldn't pass up (believe me, I still had self-control, there were so many things I saw that I wanted to buy but didn't). The moment I saw it I thought it would be perfect for a fall word, like "thankful" to be painted on it or even a verse. I brought it home and finally decided to paint the word "blessed" on it because that is always my hope for any one that walks into the house, that they will feel blessed.

There are two other projects I would really like to start working on. The first one is to make or find scripture art to hang up in the house. I was reminded of the verse in the Bible that says to hide God's word in our hearts so that we may not sin against Him. I have always thought that meant I had to memorize scripture! While memorization is a great way to hide God's word in my heart, I have never been that great at it. I think another way to hide God's word in my heart is to not hide that I believe God's words to be true by displaying His word in my house, room, or even on my clothing, so that it remains on my mind and eventually finds its way into my heart and hopefully into others' hearts. I have one of my favorite verses hanging up above my mirror that I painted and framed. I see it every morning and every time I read it, it encourages me to keep on going. I think I've shared it before, but here it is again, Isaiah 41:10.

Lastly, one project that I have been longing to do ever since moving into my parents' house is to make a fire pit. Why a fire pit? Well, at the moment, there is a sad looking spot where scraps of wood sit for an occasional bonfire. I think a revamp is in order, but mainly, there is nothing like spending a cool evening near a fire with good friends or family, chatting and laughing into the wee hours of the night. The sound of a crackling fire and the warmth it provides produces a relaxing way to spend a cool evening. I have many wonderful memories of doing just that, but one of the most memorable times I spent around a fire pit was last year during a trip to Massachusetts for Market of Hope, a non-profit ministry event held throughout the year and in October, in a little town called Norwood Massachusetts. Two Norwood families opened their homes for us to stay and at one of them they had a fire pit on the back patio. We had some

great conversations, funny stories were shared where laughing ensued, and words of wisdom were shared by our hostess that I have not forgotten.

“God does not hurt us and if we are hurt there is a reason for it.

You just never know, but God’s ways are better than our ways.”

I needed those words then and I still need them now, so a fire pit is the project on my to-do list, so that more words of wisdom can be shared among my friends!

What projects are you in the middle of, dreaming of, or enjoying?

Strengthening Your Core – Unoffendable – by Marcy Lytle

This morning I thought it might be a good idea to change the name of our country from the USA to the UFO; that is, the United States of the Offended. But then I realized that we aren't united if we're offended, so it should be DSO, the Divided States of the Offended. That's where we live, and I too live among the offended and the divided...so many times.

Offenses run high in these states where we live, and I suppose we could say many of them are rightly justified. Injustices cause offense, cruel and hurtful words offend our souls, and parents/children are offending each other right and left. Parents abandon, children are wounded and offended...of course they are. Children are hateful and disinterested, and parents are offended and feel deep hurt. We all know that these types of hurts need healing...in our country...and so we pray.

But for the sake of this article, I'm referring to offenses of the less cutting kind, the kind of offenses we carry because of a sour look, an unspoken affirmation, a ridicule from someone when they're tired, a comment made offhand in haste...things like that.

I recently read an Instagram story from a highly noted Christian speaker and she answered questions that her followers asked. One follower asked for her best piece of advice, working in ministry. The answer the speaker gave was, "Become unoffendable." That answer struck me as being so true. Being offended is the number one cause that I've seen in people coming and going out of relationships...especially in the church. It happens in families too, when a sibling runs to his room because his brother won't play with him.

Wait, but doesn't that brother have "right" to be offended when the other brother is cruel?

I don't have all the answers on this subject, but I've been thinking on it...deeply. I probably get offended way too often at things that often make me wonder why I reacted so strongly. Someone can say a comment to me that doesn't set well, and I've got all sorts of speculation in my head about why they said it and what they meant behind it and how rude they were, until...that offense causes me to retreat from that relationship.

But is it the action that causes the offense, or is it what's missing in our own hearts? In other words, can we really CHOOSE to be unoffended, or do we need to consider our own hearts and receive healing, before we can make that choice?

Here's what I mean, and what I've realized about myself:

- Offenses come daily, and often I attach meaning behind what was said or done that isn't really there. At least, I don't know the person's heart, but I think I do; therefore, I'm offended.
- Offenses come from those I love the most, because I expect the most out of those I love. But that's not fair. I need to expect less and love more, offer judgment less and give grace more. Because I have received grace over and over again.

- Offenses happen in my marriage, when I'm tired, when I'm wanting to prove my point, when I'm demanding my rights. Even if he's mean, I can cast that care on HIM, and the Father I serve will deal with him...and with me. Because he loves us both that much.
- Offenses are taken at church, when our ideas aren't chosen, and hers are. We're completely aghast when changes are made and we weren't told, things like that. But the altar (in my heart) seems to be the place to leave those offenses and let them die.
- Offenses are there for the taking daily, like a never ending buffet line. They seem right and good, but once we've filled our plates with all the things and eaten until we're stuffed, we feel bad...really bad.

I'm working on this one. I'm looking deep to see the reasons I'm really offended and it's more often than not – not them – but me.

Unoffendable. A goal I hope to reach.

Upper Quadrant – Panicky Peace – by Marcy Lytle

There are so many subjects to write about regarding aging and all the fun of it...or pain of it. Every month something new comes up regarding this season of life. For November, I wanted this entry to include thanksgiving, because we all know that gratitude does wonders for the heart, mind, and body! But sometimes, finding gratitude for the aging process isn't the easiest or most reflexive thing to do. I've found that pushing the panic button is easier, and sometimes what I do way too often.

I hear about one more friend with a heart issue about to have heart surgery, and the panic button gets pushed, wondering about who will be next, and what does the future hold...except a dying body closer to the grave. Pretty pitiful, right? It happened just this week when a text came through about a cousin my age having a triple bypass! However, today I talked with another friend that was sharing with me the success of a heart procedure on a 13-year old young man. So age isn't really a reason to panic and neither is heart disease, is it? I'm pretty sure it says somewhere in the Good Book that all of our days are numbered and we aren't to worry about tomorrow...

I read about a friend that's placing her mom in a facility for those with dementia, and I remember how hard it was with my husband's mom, as we too put her "away." All feelings of guilt arise, and then if we let our minds wander further down the foggy path, we're panicking that we too may one day end up in a one-room place with a chair, if we're lucky. But I'm pretty sure the Good Book says nothing of luck or fate, but rather of provision and peace...even in the middle of some pretty intense storms. Though minds and bodies may fail, our relationship with Him is intact, and for that I'm so grateful!

I watch my kids as they make vacation plans with friends, head out for fun family days with their kids, and arrive home tired at night with homework, make lunches, prepare for work the next day, and I panic about become more and more obscure in their world. Pity parties start to form in the rooms of my mind until my entire thought-house is full of banners and balloons of doom in dark shades of black and gray. However, I'm pretty sure the Good Book tells us to continue to give cheerfully all of our days, expecting nothing in return except the satisfaction of knowing we're obeying that mandate to lay down our lives for others. And I'm certain that joy rises up when we do, and those dark balloons pop, and color returns...to our world.

I just studied and taught a class on worship at my church where the majority of the attendees were "older" people, not any of the young couples with little kids. I thought this morning how I was so disappointed in their lack of support of "my" generation and then...I remembered how when my kids were young I was busy, too. Especially the weekends were full, with games and lessons and grocery shopping and more! And I realized that they too might be disappointed in my generation in our judgment of them and our labels on them, like being entitled. That same Good Book tells me that I'm loved all of my days and what I do is pleasing to him when I obey. I then changed my thought process and decided that we all (the olders...) need to be an example of a worshipful community full of faith and vigor and compassion and love for all of those behind us. They need our support, more than ever. I can give it or whine in my seat, and wish to receive it. I want to always be a giver...

What about you? What causes you panic in the deepest parts of your mind? Is it the future, how you're going to make ends meet, if your kids are ever going to "come around," or the fact that you too just received a diagnosis or your parent fell and now you're the parent and they're the child? We are all in different seasons of life, some with leaves that are turning brown, and some with colors in full bloom. But how silly it would be for leaves to panic! Leaves are beautiful attached to branches, or dried and used for décor or covered in gold to make beautiful jewelry. They all originated from the vine and are never let go until it is time to move on to something more beautiful downstream...

I don't want to panic. I want to live in peace. I know it will be hard some days, but gratitude for the Good Book and what it says to all of us – be of good cheer – is what I want to have always. Panicky peace is what I call starting to fall off the cliff and then realizing he's got me firmly by the hand and I'm not going down until he's ready to fly with me...not to a crash landing...but to a higher place.



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – Those Routines – by Marcy Lytle

There's something to be said for routines. Oh sure, there's also something to be said for breaking routines and stepping out of ruts, and being spontaneous. Those times are also great! But for this month, I'm going to talk about routines...in our marriage...that is. Sometimes, those routines are the very things that settle my soul and make me smile when I'm literally feeling like the world is spinning way too fast...

Morning kisses and hugs

We both have our own way of waking up to the morning. I am up way earlier than he and I spend that time working on my laptop. By the time he's up, I'm usually already tired. He gets ready to leave and there's the first routine of the day, that lingering hug and kiss where we say we will miss each other and can't wait to see each other again come evening...

Afternoon texts and messages

I absolutely love getting a random text from him that says "I miss you" or "How are you doing?" I love to send him texts to ask how he enjoyed his lunch or to ask, "Are you coming home soon?" Dings on the phone where his name is attached make my heart sing...

Evening outings

I work at home, so he is very gracious to go out with me each evening, even if we do nothing more than get a bite to eat and take a walk, holding hands. This time together settles our minds and connects us, allows us time to unwind together and enjoy a fresh breeze. I know that some nights he is super tired, and other nights I am too, so the routine of just being together is enough...no matter what we do.

Weekend movies and dates

By Friday, we have the weekend planned, actually written out on paper, so that we have it to look forward to. Usually, there's a chore or two, and then lots of fun away from home, like a movie, a walk, a nap in the car after reading a bit, shopping, visiting, church and more. Sprinkled in those weekends are out of town day trips. Planning and having those plans to look forward to, is fun for both of us!

Household chores

We have this agreement that he makes the bed and washes the linens, and I clean and make our lunches. It works great for us. When we need to do yard work, we usually do it together, because we both love being outside. It's a rhythm we enjoy and count on each other to keep the beat...

Before lights out

We have this small book with one page devotionals that he reads to us out loud, every night, before lights go out. It wasn't always this way, but it's been happening this past year, and it's

awesome. It reminds us both to love and to put the other's needs above our own. It includes a verse and prayer. It's short and simple, but satisfying...

None of the above is anything new or innovative; it's pretty simple and plain. But these routines are like little protective fences that surround us both and let us know we are in safe spots with each other, and with Him. I know that many marriages don't have any sort of routine, that there are huge breaks between relationships, and so much busyness and separateness that routines are non-existent. For us, this works and feels good. And when life gets so stressful that these routines get pushed aside, we feel the waves, and we work hard to row ourselves back to calm waters...

What routines do you have, and can you make, to settle your souls together?

Date Night Fun – All the Things – by Marcy Lytle

You know, all those fall things that we tend to only use or do or eat during the months leading up to Christmas. Things like the popcorn popper, the fondue pot, pumpkin flavors and scents, the fireplace or fire pit, and more! Why not make date night revolve around these things this month? I absolutely love fall the most of all, because of these things, do you?

Popcorn bar – We recently hosted a party and set up a popcorn bar and it was great fun. Invite another couple or two over and have them bring part of the fun, and set it up! You'll need a big tub of popcorn with a scoop, flavors to spritz (including butter), toppings (like candies) and drinks. You can purchase tiny popcorn bags from the dollar store. Include conversation about popcorn (maybe print out trivia questions!) and even put together a popcorn jigsaw puzzle! Fun, right?

https://www.zazzle.com/small_town_drive_in_movie_puzzle-116592503673137055

Fondue, anyone? – There's a restaurant in our town called the Melting Pot and there are different options of fondue from just appetizers to a full course, or even just dessert! Have a romantic date at a place like that, or make your own fondue at home and watch a romantic movie together. Find a great fondue recipe and cut up cubes of fun to dip. Try a cheesy one with cubes of bread, and then a chocolate one with fruit and cake!

<https://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/tyler-florence/cheese-fondue-recipe-1906678>

<https://www.chelseasmessyapron.com/chocolate-fondue/>

Around the Fire – If you have a fire pit, you can totally plan a date outside near the pit. Play some soft music, order pizza to be delivered, and dance to the flicker of the flames. Check out a couple of books from the library or your own collection (or the neighborhood boxes!) and share excerpts or pictures. We have this huge coffee table book of pictures from America that are stunning. Talk about your next vacation and where you might like to go. Make s'mores if you wish, for your dessert.

https://www.amazon.com/America-Amazing-Place-Natalie-Danford/dp/0785830782/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=9780785830788&linkCode=qs&qid=1570533813&s=books&sr=1-1

More Pumpkin – Halloween is over, but pumpkin season is not! Pumpkin pie, pumpkin bread, pumpkin candles, they're everywhere! Enjoy a breakfast date either at a coffee shop over pumpkin bread and a latte, or at home with the same. Light a pumpkin scented candle and complete a crossword puzzle together, as you sip and snack. Or you could have a cooking session together, making something with a pumpkin base.

<https://www.onceuponachef.com/recipes/spiced-pumpkin-bread.html>

Give Thanks – Why not make date night all about giving thanks for so many things? Each of you makes a list of five things for which you're thankful around town. Yours might include your

church, a favorite restaurant or coffee shop, an experience you had at a theater or arena, a particular tree or park you love, etc. Pack a picnic supper/lunch and visit each place and reminisce and give thanks together. I love this idea!

November can get really busy, so get your date night on the calendar first thing – and make it happen. Enjoy all the fun of the fall season before it's gone!

In This Together – Get Real – by Bekah Holland

Since you've been sharing your time by reading some of these tangents I've gone on, I decided there are some things that you should know about me. First of all, I'm pretty consistent. And by consistent, I mean consistently playing catch up. I play catch up with my kids and their chores, doctor's appointments, work, my to-do lists, and laundry. Okay, that last one is a lie. I don't even try to catch up on laundry. In fact, we have an entire couch dedicated to clean laundry that mocks my feeble attempts at success. But I digress... Other than that, I'm mostly friendly, unless I've run out of coffee. I am a people pleaser and I tend to apologize for everything until it even annoys me (I hate this particular trait, but I'm a work in progress).

Let's see, what else....oh my children tortured me for about a decade by taking turns waking me up multiple times a night. They pretty much broke my brain and now I'm an insomniac who needs a dozen bedtime routines, medication, eye masks and earplugs to force a reboot. I can also survive solely on caffeine and carbs. Like, if I could take only three things to a desert island, I'd choose coffee, an endless store of bread and my magically-never-need-to-be-charged kindle. In fact, that sounds like what I might ask for on Mother's Day. Also, my husband and I have recently decided that I am basically a plant. I need water (okay, coffee, but there's water in coffee so that counts) and sunshine to thrive. Too many gloomy days and I want to climb under the covers and wake up when it's summer again. See? Plant. However, while my husband has an amazing green thumb and we have glorious green life all over our house, I am not allowed to touch them. In fact, I'm not really supposed to look at them for too long. I don't know what it is, but if they sense me there, they just give up and die. They don't even wait for me to drown them or to forget to water them for seven weeks. I've even managed to kill the cactus. More than once. What can I say? It's a gift.

But speaking of green thumbs (not mine, obviously), I think it's time to start taking the same approach with our actual lives. Now, full disclosure, I excel at stressing the importance of self-care and finding ways to carve out time to breathe and regroup....but mostly for other people (my own stuff, not so much.) Some of it is a misguided view of my childhood. I've talked about my mom before, and her ability to cook these amazing homemade meals, sew actual clothes, run all aspects of our family and household, seemingly with ease. As a grown woman myself now, I'm relatively certain that she is at least partly human (sorry, but no matter how old I get, she's always going to be slightly superhuman to me). I'm sure that she cried in the bathtub and locked herself in the closet with a spoon and a tub of ice cream like the rest of us. But to me she was bigger than life and I have felt this internal need to live up to a little girl's idea of how this whole mess is supposed to look. So I push it all back and focus on the stuff that doesn't take the same emotional effort.

Ask me how this plan works out most of the time. Or better yet, ask my husband. I need gentle reminders to take some time for me. Usually those gentle reminders come in the form of my sobbing on said husband's shoulder, completely melting down because I forgot to sign my kid's homework folder (again) and I did the dishes instead of holding the other kid responsible for their chores, so obviously this will all result in our kids growing up and robbing a 7-11, emotionally stunted and never forming healthy human attachments. At this point in the breakdown, I get pointed in the direction of the bathtub with instructions to soak until I'm pruned and sane.

Why do we think, especially as women, that our needs are the least important?

The whole “put on your oxygen mask first” thing usually seems like what I’d tell other people. I’m not as kind to myself as I am to other people. I’m not as gentle or merciful with myself as I am with other people. But I don’t believe that’s what God had in mind for us. If you grew up in church, you probably remember hearing about how important it is to be selfless, giving, loving, and forgiving. All of these are marvelous things to be and strive for. But we forget the things that Jesus did. Like rest. Weep. Leave his friends to spend time on his own. If Jesus recognized this and took time to do what he needed to do to nourish his own soul, why don’t we give ourselves the same permission?

For some reason, most of us act like we shouldn’t have our own needs or maybe that they should just magically be met. We act like our exhaustion from trying to do all and be all and create all and is just our lot in life. Sometimes we wear that exhaustion as a badge of honor. A virtual trophy built of just how much we do and how great that makes us look on the outside. But I don’t want to just be the doer of all the things and the care-er of all the people. I want to build up my heart and my mind and my emotional reserves so I can be a better (preferably less tired) version of me. I want to intentionally create time and space to do what Jesus did so I can love like he loved. We can’t pour from an empty pot. So let’s create some time, not just for bubble baths or pedicures, but for the kind of moments that feed our souls.

“Some things are better not spread too thin. Your-self and peanut butter.”



ENCOURAGEMENT

Best of the Mess - All in My Mind Part II – by Ashley Zanella

Last month I shared with you my personal weight loss journey, post two back-to-back pregnancies. I shared how I was able to commit to my health and lose 60 pounds in roughly 13 months. If you didn't get a chance to read last month's article "All in My Mind" visit our ARCHIVES page for some practical strategies that helped me stick to my health goals and actually reach them. This month, I promised I would share how I was able to manage working out 3-5x a week, on average, with a 1 and 2-year old in tow.

In my mind, it's really as easy as 1-2-3.

One, it's my priority. For me, working out means a release of endorphins that turns a crazy and chaotic morning with two toddlers that I am simply *responding* to into an afternoon where I usually have a lot more energy ending the day than I do starting it. Instead of playing *defense*, I'm on the *offensive* - instigating a chase around the kitchen and through the halls, a tickle fight or story time instead of trying to hide under a blanket and hope my kids forget about me for three minutes. So when I get stuck and am being annoyingly indecisive about whether or not I should workout, usually the questions that kick me into gear are,

"Do I want to be kicking myself later because I am sore, but feel accomplished?"

"Do I want to be kicking myself later because I have zero energy and haven't done anything productive for myself today?"

That is another mental trick I use on myself- that working out is something I do *for me*. I was once told, during one of my first bouts of depression, that if I wasn't happier three minutes into a run than when I started, I should stop. I used to hate running. I went from hating running to running an average of 2 miles a day and usually a couple 3-6+ mile runs a week just because I loved how it made me feel. Since having my first son, I've had terrible knees and haven't gotten back into running like I used to, but the gym gives me the same release, the same time alone and the same feeling of accomplishment that turns a basic day into a better one. Making exercise a priority for me means making myself a priority, and taking time to do the things that make me a healthier, happier and stronger version of myself. I have only ever regretted the workouts that I *didn't* make time for.

Two, affordable gyms. I found a great local gym that is very inexpensive compared to other gyms and it provides onsite childcare. As part of my membership, I am able to work out two hours a day while my children socialize. Not only can I work out during that time, I can sit in the sauna, I can go for a swim, or I can sit on one of their comfy couches, drinking a quiet and uninterrupted cup of their coffee, while I study, write or read something. On top of the workout benefits, I get 12 hours a year where I can use the childcare facilities while I go offsite, whether I need to go to an appointment, an interview or a day date. One Friday a month, I can drop off our boys from 4-8pm while my husband and I enjoy an evening alone together. It's truly a win/win because the kids get to make a lot of new friends and we both get to use all of these perks to not only take care of our bodies, but also our sanity and marriage.

As you can see, there were many days where this gym became my safe haven and I was

thanking God that it existed by the time I was trying to get both boys to go into the right door so I could check them in, pop in my headphones and be on my own for the next hour or so. I know that a membership isn't totally realistic for everyone and in every season, but I will say that I prioritize this gym membership over any internet, music or streaming package. If we had to let one go, I'd let go of all of those three before I would cut loose this gym membership.

Three, *stick with it.* No matter how many times I fell off track with my diet, no matter how many days in a row I missed a workout due to illnesses in the house and no matter how unmotivated I felt, I *had* to make it a priority to get into the gym and I had to stick with it - meaning I had to keep making it a priority over and over again. One, two, five bad days are nothing in the grand scheme of things. But if I let that week turn into two weeks and two weeks turn into a month, I was giving up on myself. And I *refuse* to give up on myself. Yes, I absolutely fall off the wagon many times, but I always get back on track and snap myself out of it. There were many months where the inches didn't go down, the scale stayed the same or even went up a few pounds, the clothes started feeling a little snug again and I wanted to give up. But the journey I started did not have an end. I had goals, but I wasn't trying to do any quick fix or two month diet. I set on a journey to get back to a body that I loved, felt healthy in and was proud of. So even if I fell off track for a week, that was going to be okay *as long as I didn't let a setback turn into a failure.*

Last month, I shared a delicious smoothie recipe and I hope you enjoyed it! This month, I want to share a simple way to meal prep so that even with two toddlers and a full agenda you can cook a healthy, nutrient dense dinner.

Ingredients:

- 3-4 boneless, skinless chicken breast, diced
- Teryaki sauce
- Sweet and Sour sauce
- Garlic powder/salt/pepper - to taste
- 1 package mushrooms, chopped
- 3 medium sized bell peppers (red, green, orange or preferred), sliced
- 1 small yellow onion, sliced
- 1 small zucchini
- 1 can chopped pineapple or 1 cup chopped pineapple
- Rice or your favorite lettuce mix

What to do:

- 1) Separate the chicken equally into different zip lock bags

- 2) Add teriyaki or sweet and sour sauce to the bags, covering the chicken. You can make half of them with one sauce and the other half with the other. You can also make your own versions of these and similar sauces to reduce sodium etc.
- 3) Label the chicken bags with the date and put two in the fridge with the rest in the freezer.
- 4) Chop all veggies and add to one gallon zip lock bag in the fridge.
- 5) When it's time to cook, you cook the chicken in a large pan over medium heat with some oil (I use coconut oil). Add garlic powder, salt and pepper to taste.
- 6) When the chicken is almost finished, you add the veggies and a generous amount of additional sauce.
- 7) If cooking the sweet and sour sauce, add the pineapples after you add the veggies.
- 8) Serve over lettuce for a salad or rice for a heartier dish.

Firmly Planted – What Matters Most – by Dina Cavazos

Sometimes the work necessary to keep the garden looking good feels burdensome. The drudgery of raking leaves only to have them fall again and again, the clipping back every few months to keep even the evergreens from going nuts, the continual re-filling and cleaning of the fountains...*why am I doing this? Does it really matter and does anyone even care?* The daily routine of life can feel like that too. Wake up, work, clean, cook, fix, run around, deal with traffic, etc., etc. *Does it ever end? What's the point?* ...Life can feel like a hamster wheel--UNTIL God shows up.

Now, I believe that God is always *here*. He's always near, waiting for me to acknowledge him, but sometimes my nose gets buried in my navel and I just can't see in that nasty darkness - I'm on the hamster wheel, pointlessly circling round and round with 'no direction home, like a complete unknown'. Recently, I came up for a breath of fresh air - actually, he pulled me away from my navel and I heard him loud and clear. I can say with certainty that when God shows up in any kind of way the hamster wheel stops; Light comes, bringing Life and Truth into my world, and then I see what matters more than anything else. A few weeks ago, I had such a moment.

In previous stories, I've shared about my mission to simplify, stop the thrift store habit, and get rid of excess *stuff*. Besides clearing the clutter my kids don't want to inherit, I feel I'm following God's prompting to get to a place of "less" so I can have "more." More time and "white space" to fill in a way that's meaningful and purposeful. Then there's the prayer garden--started with mustard seed faith, it's now a place to connect, reflect, and listen to the quiet voice that keeps me grounded and centered – a place to pray words that can bring God's kingdom near. This is God's way for me; he set my feet on this path; but the shadows of old paths remain to tempt and lure away.

Letting go of "things" started several years ago when I felt I was supposed to "give away" the excess items I was storing in the attic as a result of downsizing. I'd lived in two historic homes—antique and vintage was in my blood. Giving away was hard - my thrifty nature resisted, but I obeyed—kind of, half-way. Since then, I've sold, donated, and (sometimes) given away the majority of my thrift store finds, but one batch of extra-special stuff remained. These were things I valued the most - my special treasures - and I couldn't just let them go. I reasoned they were worth selling, which would help me recoup some of what I'd spent on my home updates.

In August, a friend and I visited some shops in Taylor, Texas and on a whim I asked about booth space. Seventy-five a month, three month commitment - this seemed like an answer, and in about two days, I came up with several reasons why I should to rent the space. I priced, recorded inventory, loaded it, drove there, unloaded it and then arranged everything in a bright sunny hallway. Over the next month, I bought a few more items to sell in the booth. A few weeks later, I still hadn't sold one thing.

Here is the moment: I don't remember where I was. The surroundings can disappear at times like this. Suddenly, like lights coming on in a dark room, I realized I was going the opposite direction of where God had been leading me! I was spending time buying and selling, thinking

about “stuff,” using my time and money in ways I’d been trying to leave behind. Like neon lights, the saving Word illuminated the truth,

“What does it profit if you gain the world and lose your soul?”

I felt the heaviness of being out of God’s will, of not being in sync with his plan for me. At that point, the treasures became a burden, a weight I wanted to just get off of me, and I began to hate the things I’d loved. The realization of pursuing the wrong treasure hit hard—and not only that...I’d gone *backwards!* The weight of it stayed with me for awhile, but I received it gladly. The discipline of the One Who Loves Like No Other is good and loving and brought me back into alignment. I was now willing to lose it all to gain what matters most.

I immediately took steps to get out of the thrift store business; but there are consequences—he can’t be anything but fair. The three month commitment remains. The entire booth is 40% off and things are now selling at that bargain price, but, after donating or giving away what’s left, it will be a “loss.” It would have been better to just give everything away like he said in the first place - a shortcut to where I am now! How often I’ve missed those shortcuts! I hope the lesson pulled this thing up by the roots. I don’t mind the loss—in fact, I welcome it, because it’s a small price to pay for a serious reminder that I’m not just running on a hamster wheel. His purposes for me and my mission to accomplish that purpose matter.

Listening, obeying, following...staying true to the directives of the Keeper of my soul...

that is more important than any earthly treasure.

That’s what matters most...

Moving Forward – Gentleness – by Pam Charro

Have you ever considered the gentleness of God? To me, it is one of his most endearing qualities. It is a rare treat to find gentleness in this often harsh world.

I am not always as gentle as I should be. When I fall short, it's often because I am unaware of my ability to cause the other person pain or I don't trust the other person to care. Sometimes I am just so frustrated about a situation that I'm not even thinking about how the other person might be feeling.

Conversely, it's relatively easy for me to be gentle when I am aware that the other person cares or is fragile. It's also easier when I am in a good mood or not overwhelmed by the situation. Then I can more easily keep in mind that taking care of people is always more important than taking care of a problem.

Based on these statements, what can we surmise about God?

- He knows he is powerful
- He knows we are fragile
- He is in a good mood
- The situation is not frustrating or overwhelming for him
- He trusts us
- He always cares about our feelings and never desires to cause us pain

Our heavenly Father has a perfectly beautiful, perfectly gentle heart.

Real Stories – Ready for Love – by Kristina Gomez

My husband and I talked for the first time by phone on July 25th, 2016 for two hours! Conversation flowed and there was no awkward silence. Before we said our good-byes, we decided to meet in person the next day. It seemed so simple!

Below is our story of grace, hope and love...

Joe and I had both tried online dating, him more than me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to date because I feared the type of relationship I previously had. Since my divorce in 2010, I was totally focused on raising my two boys and establishing a household and career. I obtained a nursing degree to establish my career and completed years of counseling to forgive and heal. It took a lot of support and guidance to be a single parent.

The kids were finishing high school and needing Mom less. At 39 years old, I found myself telling my coworker a crazy idea that I wanted to begin to date. I went on a hike by myself the previous weekend and she said, "Joe would love to do that with you." Joe was her boyfriend's brother. It took a few months of me back and forth *deciding* if I wanted to date. But honestly, I know it was God softening my heart.

Joe was a 47-year old Christian man with no kids; he was financially stable, and ready for a wife. Nothing and no one had come for him in terms of dating. He had been waiting and praying, asking God, "If you want me to date, please bring her to me." In June 2016, Joe was prayed for and encouraged that he would meet his wife by the end of the year. He didn't know how that would happen, but he held onto faith. Not faith in that word, but faith in his Father.

I like to think while I was getting myself together - Joe was patiently waiting for me. As cliché as it sounds; it was an instant connection. One funny note is that after our first dinner date he asked me to call him when I got home to be sure I made it there safely.

Independent Kristina said, "It's not that far, I can get home by myself."

And the other part of me screamed out loud in my head, "He cares!"

I was ready to accept someone into my life to love.

Joe did all the *right* dating things and was an amazing boyfriend. I was so happy because I had *learned* a new love! We met each other's parents, we arranged a family outing with the boys, and we talked a lot to discuss life and goals.

Joe and I dated for months. He then traditionally asked my dad for marriage and proposed in December. Exactly seven months after meeting, we married on February 26th, 2017.

We love being married. We have learned a lot about ourselves and each other through this process and a lot about His timing and care as we wait...

Kristina is currently a registered nurse and in graduate school with a desire to teach. Wanting to be a nurse since her teen years she has a passion for helping and caring for others. She is married to Joe with two grown sons, Javier, 21 and Adrian, 19. Hobbies include hiking and enjoying the outdoors. Favorite foods are spicy vegetarian dishes.

Simple Truths - The Evolution of a Prayer Warrior – by Erica Simmons

Back when I was writing articles for this magazine through the lens of a single parent, I wrote one about using prayer like duct tape, a temporary fix in emergency situations. Below is how I ended that article.

So to turn my duct tape prayer life into a prayer warrior all I really have to do is stop creating a prayer life in pieces that are bound together in crisis. All I have to do is stay engaged in continuous prayer for my life and the lives of my children and the lives of other Christians around the world. I am now a prayer warrior, a member of God's holy army.

That article was written two years ago this month. Wow! I wish I could say that making the decision to become this fierce prayer warrior was as easy as writing about it. I can say that in time I have learned a lot.

1. God is not sitting in heaven playing chicken with me and my prayer life. He isn't seeing who will blink and give up first.
2. My prayer life is not some marathon that I engage in until I give up and quit, because God has not answered yet.
3. He is not waiting for me to cross some arbitrary mark before He answers. HIS Word releases His power and authority in a situation.
4. There is no such thing as critical mass for him, He is not waiting around saying He will let the situation go just a little bit further and then He will answer.
5. He does not want His children to spend one second in sin off track wondering if He is real and if He will ever hear our cry. No, He is a compassionate God, who loves us and wants to see us grow in the fullness of who HE is.

As Christians, when we are interceding for one another, we are not fighting the person we are in prayer for. We are not fighting against flesh and blood, but against principalities and the ruler of darkness. Here is the thing, though: he is ALREADY DEFEATED. We just have to stand by faith on that truth and send the enemy packing. We do that by praying God's word over the situation. The enemy has to flee and has to flee right then. The divine truth is we have to learn how to pray IN line with God's word. That is the path that I am traveling in my evolution into a mighty prayer warrior.

In the following example I share how this can look:

I have spent the last three days searching for an issue that was causing my report to not generate the data I wanted it to. The most important thing to do in situations like this is to isolate the problem. Once the problem is isolated a solution can be deployed, which is easier said than done. To do this, I had to examine every aspect of the report and the logic I had written. When I came upon something that I thought was the issue I wrote logic to fix it, and for three days I deployed many solutions I THOUGHT would fix the issue. However frustrating it was, each time I failed I learned something; each time I failed I was able to actually hone in closer to what the real problem was.

As Christians we all too often see unanswered prayer as a failure.

In my evolution into a prayer warrior I too walked with that mentality, but I just felt the Spirit continue to draw me deeper into understanding of why my prayers were not answered. I

remember talking to a dear friend and mentor about the generic "...not my will, but Your will be done" mantra that we as Christians all too often fall into. I just felt that at some point we should KNOW what that will actually is. The word of God tells us that we HAVE to pray the will of God and as Christians we know that the will of God is His word. I have looked at the examples provided in His word by Jesus and the disciples and I see very specific word and/or instructions in their lives. Most of the healings Jesus performed came with instructions. How did he know to tell the blind man to wash his eyes in that specific river and not just at home or at the nearest place to get water? He knew because He heard His Father's voice. I have come to desire that in my life, but in order to achieve it, I have to do as I did with my report. I have to press in and keep going after the right word for my prayer situations.

If I want what Jesus and the disciples had (and I do!) I have to seek, trust and lean into God the way they did. I have to learn to not only hear when God is drawing me near, but be obedient to go into the Holy of Holies and spend that time with Him. I have learned that for me it was not a *simple to do* thing.

It was again similar to my report example. I had to learn the new code I am using on my own about a year and a half ago and the skills I have now are so much better than what I started with, but there are so many ways I can get better. My evolution into a prayer warrior has provided me with spiritual understanding that I did not possess when I started and there is so much more I look forward to God sharing so much more with me.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Focused – by Marcy Lytle

We recently got a new car, a Kia. I'd never really noticed a Kia on the road anywhere before, because we drove an Edge. But now that we have this new Kia Sportage, we spot them everywhere! Isn't it funny how that happens? I remember when I became engaged to be married while in college, all of a sudden I saw other girls in all of my classes with engagement rings! Unless we're experiencing a particular thing, our eyes aren't really focused on seeing it anywhere else!

I was thinking about this the other day and realized that we do the same thing with attitudes. If we are currently in a bad mood, we tend to see and view and are drawn to others with the same sour disposition. In other words, bad company likes bad company. If someone will listen to our moaning and complaining, we're attached at the hip and suddenly best friends. We catch the sour smell from those nearby and want to settle ourselves in beside them, so that our own sour smell isn't so potent.

Wow, this really spoke to me!

I then realized that it can be the same for a sunny disposition. If we are in a good mood, we tend to seek out those that are up with us! If we're enjoying life, we want to be surrounded by those with happy-go-lucky attitudes just like we have! We want friends to join in on our fun, show up to hang out, and revel in so much fun we can't stand it. No naysayers here! Those ones with sour dispositions can stay home!

What does this have to do with a new Kia, or a pretty shiny engagement ring?

Our perspective shifts, depending on what we're wearing or that in which we're riding. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it is when we can't see that good thing unless we have it. In other words, until I became engaged I didn't really look at the hands of other girls to see if a ring was sitting there on that third finger. Who cared? I wasn't engaged. And before we bought a Kia, I didn't really spot other cars like it, because I was driving an Edge. Who cared if she had a Kia over there? I had a different car.

When we're happy and life is good, we tend to forget those in severe need, because it's just a downer to listen to their woes, when we're planning our next vacation. Who cares if she's stuck in a lifeless marriage when ours is great? Or perhaps we're the one in deep need because we've been sick for weeks, and we can't see out to rejoice with that friend over there that just got a new job. We're too focused on our own sniffly nose!

I learn and listen and look from practical day to day experiences, and I realize that I need to observe others more. Not just observe those that are like me, or those that are sitting behind the same wheel as I am or wearing the same ring I'm wearing, but those that are not like me at all. I need to look over at that driver in the Edge or the Telluride (a nice new Kia that I really wanted!) and lend a smile and a thumbs-up as she drives by. When I'm feeling a bit down, I know that if I look up and rejoice with my friend that's up, it will do my soul a world of good to pull me out of the pit. Who wants to wallow with pigs in the mud when she can sit in a pool and splash?

I'm sure before long I'll barely notice what kind of car others are driving because my Kia will be old news. But I'm going to work at being more aware of those around me, whatever they're driving and whatever they're wearing, and take note, compliment, and smile.

What are you driving today? And what is she driving, next to you?

FRESH THYME - Have You Heard? – by Marcy Lytle

If you're on social media or hang around the younger set, you'll hear them say things you might not understand, but you'll hear them over and over again. And you'll observe new trends, new lines of thought, and other ways to express how you feel. Have you listened in, lately? Here's what some of them are saying and what it means, if you care to know. I find it fun and interesting...

"I'm obsessed." If I've heard it once, I've heard it a million times. It's what they say when they've found or discovered a new product or outfit or activity that they thoroughly enjoy. They talk about it and describe it, and then they tell us how obsessed they are with it. I suppose it's putting emphasis on how good what they're doing really is!

"It's been a hot minute." Any time it's been a while (not a minute at all – but maybe weeks or months!) this is said to the viewers or the readers or the friends when they see them. Maybe we used to say, "Oh I've missed seeing you!" But now, it's this new phrase. Okay, then.

"I haven't washed my hair in a week." What? We always washed our hair daily, or at least every other day. But supposedly now, dirty hair is easier to style and work with, so dry shampoo is a thing, and dirty hair is okay. I just wonder if dirty hair stinks. Does it?

"I've been ghosted." This means they were in a relationship, then that person just vanished. Like a ghost. It's something that apparently happens a lot in the dating world, nowadays. We probably used to say, "He ditched me." Same thing.

"Extra" - I first heard this on a makeup tutorial when the presenter was "going all out" on her makeup routine with color and lashes and more. It still means more than enough, but now it's used to describe how they present themselves by going "extra!"

"100 percent." Nope, it's not a math term. It means to keep things real. Be a hundred percent authentic. Authenticity – it's what this generation wants and looks for in every person they meet.

"Tbh" – to be honest, to admit something about yourself. It goes with that 100 percent. Somehow, even if it's bad and horrible, if we admit it, we can be forgiven. Something to note, and think about...I guess.

"Bae" – before anyone else. We might have said something like, "My one and only," but they say Bae. Or maybe we'd say honey or sweetheart (I like neither of those words), but if we hear them say this, we might wonder, "Well who is it?" And maybe they'll tell us...or maybe not.

"Basic" – anything mainstream is basic. For example, coffee with friends is basic. It's what they all do and enjoy, all the time.

"Lit" – this means something is really good. Yes, of course, it still means the light is on. But that's probably not what she means when she says that party she just went to was so lit. Maybe it's sort of what "sick" means as well – it means good. What?

I hope you have enlightened yourself now, by reading that above list. At least you've learned a bit of a new language you now will be able to understand when you stand among your children and their friends...until it changes again. And that might be tomorrow.

Now go wash your hair...or don't. And tell your spouse that he's your bae. And find out what you're obsessed about and share it with a friend...but tell them it's lit. See what happens. Or just keep talking in your own language and smile at the terms they use, and let them alone...we had our own phrases and words as well. Geez, wasn't it neat?

FRESH THYME – I Saw the Light – by Marcy Lytle

There's an old hymn that we used to sing when I was a kid called "I Saw the Light" and it was a peppy tune with a great message. However, I'm not talking about that song or the fun message in it, but rather about an attitude. When we say we've seen the light, we mean we finally get something we hadn't gotten before, or we've arrived, or we now see what we were missing. In that hymn, it's referring to finding Jesus. And that's a great thing, right? Of course it is! Unless...

Let me explain what I'm trying to explain!

Have you ever watched little kids playing a game? One gets way ahead and he starts bragging and stating that he's the winner, long before he reaches the END space. Or when I was teaching a class of "gifted" kids, there was always one girl that slammed her book shut when finished with an assignment to proclaim to the class, "I'm done, aren't I awesome!?" That kid wanted everyone to know that she had completed and understood what they all were still working on! Fast forward to our adult lives, and at any given gathering it seems there's always one person stating a problem and another answering on how to solve that problem doing what "they did," because it's *so simple*...

In other words, when we "see the light" and get something or we are winning or succeeding, we tend to want others to see how great we are and to step up the game and be like us.

Let me explain further...

We, as Christians, tend to form a theology of God and all that he's about, based on how he's treated us as we've lived our lives. If we are successful financially and have really had no setbacks, we tend to say that we are blessed because we've given or been faithful. Although it may be true that we've been faithful and have given, we base our success on the *fact* that we are "so good." If we've been healthy and never had any chronic or acute illnesses, we tend to brag about how we eat, how we live, and tell others how they ought to be "like us," as they suffer over there with their chronic allergies and stomach issues.

I do not like it when folks (because I used to do it myself!) act and talk like the light they're walking in is something to be shone in the faces of those who are still in a dark tunnel! It's NOT cool, and it is certainly not attractive for an outsider that's not in our "inner circle" of believers. I remember a time when I was first married and had graduated from college with a degree in math, when I thought those with money struggles just didn't know how to balance their checkbook (or now, it would be an online account!) It was simple, wasn't it? And I could be very non-sympathetic and judgmental on those with financial issues, until I found myself in the middle of one of those struggles!

What happened to the "light" in which I was walking? I was in one of those dark tunnels myself!

I still see it happening today. We sit and point fingers at those who aren't quite as mature as we are, haven't studied and learned who God is, or those that are falling short in one area or another. And I have never seen any good fruit come from that attitude of, "I saw the light, so

now why can't you?" In fact, that attitude will send people running from us, or fighting us in our faces, and neither has the outcome of a loving relationship with one another.

If we've seen the light in some area, we can walk in it and give thanks. But honestly, the only light we're all called to walk in – together – is the light that enables us to love each other as Christ loved us. He sat with those that didn't believe like he did, he had dinner with those that absolutely hated what he taught, and he loved the outcasts of society. He always got to the heart of the matter and spoke healing to that wound, instead of creating new ones.

If we find someone that hasn't quite "seen" it like we have, we need to be cautious and careful that we love them instead of sing a tune "over" them. If they're stumbling, we need to offer a hand of encouragement, not a word of shame. And if they're downright awkward at living life successfully, prayer can do wonders for a friend! I mean, wonders!

Go look up that song, "I Saw the Light," if you want. And give thanks that you've seen the light of God's love. But remember that it was He that shone his light into your darkness by his death on the cross. Be the light in the dark paths of others, but don't shine it in their faces...that will cause sheer blindness...sometimes permanently.

FRESH THYME – The Beauty of People – by Marcy Lytle

I had lunch with a four-year old today and I suggested that after we got our food from the drive-thru, that we sit in a shady spot and “people watch,” one of my favorite things to do. His reply was, “I don’t want to do that. It sounds boring.” We got our food and I parked in just a random shady spot, which happened to be facing a grassy area near a toll road. He scooted up to the front seat where I told him he could sit, and his first comment was, “There are no humans to watch.” Go figure. We sat and looked at shapes in the clouds instead of the shapes of humans...

That little experience reminded me something that I think of quite often when I people watch. We’re all SO DIFFERENT. In one sitting of observing people I see all sorts of notable things...

Young girls have no qualms about wearing shirts and shorts that are two sizes too small.

Lots of people dress for comfort not style; in fact, most people do!

There’s a guy that can barely walk under the door frame, he’s so tall.

There’s a lady over there that can barely shut the back of her car, she’s so small.

Her hair is all shades of pink, and her hair is in a bun, and her hair is long and wavy.

His pants are skinny jeans, his pants are relaxed fit, and his pants are below the hip.

Her skin is white-white, his skin is dark-dark, and they’re walking together holding hands.

That man over there can barely walk as he shuffles into the store and grabs a cart.

That lady right there can barely walk because her heels are too high!

She gets out of her car with three kids in tow, one of them a teen, rolling his eyes.

He exits his car with his earbuds on, oblivious to anyone around him.

That family looks like they rolled out of bed, literally, in every way.

That couple looks like they’re dressed for success, in every way.

He’s missing a leg and his ride is a wheelchair, and I wonder about his story.

She’s holding the hand of a special needs child, and she looks so very tired.

I could probably write for hours about the differences in all of the people I watch come and go from one sitting in a car eating my lunch, waiting on my husband while he gets a haircut, or just resting on a bench on a trail. We’re all so different. So beautifully and wonderfully different, in the way we look, the way we dress, and in the lifestyle we have chosen to live or have been handed to survive.

I hope I never forget to pause and look at the beauty of people. I hope that I catch the eye of one of those stressed out moms and give her a smile, or hold the door open so she doesn't have to let go of the hand she's holding. I want to never think judgmental thoughts of disdain because that person isn't dressed a certain way or acting like a good human should. And I want to always give thanks for each and every person that breathes like I do, sees through two eyes, or wait...there goes a guy with a walking stick that can't see through either eye!

I often get caught up in the outward instead of the inward, never knowing the why's of how people look or dress or end up as they are on any given day, coming and going as they run their errands. I don't know if they've just received a devastating diagnosis or lost a loved one, or if they just found out they got the job promotion they've been waiting for, for years!

The point is, I just don't know. But I do know that we are all made in His image, and we are all beautiful in His sight...and so I hope to see that beauty whenever I people watch, human watch, or after I find shapes in the clouds with a four-year old who thinks humans are boring...



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TIPS

The Dressing – All the Boots – by Marcy Lytle

Boots are everywhere! And there are SO MANY cute ones out there, I want them all, in so many colors! And while I mostly shop at discount stores for my boots/booties, there are a few brands in particular that I like to scoop up if I see them. Since boot weather is here, it's fun to have several styles to wear with skirts, jeans, or nice pants or dresses. And comfort is a must!

Franco Sarto – They sell this brand at nice shoe houses like DSW, and you'll pray a pretty price for them, BUT they're usually made very well and fit nicely. I've found them in discount stores as well, so just look for that brand. This cute bootie comes in taupe and black, so you have a choice! And check out the detail on the heel. Speaking of heels, this block heel is super comfortable for wearing for hours...

<https://www.dsw.com/en/us/product/franco-sarto-dex-bootie/465550?activeColor=250>

Natural Soul – This is a brand of shoe that I've bought often and loved them! But in a bootie, this brand can also be found at DSW, so check out this dark brown pair. This is a tailored ankle boot with a cut-out side that can be worn as a dressy look or casual.

<https://www.dsw.com/en/us/product/soul-naturalizer-suzette-bootie/462125?activeColor=201>

Me Too – Have you tried this brand? I've had on a pair of these booties all day today and they feel great! Check out this really pretty black pair that looks so chic and has such pretty stitching. You'll need a black pair, but it also comes in taupe!

<https://www.dsw.com/en/us/product/me-too-zasper-chelsea-boot/459449?activeColor=014>

Qupid – Check out this brown bootie with a slit on the side, and it comes in two other colors as well. I rather like the rustic look on the toe and the easy slide-on instead of a zipper. This is available on Amazon!

https://www.amazon.com/Qupid-Womens-Wilson-02-Ankle-Bootie/dp/B01EACI7HQ/ref=sr_1_14?dchild=1&psc=1&qid=1573042990&refinements=p_4%3AQupid&s=apparel&sr=1-14

Charlotte Russe – I'm not sure this store exists on the street anymore, but they're still on line. If you're looking for a knee-high boot with a low heel so that walking will be painless, then this boot might be for you! It zips and has that ruched look, which makes it super cute!

https://charlotterusse.com/collections/shoes_boots-booties/products/0771-08677921-ruched-knee-high-boot?variant=28834187411540

Style & Co – These boots are found at Macy's in all sorts of colors, and I personally like having a red option! Or maybe you prefer an animal print! They look dressy with the detail on the zipper, and they just look fun and festive for the holidays, Valentine's, date night, or just because!

https://www.macys.com/shop/product/style-co-masrinaa-ankle-booties-created-for-macys?ID=4789743&pla_country=US&cm_mmc=Google_Womens_Shoes_PLA- -G_LIA_Womens_Shoes_Style_%26_Co- -337036192474- -pg1051331577_c_kclickid_ba596964-d3b6-4979-a2e1-f456f6da5796_KID_EMPTY_1542323178_67551173197_337036192474_pla-352570797257_732994312868USA_c_KID_&trackingid=456x1051331577&m_sc=sem&m_sb=Google&m_tp=LIA&m_ac=Google_Womens_Shoes_PLA&m_ag=Style%26Co&m_cn=G_LIA_Womens_Shoes&m_pi=go_cmp-1542323178_adg-67551173197_ad-337036192474_pla-352570797257_dev-c_ext-prd-732994312868USA&qclid=EAlalQobChMI1MjapczV5QIVYSctBh1nZqG6EakYBSABEqJ7wvD_BwE

Journee – I love a little something different, and these booties with the soft fringe detail – especially the gray one – look so fun! There are so many options to choose from in color, though. It's nice to have a pair that's not your ordinary boot...just sayin'.

<https://www.dsw.com/en/us/product/journee-collection-moxie-bootie/409807?activeColor=032>

I have boots in almost all of the brands above, and I did not buy them at full price, but rather found them at places like Marshalls or TJ Maxx. I love scouring the shoe shelves often, to see what goodies there are at a good price. Do you?

Happy boot bopping...

Seven for You – Tradition! – by Marcy Lytle

Traditions can be bad, when we force them upon our kiddos, just like we see in the great *Fiddler on the Roof* – one of my favorite stories! However, traditions at Christmas can also be something that makes our family feel peaceful, loved and secure, and that's the kind we're sharing this month! Whether you have little toddlers, teens, or even grown kids, traditions are great to have with someone you love...or with friends!

Here are a few ideas for you, should you be on the hunt for new traditions to enjoy with you and yours this holiday season (there are more than seven!)

Family Fun - I always buy three new 1000-piece puzzles usually from White Mountain since the pieces interlock well. I set up a card table and everyone likes to find some quiet time away from the noise and work on the puzzle – two over Christmas break.

<https://www.whitemountainpuzzles.com/>

The little kids are old enough to play charades, so we have started doing that at our family gatherings. Recently, the word was “apple” and the 8-yr old folded his knees and fell to the ground. We laughed and laughed, as he was depicting an apple falling from a tree! We find printable cards and use those, just cut them and draw from a pile!

https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBD_enUS839US839&q=printable+christmas+charades&tbm=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiY4azvhdPIAhVPXKOKHZVwAA0QsAR6BAgHEAE&biw=1600&bih=757

One tradition that we have always made happen is gathering our kids (now adult kids and two are married) at the house. Piling in the truck and/or SUV, we head to the nearest coffee place whether it's Starbucks or our local Mojo's. We all get a hot treat whether it's tea or coffee or the hot chocolate stand-in. We play Christmas music from the traditional to the inspirational. We laugh and tell funny stories from the past. We head out to a place with lights – Marble Falls Walk of Lights, Lake Belton lights (a drive-through), neighborhoods that are known for amazing light displays like ones in North Georgetown, Texas - The Village. It's not been the same any year as of yet. I really enjoy the ones that we get to get out and walk, as the kids love to get silly and take photos which are endearing to me as I keep photo albums for our family. I think this is one of my favorite traditions – family, food and fun!

We go to the Trail of Lights in our city. Kids and grandkids come, or if they can't then my husband and I go. I love this - always went as a child. We eat dinner at a restaurant nearby (Shady Grove in Austin, Texas) and then walk down and finish under the big Christmas Tree.

Advent - After Christmas, I look for sales on advent calendars. Not the candy/chocolate kind, but the little gift kind. This past Christmas I found an advent box with 12 days of socks for the kids, and I've kept it to give to them this December. This is a fun tradition, for sure! And did you know there are Barbie and Lego advent calendars from Amazon?

<https://www.target.com/c/15-days-of-socks/-/N-wh6x8>

Aromas – I love to make the house smell like the time of year. I use all sorts of scented candles – love Bath and Body Works three-wick candles mostly. I like to put mulling spice on the stove in a pot and let it pervade the house. I also bake pumpkin bread and make apple cider – I love to eat and drink both but I think I enjoy the smells more!

There's a stovetop (or small slow cooker) recipe that I absolutely love to leave simmering, this time of year. It includes cinnamon sticks, nutmeg, cloves, lemon quarters and orange quarters, and a bay leaf, and it smells divine! Or...add this to a pot of water for a coffee cake aroma: 3 cinnamon sticks, 2 t vanilla extract, 1 cup leftover coffee grounds. Simmer away...

Ornaments and Trees - We have a few traditions for Christmas! One is that we each get to pick out one new special ornament every year to put on the tree. It can be something to symbolize what that year has meant to us or just something silly and fun.

We started a new tradition the last couple of years. We rotate going to the Christmas tree farm in Elgin, Texas to pick out a tree with whoever can go one year, and then to Johnson City, Texas for the PEC lights, and on to the Bethlehem Market in Burnet, Texas the next. That way it doesn't get too old.

Movies - During the holidays we like to watch as many Hallmark Christmas movies as possible, the cornier the better!

My favorite tradition is on the day after Thanksgiving we play Christmas movies all day and put up the Christmas tree, and decorate the house. I think my daughter looks forward to it even more than I do!

We love to find the classic movies showing at the theaters this time of year and go. One of the theaters in Austin, AFS, is showing an entire week of classic movies the week of Christmas! Check your local listings!

On the years we are not all together, my husband and I usually go to a movie on Christmas Day. Much more fun than football!

Music - We try to see David Phelps' Christmas show if his tour comes anywhere near us, and we always listen to his version of O Holy Night as we drive to church on Christmas Eve.

<https://davidphelps.com/>

We try to have Christmas music playing daily or nightly in the house, and we love to include lots of artists and types of Christmas music. We love Bluegrass Christmas, as well as Sarah Groves' Christmas music, and of course Mannheim Steamroller!

https://www.google.com/search?q=sara+groves+christmas+album+2019&rlz=1C1CHBD_enUS839US839&oq=sarah+groves+christmas+&aqs=chrome.3.69i57j0l5.8309j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

We also go to the Armadillo Christmas Bazaar (a fun Christmas shopping market) - mostly just to look at all the interesting things they have and to listen to music. I started taking the littles to the Nutcracker. They love it and talk about it all year long. Can't wait to go this year!

Recipes and Dishes - Our family makes peanut brittle from a recipe that was given to my husband by his grandmother. We hope to be able to pass the recipe and technique on to our kids.

What I have added as a tradition now for many years is to use the really good, and really old, china at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The china that actually has to be washed by hand (which my husband loves - *not*) since he is the main dishwasher. I have my grandmother's old china cabinet with different china sets and pieces from about seven different wonderful ladies along

with boxes, stored, filled with china of all kinds that I pick from to use. It makes a festive, beautiful, and sentimental table setting.

I use my grandmother's cornbread dressing recipe that she wrote for me on the back of an envelope 40 years ago. It's taken me most of that time to get it as good as hers. I love traditions!

One of our newest and cutest traditions is the little granddaughters making cookies with PawPaw.

Our food items can vary, but we have all decided we don't really like turkey. What is a consistent tradition are the pies! Pecan, Chocolate & Pumpkin. I make the chocolate and pumpkin and my son's wife makes the pecan.

We have a family get together on Christmas Eve where we play games and do a present opening game. We all bring small gifts we can put in stockings for Christmas morning. Cinnamon and orange rolls are always present on Christmas morning, as well.

Photos - We have our kids here every other year because some of them live out of state and they spend the odd years with their in-laws. When they are here we take pictures by the tree, open presents AND stockings and have turkey and dressing.

We love having our entire family dressed in the same PJ's that we find from Land's End or other places, and then we snap a photo.

Selah's Style – Kayleigh's Korner

Kayleigh Joy is three years old and she's the granddaughter of one of our writers! She is fun-loving, joyful, funny, kind, inquisitive and caring.

This little girl loves to sing and dance (she loves Streisand music!) and enjoys zipping around the neighborhood in her little car. Besides that, she loves to read books. Kayleigh's favorite place is to be outside, whether she's swimming, running around the park, or blowing bubbles!

At night, you might just find her snuggling on the couch with a cozy blanket, watching her favorite movies, Toy Story and Frozen.

We are happy to feature Kayleigh's fashion style for you this month. She's so cute in her new glasses, and her taste in fashion is the best!

Kayleigh recently discovered Frozen and is so excited that there is a new one out now! Anna is her favorite character.

This outfit is one that Kayleigh's Nana gave her, because it was picture day! Kayleigh felt so special with her very first purse!

Here she is, dressed up as Jessie from Toy Story for Halloween, and of course – holding her favorite Woody doll.

Kayleigh loves to wear pink, especially these fun, glittery sneakers that are – you guessed it – pink!

Here in this photo, this three-year old is sporting her favorite summer dress and sandals!

Back in the spring, Kayleigh had so much fun chasing down the Easter bunny and hunting for eggs in her Gigi's backyard!

Kayleigh is fun-loving, joyful, funny, kind, inquisitive, and caring. She loves to sing and dance, zip around the neighborhood in her little car, and read books. Her favorite place to be is outside, whether she's swimming, running around the park, or blowing bubbles. She loves to snuggle on the couch with a cozy blanket and watch her favorite movies, Toy Story and Frozen.

Amanda easter one

In the Kitchen – Red and Green – by Marcy Lytle

Fall veggies and greens from the Farmers Market make for colorful bowls and dishes, with red and green. And when there are sweets coming at us from all directions, it's nice to have some dishes to enjoy that still include healthy ingredients. In fact, it might be fun to serve some of these dishes at your holiday gatherings instead of the traditional feast that we so often enjoy. Offer up some red and green and gold and even black (radishes!) and enjoy the bounty from the ground, even when winter is here...and bring good cheer!

Green Arugula and Roasted Red Pepper Pasta

We purchased freshly made pasta and arugula from the Farmers Market, and prepared this dish from there. I had green olives in the fridge and a jar of roasted red peppers, as well as smoked almonds. Here's what you'll need to prepare this dish:

- 1 pkg pasta, cooked and drained, placed in a large bowl
- A bunch of arugula
- Black or green olives

Pesto:

- 2 c roasted red peppers
- 1/3 c olive oil
- 1/3 c Parmesan grated
- 3 cloves garlic
- ¼ c almonds
- Freshly ground pepper

In a food processor, blend the red peppers, oil, Parm, garlic and almonds, season with salt and pepper. Add to the bowl of pasta, along with the olives and arugula and toss. Adjust seasoning if needed. Garnish with more Parmesan and serve!

A Bowl of Winter Color:

I had a variety of root veggies we had purchased at the market, along with one ear of corn and some broccoli. Among those root veggies were a few black radishes, I had never tasted before! Along with the veggies, I pulled out some walnuts, sliced tomatoes and avocado, and sliced up some cranberry pistachio bread (purchased at the grocery store). The cranberry provides the red color!

- A bundle of root veggies (including black radishes!)
- Any other veggies from your fridge
- Walnuts (and maple syrup)
- A variety of tiny tomatoes
- Avocado
- Bread

Slice the radishes thinly (1/8 or 1/4 inch thick) season, then toss with olive oil. Bake at 400 degrees, turning once, about 15 minutes or more, until they're crispy – not burned! (These are only good eaten right away.)

Keep the oven on and roast all the veggies (I also added onion, then tossed all with olive oil, S&P), laid out in a single layer on the same sheet, turning once, until tender.

Meanwhile, toast the walnuts drizzled with syrup, slice the avocado and the tomatoes.

Arrange your bowls: Place a pile of veggies in the center, then all of the other goodies around the outer edge of the bowl, ending with a nice chunk of your favorite bread as well.

Done!

Fruit Salad with Greens

I had some greens we purchased at the Farmers Market and a variety of fruit in my fridge, so this meal came together nicely, was so pretty and tasted so good! It was quite easy, too. We packed it up for lunch, so we kept the nuts and the dressing in little containers until ready to serve and eat.

The Bowl:

- Sunflower greens
- Arugula
- Kale
- Assorted fruit
- Walnuts
- Maple syrup

Dressing:

- Olive oil
- Lemon juice and zest
- Sugar
- Salt and pepper

Just toss your greens and place in the bottom of the bowl for each person. Cut up the fruit into bite sized pieces and toss them and place on top of the greens. Toast the nuts with a drizzle of syrup in the oven and keep them in a container until ready to eat the salad. Finally, whisk olive oil with the other ingredients for your dressing. (I don't recall the measurements, but look online for a dressing for fruit salad).

Black-eyed Peas and Bok Choy

We purchased a big bunch of bok choy at the market and he said to saute it with soy sauce, so we did. In another pot, we boiled black eyed peas, and then decided what else to place alongside for a lunch full of flavor and color. It came together nicely.

- One bunch of Bok Choy
- Soy sauce
- Sausage
- Black eyed peas
- Brown rice
- Tomatoes
- Seasonings

You'll need to cook the rice, the peas, and the greens. For the Bok Choy, I placed it in a skillet of a bit of olive oil, sprinkled with salt and pepper, and poured on some soy sauce. It took a while to cook before the stems were tender. I removed it and chopped. In the same pan, I cooked the sausage.

In each bowl, it starts with a base of rice, then arrange the other ingredients in a circle on top.

Serve with extra soy sauce if desired...

Tried and True - Impulse Buying – by Marcy Lytle

I've done it, you've done it, we've all done it...most probably. We go into a grocery ravenously hungry and we exit with all sorts of foods we'd never buy had our stomachs been full. We enter a clothing store and head straight to the sale rack but then wander around and end up at the register paying 10 times what we meant to pay when we arrived. It's called impulse buying. There's nothing wrong with it once in a while, if funds are there, and fun is to be had. However, there are some ways to curb it this season, when we have to be so purposeful with our budget and gift-buying.

Impulse buying can be so much fun – don't get me wrong. But it can also be so much pain – if we do it too much.

Here are a few tips on keeping the impulse buying at bay:

- Place the items in your cart, walk around a while, and then think. Do you still think you need that first item you placed in there an hour ago? Many times, I change my mind. Recently, I stuck a fancy jar of cinnamon sticks in my cart only to remember later that I had them already at home, and had just bought a package of mulling spices at a farmer's market. Which brings me to my next note...
- Remember that little things add up. Haven't you gone into a store thinking your cart only amounted to \$100 and then paid, and were told it was \$200? Yikes! This can be avoided if we use our phone to add up our purchases before we step into the checkout line. We might realize that a few of the things we threw in were impulses - not really necessities.
- Make a list of those impulse things you want. Now is the time of year to list! Keep a running list in your notes on your phone of the impulse items you placed in your cart and then put back. Place them on your Christmas or birthday list for someone else to gift you, OR for you to return and buy when you have some funds to do so!
- Look for coupons on line. If you feel it might be an impulse purchase that you don't really need, search for a coupon on line. Ask at the register if there is one available. If there is one, maybe that purchase can still be made. If not, maybe wait until a coupon is available, and then purchase that item with a smile.
- Take a frugal person with you. Not a kill-joy, but a sensible shopper that you can bounce your ideas off of. Maybe you see this unique top that's calling your name, but she reminds you that you have told her that color looks bad on you, or she might ask what you will wear it with, and your answer to both questions might make you stop and realize it's not really a practical buy. (However, once in a while it IS a great buy and you might both agree – and you'll buy it – that's okay!)
- Go in to the store with a budget in mind. Better yet, take a certain amount of cash and leave your cards at home. That way, you won't overspend. We gone to festivals before and taken cash and decided ahead of time what we will spend. It does help to plan before you go.
- Impulse buying on a big price item is not always a good thing, unless it's thought over, talked over, and agreed on the necessity of it. Spending large sums of money that is not

all *your* money is not a good relationship builder! It never hurts to make a call, ask for advice, and agree together on a large purchase, before impulsively buying. If he NEVER says yes, or you both ALWAYS buy too much, then seek help from some good friends and ask for accountability.

- If it's cute, it's one of a kind, it's something that really speaks to you and your shopping buddy agrees - then purchase it, without regret. I just stuck a little metal tree with "joyful" written on it my cart and kept it there. I wanted the reminder this season to be joyful, and with that little tree nestled among my décor, it would be there to speak to me. It was not much money, and I went ahead and got it.

There's no shame in seeing things we impulsively want to buy, but there is a lot of wisdom when we stop and think and consider before purchasing. Shopping is one of my favorite things to do. But coming home and being broke afterwards is not a fun experience, so I try to mindful...at least most of the time.



HOME

Practical Parenting - Give Them a Happy Ending – by Marcy Lytle

What are you giving your kids this Christmas? I know that the kiddos in our family are getting toys, books, and all sorts of fun things, which I hope every kid gets! However, we as parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, want to give our kids lasting goodness as well, right? We want them to be hopeful in a hopeless world, thankful in an ungrateful society, and to know that there's a future that's good in a scary, evil nation.

How in the world can we give our kids a happy ending for Christmas? Is there such a thing?

Hallmark movies offer happy endings, and it's why they're so wildly popular. But even those wholesome stories don't ever mention God or Jesus, but rather the universe and fate. But I don't know about you, I don't want my future and my life to be held in the cosmos...do you?

Cartoons and kids storybooks often end well, making our kids smile as they drift off to sleep. But then there are also classic kid stories like *Hansel & Gretel* and *Little Red Riding Hood* that have horrible endings. What's up with that?

There's a rising star in the music world, a young girl that sings lyrics that attract the masses. In fact, tween girls everywhere are flocking to her concerts. I recently asked an older teen about Billie Eilish's songs and one replied to me that kids identify with this singer because she sings about how hopeless this world is, and "It is!" said this same person.

Our kids are now being taught safety in terrorism attacks, they're confused about what gender they are, their families are broken, and they're being pulled into drugs, sex, and so much more...and we know that there is no happy ending when angst and fear and confusion reign.

So this Christmas...let's given them a happy ending under the tree, in their ears, over their minds, and etched into their hearts.

How can we do that?

- Tell them the story of Jesus and his love.
- Tell them that they are wonderfully made and beautiful.
- Tell them that Jesus forgives and saves us from sin.
- Tell them that nothing is impossible with God.
- Tell them that God is love.
- Tell them that they are the apple of His eye, even when others make fun of them.
- Tell them that He's a good, good Father, even when earthly fathers abandon.
- Tell them that He provides everything we need, when we seek Him first.
- Tell them about heaven, and surety of that being our destination when we believe.
- Tell them about miracles and faith and standing in storms.
- Tell them about how God works all things together for good.
- Give them hope every day, because He is our hope.
- Give them kindness and love, yet discipline and instruction.
- Give them an example of how to love the unlovely, the lonely, and the outcast.

- Give selflessly to others, as they watch and learn.
- Give a listening ear and a helping hand.
- Give time, play, and joy.
- Give them the gift of a healthy parent, emotionally and physically.
- Give them the truth that when trouble comes, Jesus is near, and there's no need to fear.

In other words, read the Word, see what it says about their heavenly Father and his plans for them and the future of their lives, and reiterate that truth over and over again until they believe it, and you do, as well. Little ears don't have to hear the news of the latest fire outbreak, stabbing, or rape. They don't need to listen in on our conversations where we rant about the office and the nation and odd people. They don't prosper when they listen to nastiness, hatred, and hopelessness in music, and in shows that they watch.

But they will see and soak and soon slide into hopelessness if we aren't vigilant and give them what they need most of all – a happy ending to this journey called life.

Every night in the month of December, speak truth and give them hope.

It's the best gift of the year...and every day of our lives...and should be at the top of our wish list for all.

I Don't Do Teens – The Rubik's Cube – by Marcy Lytle

This is one gift you need to buy the teen on your list – the Rubik's Cube. It hit me like a ton of bricks as to why this gift is the perfect one for that kid that's between the ages of 13-18, that kid that's looking for a reason to live, purpose in his/her life, and order and peace in this crazy chaotic world in which we all live.

The Rubik's Cube.

I know. It's been around since you and I were teens, but it's still there on the shelves of the stores, and it's still popular! But there are so many reasons to give your teen this gift, along with this little write-up that you can print to go along with the gift:

The cube pivots in the middle, allowing all of the colors to be mixed up.

All the moving parts can be manipulated but the cube will not fall apart, because of that internal piece.

It was originally advertised as having over 3,000,000,000 combinations but only one solution.

The solution to the Rubik's cube is through hand movement by a skilled player.

There is a solution, though it may take many many movements of the disorganized color blocks.

At first, it seems impossible to solve, and movements are many...but it's really just a few easy moves!

This toy is wildly popular for all ages.

The solution is a mathematical formula, it works every time.

Keeping the cube oiled makes it last a long time...

Your life is secure with an inner mechanism as well when you believe – Jesus.

Therefore, all of the moving parts and chaos in your life will not make you fall apart.

There is a solution and purpose for your life, when you let Jesus – the skilled one – handle the pieces.

It might take time, but the disorder will become ordered and the puzzle completed.

It may seem impossible, but remember that internal piece and the hands that hold the external ones together.

There IS a solution...every time...for every misplaced square.

The oil is the Holy Spirit, the one that resides within you, and holds you secure for all time.

You are wonderfully and beautifully made, even if all you see is messed up colors at the moment.

Copy and paste the above and fold the note up with the cube, and then wrap the cube. Tell those teens that they are loved, that their life may look mixed up but there's a grand solution when they trust the hands that move the parts and hold them all together!

The toy will serve as a reminder of His faithfulness and ability and master plan for their life, every time they pick it up to play...

That's why your teen needs a Rubik's cube for Christmas.

An Adage a Day – Let it Snow – by Carole Gilbert

I love snow! I remember the first time I saw it snow. I was in sixth grade in South Texas where snow was not the normal. This particular day that it snowed, school was let out early so I rode my bike home in the snow with my mouth open hoping to get a snowflake inside like I'd seen on television. It was such a wonderful, unexpected adventure in a less than wonderful, unexpected time in my childhood.

Fast forward 20 years and I no longer was the child but had three of my own who, like me, loved the snow and had only seen it a few times more than I had at their age. I didn't have a lot of examples for raising children but I did try to give them new wonderful adventures of all kinds and I mainly tried to raise them with the sense of love and security that I had lost as a child. Through doing this with them, I discovered the true meaning of the proverb, "Home is where the heart is." I learned we didn't always have to be in our house to feel at home. In fact, sometimes, that's where we didn't need to be.

Let me explain. When our children were little we'd have large family gatherings at Christmas. But then we lost some loved ones and some moved far away and we also moved. The next Christmas it was just us and I explained to my youngest son over and over we wouldn't have any extended family with us and why, but he really didn't understand. I even tried coming up with new traditions.

But as we sat there at the table for Christmas dinner he asked with a sad little face, "Mama, when's everyone coming?"

That was the moment I knew we had to do differently. Our first Christmas by ourselves in our new house was our last for several years.

This proverb, "Home is where the heart is," refers to the place, your home, being where you prefer to be, where you feel most secure and loved, where your memories are the fondest, where you hang your hat. We normally think of our home as the place where we grew up or live presently. Do you have a place in mind when you think of home? I can attest that it's not always a particular house but it is always where your heart is or was. This proverb is mostly known to have started from Pliny the Elder, a Roman author, naturalist, and philosopher, who lived from A.D. 23-79, although, its original origin is unknown and it's believed to have been around forever.

So with this proverb in mind, our next Christmas and several after were spent at different ski resorts, just us. We learned to ski. Our sons learned they could sit on their skis and lean back while going down the slopes to the point where their pockets would fill and compact with snow so at the bottom of the slope they had ready made snowballs, hence the immediate snowball fight. They learned that going from the hot tub to making snow angels and back gave a chilling sensation and we all learned that hot chocolate, at the end of a hard fun-filled snow day, was the most rewarding treat! We got to see beautiful Christmas Eve candlelight ski shows and we

skied Christmas Day with Santa and Mrs. Claus. But the best memories were the times we had just being together. We'd already opened our gifts before we left home so we spent time reflecting on the true reason for the season, Jesus, and each other.

Our "home," during those Christmas seasons wasn't a house, it was wherever we were together. It wasn't the place but the people. It was truly where our hearts were.

What are you reflecting on this holiday season? What do your memories associate with when you think about going home? Even now, whenever I have hot chocolate or see the occasional snow in Texas, I remember those cozy Christmases at the ski resorts years ago and I reminisce all over again. It brings happiness to my heart. I hope your heart finds its' "Home for the Holidays."

*And remember, through all your holiday cheer,
Christmas comes but once a year.*

*Let your heart to our Savior, Jesus, respond.
And your "home" will last to "Infinity and beyond!"*

A Night to Remember – True Religion – by Marcy Lytle

Looking after widows...that's part of pure devotion to Jesus. In other words, blessing those who are alone without their spouse is very pleasing to Him, and since it's a blessing to give, why not make that activity incorporated into family devotion time this Christmas? Does your family know any widows? If so, make a list. If not, ask a church or friends if they know a few widows, and make that list. And you might just want this to be an annual family devotion activity after you try it once...

Preparation: Gather small gifts, make treats, and write out and draw handmade cards, as you make your list and decide your plans for this devotion. Find out movies and times or pick a coffee house or a neighborhood for lights. Be prepared to then make a list and put it on the calendar of times and dates to bless and give. You can try to bless five widows...or even just one. But you'll have a list to work from all year long...

Widows are women that have lost their spouse due to death. It means that their husbands left this earth before they did, and now they live alone. Often, these ladies are very lonely, and many times they're elderly. They often get forgotten because families are busy having fun with the complete package – a mom and a dad and kiddos. However, the bible tells us to take care of the widows and to visit them and care for them.

Let's make our list of five widows that we know and write them down by name, acquire their address and phone number, and their full name.

Let's think of what we can do this Christmas for each of these widows. Sometimes, widows enjoy just a visit with another lady, but why not give them the blessing of an entire family that cares?

Here are a few ideas:

1. Make a gift basket and deliver it and stay for a visit. (Call ahead to set up a time for this activity). Included handmade cards in the basket.
2. Plan an outing with her. Find out if she loves movies or concerts or shopping, and invite her along on your family outing.
3. Invite her to your house for dinner, if she enjoys getting out. Or just dessert. Make it simple and lovely.
4. Ask her along to look at Christmas lights with you and yours. Stop for hot chocolate at some point during the ride.
5. Make room for the widow at your family Christmas table. Invite her to sit in and enjoy Christmas with you and yours, especially if she has no family of her own in town.

There are lots of ways to bless widows, and your family can be creative to think of more. It's important that the widow is told ahead of time so that she can plan. It's important for kiddos to be instructed on behavior and how to visit with an adult, i.e. ask about her and share their life with her. She will love to hear about it! If you think she might feel awkward alone, then invite a couple of widows at a time. Make sure to end the visit with prayer and a blessing, and the idea that you will visit her again soon...and make that happen.

Christmas is the loneliest time of the year for those who are without their special someone. We don't need to be down and sad about it, but rather share the joy that we have as a family. Even if you're a single parent with children, make an effort to include a widow.

Widows are women with purpose and life, and they need to be treated as such, and noticed. And when we do just that, we are spreading good cheer and bringing joy to His heart...and hers.

Note: If your family car won't accommodate another person because of space, then consider meeting her or inviting her over, if she can drive. Or send one parent to pick her up to come to your place. Or just all pile in and visit her, if she prefers! Or have a party and invite her with your other guests!

Tiny Living – Sprucing Up – by Leyanne Enterline

I think I've mentioned in the past that decorating in general, in such a tiny space and with paper thin walls, has been very difficult. I've tried to come up with some creative ideas, but I'm not sure that I'm doing so well with it.

I do have some of those command sticky strips to hang a few items but if the weather gets too hot or humid, everything falls off! So it's not worth it to keep much hanging around.

For Christmas, I hang some yarn from one end of the weird accordion blinds and clip with a paper clip to the other end. I use this to hang up the cute Christmas cards we get throughout December. I must say everything is very flimsy, so we don't look at anything in the wrong way or it may fall or break!

We constantly hear weird noises. Someone might shut the front a little too hard and glasses then slide around in the cabinets and break. My kid's pillow could hit the box fan and then the fan hit him or hit the floor in the middle of the night! Or perhaps it's the wooden frame I have hung randomly, falling to the floor.

I believe more things have been broken in this tiny 325 square feet than in our 2500 square foot home!

Anyway, back to the decorating...

I bought us a tiny tree for inside that I let the kids decorate with some ornaments they like. Then we do get a real Christmas tree for outside and decorate some more random trees in the yard.

I don't know this year where we will put the tiny tree, now that we have a giant dog crate in the living room! *Maybe on top of that?*

I started getting holiday hand towels for each occasion to try and spruce things up a bit since the decorating is very minimal. I'm hoping to be able to add some fun pillows to the room too, this season. I also try and get some decorative holiday paper plates and napkins for the kids to have a little fun with, as well!

Any ideas are welcome on how to spruce a tiny space!



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Newly Remodeled – by Marcy Lytle

Remodeling. Have you ever done it? It starts with a vision of what you want the space to look like, and then the tearing out of the old begins. It's nasty, it's hard work, and often during the process there's this thought, "Can I really do this, and do I even want to finish?" But then...when the remodel is complete there's the beautiful sigh as you stare in disbelief at the transformation that has taken place...

There's a big Target near our house and it's the one where we shop often, because who doesn't love Target? However, several months ago the entire store underwent a massive renovation. Items were moved and shelves were relocated, there were huge trailers outside in the parking lot, and there was even a restroom placed on the sidewalk, while the inside ones were being redone! It was a big pain to shop there for a while. In fact, we went to another Target when we found out that the remodel was going to take until October to be completed!

Sometimes, we stepped inside just to see the progress. It seemed like it took forever, and for a while it didn't seem that much was being done. However, we couldn't see behind the walls, what was happening at night when the store was closed, and we certainly had no vision of what they were creating.

But thankfully, someone did have a vision!

Fast forward to just before the holiday season began and a big sign emerged on the wall outside the store that said "Newly Remodeled." Of course, that sign invited everyone in, new and old shoppers alike, to see the transformation. And wow, it was amazing! There were new displays, new lighting, more products, inviting colors, and more...all on new floors with a new look from top to bottom! We have wandered around several times just to see all of the new, and to marvel and shop and enjoy.

What's my point in sharing this story?

Being a woman that loves Jesus, I know that he's always transforming me into his image of a loving, caring person so that others will see and believe and be changed. But just like that store, and just like home remodels, the vision has to be there first. And He has that vision. He's had it since I was created and he never lets go of the vision of the beautifully restored lady that he has in mind, one whose life reflects his beauty and grace.

There are times when he gently shifts one part of my life to a different placement, or he changes a lightbulb in my head so that I finally understand things, or he even rips out an old idea and replaces it with a new and improved one about His character.

And then...there are those massive remodels where he almost closes all of my doors and works on the inside to completely remake and clean up and transform every corner, every aisle and every display so that the new emerges and invites a whole new crowd to see. That kind of renovation is painful, takes time, and looks nasty in our own eyes as we wait in the shadows and wonder what in the world He's doing in the dark of the night.

This I do know, though. His plan is to hang that “newly remodeled” sign on our walls as well, one that says “I’ve been changed for the better,” so that curious eyes want to see and wander. They want to take note of how we’re different...and they just might be interested in the “product” we’re selling – that grace and love from a Father that’s good.

There have been a few times in my life where I’ve felt that shift of a massive remodel, haven’t you? So if you’re in the middle of one, just be patient and await the end results with bated breath...because it’s going to be quite amazing and breathtakingly beautiful and wonderful. He’s got the vision and the power to make it so, especially when the lights are off and all is dark...

Life Right Now – Wonderful Things – by Bethany Gomez

The Christmas season is upon us again. I can't believe it. This year has simply flown by.

You know how Oprah has "Her Favorite Things" list? Well I thought I would share some of my favorite things, including some of my favorite things about the Christmas season. It won't be nearly as impressive as Oprah's, but here it is nonetheless.

I love all things hair and makeup, so quite a few of my favorite things are in the beauty category. Like **Thayers** rose petal witch hazel with aloe vera facial mist. It is a gentle skin toner, alcohol free, so it doesn't dry out my skin. It leaves my face so moisturized, it is absolutely wonderful.

I also love the beauty line called **Love Beauty and Planet**. So far I have tried their sulfate free shampoo and conditioner and aluminum free deodorant. I love the way my hair feels after washing it with this shampoo. The deodorant is good too; however, it doesn't hold up well in Texas summers, so I am still on the hunt for an all-natural deodorant that can hold up in the Texas heat.

I have come to really enjoy wearing lipstick and have started a little collection. My favorite one so far is none other than one that my best friend sells. It is called **Power Lips Fluid by Nu Skin**. It's a matte lip which is my favorite at the moment and it lasts all day, I'm not even kidding. I apply it once and don't have to worry about touching it up at all throughout the day and the best part, it does not dry out my lips one bit.

I love food, but just to warn you - most of my favorite food products at the moment are dairy free. That's because I am lactose intolerant. However, I'm fairly new to the lactose intolerant club. Earlier this year I participated in the Daniel Fast. If you are not familiar with this fast, it's basically cutting out anything that does not come from the earth, so no milk is allowed. 21 days later, I tried to consume dairy products again and it did not go well. I will spare you the details. Since then, I have been trying to find good dairy free substitutes for some of my most loved food items like ice cream, mac-n-cheese, pizza, yogurt, chocolate, and queso, just to name a few. It has been a challenge. I'm not going to lie. I still eat cheese, but only sparingly, because I have yet to find a good dairy free cheese. Although, I got word of a good dairy free cheese option from a friend recently, so I remain hopeful.

My go-to dairy free chocolate treat has been **chocolate hummus with strawberries**. It tastes like chocolate icing and it is semi-healthy. I call that, crazy good.

I absolutely love **So Delicious Coconut Milk Yogurt**. I've tried so many dairy free yogurts and so far this one tastes great, and the coconut flavor somehow does not overpower the fruit flavors. Also, it is the consistency of "yogurt" if you get my drift.

My favorite dairy free ice cream is **Nada Moo**. So far, this is the closest to the real thing that I have tried. I can't wait to try all their flavors, but I can tell you right now Lotta Mint Chip is the bomb! They use a coconut base and non-GMO ingredients right here in Austin Texas. It is vegan, gluten-free, and fair trade certified. I haven't gone yet, but they have a scoop shop off S Lamar Blvd in my city. It is family owned and they serve scoops, shakes, and espresso and also seasonal flavors. Seriously, even if I didn't need to eat dairy free ice cream I would still eat this ice cream.

If someone were to ask me what are some of my favorite things about Christmas time, one of the things on that list would definitely be these three words: Hallmark. Christmas. Movies. Who else loves **Hallmark Christmas movies**? These movies are one of my favorite things about the

holiday season. I love them. I can't help it. Yes, they are predictable, cheesy, and a tad bit unrealistic, but they are wholesome, cheery, uplifting, and festive.

Finally, do you know what I really enjoy right now, like more than all the other things? It's the fact that one of my best friends is getting married on the 21st December to her one and only. I couldn't be more thrilled for them. To be honest, I am trying hard to not let the enemy steal my joy for them. I can already hear the lies he will try to feed me as my friend's wedding draws near, like "You won't be happy till you get married," or "She is moving on with her life without you." First of all, not today Satan! Second, my happiness is not found in an imperfect person but it is found only in God the Father. Third, my life does not start the moment I get married. My friend is simply moving into another season, but that does not mean we are not both still moving closer together - while at the same time moving closer to God. He is the only one we both cannot do without in this thing called life...this most wonderful life at this most wonderful time of the year!

To the Shining One

The Bright Morning Star
Came down from Heaven's Heart
Born for others near and far
Never to depart

Breathing Hope and Perfect Love
Delivered in Eternity's time
The answer through a Dove
A song to rule and rhyme

A donkey brought Him near
A manger filled with hay
Those shepherds should not fear
No more waiting or delay

Raucous Joy burst through the air
That night in Bethlehem
Myriads of Angels did clamor to declare
All nations come join in

A New Day had begun to rise
The scene forever changed
Son's beams radiate the azure skies
Hillsides ablaze with brand new frames

What man could never dream or see
This purpose from the start
God's unending plan makes all nature free
Hidden within our transformed hearts

Then traveled Wise Men from the East
Who brought treasures of the earth
From Ancient lands to those deemed least
Our Father's plan from birth

From time eternal til the end
This baby grew full measure
Salvation's Perfect King and Friend
The world's most valued Treasure

No eye could see nor even think
Such bold and cosmic love
Could appear in one mere blink
Invading from scenes above

Let us sing with laughter full of bliss
Let us dance upon the trees
For Christ has Triumphed with one kiss
While setting mankind free

Our Shining One has broken through
Delivered us from pain
He's recued us and made life new
The Father's greatest gain

Our hearts will soar
Our bodies leap
When trumpets shout and roar
For Jesus whom we long to greet

We'll get to hug His feet!

The Shining One is my heart's desire. I love Him more each day.

From the rising of the sun til setting of the same, I'll answer Love's true call.

His whisper I will pause upon to hear what next He'll say. Heightened expectation brings moments filled with awe.

Never will my heart escape from Love's pure grasp and hold.

I know He's always watching me, waiting to exchange. His heart for mine, my heart for His, the greatest trade around.

Such joy does fill my heart with bliss, just thinking of His smile.

Whenever darkness seeps inside, and I am all alone. I think of what He's done for me, and tremble at the throne.

Such love divine, such beauty known, encases all my being. For truly no one ever held my soul in perfect peace.

When I see Him face to face, my heartbeat races throughout space. The thought that He is Shepherd King explodes within my mind.

The Lion and the Lamb enfold me once again. As I lie here in-between the full blown love of God, there never ever could be, a safer comfort place.

Healthy Habits - Melodies for Maladies – by Marcy Lytle

I could cite reasons for why singing is good for you, health-wise. Seriously, there are many benefits to your body, soul, and mind when you sing. And I could list all sorts of maladies known to mankind and end up depressing us all. But for the sake of this article, I'm just going to speak personally on how melodies have helped my own maladies, time and time again. It might be one of the best Christmas exchanges you can make this month. No, singing might not make the malady disappear (although it might), but it will lift the weight of it from your shoulders.

Listening to music (if the lyrics are uplifting) can brighten a sour mood and bring me out of my slump. When wrapping Christmas gifts, I love to have music playing in the background. Music that talks of joy, the wonderful Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, and the hope of heaven all make me smile while I cut and tape and place a tag for that person and this one.

Singing a melody out loud while I'm decorating, cooking or cleaning makes the mundane become joyful. It releases some of the tightness in my chest and the angst in my soul over the maladies in the world around me. Especially when I sing about the name of Jesus, it lifts Him higher over all the things that seem impossible and bleak. And that's a wonderful thing.

Listening to music in the car, while driving across town in the traffic of the season, waiting in one red light after another, is soothing and stills an anxious soul. Especially listening at night, with the taillights and headlights shining bright, and in neighborhoods where lights adorn houses, listening to music sets the tone for a silent night...where miracles happen.

Singing with others in a congregation, and hearing the voices of a crowd come together to sing one theme, and one theme alone – that God loves me – is powerful. I can enter a building selfish and angry at the fears and the failures of the week, only to be escorted to a place of faith and hope in a matter of minutes when I join in a chorus to sing the truth about how he loves me and is a good, good Father.

Listening to the sights and sounds of the season at a play or a musical or a performance by little kids sends the maladies of the world to the place where they should be – in His hands for healing and safekeeping until all will be right again and whole. Hearing a rendition of "Messiah" or even to the joy of "Jingle Bells" sends my soul soaring right past all of those thoughts of gloom and despair.

Singing when I don't feel like singing, lifting up a melody from my own heart without words (or with words) in the still of the night, or early in the morning, can make my tired body feel energized and healthy and strong. Singing does that, you know. It lightens the step and eases the pain, whether it's mental, physical or spiritual.

Listening to my Father sing over me (he does that, did you know?) his songs of deliverance, songs of joy and hope and a future, songs of good and not evil, songs of a love that's stronger than death, all makes my frown turn upside down into a smile. And a smile is healthy for my countenance, my face, and my skin.

Are you suffering from one of the maladies of ill health, or weighed down with all the maladies present in this world at large, or even in the world around you personally? Try focusing on good melodies this season and sing them loud. Listen to them daily. Mediate on the lyrics that come straight from the Word, because his Word is truth. And see if you don't feel healthier and find yourself skipping in the kitchen, jumping in the family room, or grinning from ear to ear at all the good cheer you've just sank deep into your soul...

Merry Christmas

Upper Quadrant – Mom’s Pity Party – by Marcy Lytle

Let’s just talk about the elephant in the room. It’s the Christmas season of joy and hope and goodwill, but here we sit wondering if and when our kids will visit, how long they will stay, if everyone will get along, and whether or not they’ll like their gifts, and then the depression (or maybe joy) that occurs when they all leave again.

At Christmas time, my emotions are all over the place. And I’m thinking yours might be, as well. They might not be your exact experiences, but I’m betting you do have some to add...

I want the kids to do things with us for the season, like attend a play or go to an amusement event, or something. However, their schedules are often full with friends and work parties and their own kids, so we are often told no. Maybe they can squeeze something in that one Saturday in the month, where they have a 2-hour window and that’s it.

I used to ask the kids to continue coming to trim our tree, but then I finally got it that they have their own trees to trim and traditions to create, without me. Ouch, I thought they’d always want to show up for that family activity. So we trim our tree, alone.

Am I sounding pitiful, yet?

I was going to buy my kids matching pajamas if they wanted them, but realized that’s something their mom wants to do. She wants to pick them out, and take the kids with her, and that’s a family thing they do. Okay, so I won’t ask that question ever again.

There are lots more examples I could give of expectations, unfulfilled wishes, and things I thought were going to happen that don’t anymore, now that the kids are away from home and have been for a few years now. Oh for sure, we have tons of fun when we get together, but I recall how the sting of the separation was so strong at first and even stings a little...still now.

I’ve also realized that I can wallow in my pity and start down the road of thought that they don’t care for me, don’t want to be with me, or have outgrown me and are becoming distant...which none of that is true. Even if one of those thoughts IS true, and I have been as kind as I know to be, then I can ask HIM to heal that part of us and not worry about it. But most often, our thoughts about our doom are NOT true and can cause us so much down time if we let them linger.

I’ve found that I have to set my mind to think the truth, set my heart to be happy and content when they’re here and content when they’re not, and set my eyes on my friends and my husband and others...and not so much on me all the time.

Here’s what I mean...

If the kids can go with us to some Christmas activity, I can enjoy every minute and dismiss every thought of why they couldn’t do it all with us. If they can’t attend anything with us, I can invite friends and enjoy the company of those and be happy and joyful. I can choose to be happy, and release my kids to find their traditions and joys and to navigate parenthood and adulthood on their own terms.

If the kids now have their own traditions started, I can pine in the corner that they're not including me or not showing up for mine, or I can make new ones with him, or enjoy outings that are fun – and learn to enjoy the season of Christmas and give thanks instead of complaining.

If they want to buy their own pajamas, then I can buy some for me and him, or do something else altogether. I can ask what pajamas they bought and ask for a picture, and compliment her on what she picked out, and make her feel good! Giving is what Christmas is all about, after all.

Is any of the above easy? Not really, at first. I think our mom hearts always want our kids near and we always want to be their #1 thought. But if we can remember, we were once young and we were once trying to set up house and home and kids and family and make our way in a wacky world, too. We can give them the gift of grace and love, which has GREAT return.

I've often taken my silly sorrows (because in the big world scope, I am very blessed) to Him and asked him to help me reconfigure my life sans kids and traditions with them. And you know what? He has, and he is, and he will. He's given me great friends, great times with others, and great satisfaction in the joy of Christmas with Him.

Do I still miss the kids and the traditions and the constant presence of their chatter and mess? Yes, I do. But I also enjoy the quiet nights by the fire, the clean rooms, and the holding hands with him while we sit at home or leave, because we now have the freedom to do so.

I don't know where your family fits in to the story above, but changes do occur when our kids get married, move away, or even stay. They now have in-laws, they have demanding jobs, and they have homes to keep and kids to be with. They can't ALWAYS include us in all that they do, nor should they. But if we make them feel bad, then we will create a wedge, and that's never a good thing.

Let's go in our rooms and cry and get it out, but then let's not carry a grudge or a disappointment, but rather be of good cheer and give thanks for another year of hope and grace and love for all.

And when they show up to be with us, let's hug them and smile and have a good time. And let's do the same when they return to their homes once again...



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Life's Short – by Bekah Holland

I have been hemming and hawing (dear Lord, I did not expect to sound like my grandmother at 39, but here we are) over what to write this month. Don't get me wrong, I have plenty of high horses I can climb up on, but seeing as I don't enjoy the falling off part so much, I try to keep my feet planted firmly on the ground. But in all my back and forth over what brilliant marital advice I can give, I realized that I rate approximately negative 17 on the brilliance in marriage scale. And being a recovering lifelong people pleaser, I didn't want to veer out of my lane as someone who is supposed to write on marriage. That said; I'm probably going to veer out of my lane, or more likely I might hop the curb on the median and potentially drive backwards.

So buckle up.

If you're reading this, and you're anything like me, at some point in the last 24 hours, especially during the holiday season, you've probably heard, or read, or seen an unending string of memes about how short life is and how eternally grateful we should be. This is completely true. We aren't guaranteed a single moment and we should tell those around us how much they mean to us. Yes. Yes to all of it. But I have an additional and possibly less socially acceptable reaction to these relentless posts. And that is that I.DON'T.CARE.

Now don't get me wrong. I understand the heart and intent behind these words. And I do my very best to remember, even when things are hard, that I am so very honored to be doing life alongside my people, and make sure that they never question that I love them desperately. But I also remember being a young wife and mom, very pregnant, and with a toddler, trying to survive a trip to the grocery store, while being so broke that I was choosing which bills could wait so we could buy food. I was pushing a cart with my daughter crying because toddlers can be jerks, hobbling along on swollen ankles, when this very sweet, well-meaning woman stopped to smile and pat me on the shoulder and tell me how much I was going to miss days like this.

Let me tell you something.

Many years later, looking back at that time in my life, I miss exactly nothing about those days. NOTHING. I don't miss my husband being overworked and underpaid and unhappy because life at that time was nothing like we had imagined. I don't miss my exhaustion from years of not sleeping. I don't miss praying that our electricity didn't get shut off before my next shift so that I could pay just enough to make it another week. And that very well-intentioned person, with her well-intentioned words, made me feel like a failure. Because while I tried to see the bright side of things, some days just sucked, and not just a little bit. Some days were so hard and so ugly that I didn't know how to do another one. Those words added a new layer of shame to my already guilt-ridden heart and mind.

So I did what any other strong, smart woman in my shoes would do. I slapped on a smile and faked my way through each day. Not just in a keep your chin up sort of way, but when I was with people who would have happily taken some of that burden. I thought that I needed to put on a brave face for my husband and appear to have it all together. I thought my kids shouldn't see me cry. That my friends and family could never know that some days I wanted to run far, far away where I wouldn't be touched or covered in snot or haphazardly balancing a bank

account. I hid the fact that some days, hiding in the bathtub, with the curtain closed, was the only time I allowed myself to feel so utterly broken and lost.

*I felt alone because over and over people told me how short this life is,
that I was supposed to be cherishing every dangd moment, so I hid in shame.*

Being honest about how things really felt, made my load a little bit lighter. Telling someone that my kid was being a tyrant and that I hadn't showered in the last 5 days and that being pregnant made me question my mental capacity made the smile I smiled a little bit more true. And that truth begat freedom, and freedom begat rest and rest begat joy (I've always wanted to use that word!).

I promise. You will be a better, happier, spouse-parent-friend-human when you're able to open up and just be real. So do your soul a favor. Don't let things like fear and shame keep you from speaking your truth. Because the truth will set you free. Free to feel understood, and "normal." And that freedom clears the room of all the lies you've been hearing on repeat and shines a light on all the beauty that was right there all along.

"Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times,
if one only remembers to turn on the light."

Date Night Fun – Happy Giving – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever given because you felt guilty, were forced to, or just because you knew it was the right thing to do, but your heart wasn't really in it? That kind of giving isn't any fun at all. Cheerful giving, however, can be super great fun. It doesn't involve someone asking you to sign up, it doesn't create a strain on your wallet, and there's no guilt if you can or cannot do it. It's the kind of giving that just happens because you're cheerful and want to enjoy life and share that with others!

Why can't date night be just that, this month? What if we had a date night that involved giving, but it was super fun and satisfying...and romantic? Can giving be romantic? I think so. Seeing him work and serve and smile and give is totally inspiring, and he looks so handsome doing it!

Here you go:

1. **A Night for Them** - Pack up the kids or invite another couple, or even your parents, and GIVE them a night at the movies and a drive to see lights. Surprise the kids, send an email invitation to your friends, or just call up an elderly couple and see if they want to join you on a night out. I bet they'll love it!
2. **Accolades for All** – Attend a concert or play or event that you know someone has kids in, or is starring in themselves, and be there – be present to clap, to bring flowers, or to just tell them what a great job they did. Buy the tickets, and GO.
3. **Give Attention** – to each other! You know what he likes, and he knows what you like, so give it. Offer massages and foot rubs, and light candles and set the scene. Watch a game with him, let him pick the restaurant. Pretend it's HIS or HER day and pamper them with the gift of love.
4. **Toss Things** – Go through a closet or shelf or room together and pack up boxes of things and stuff and go together to give it away. Make some goodies to enjoy while you're working, and play holiday music, too!
5. **Tip the Teens** – Set out on date night with a wad of cash and stop in at least three drive-thrus for a snack. Slip a big tip to each teen that waits on you and tell them that they are loved by HIM and to have a very happy holiday season.

What else can you think of? Incorporate giving, the fun kind, into your date nights this month with him and see if your heart doesn't feel so full! In fact, it might feel quite large and you'll fall in love with each other all over again.

After 40 Years – The Most Wonderful Time – by Marcy Lytle

It's the month of December, and I'm sure this particular month places a lot of stress on marriages. There's how much to spend, whether or not to buy that gift or this one, if you're going to get HIS family gifts or if he's going to do it. You most probably will want help with the kids if they're underfoot, as the house needs to stay nice for guests, and oh – what about traveling to the in-laws? Is that happening, or not? Those are just a few of the seasonal issues that crop up between now and the end of the year! And all of these can cause arguments!

One thing we do in the month of December is try to focus on something Christmassy every day, most of which are small and simple things that evoke gratefulness, peace, joy, hope, or just pure and simple pleasure. So listed below are some of the things we do, and I hope you find time to do as well, so that you can find time to hold his hand, breathe, and realize that all of the above things will soon be over...but these memories of time together will linger...

Here are 25 ideas for you to try, to make each day with him count, so that when the decisions have to be made, you're both in a good state of mind:

If you have 5 minutes:

- Listen to a Christmas carol together before you get out of the car.
- Pop open a box of Junior mints (the Christmas peppermint version!) and share it with him.
- Stop by a drive-thru for holiday treat.
- Text each other sweet compliments and love.
- Leave a note on the counter for him to find before he leaves for work.

If you have 15 minutes:

- Take a walk hand in hand, around the block.
- Have a conversation about that long list of to-do's, split it up, and hug when you're through.
- Heat some hot chocolate or cider and get creative with your toppings, using what you have at home.
- Clean your car together, and you'll both be happy you did.
- Talk about New Year's Eve and plan it, so you have that to look forward to now.

If you have an hour:

- Enjoy fondue for two and watch a show.
- Make breakfast together and have a picnic on the floor.
- Stop and buy an impromptu gift for a friend and deliver.
- Stop in a bookstore and browse, sip on coffee, then sit down and visit.
- Meet each other for lunch, and then share a decadent dessert!

If you have two hours:

- Watch a Christmas movie together.
- Invite another couple over and play Christmas charades, sipping hot chocolate or toddies.
- Find a neighborhood with great Christmas lights and drive it, then stop in a local coffee shop in that area.
- Wrap gifts and stuff stockings together.
- Bake cookies together and bag them up for gifts.

If you have a whole day:

- Get out of town to a small town festival or square, eat, have coffee and walk.
- Start with breakfast out, shop for last minute items, have a nice dinner and go to a Christmas concert or play!
- Stay in and have a holiday movie/tv shows/music marathon. Don't get out of pajamas, and do light candles.
- Volunteer together a local food bank or soup station, or at your church, or by helping a friend.
- Walk the mall, enjoy a pretzel, buy one thing each for yourselves, people watch, and end the evening with a movie.

I love having a list to work from, to look at, and to use as a reference. He does, too. So I'll print out this list and have it up where we can both see it and be reminded to connect each day this month, in some small or big way, so that our home and relationship is joyful and not insane.

Merry Christmas!



ENCOURAGEMENT

As the months of fall slide toward the end of the year, a bubbling mix of thoughts and feelings stir within me. Each year I try harder to slow down the season and savor the journey as the year races to the finish line.

The Thanksgiving-Christmas season is overwhelmingly busy, especially for someone who needs a lot of solitude, quiet, and an open schedule. Time leaps from one weekend to the next. Trying to manage get-togethers, fairs, strolls, lights, dinners, shopping, decorating—on top of normal everyday life—I'm like a leaf spinning in a whirlwind. Shopping (for anything!) is like weaving through narrow canyons with walls that scream trivia and consumerism on every side—and it starts before I'm even *thinking* about Christmas. During the transitional month of November, it's not unusual to see contradictory Halloween and Christmas decor displayed right next to each other. The things my heart wants to do to enjoy the season clash with the things I feel compelled to do for the wrong reasons. So many demands and so little time! I feel disgusted with the shallow world, and I don't want to play the game.

How can I stop the whirlwind? How can I replace the blur of too much too fast too late with clarity, calm, and peace? How can I be true to what matters?

Over the years, I've made some headway: decorating and Christmas cards have fallen to the bottom of the priority list—I do what I can when I can if I can; my family and I agree on a minimized gift-giving plan during Thanksgiving; I make time for activities with friends, knowing I can't attend every gathering; I celebrate Christ by bringing Him into the conversation when possible, and giving more. When I have to shop, my self-talk is, "This is good for the economy" and, "Many small business owners can prosper because of this season." Instead of groaning and complaining about everything, I try to "give thanks in everything."

Even though our culture seems to twist and wring the real meaning out of the "holiday season," even though Jesus wasn't born on the exact day of Christmas; even if it's commercialized, idolized, supersized, and paganized...it's possible to have peace and enjoy the season.

When my actions are dictated by an inner prompting rather than outside pressures, the result is peace. Because of God's grace, the "supposed to" list is a weight I don't carry anymore—I'm free to follow a different path. Peace comes when my eyes are open to Truth instead of empty traditions and unrealistic pretense because *knowing* keeps me grounded. Behind the santas, reindeer, cherubs, and flashing lights is the reality of Jesus every day of the year. Despite appearances, which focus our thinking on *one day* of celebration following weeks of frantic preparation, the truth is that every day is a day to be thankful, and every day is a day to celebrate Jesus.

Savoring the journey, for me, is enjoying the lights, the plays, concerts, and time with friends and family. Out of the ordinary giving reminds me of God's greatest gift to us—the Light of the World who gives us his peace, and will one day bring peace to the world.

Best of the Mess – Meals & More – by Ashley Zanella

The last two months I have been sharing a bit about my journey over the last year to lose over 60 pounds gained from two back-to-back babies. If you're interested in reading about my practical mental strategies and how I was able to work out 3-5x a week with two toddlers in tow, check out our ARCHIVES page. You'll also find a delicious green smoothie recipe and a simple meal prep plan.

This month, I wanted to share some ways we were able to incorporate a healthier diet without breaking the budget AND some personal holiday confessions of my own setbacks that I did not turn into failures. Here we go!

So first, I'll start with the confessions. October and November got me. I think I ate more Halloween candy this year than I have since I was trick or treating as a kid myself. It started when our neighbors "booed" us two weeks before Halloween, and that sugar addiction became real, really fast. Add that bucket of candy to the various Youth Group activities (where we volunteer) involving candy, soda and pizza and I knew I was on the path to personal destruction.

But guess what? It's okay! I told you two months ago that I fall off the wagon, because we all do! What I refuse to do is let it become a failure. So what I have I been doing to make a balance? I focus on salad-based meals and portion control.

What does that look like? I'm happy you asked!

I personally like to keep breakfast light. Breakfast is either fruit (like a banana) or protein (like 2 eggs with lots of onions, peppers, etc.). Then for lunch I almost always have a simple black bean salad (recipe below). For dinner it's a hearty salad with lots of protein. So even if I have a piece of candy (or 3), most of my intake that day is still full of nutrients and I am never over-eating to where I feel like I need to undo that top button on my pants to breath after a meal. My key rule is that no matter how good a meal is, the second I start wondering if I am full, I stop. I can still enjoy the good stuff, and have off-days without gaining all the inches. Speaking of the good stuff, I try to keep a bar of dark chocolate on hand. It's never been my favorite chocolate, but it is packed with healthy antioxidants and I can satisfy that chocolate craving with a couple squares of dark chocolate, and without the guilt! It keeps me, for the most part, away from the ice cream, cake and other temptations.

So there you have it, my holiday confession mixed with my recipe for not letting it turn into a failure.

Now let's talk budget friendly meals!

My husband and I have been following Dave Ramsey for over two years now and finally went to Financial Peace University Sept-Nov. so our budget is extremely strict. With that, we have managed to cut grocery expenses and still eat healthy. How do we do this?

First, I always go for the low cost proteins and find a way to make it something I actually enjoy eating. For instance, chicken legs are \$0.99 a pound. There are some delicious recipes on healthy homemade marinades. If I am trying a new sauce blend, I split the batch in half and make two different sauces to make sure I enjoy at least one flavor. I love pairing those chicken legs with a simple salad, maybe a little pasta (yes, you can eat carbs---portion is what matters) and some peas, broccoli or corn. Typically we spend less than \$10 on this 2-night meal that feeds four of us.

Second, I stick to a routine shopping list, but switch up the flavors or sides. I don't know about you, but we waste a lot of money when we don't go in with a plan or when we try to make different meals every night of the week. I like to pick a couple meals and make sure they last 2-3 nights. For variety, I make something different the next week, or choose different flavors. I then rotate those meals each week so I don't get burnt out.

For the last 5-6 months, we have rotated between chicken legs, green chicken enchiladas, taco salad, and chicken salad. Those are pretty much the meals we have stuck to 5-6 nights a week. We usually pick 1-2 nights where we do eat out and I don't give myself any restriction, aside from portion control. That helps us not get burnt out on our rotation. And honestly, I have learned through my own weight loss journey that I have to confuse my body regularly. If I eat the same exact meal 7 days a week, I will not see as much progress as I do having 1-2 lazy food days a week. It confuses my metabolism and when I fill my body with healthy food the next 2-3 days, my body is more likely to dig back into those fat stores. Plus, it makes the difference between maintaining a mostly healthy lifestyle vs. eating low-calorie, low-everything diet for a month or two only to binge and lose any and all progress.

Third, I buy frozen veggies! They are almost always less expensive and if I don't get around to making dinner that night, I have veggies another night! Plus I can buy a larger amount at a time without worrying about any of it going to waste.

Fourth, I stopped buying pre-packaged salads. We get two large heads of romaine lettuce each week and have a large Tupperware. After I put the groceries away, I chop one head of lettuce, some onions, cucumber, celery etc. And mix it. It all stays fresh in that large container in the fridge for up to 4 days unless we eat it all first. It makes it much easier to stay on track when I have salad ready to go for lunch and dinner for most of the week! When that runs out, I just cut up the next head of lettuce and switch up the veggies.

Simple black bean salad recipe (perfect for lunch)

1.5 C Chopped romaine lettuce
1-2 T Chopped red onion
1-2 T Halved cherry tomatoes
1/4 C Black Beans
1-2 T C Shredded cheese

Whatever dressing you want (I like Ranch)

I eat this for lunch 4-6 days a week. And I still love it! Sometimes I take out the tomatoes. Sometimes I add corn. Sometimes I switch the beans for boiled eggs. Make it yours, make it something you love!

That wraps up this 3-month run of all the tips and tricks I could come up with on how I lost over 60 pounds in about 13 months. I truly hope there is something you were able to take away to apply to your own health goals. We are all on our own journeys, and these journeys don't end until we are dead. If there are tips you'd like to share please comment! I am sure there are lots of individuals that would love to hear what has worked for you as well!

Happy Holidays!

Stay safe, and I pray that God blesses your health journey wherever you are!

Simple Truths - The World Didn't Give It – by Erica Simmons

What an amazing night we had in our women's discipleship class. We read Romans 12:1-2 (MSG) and the words, "Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking." As we were having our discussion, conversation came up about how those in the world point to our behavior sometimes and try to shame us because it doesn't *fit* their definition of Christianity. There is this song we used to sing at our church when I was growing up called "This Joy I Have." The main lyrics say that this joy that I have the world didn't give and the world can't take it away.

The world doesn't get to set the parameters for a life provided to us through our Savior's death on the cross. Don't let them paint us into their image of a Christian life. We will fail, because their criticism is not coming from love - it is coming from the enemy. If he can get us to run around trying to meet the world's view of us, we will miss out on becoming what God wants us to become.

Let me explain. What I am NOT saying is that those who are not Christians can't call Christians out on their sinful behavior. If we are sinning against God and ANYONE calls us out on it, we best hit our knees and repent.

What I AM saying and want to focus on is that throughout history various religions have created images of legalistic Christianity. Those beliefs are still the center of a lot of people's thinking, but as we mature as Christians, God takes those things out of us and replaces them with truth. Because non-believers, and even some Christians, are not truly on the journey of living their life FOR Christ, they don't ever get to come into the true knowledge of our God and Savior. This has left many with a false image of a Christian life that they hold up to the lives of Christians, to compare. We can't control what they do, but we can take the time to share the truth with them. And most importantly, we cannot let their image of the Christian life be the blueprint for our life with Christ.

Christianity is under attack more than ever in our country. Prominent Christian leaders are receiving more and more, bad press: Joel Olsteen not opening up his Houston church during hurricane Harvey, leaders' wealth and how they use it, as well as belief in same sex marriage and so much more. In all of this the truth about God, who He is, gets mangled and becomes a filter that gets applied to all Christians. In the midst of this chaos, it is critical that we know the truth and be able to withstand the stereotypes of what the world thinks about Christianity.

“How can we do that?” you ask. Here are a few tried and true ways:

First, is simply **KNOW the word of God** and more today than we did yesterday and more tomorrow than we do today. I recently ordered a new storage unit for the boys’ bathroom. It required assembly. Over the years, I have put together many things and more often than not I have had to do assembly X2. In those times, the second assembly was made easier because of my experience with putting the first one together. So because of my history of putting things that needed to be assembled, I knew I could put this together this new item without a problem. I just had to learn the specific way this cabinet needed to be assembled and now I have more experience than I had, prior. The new experience grew me and I have more knowledge now than I did before. That is the way we can look our experiences with God. The more we experience we have with Him the more we learn about Him.

Which is critical in my next point...

The more we know God’s word the better we will be able to **LIVE God’s word**. I cringe at the things I did said and believed out of ignorance to God’s word. Not that it is okay, but we all have to start with where we are and grow from there. Recently at work, I attended a professional development class on communication. One of the elements they focused on was empathy. To demonstrate this to the class they showed a video of a church that found out that a Muslim mosque was being built across the street from their church. There is this moving scene when one of the member shares how he went to the pastor of the church and told him that he did not think he could continue to go to church there because of the development. The pastor told him he needed to read his bible. The member, holding back tears, confessed how the problem was with him and not just in regard to this, but to many of the issues we face today. WOW, I was emotionally moved sitting there in the class. Lack of knowledge of God’s word leads to poor behavior on our part. I often share with my kids the mantra that their behavior is either tearing down or reaffirming the beliefs someone has about African Americans. That mantra applies here as well. As Christians, we are either tearing down or reaffirming others’ beliefs about Christianity. Pressing into God’s word helps to ensure that we do both in the positive, tearing down the negative views of Christianity and supporting the positive views. Sometimes behavior may not be enough...

Which brings me to my third point...

We have to **SPEAK the truth of God’s word**. We will encounter people who may scoff at the way we live our lives. It is in these moments we need to be able to clearly speak and share the

truth of God's word. I have a co-worker that I have had the honor of working with more closely over the last several months. The inevitable is that as we get closer to someone we learn and share more of ourselves with them. As frustrations with a fellow co-worker mounted, I fell into the habit of venting to her. I started to be convicted by the Holy Spirit of how I was reflecting God in these situations. We were in the car on the way back from a meeting where this co-worker had been present. I started to vent, but then stopped myself. She became frustrated and said I was living up to some invisible standard. I turned to her and simply said, "Yes I am, but it is a standard that I choose to live by and that it is important to me." You see, it is not a burden but a joy for me to live my life for something greater than myself. We need to be passionate about our life of service to God. No one wants to commit their life to something they see as a burden. This is yet another misconception that the world has about a life serving and following Christ, and it is up to us to tear down that false belief. We need to live our life with joy and passion for the One who sacrificed everything for us.

You see, knowing God's word, living God's word with our lives, and sharing the truth about God's word is the only way we will live the life God sent His son to the cross to die for and give us. Don't let the world take that away.

Moving Forward – Good Surprises – by Pam Charro

Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Did you know that we can expect good in some form every single day?

God loves to lavish all kinds of blessings on us, since he is such a good God. But there is a difference between expectancy and expectations. We know that we can expect good but not necessarily be guaranteed of what that will look like.

A guest speaker at one of the churches I attend showed an interesting video that illustrates this concept. The Coca Cola Company decided to bless a particular college campus once, and the video showed various students purchasing cokes out of the machine. One student put her money in, and cans just kept coming out, more than she could hold, so she just began handing them out. Another student's drink came, but was then followed by a pair of hands holding a pizza! And another student got a soda and a 20-foot long submachine sandwich!

After I saw that, I told God that I want my submarine sandwich out of the Coke machine. That very morning, one of the guests at the hotel where I work gave me a beautiful and very large covered cat litter box...so unexpected and so much better than the small open tub I'd been using!

I made the same request to God again on the way to work the next day, and one of the delivery men just a few hours later very respectfully asked me if I would like to have lunch with him sometime. Another very flattering surprise that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't come to work!

The following week was also full of unexpected praise and positive situations I would have never foreseen, and I'm sure I noticed them more because I was watching for them! I think God likes it when we tell him that we're ready to be blown away by his goodness.

When I start to feel that life is predictable, it helps so much to keep in mind that God is full of fun surprises.

I wonder what he will do tomorrow?

Real Stories - Sweeter than Candy Canes – by Juilia Hirsch

To wake up on this day of the year brings me butterflies, quite frankly. I'm squeamish and giggly, shouting out of sheer joy and at almost every moment. Today is infused with traditions, old faces and the kind of belly laughs in which make you hurt later. It is one of the purest forms of magic among this world.

There's an additional emotion attached to the unnecessarily youthful grins and massive chatter this time of year. It seems cliché to still have to say it, because when it comes to it, I think we all know that Christmas ' real meaning is when that little baby showed up and the whole world rocked! He was born and the world picked up handfuls of graciousness and a huge gaping sigh of relief. We're enjoying that as our celebration.

*The goodness in our midst.
Between all of us, the holiness.
Between us, the elegance.
The FORGIVENESS of Him among us.*

We celebrate the guy who every day rocks our flipping socks and shows himself in every heartbeat, every tragedy, in every growl of hate. He's always in the echo here with us. And if it weren't for him, there'd be no childish wonder this season, no excitement and anticipation, no love and genuine light, no giving and sharing and heart, and we'd all just sit down unwrapping open boxes covered with pretty paper. Because of that day these things take meaning. Traditions of festive socks and Christmas decorations, hot chocolate and story books, and awkward dance moves, giving presents and stuffing—the inexplicable feeling of Christmas spirit behind these things, the same one that tingles a little and actually makes us feel warm and cozy inside (you know that feeling)—that's Him.

*He brings love and light and true magic and,
like confetti,
he throws them at us.*

And I can't help thinking of how every Christmas Eve morning as I sit here in front of the Christmas tree wearing this goofy kindergarten grin, tapping my fingers so fast that they start moving on their own— that this day, this sensation, this grace we're washed in is all it takes to see the hurt head-on in the world. I look out my life's window and see it fall apart; all the pain and anxiety and bewilderment and I just want to wrap the world in a warm cozy blanket and tell it how much goodness there is inside. I know that's not so easy.

We're not able to change hearts. He's capable too, which is the good news. And while he's dealing with lightening loads, we can cover some ground for him by introducing better parts of who they are to people, parts they are not even aware of. Unbelievable things happen when we love without having a motive behind it.

So let us pack Christmas this year with feelings of joy and magic and carry it with us everywhere we go during this scary time in such a tiny world of ours. Let's show and tell off his light as irritating 2nd graders.

*Let's leave people into less world uncertainty and more mystery about his love's purity.
Let's leave the people with his name stronger than ever.*

And one last appeal, while doing it, let's all wear fuzzy socks.

(Also, if that felt like it was super serious, please just remember that even a month before Christmas I was wearing Christmas pajamas and matching fuzzy socks the entire time I wrote this.)

Hi friends! It's me Julia...

I'm a writer of words so I like to tell myself. For the past 18 years I've been this thing called a work in progress. I love the way that sounds, like there's never a wrong answer to being myself, or an end.

I love fashion and anything to do with clothes, shoes, etc. I have an embarrassing affinity for elderly people and I should not know how many days there are until Christmas in the middle of June - but alas, I always do.

My main hobby is piecing things together. And God has these big hands for holding onto those pieces, and handing them to me when I'm ready for them. That's what I'm doing here, piecing things together.

Step by step. Just falling more and more in love with the strange, painful, and blindingly beautiful life.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – 3 Stressors – by Marcy Lytle

I'm sure some of you already have all your gifts purchased, tallied up and wrapped – under the tree. But I'm sure there are many more of you that haven't even started. However, for all of us, there are three things that can really stress us out as the fun day of Christmas approaches. Oh, there are many more things that stress us out during the holidays, but I'm focusing on three big ones:

Tallying

Totaling

Wrapping

Maybe the first two sound the same, but they're not, and I'll explain below. I'm hoping to offer some practical tips to alleviate the strain of all three, and actually make them enjoyable!

Tallying – This refers to keeping up with how many gifts each kid/person gets. My mom always had me count and look at the “pile” and make sure they looked similar. As wrong as it may sound, I still do the same. Once I've purchased ALL the gifts (I don't wrap until everything is bought), I place the piles on the bed by name and look and count. I don't like having one kid get a huge box, while the other gets all small items. I realize that kids need to learn that life's not fair, but Christmas morning isn't that time...in my opinion. And besides, it's fun to look and arrange and think, while sorting and tallying.

Totaling – Yes, this is the one – that grand total you're spending on each person. It can certainly be way over budget if we're not careful. I like to keep a notebook with columns for each person, list their gifts and the price beside each one. This helps me stay within budget, because I keep track of what I'm spending. Then there are all the peripheral gifts (just calling them that, not because they're insignificant, but because they're outside the family.) If I can't afford them one year, then I make something simple like cookies. Who can't use cookies for a family gathering? Stockings are extra fillers and can drain the wallet! And buying gifts for friends can certainly total another huge amount. Here's how to keep it simple:

- Make your columns and the totals you can afford to spend for each family member. (If your family insists on purchasing gifts for everyone outside your immediate family and you cannot afford to do that, speak up! Draw names!)
- Make a separate column for stocking gifts and amounts you're spending there, as well.
- Make a column for hostess gifts, teacher gifts, and other people you want to thank and give to.
- Make a column for friends' gifts, what you can spend, or what you're going to make.
- Make a column for your spouse – don't ever skip giving to each other – it's important and fun!

Know the total amount you can spend for Christmas and make your column total add up to that amount (within a given amount of leeway.)

This may sound harsh and something you don't want to do, but unbridled shopping – while it may be fun at the time – will make you cry come January. And, you'll want to leave a bit of change for after-Christmas sales for you and yours!

Wrapping – Some like to be elaborate and some make it so simple. I'm probably somewhere in between. I purchase all wrapping paper after Christmas for the next year. It's so cheap then, and that's one less thing I have to worry with, when wrapping begins. It's also totally okay to use newspaper or brown paper, if wrapping paper is too pricey. Gift tags, to me, take up the most time and are the most annoying. This year, I've opted to just write everyone's names on their gifts (in cursive) with a big black marker, I'll use color-coordinate papers that are gray/silver backgrounds, and I'll be done! I skip bows because they make it impossible to stack gifts, and I opt for ribbon only on about every fourth gift, just so they look pretty under the tree. Done!

For those that have slim budgets this year, may I suggest these simple ideas for gift giving? **These ideas are all about \$5 or under:** (Okay, so this is a 4th stressor - what to actually buy!)

1. A deck of cards with a batch of Chex mix to enjoy while they play – wrapped in a bright red bandanna!
2. A new measuring cup with five of your favorite recipes tucked inside, wrapped in tissue paper and tied with a pretty ribbon. https://www.amazon.com/Pyrex-Prepware-2-Cup-Glass-Measuring/dp/B0002ITQHS/ref=sr_1_30?keywords=measuring+cup&qid=1573563325&sr=8-30
3. A local food item, like a favorite salsa, and a cute bowl to dip from (purchase it at the dollar store!) Wrap in tissue and place in a bag. <https://www.dollartree.com/royal-norfolk-turquoise-swirl-stoneware-bowls-5frac12/197524>
4. A journal with a pen is a great gift. Look on the shelves at the discount stores like Marshall or Ross, because sometimes they have the cutest journals! Or even a devotional book would be nice! Wrap in brown paper and tie up with string, like they used to do back in the olden days at country bookstores.
5. An adult coloring book with colored pencils. I've seen some of the coolest ones at the dollar store! Place in a small shirt box and affix a big Christmas sticker, to wrap!
6. A bar of good chocolate. I love the Lindt brand at the grocery store, as it's 70% cacao and good for the heart! Include a small bag of peanuts, to go with, along with a note telling them to enjoy it at the movies. Slip this into a large envelope. https://www.amazon.com/Lindt-Excellence-Dark-Chocolate-Cocoa/dp/B0059X9B9Y/ref=sr_1_11?keywords=lindt+chocolate+bar&qid=1573563666&sr=8-11
7. A caramel apple, if you feel so inclined to make. Make a batch, sprinkle with chocolate chips and nuts. Keep in the fridge, wrapped and ready, and deliver one by one to those gathered under the tree.
8. A package of hair clips – they're all the rage right now! Sparkly or geometric, you pick one for her and slip it in a nice card with a sweet message, and hand to her in the envelope. <https://www.amazon.com/KCHIES-Hair-Clips-Accessories-Faux/dp/B07PDX8T3>
9. A set of stainless steel drinking straws for the eco-minded folks on your list can be found back in the kitchen section of Marshalls, or on line! These are fun and a new idea! https://www.amazon.com/Hiware-12-Pack-Stainless-Straws-Cleaning/dp/B07D34ZNMH/ref=sxin_3_ac_d_rm?ac_md=0-0-

[c3RhaW5sZXNzIHNOZWVsiHN0cmF3cw%3D%3D-ac_d_rm&keywords=stainless+steel+straws&pd_rd_i=B07D34ZNMH&pd_rd_r=460877a7-7ce3-4bd5-8003-5c1d83608b73&pd_rd_w=G5pik&pd_rd_wg=Wzp1S&pf_rd_p=ed481207-4bea-4e19-bbad-73ed40fdc292&pf_rd_r=PPR244N1ATT3D1H0FAQ7&pvc=1&qid=1573563865](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07D34ZNMH?keywords=stainless+steel+straws&pd_rd_r=460877a7-7ce3-4bd5-8003-5c1d83608b73&pd_rd_w=G5pik&pd_rd_wg=Wzp1S&pf_rd_p=ed481207-4bea-4e19-bbad-73ed40fdc292&pf_rd_r=PPR244N1ATT3D1H0FAQ7&pvc=1&qid=1573563865)

10. A tiny live succulent is a welcome addition to any friend's home! These are super trendy and fun. Set them on a window sill and ask them to seek and find them!
11. A bottle of gorilla glue. Seriously, it was on one of our guy's lists, and it's probably something everyone needs but forgets to ask for. Just slip into a paper bag and roll it up. https://www.amazon.com/Gorilla-Super-Glue-Gram-Clear/dp/B00OAAUAX8/ref=sxin_2_ac_d_rm?ac_md=0-0-Z29yaWxsYSBnbHVI-ac_d_rm&crd=UKRGECXX13O7&keywords=gorilla+glue&pd_rd_i=B00OAAUAX8&pd_rd_r=31abc9c9-1b90-4f8e-a244-a0ce52d219b6&pd_rd_w=8VyFG&pd_rd_wg=laXlo&pf_rd_p=39892eb5-25ed-41d8-aff1-b659c9b73760&pf_rd_r=2MS415YCPGBD95ZSBCH2&pvc=1&qid=1573563932&sprefix=gorill%2Caps%2C257
12. A pair of socks is the most traditional gift, but it's always a favorite, especially when they say something on the sole! Chocolate lover socks or coffee lover socks are always a hit! Roll them and tie with a ribbon and have them in a basket to toss to the recipient when it's your turn to give. https://www.amazon.com/Tmrow-COFFEE-Womens-Novelty-Letter/dp/B07MKB92L/ref=sr_1_7?keywords=bring+me+coffee+socks&qid=1573564027&s=hi&sr=1-7

I hope that wherever you find yourself in your budget this year that you'll shop happily and joyfully as you make your lists, look at what you've bought, and wrap them all up! Sit by the fire, listen to Christmas music, burn a scented candle, ask a friend over to wrap with you, watch a Hallmark movie, or whatever sets the mood – while you total, tally and wrap (and shop) the night away...

FRESH THYME – Almost... - by Marcy Lytle

I almost did it, and I'm so glad I didn't.

We were at a Veteran's Day assembly, on the fourth row of a group of chairs, watching the elementary school kids file in and find their places for the program. We had brought my dad, because his great grandchildren were part of the performance, and we wanted him to be able to see everything and enjoy. I mean, who wouldn't want their 94-year old father to be able to see and smile at the little kiddos as they filed in and looked over to see if we were there?

As the kiddos filed in, there were three adults standing on the front row just chatting and blocking our view...totally. We could only see their backs, and I became increasingly annoyed that they weren't sitting down so that all behind them could see. Kids filed in and waved, but these three blocked so many, just so they could stand there and visit – or so it seemed!

Someone beside me even remarked, "Why don't they sit down?"

I thought about tapping these folks nicely on the shoulder to ask if they would sit, and I almost shouted, "Would you please sit down! We back here cannot see!" But, I didn't.

Aren't you thankful for those times when your impulses to speak are somehow subsided and you don't even know why, but later you're so thankful something stopped you?

This was one of those moments.

I said nothing, and eventually they sat down for the program and all was well. I was no longer annoyed, but still thought how rude it was for people to be so inconsiderate. That was a judgment I made purely on what I saw from the back view of these grown folks that blocked our view...

After the program, there was a parade through the halls of the school, with a drum roll playing, kids putting out their hands, and all of the veterans walking and being honored – it was so cool – and quite emotional!

As we came around the corner, I spotted one of the guys that had been standing "in the way" and this time I saw him from the front, as he was standing near a doorway he had open for us. His speech was a bit slurred, he appeared to be disabled, but he had the sweetest voice and smile. Immediately, I felt ashamed that I had only viewed that guy from the back, critical in my assumption that he was being rude, when in reality he was a sweet veteran that perhaps had been injured in a war. Or clearly, he had suffered in some way...

Immediately, I felt a rush of thankfulness that my impulsive mouth had been stopped by some unseen force, when I almost blurted out a directive to these folks to plant their butts in their chairs. (Okay, I wouldn't have said that, but it's what I was thinking.)

Oh, believe me. I've said things before on impulse and wanted to run and hide because of what I'd said. But this time, I didn't say it. I waited and stayed quiet and enjoyed the show, even

though for five minutes my view was blocked. It didn't prohibit me from having a good time, at all.

As we walked to the car, I thought of the numerous times we start to act on impulse, and sometimes do. But then I was thankful for the other times when our impulses are squelched just in time to realize the huge mistake we would have made, had we spoken that nasty directive or judgment out loud.

It helps to pause when we feel impulses, and think. It helps to listen when we feel impulses, and wait. And it sure is nice when we think and pause and wait, and find out later that we spared us all an avalanche of hurt feelings and offenses because we did just that.

FRESH THYME – Have You? – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever attended a potluck or dinner party or holiday party, and the dish you brought to share ended up being the one people ate the least? Oh, it's wonderful when your dish is wiped clean and everyone says, "Oh that was delicious!" But what about when you tried a new recipe, it sounded so good to you because it was healthy and colorful, but no one touched it? Do you quickly pick up your dish when no one is looking and head out the door, so the baker of the uneaten dish is a secret?

Have you ever been in a group where everyone is sharing, but when it's your turn to talk, they all seem to be distracted and not even listening? In fact, you're talking and they're walking the other way, so you just quit your story and walk away, as well...

Have you attended a holiday party where you were way under-dressed or way over-dressed? Perhaps they said it as a holiday affair so you wore your sparkly earrings and bright red wrap, only to see that everyone else was casually dressed in jeans and maybe an ugly sweater. Or...everyone is dressed to the nines and you feel frumpy as you arrive and catch a glimpse of the beauties before you...

Have you ever been to a gift exchange, only to realize that your gift really paled in comparison to the other gifts given? There's this sick feeling that comes to your stomach, but then a sigh of relief when you remember that no names were put on the gifts, so nobody will know...

Has your child been the one kid in the Christmas program that stood there and wouldn't sing or decided to cry and run off the stage? While other kids smiled for the all the photos being taken, you were socked hard in the chest by your child that's now mad that you "made" him perform when he didn't want to.

Have you thought and shopped hard for that perfect present, only to realize that person already has that item, or someone else gave them the same thing? Your heart sinks, because you really thought you had it so right, this year.

Have you showed up at a family gathering and someone makes a remark that you've put on a little weight, or asks why your skin looks so dry? Maybe that relative over there dominates your time and fills your ears with boring conversation. Or you don't feel like you fit in at all, and wish you weren't there...

Have you been sitting around the tree with your family enjoying all the gifts, and then felt so disappointed at the gift he gave you – because it's not you AT ALL? "How can he think I'd like this?" you query in your mind, as you try to keep your lips in a smile and say thank you, but you feel like you're lying because you're not glad about it one bit.

Have you worked tirelessly and selflessly shopping and cooking and cleaning, only to have someone fall sick or not show, or criticize or make a mess, or show up and not notice your beautiful home? It hurts because you worked so hard, and it all fell so short...because life happened in disappointing domino falls.

I bet you can relate to at least one of the situations above, or have your own, where you were so disappointed, taken aback, or hurt at some event or person during family time when everyone's supposed to be jolly and of good cheer.

The only way I know to avoid feeling sad at those kinds of disappointments – at the actions or inactions of others – is to remember to give to HIM in all that we do. It's the same advice I gave my kids when they started working with a youth group at church. As long as we obey and give out of a heart of thanksgiving and love to him, grateful for all of his love to us, the reaction of others toward us won't sting as hard or linger as long. It's true. Try it, this Christmas season as this one or that one speaks out of turn or walks away without a hug... Just look up and see the ONE that matters smiling down with a big thumbs-up.

Then leave in your car with that screaming kid or that uneaten food and purpose to laugh and be merry anyway, because it's that time of year!

FRESH THYME – The Captain

We saw an Asian film recently about a true event that involved a harrowing plane malfunction where the pilot had to make it through a storm, severe turbulence, and deal with a cracked windshield that blew out, causing the passengers and crew much fear and angst, as you can imagine! I found eyes welling up with tears near the end of the movie, and I'll tell you why...

The passengers on the plane didn't know the pilot personally, yet they had to place their trust in his ability to fly the plane. They really had no choice, although one passenger said to her husband during one of the plane's rocky moments, "I want to go back home." They had all boarded this plane to make it to their destination, but were in no way prepared or anticipated being scared for their lives.

There was a head flight attendant that had to remain calm and portray that calmness to the passengers, as she saw one of her fellow attendants struck down, watched babies and moms cry out, and deal with men that were losing their minds while wind barreled down the aisles and oxygen masks fell in yellow order for each person to place over their mouths to breathe.

We've all seen movies of near airplane disasters, and most of them end badly. However, this pilot was well trained and he had a purpose to carry his passengers to a safe landing, and that he was going to do.

As I watched, I realized that I DO KNOW the captain that's piloting the trip I'm taking through life. I DO KNOW that he is an excellent pilot with a 100% track record; and that he can be trusted, to bring me safely home. However, just like those people, I am thrown into a panic when turbulence arises. When something's broken, when winds are fiercely blowing, and when I'm seeing others fall around me and we all feel as though we cannot breathe very well due to anxiety and fear, I worry that maybe this time we won't make it.

This grieved my heart, as I realized that it must grieve HIS HEART, that I don't just sit back and breathe while he flies, and rest while he pilots, and sing while he sails through every dark cloud, above every ominous mountain and at the perfect altitude as he heads toward a perfect landing. I KNOW that the end of the book says we who know the Captain are going to make a safe landing.

- Turbulence will happen.
- Things will break.
- People will get wounded.
- Oxygen might be scarce.
- Storms will brew.
- Obstacles will rise up.
- Impossibilities will loom.

But there's no way the end of our movie is going to a crash landing.

That pilot in the movie miraculously made it to the ground, against all odds, and not one person was lost. In fact, as every passenger exited the plane they looked around and began asking,

“Where’s the captain?” Of course, he was still inside making sure everyone was accounted for, and his crew was safely out, before he stepped out the door.

The entire flight turned and gave thanks to the captain for saving their lives. If they’d only KNOWN that the captain was trained and was going to make a safe landing, would they all have ridden a little differently, laid back and rested their heads, gasped but only for a moment at the burst of wind from the outside, and closed their eyes when they saw lightning out their window?

I know the CAPTAIN and I don’t do any of those things, but I too panic constantly at every drop in altitude, scared to death that we’re headed straight down for a crash.

I felt all sorts of emotions during that movie. He never promised us a smooth ride. In fact, he said there would be trials and tribulation, but he did say to be of good cheer in the middle of them. None of the passengers knew the captain, so they worried and feared. I do know the CAPTAIN and I still worry and fear, and that concerns me. It makes me sad, and it makes me want to say I’m sorry.

There is no crash landing on the trip on which I’m on, only a safe landing. I may not like the fact that some will reach that landing before others, that pain may be involved from the broken windows and glass shards, and that dark, dark clouds will be something we have to pass through, but we’re not going down. There’s absolutely nothing that can separate us from the ONE behind the controls, when we are sitting behind him, observing the instructions he’s given us for a safe flight.

I’m working on that better flight experience where nothing fazes me, sudden drops don’t move me, and storm clouds only make me sleep more soundly.

All because I know the CAPTAIN and better yet...the CAPTAIN KNOWS ME.