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Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

May 2020



TIPS

The Dressing – Yes to Clothes! – by Marcy Lytle

I was sharing with a friend last month how I'd ordered on line a few spring tops, and her question was, "Where are you going to wear them?" So true, it's been a different way of life lately, as we stay home and go very few places. I was amused by how many jokes flooded Facebook about staying in pajamas all day. I decided to ask my friends on Facebook if they truly stayed in pajamas all day while staying home during crisis. I'd say almost every one of them said no, that they eventually got dressed.

So...I too got dressed. I enjoy getting dressed, even if I'm working at home or going out, or doing nothing. And I still love to shop, although it's been on line as of late.

Here are a few places I found some fun things on line, should you still be looking...

Old Navy. I ordered this midi length skirt (which comes in several colors). It has elastic in the waist, cute pockets, and I'm excited to wear it. Ordering on line can be tricky, so skirts are often safe – if they're not fitted and they have elastic. (the skirt)

Did you know the midi length is back?

This belt is that woven style, a classic. I love the brown leather for summer.

The Loft Outlet. This store has had some incredible deals. Honestly, this isn't one of my favorite stores. But I found some really cute spring tops on sale 50% off and then there was a code for another 30% off as well! Tops with pretty sleeves and a flowy bodice are often safe bets, when shopping on line. Look at the fabric, so you'll know how they wash, as well. And read reviews! (the three tops)

Love this puffed sleeve and floral print, so popular this spring.

<https://outlet.loft.com/paisley-bubble-sleeve-top/520567?skuld=29020904&defaultColor=3304&catid=cat3950030&selectedColor=3304>

Bright colors appeal to me, so this pretty gold/yellow hue reminds me of sunflowers!

<https://outlet.loft.com/cinched-sleeve-tee/526865?skuld=29000241&defaultColor=3102&catid=cat3950030&selectedColor=3102>

How can we ever have enough white tops? They go with everything, and they lose their whiteness so quickly, so I snapped this one up quickly. Love the length of the sleeves and the top itself.

World Market. The bags, jewelry, and sometimes the clothes are so unique and fun. Often, they run sales, and their inventory is always interesting. I like interesting!

Check out this cute bag for spring.
<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/natural+jute+backpack+with+leather+straps.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

How about this necklace?

<https://www.worldmarket.com/category/jewelry-clothing/necklaces.do?c=116733.117237&tabName=productTab&productType=Pendant+Necklaces&pp=26&sortby=ourPicksAscend&cx=0>

And this dress!

Ann Taylor. This is another store I hadn't shopped at that often, only browsed a few times. But they too had some really cute tops for spring! I have plenty of jeans, capris and skirts, so I opted for more on the top!

Check out these fun blouses.

I love the sleeves and neck on this pretty textured tee. There are lots of color options!

<https://factory.anntaylor.com/pointelle-tee/522510?skuld=29134953&defaultColor=9687&catid=cat3960032&selectedColor=5333>

The angel tee – the sleeve length – in black – a favorite classic and staple even in spring/summer!

<https://factory.anntaylor.com/angel-sleeve-top/523804?skuld=29457328&defaultColor=2222&catid=cat3960032&selectedColor=2222>

What have you ordered on line, or will you? Will you go back to shopping in stores in person, or not? I hope we get to do both!

Seven 4 You – Mom’s Advice – by Marcy Lytle

Mother’s Day is this month, a time to celebrate our moms, celebrate being a mom, or just to give thanks for moms in our lives everywhere. I know that I have many women that I consider to be like a mom to me, now that my mom is gone. Moms always have advice to offer, some good and some bad! However, we thought it would be fun to hear from our panel of women what they have learned from their own moms...so enjoy!

My mom had three daughters, so hair was a big deal! She was adamant that it was kept clean and out of our faces at all times, at home, school and definitely church. When we got a little older and started bathing ourselves, she didn’t think we got it clean enough, and I’m sure she was right because I’ve seen the same thing happen with my grandchildren when bathing themselves! Boys and girls, alike. So she told us,

*Scrub your scalp from front to back then the sides, twice.
If you get your scalp clean your hair will also be squeaky clean.*

I still do it her way to this day and I’ve passed the advice on to my grandchildren.

My mama taught me about working hard. She instilled her love for art, crafts, and sewing in me and taught me about helping others. But the most important thing she gave me was the knowledge and love for Jesus and how to know Him personally through prayer. Mama died and never got to see me grow up or see how important her words about Jesus were in my life. One day we’ll hug in heaven and know it was Jesus who got us both there.

My Mother at 99 years of age has taught me many things by her actions. The first thing that stands out in my mind took place in or around 1963 when Mom had a beauty salon in our basement. We had a black housekeeper who was also our nanny, and my Mother came upstairs to eat lunch one day. Velma and I were eating at the kitchen table, Mom pulled up a chair and Velma got up and moved. My Mom asked where she was going and mentioned she hadn’t finished her lunch. Velma stated that she knew she wasn’t allowed to eat with Mom at the table. But my mom said, “Whoever told you that was wrong! You are part of this family now, so please sit back down with us.” That made my heart smile as I loved Miss Velma so much.

After a 10 hour day on her feet my Mom still went house to house collecting for Unicef. It made an impression on me later in life, because I’m sure at the time I would have preferred to play with my friends instead. She always told me,

Treat others the way I would want to be treated.

My mom taught me many things, but the things I seem to remember most are the things she taught by example. She was kind, and worked hard to keep her house clean and her family deliciously fed. She loved to cook, was a great seamstress, but mostly loved Jesus with all her heart. When Dad went to preach somewhere she was there with us in tow, prepared to gather us girls to sing before he preached. When I think of Mom, I still feel a special love in my heart for her that is extra special and different than I have had for anyone else, ever. Mom wasn't perfect. Secretly, she often felt inferior, but accepted challenges that made her uncomfortable as she was required. Lastly, she was a great MeMaw. She had a good relationship with her grandkids. I hope to be the same!

My mom had lots of funny sayings and those have stuck with all of us kids. But one of our favorites was her short prayer that she offered when asked to pray before a meal. Mom didn't want to let her food get cold, she knew it was the attitude of the heart that mattered, and she would grin a little when she finished praying. I loved the simplicity of the prayer, and it has helped me in my own prayers. I don't have to use a bunch of words. I can just speak, be thankful and love. Her prayer was simply,

Father, we're grateful.

Things my mom taught me (we had a sometimes complicated relationship):

1. She was a hard worker. She always worked outside the home as far back as I can remember. Mainly because my dad wasn't such a hard worker....
 2. She was very gracious and taught me how to set a table and put meals together. This is something I really enjoy doing for my family.
 3. She accepted Christ when I was about 14, so I am very thankful for that! Because of her transformation, I too became a Christian. That should have been #1. I guess I am going thru my list chronologically. I wish we had had a closer relationship but we did the best we could do.
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Mom and I had a tough relationship in some ways. My mom didn't have very many friends at all, so she leaned on me for emotional strength in her marriage and personally. I didn't like that. She also often had a "rejection spirit," one where she thought so little of herself that she somewhat pushed others away. She often asked when she visited my house, "Do you mind if I use your bathroom?" I never understood that, and it irritated me. I also didn't like being her emotional crutch. I loved Mom fiercely, but those two things have made me purpose to find my strength in God alone and to have many friends, other than my kids. I think this has helped me navigate motherhood as my kids have left home...

Selah's Style – Princess Sky – by Marcy Lytle

Skylar is a fun-loving five year old who goes by the nickname Sky. Sky's true passion is baking and cooking. She loves to create her own recipes or "experiments" as she would call it. Sky is creative and enjoys making crafts, coloring, and painting. She loves all the colors of the rainbow and anything unicorn or Disney princess related. She is the sweetest little princess.

Skylar definitely has her own sense of style and will mix and match any outfit. Sky will dress up at home in her princess costumes or fancy dresses and put on a fashion show. Her favorite place to shop is Target; she would shop everyday if she could. Sky is just as smart as she is cute. She loves being with people and truly enjoys when she is able to spend time with her grandparents, cousins, and friends. This five year old is sure to capture your heart with her smile and kindness.

A dress with sparkly gold shoes is a must. Dress is from The Children's Place.

This picture was taken after Sky's first ever haircut this year. This is one of the many different shirts Sky has from Target.

Sky loves dressing up, peach picking in style. Dress is from The Children's Place.

This dress is Sky's all-time favorite because it is rainbow colors. Dress is from Target.

In the Kitchen – One Thing Frozen – by Marcy Lytle

When the grocery hauls were becoming harder, I was told to stock up on frozen items, as fresh would become scarce. I didn't really find that to be true, but I did buy a few frozen items I don't normally purchase. And they turned out to be nice things to have in a pinch, when I wasn't sure what to create for dinner. So, below are some recipes that use at least one thing frozen...and it was fun!

Hopping John

Have you had this dish before? It's basically black-eyed peas over rice with a lot of color added in, and it's a favorite of ours. I decided to buy frozen black eyed peas instead of the usual canned peas. It turns out, the frozen ones take more time to cook, but they taste so fresh!

Ingredients:

- Cooked rice
- Chopped onion
- Chopped red bell pepper
- Thinly sliced celery
- Minced garlic
- Black eyed peas, cooked
- Chopped tomato
- Chopped green onion

In a large skillet over med-hi heat, add olive oil and add onion, bell pepper, celery – saute for about 7 minutes, then add the garlic and cook 30 seconds more. Add the cooked rice and stir. (Make sure your rice is already seasoned as you like it). Add the cooked black eyed peas, and serve the mixture into bowls. Top with the chopped tomato and green onion! We enjoyed this with a side of naan bread.

Spring Pasta

This is a tasty dish and so pretty for this time of year. Tastes so fresh, too!

- 1 lb corkscrew pasta
- Olive oil
- 4 cloves garlic finely chopped
- ½ c Italian style breadcrumbs
- 3 zucchini thinly sliced
- 4 ears corn (I had frozen corn)
- 6 oz Swiss cheese shredded
- Finely chopped basil

In a large pot of boiling salted water, cook pasta and drain – reserving 1 cup of the pasta water. Meanwhile in a small skillet, heat oil and add half the garlic til golden, about 30 seconds. Stir in the breadcrumbs and remove from heat.

In the reserved pasta pot, heat olive oil and add remaining garlic and cook 30 seconds, add zucchini and frozen corn, and cook til tender and starting to brown. Stir in the reserved 1 cup of pasta water. Add 1 cup of the cheese and toss, season with S and P. Stir in remaining cheese and basil into the breadcrumb mixture and sprinkle on top! You're done!

Mango Sorbet

This was literally SO EASY and SO TASTY, I want to make it over and over again!

- 1 pkg (16 oz) frozen mango chunks, slightly thawed (you can use any bag of frozen fruit)
- ½ cup lemonade (or passion fruit juice, your choice)
- 2 T sugar

Place all ingredients in a blender; cover, and process til smooth. Cover and freeze for about 3 hours, then enjoy.

Sausage and Sides

- Sausage link, sliced
- Frozen okra
- Wheat bread (fresh or homemade)
- Potatoes, chopped small
- Onions, sliced
- BBQ sauce (I prefer Stubbs)
- Canola oil for frying

In one skillet, I added some oil and fried the potatoes and onions (seasoned) and removed. I then added the sausage (sliced) and cooked, as well as wheat bread on the side to toast. I removed the toast and added some BBQ sauce to cover the sausage.

Meanwhile, in another skillet, I added oil and let it get hot (this is key – one okra should sizzle when dropped in), then added the okra and cooked until browned. Drain it, salt it - and it's done.

We served this up on our plates, and the flavor combos were awesome!

Tried and True – Words on Walls – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not a big lover of the whole farmhouse décor, but I do like some pieces of it. I also enjoy part of the industrial look and mid-century modern. I'd say I like a mix of a lot of types of décor. And I have noticed the trend of hanging words on our walls! Phrases, sayings, or just one word all displayed in fancy fonts adorn bedrooms and family rooms, and kitchens and more! I recently added a few words of my own to my walls, and I've asked a few friends to share as well:

In the bathroom: I decided to change out a small piece of art seasonally, or perhaps even monthly. But the one I've chosen right now has a single balloon with the phrase "Let it go" written – to read when my guests enter. There's no pun intended, but there could be, if we wanted a laugh. It's just a gentle reminder to let worries go, floating up to the sky to Him, the keeper and healer and protector of all things precious to our lives.

In the kitchen: "Choose happy" caught my eye and I hung this piece of art right above my rolling cutting board cart, where I could see it each morning when I rise. I need this reminder, and so do a lot of us, because our default is grumpy.

Above your photos: It's fun to hang family photos, but with added words, it creates a warm feeling for each one when they view them! Check out this trio holding the kiddos, with "God gave me you" printed above. The kids and the parents are reminded of God's blessings.

On your mantel: Often it's nice to set a grouping on the mantel, with one being word art. Calming words, truth, and reminders are great – especially in different seasons or for holidays! Isn't this "Be at Peace" so pretty for a cozy room? Or "Grateful" speaks volumes, especially during the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving.

Pillow talk: Just one pillow for your sofa or on a bench can speak volumes, sometimes funny sayings! I read recently that the "Let's Stay Home" pillows have lost their appeal for sure! But we love our "I Love Us" pillow, and "I Can't People Today" is just plain honest!

Those letter boards: Have you seen the letter boards where you can switch out and create your own sayings? I have one hanging in my kitchen, and this one is above a coffee bar station in a young mom's house. So cute!

Cross stitch: Did you know this art form is making a comeback? Stitching simple words or images and framing them makes for a super sweet wall! Memorable occasions or family images are the best.

Front and Center: Maybe you have an entire saying you'd like to present in your home, and it can sit on your mantel, surrounded by other décor. We recently saw this one at a holiday festival.

Written on Paint: The actual words don't have to be framed...they can be part of the wall! I love these ideas where it looks as if someone took a pen and wrote a note to the family!

Family sentiment: If there's a phrase, a mantra, or a verse that's special to your family, hanging it on the wall can bring peace and comfort to the parents and the kiddos, as well! Or if there's one word you want to speak life to your relationships, let it sit where you can read it daily. This little "LOVE" triangle was on clearance at Kirklands!

Being at home gives us time to create, redecorate and think...and then present lots of words of wisdom in our homes! We read them when we come and go. And we never forget them and the joy and comfort that came...from words on the walls. You don't have to spend big bucks. You can totally make your own with some wood, metal, markers and paint!



HOME

Practical Parenting – Fears and Family –by Three Moms

We have new contributors to this column – three moms that have nine kids between them! They range in ages 1-10 and these moms have plenty of stories and encouragements and frustrations to share! Each month, they will tackle a question that hopefully most moms of young children struggle with, and share some hope and insight into what's working/not working for them. Hope you enjoy!

This month the question is how to handle the fears of the pandemic as a mom, what those fears are, and how to keep the fear from being part of the kids' emotions, as well. It's something everyone has faced since the world turned completely upside down and all the kiddos are home. Who would have believed schools would be closed, masks would be mandatory, and a new war would be waging – against a powerful virus?

“The conversations about the virus have been a big one at our house.” When the news first came out was the worst because my husband was traveling and it made me nervous. I sounded worried and panicked on the phone, as I was totally in prep mode as a mom – being protective over my kids! That night before bed, my oldest wanted Dad to come home so he wouldn't be sick. Hearing my fear caused him to fear. I realized then that our conversations about the virus needed to be in private and not in front of the kids. We could manage our convos with the kids better, after we talked alone. If I walk in panic or fear, they do, too.

The kids were excited at first about not going to school. But my daughter, age 7, was super sad about missing friends and not being able to have her birthday party. She had been planning it for months, but friends drove by and surprised her - which she loved!

“It's been hardest on me as Mom.” Because of pay cuts, we can't buy all the things I want to give them, or have the fun I want to share. However, our kids are troopers. We just do life. We talk about the Lord. I have to limit social media and news. – I spend a lot of time praying, we pray together as a family, then we stay away from all the updates – *we have normalcy* – and take one day at a time. I want them to know the hope of Christ in every area of life, not just the pandemic – but in finances, too!

“What if one of us gets the virus?” This has been my most troubling thought or fear. My oldest, age 10, had stomach issues and I was completely panicked. I was convinced she had COVID-19 and was beating myself up for letting her ride in the car as we delivered a meal to a grieving family. I thought perhaps she contracted it when the family came outside to greet us. She is fine, thankfully, but I totally worried for a couple of hours. I tried to stay calm in front of her, but ended up talking to my husband and my mom. This was a huge help in calming me down. It's important to phone a friend or family member – *sometimes it helps just hearing another voice* from one that is rooted in faith, to help us out of our funk.

“I'm enjoying the innocence and joy through my girls' eyes.” My girls are 3 and 1, and so we don't have discussions about hardships. However, our oldest does understand that a lot of places are closed. She gets discouraged that she can't go to church or see a friend. She knows the term “corona virus” but she doesn't comprehend what it is. And the biggest

difference both girls have realized is that during this pandemic, Mommy and Daddy are home more often! One day I will have to explain hard things...but not now.

Fun things:

We've most enjoyed our mini white boards –we all 5 have one – and we take the **Three Marker Challenge!** We write a bunch of objects on paper, like giraffe, shoe, bed, etc. and put these in a jar. Then we pick one out to draw. We have a bucket of markers and we have to close our eyes, and draw out only three colors. This has been our favorite family activity! We have to draw things in colors we didn't choose and they come out funky and fun. We all love to draw!

We had a whole **watch party event** for *Trolls, World Tour*. We printed out coloring pages, made a concession stand, got dressed up for the "red carpet," attempted to dye our hair and made troll hair, made a microphone, and had a dance party! (It's a good movie!) It was so nice to focus on something fun – not school, work, or the news. Music and dancing just did something for all of our spirits!

We try to **make a list** of things we are thankful for, every day. Sometimes it's as simple as a backpack or a rock my girls find on our walk.

I Don't Do Teens – Bully Society – by Marcy Lytle

We recently watched the series *Anne with an E* on Netflix, the updated version of *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne is a young teenager when she arrives to live with her new guardians. Almost every show of the series shows us some sort of meanness her peers participate in. They make fun of Anne's hair, they think she's a poor orphan and call her ugly, and all sorts of things. However, there are a few things that enable Anne to get back up, stop crying, and rise above the insulting words and actions around her.

While our kiddos are out of school and home, it might be just the right time to instill in them some confidence and love and help, for when they face the bullies again...

Speak the truth. When Anne arrived home after school and repeated the words spoken to her about her looks, Matthew often spoke truth back to her. Hearing the one who guarded her speak words of truth then quieted the lies from the kids. When our kids are teased, we can speak the truth to them above the lies.

Be a refuge. We can let our kids run into our arms sobbing, until their hearts aren't breaking and they can speak. We can offer comfort and hugs, until the crying stops and communication can take place again. Anne sobbed often, and her once unemotional guardians learned the value of hugging her tight.

Encourage self-confidence. Anne is different from the other kids in many ways. She's tall and skinny, has freckles, and red hair which she despises. She's a dreamer, a romantic, a user of big words, and she gets teased for ALL of it. However, Marilla and Matthew encourage Anne to be herself and be happy with how she's made and her disposition.

Model kindness. If our kids see us bully other parents on the field, on the phone, or make horrible demeaning comments about leaders in our community and nation, they will see that it's normal life to criticize and wish harm upon another. We have to stop that kind of behavior from entering our homes, so that it then doesn't exit our homes in the form our own teens.

Cover them. If bullies are out of hand and causing harm to our kids, we can listen, offer advice on what they can do, or go to authorities. And most of all we can go to the One, the Father of all Fathers, the Protector of our Children – Jesus. He knows how to comfort, direct, and guide us in making decisions concerning our teens. Even if it's just a prayer of thanks around the table, as Anne's family was sure to offer, this trains them to look up.

Prayer is mentioned very often in these teen articles. I'm a firm believer that we often discount its effectiveness because circumstances don't change, in our eyes, when we pray. The Lord's Prayer starts out with Our Father...and that's the way he loves to hear from us...because he cares for our children even more than we do. And he cares for us, too.

We live in a bully society. It's everywhere our kids look, but it doesn't have to be in our homes.

An Adage A Day- The Changing of the Shoes- by Carole Gilbert

One Sunday, during Sunday school, our lesson asked a question about our trust in products, "Has your trust in a product or brand been affirmed or eroded?" I thought about this and how it applies to so many things. My body getting older is one of those things. I guess my trust in my body is being eroded. I've walked with a slight limp for almost a year now still hoping to get over this foot injury, this "thorn in my flesh" as Paul called his in 2 Corinthians 12:7. All the responses in our Sunday school class that morning were nothing short of outstanding. My favorite part of the discussion was about shoes, especially "if the shoe fits, wear it." If you have found shoes or a brand of shoes that work well for you, and you have trust in them, then those are the ones you should buy and wear.

Of course, this proverb, "When the shoe fits, wear it," does mean something else when used in its correct version. Beginning in the late 18th century, it meant that when something is applied to you truthfully, you are to own up to it, like a description or a comment. In our discussion this meaning applied also because we were talking about how well we trust God and his Word and how well we demonstrate it honestly to others. We will most certainly tell everyone when we find a brand of shoes we like, but do we tell others about God? One friend elaborated on this proverb in her style, saying, "If the shoe fits, and is comfortable, buy it in every color." I like her style!

We've just finished the season of our all-weather winter footwear and are changing those for our summer sandals or maybe you prefer a shoeless schedule like me. When I started to write this article, I looked for a picture but decided to hold a little contest on Facebook and the pictures I received of those "knee-high to a grasshopper" little ones in their parents' shoes were so cute it made choosing one really hard. Each picture was a story itself and a precious story at that! When we think of all those little feet and how they got into those big shoes, it makes us smile. It makes us wonder what they were thinking when they stepped into those shoes. What little girl doesn't want to dress up like Mommy and what boy like Daddy. I really thank everyone who participated!

All the pictures captured my heart but the one I chose was a little boy standing in what looks like his daddy's old work shoes. He didn't have to walk a mile in his daddy's shoes to know Daddy is someone he wants to follow in his footsteps. He already wants to step right in. And when this little guy changes from his baby shoes to his big boy shoes, he'll probably have the same character his daddy demonstrates. There's a lot to be said about the shoes we wear.

It's funny how much of our lives are described simply by our feet and what we put on them. A favorite song of mine states, "These boots are made for walking, and that's just what they'll do." Remember this song by Nancy Sinatra? We use it as a saying for inspiration or encouragement to stand firm or as a lesson to someone as the next line says, "One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you."

We have so many descriptions about our lives that we are walking through from idioms, adages, sayings and proverbs. We learn that we must stand on our own two feet and that's after we land on our own feet to recover from having two left feet. We get up and put one foot in front of the other, starting with our best foot forward and we work to get one foot in the door. We keep our feet on the ground and remain steadfast. We don't drag our feet. We dig in our heels and put our foot down knowing our own weakness can be our "Achilles' heel." And towards others, "We don't judge someone until we walk a mile in their shoes."

Then, when we have everything complete that we set out to do, from head to toe, we kick off our shoes and put our feet up to relax. That's where I'm at right now with this older body of mine and my "thorn in my side" and I'm loving every minute. After all, it's almost summertime y'all!

Tiny Living - All We Can Do – by Leyanne Enterline

Tiny living during the world crisis has been a bit interesting, to say the least. There have been many positives along with the negatives. We had been on the road so much that it had been nice to be back in our tiny space.

Since the stay-at-home order has been in place, we have had plenty of time to reorganize, declutter and get some yard work done! The boys have made it their goal to go fishing every day, so we've been able to get outside as much as we can. This has been nice, since the weather has warmed up! We are trying to keep getting that vitamin D!

The boys' school has not changed much, as we were still doing lessons while we were on the road. And since all get-together classes have been put off for now, we have continued with our schooling as if we were on the road! I have the boys document their thoughts on the quarantine, as hopefully they'll never experience anything like this again. It will be neat to look back on it and see all that God brought us through!

The biggest downside to our quarantine has been that both Brian and I have lost our jobs for the time being. We know we will get them back eventually, but we have absolutely no idea when that time will come. We have frantically been applying at different places, but with so many layoffs it's hard to find someone that is hiring! I think it has slowed down even at our local grocery stores, because we have not received a call back from them either...

Literally, all we can do is trust in God.

With no income coming in, we are beginning to get a bit stressed. We are beyond grateful to have our health, though! We are praying that staying at home works to get everybody healthy and back to normal again. It definitely makes me think of all the things we took for granted! Even toilet paper! In no way, in a tiny trailer, can we be hoarders, so it's been difficult when people are frantically buying up things. We don't have the space or the money now to stock pile. Praise the Lord, I had actually bought a larger package of toilet paper than normal (because that's all I could even get!) so we are good for a tiny bit longer.

We are praying so hard for healing of our people and our land quickly. We pray that we all learn something through all of this and become closer as families and friends. Definitely, we can't take life (or toilet paper) for granted.

Remember. Love grows best in tiny spaces!

A Night to Remember – Let the World Know – by Marcy Lytle

There's verse in the little book in the bible called Habakkuk, chapter 2, verse 14, that says this:

*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory
of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

A few verses later in chapter 3, verse 1, it reads:

LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD.

What if, this month of May, we as families across the nations placed reminders in our windows of the knowledge of God and his fame – in our own families? And what if those who drive or walk by see our photos and our words and come to faith in Jesus, as well? What if the lonely smile, the fearful lift their heads, and those who are sad become joyful?

Let's do this!

Preparation: You'll need paper plates, construction paper, paper napkins, computer paper, tissue paper,...all kinds of paper! You'll also need markers, crayons and paint – something to boldly draw and boldly write!

Ask each member of the family to think of an attribute of God that they love. You can choose from the ones listed below, or think of your own, and how to display it in your windows. Here are a few examples:

Paper plate – Someone could draw a big sunflower using the plate. Color it brown and gold, and make a happy face in the center. Across the arc at the top of the plate in bold marker write "Jesus loves you."

Construction paper – Perhaps someone could take blue and green and other colors of paper and make a sky, grass, a sun and then draw a dog. They could write, "The Lord is Good to all!"

Tissue paper – Let little ones squish them into balls and glue onto paper, or older kids make tissue paper flowers, and place this creation under an eave on the front porch in a vase or affixed to a plant that says "Trust in the Lord."

Computer paper – Let one with great penmanship write in their best handwriting an entire verse, and then color in a few of the loops and circles to make it pretty. The verse could be "Be Kind to One Another."

Paper napkins – If you have a decorative paper napkin, let a creative one in your bunch design a place setting and affix it to a large piece of cardboard to set up against a wall on your front porch. They can glue on a paper plate, fold the napkin (and make a ring), draw a fork, spoon, and knife and glue on a paper cup. Underneath they could write, "In everything give thanks!"

There are endless possibilities to share the love of Jesus with the small world we've become now in our own neighborhoods...through our creative arts shared in the windows of our homes

to those who look and see. Just make sure the markers go on the paper and not on the kids' faces...or maybe allow both!

And if we're sitting by the window studying, working, praying or reading, we can look up and wave and smile, as the neighbor looks our way...



YOU

Strengthening Your Core - Plugged In – by Marcy Lytle

I hope, if anything, we have learned the need for community and connection while we have been on lockdown. I woke up thinking about this, this morning, after noticing a few practical things at home like:

If my phone isn't plugged in well to the outlet, it won't charge. That device cannot sit on its own for much more than a day before the battery runs down and my connection with my family and friends is gone. The charging time is necessary in order for the connection time.

While we've been on lockdown and issued stay at home orders, I've missed face to face connections with real people. So yesterday, we rode to a few friends' houses just to wave from the curb while they stood safe distance away. It was SO NICE to see their smiles and their faces, even though I could have seen that on the phone. There's nothing like real connection. Their almost 2-year old smiled nonstop as we waved and talked to her.

If nightlights stay in the drawers and aren't plugged in, their purpose is nil. They're supposed to light up the darkness so we don't stumble over things and fall in the night. But if they're not in the socket, why are they even in our houses?

We have several pretty nightlights we leave plugged in, in our guest bathroom. This is not only for ambience and décor, but to illuminate this one room in the house that has no windows. It's the same with our stories, our tales of how we came into the "light" – if the light's not shining, we need to open the drawer and plug in!

If my iron (yes, I still iron and LOVE it – favorite chore) isn't plugged into the outlet, there's no heat. I can use the iron all day and the wrinkles won't budge, because the heat source was never activated. How dumb would it be to waste hours moving the iron back and forth, to only end up where I started – a wrinkled mess!

Electricity is needed for that iron to work, the cord has to be plugged in, the button pushed...before results can be seen and wrinkle places can be made smooth again.

I have worried some about the aftermath of this pandemic. Will people want to plug in again with connections, or will they forever be afraid of face to face and hide behind masks and walls? Will churches fill up again, or will people be content to tune in at their convenience and switch services if they don't care for this message or that one? Will folks want to gather for family picnics and games, or find that it's too much interaction and stress?

I for one want to stay plugged in to sources that instigate a charge, provide illumination and smooth out crooked spots. The pandemic caused panic and maybe rightfully so. It has caused us to stop all connections in favor of staving off the spread of viruses. But to stop all connections with all people would be a sad result, indeed.

What are your thoughts? Are you staying plugged in to sources that provide you energy, light and power? We have to. We have to stay plugged into truth, love, and faith. Otherwise, we die.

MAY MARVELS

May you love like Jesus loves

May you dance like David danced

May you obey like Noah obeyed

May you wait like Job waited

May you honor as Esther honored

May you have a different spirit like Ruth

May you be as strong as Samson

May you believe like Abram believed

May you judge as Deborah judged

May you pray like Daniel prayed

May you prophesy as Elijah prophesied

May you have visions like Ezekiel had

May you see the Lord as Isaiah saw Him

May you weep for God's people as Jeremiah wept

May you surrender as Mary surrendered

May you follow as Peter followed

May you yield as Hannah yielded

May you encounter Him as Paul encountered Him

May you encourage like Barnabas encouraged

May you dance like Miriam danced

May you sing like the angels sing

May you worship like Mary Magdalene worshiped

May you receive His love like John received His love

May you forgive like Stephen forgave

May you share like the widow shared with Elisha

May you be as wise as Solomon

May you be as understanding as Abigail

May you fear the Lord as Jehoshaphat feared Him

May you build the Kingdom as Nehemiah built

May You run to Him for Himself alone!

AND

May you BE the individual God called you from the beginning
of time to BE

Life in a Nutshell - Self Sabbathing by Jill Pepper Montz

My life can be nuts. And that is no lie, folks. Being a single mom to an extremely social and active twelve-year-old girl comes with a very full, multicolored, and often overlapping calendar of events. Add to that I manage my family's retail stores, called the Pecan Shed, and well you can see where the "nuts" reference fits.

My typical day starts around 5:30am and I usually don't get to stop until well after 8 or 9pm. My SUV is my office/breakroom/storage unit/dressing room/therapy couch. Most days you can probably find enough crumbs and dropped fries under my car seats to make at least a Happy Meal. This time of year, with Texas weather being more difficult to predict than the next lottery numbers, I have everything from parkas and gloves to sunscreen and flip flops and at least 5 folding/stadium chairs.

I rarely have a free evening. Usually the chaos really ramps up after 5pm when it's time to rush from one practice, lesson, or game to the next. Throw in a service organization meeting or a volunteer opportunity here or there and perhaps a church event and that is my life.

Are you as tired as I am? Are you nodding your head as you read? Well, sister, let me just say you are in good company. Just about every mom (and a whole lot of dads) I know is doing all this and maybe more. We are living in a world where the messages seem to be...

- A full calendar means a productive life.
- White space is for unmotivated people.
- Busy kids are the best kids.
- Your kid might miss out or be left behind if he/she doesn't do it all.
- And oh by the way, make sure you are eating well balanced meals, drinking all your water, and working out for at least 30 minutes a day. (Does that Happy Meal count as balanced? It does come with either apple slices or a go-gurt!)

Then one day I heard the words Corona Virus and COVID-19. To be honest, at first, I was too busy to even give it much thought. I chuckled at a few memes on Facebook, made sure I had some basic essentials, but for the most part my life was not altered all that much. Then, in the span of barely a week, life went from normal to me wondering if I was dreaming or in some kind of bad movie.

Schools were cancelled until further notice and I was informed I would be my daughter's "home school teacher." All sporting events and gatherings of any kind were cancelled. We were asked to practice "social distancing" and "voluntary self-quarantining" and then eventually we were told to "shelter in place." All phrases which were new to my vocabulary and way of living.

My once full calendar was now black with marked out events. My retail stores were like ghost towns. My daughter was home. We had no plans. We had nowhere to go...no one to invite over...no alarms to set...no things to pack in the car...no uniforms to wash...no gifts to buy...no nothing (see that double negative...I do *not* make a good teacher!)

All of a sudden I was at a loss as to what to do next. My life used to be a blur of activities and now the days seemed to move at a snail's pace. I found myself antsy and looking for "projects" to fill my time. I cleaned all my closets. Then I painted rooms, doors, and accent walls, cleaned out my garage, weeded my flower beds, and by then it was only Thursday.

I still had an entire weekend (and who knew how much longer) to fill. How was I going to occupy my days, my time, my child, my nerves, my fears, my worries? And then my Bible app gave me the answer.

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for Sabbath." Mark 2:27

God was showing me how these days could be used to practice something I hadn't observed in years or maybe ever in my life...Sabbath. Not only do I not observe Sabbath, but I rarely even think about it. And God was reminding me He created Sabbath for me (and you too). He knows I need to rest and spend time seeking a relationship with Him, so He set forth a special day to do so. But somewhere along the way I stopped taking a day of rest...I stopped taking even an hour to rest...not even a cat nap. I was far from practicing Sabbath.

COVID-19 forced me to Sabbath. It forced me to rest...to slow down...to be quiet enough that I could hear that "still small voice" speak to me. While the world was asking me to be 6 feet away from everyone else, God was asking me to cling to him. I didn't just "shelter in place"...I sheltered in God, His Word, and His wisdom.

When the day comes, where the restrictions on us are lifted, I don't know what life will be like. I'm not sure what the new normal will be. What I do hope is I continue to find ways to incorporate Sabbath in my life. It might not be for an entire week, weekend, or even a full day, but hopefully I will be intentional in carving out time in my life to Sabbath on a regular basis. After all, God made it just for me (and you too)!

Life Right Now – Holding Fast – by Bethany Gomez

Where do I even begin? A lot has changed in such a short amount of time, not only in the world around me, but in my personal life. More to come on that a little later, but we cannot forget that last month the world was shaken from its normal everyday living when COVID-19 began to spread across it like wildfire. There was so much information about it and I couldn't look away. I know I spent way too much time scrolling, reading articles, and watching videos. There was new information popping up every minute, it seemed. I would like to say that the only reason I spent so much time on my phone was because I didn't want to miss anything important, while that is true the other truth was, I just didn't have any self-control. I had to seek forgiveness.

I thought I would share a (my) little quarantine questionnaire:

- Did I feel guilty for getting sucked into the barrage of news and focusing on what everyone else was doing instead of living in the moment? Yes.
- Should I have looked to God for more information and wisdom about all this instead of what the world was saying? Yes.
- Did God condemn me for not keeping my focus solely on Him and not just during this time, but in times past? No, He did not and does not bring condemnation, but He is always slowly convicting me to turn my attention on Him.
- Did I allow a little bit of fear to creep in (mainly fear for others and all the negative ramifications that this will have on a lot of people for many years to come)? Yes.
- Did I pray about all this? Yes, and God's peace came.
- Did I think almost on a daily basis, "It seems like we are living in some kind of Sci-Fi movie and no one can predict the ending?" Yes.
- Did I use all my extra quarantine time wisely? No.
- Did I give myself some grace? It was a struggle at first, but yes.
- Did I organize something in my house? Yes, my closet.
- Did I feel motivated every day during this quarantine to accomplish something? No.
- Did I stay in my pajamas and not brush my hair for at least 3 out of the 7 days of the week? Yes.
- Did I stick to my commitment of taking a little run every day? No, I had to tell myself it is okay to rest.
- Do I feel thankful that I am still getting paid during my school shut down? Yes, 100%. God always provides.
- Do I miss my job and students? Maybe, not so much the job aspect, but I do miss my students, yes.
- Did I learn how to use Zoom? For the most part, yes, and I have been a part of two Zoom prayer meetings with several amazing women of God so far.
- Did I start reading any book(s)? Yes, a book series called the *Chronicles of Narnia* by the beloved author C.S. Lewis. If you haven't read them, you should.
- Did I love all the creativity coming from everyone being cooped up with their families for weeks on end? Yes.
- Am I going to stop this questionnaire anytime soon? Yes.
- Last but not least, am I thankful that God is in control? YES, God is a good, good father no matter what.

All that to say, this introvert in quarantine is doing good even with all the changes going on in my personal life as well that I had alluded to early.

The weekend before everything started to change due to the novel coronavirus sweeping across the world, my sister got a call from my dad letting us know that they were moving back. (Insert a look of shock on my face.) If you have not been following this article for about 10 months or so, then here is a real quick back story.

Last summer my parents got involved with a foster agency in Brenham, which is about two hours away. They committed to being foster parents there for one year. I was skeptical at first, but since they felt led by God to do this I supported them and trusted God to take care of them and us as well.

I cannot go into too much detail about why my parents were unable to finish their one year commitment, but let's just say it had to do with not only their safety but for the safety of one of their foster daughters and her 2 year old daughter.

The weekend before the shelter-in-place order went into effect, on that Tuesday in April, my parents along with their foster daughter and her daughter that I just mentioned (who they want to remain with them during this transition to another foster agency here in Round Rock), came for an extended visit, but in all reality they were moving back. They had loaded up most of their stuff in a moving truck and put it all into a storage unit down the street.

What I thought was going to be just my sister and I stuck in quarantine together turned out to be much different than what I was expecting. While it was comforting having my parents with us during this time, it was yet another big change happening at the same time other changes were happening. And to be honest, I felt overwhelmed. That feeling soon vanished with the fact that God was answering some of our prayers almost immediately. My dad got his old job back that same week they came back for their extended visit. They found an apartment nearby that they can move into while my dad gets their home (AKA our home currently) foster approved and then my sister and I will simply do a switcheroo with them when that is all finished.

Hopefully by the time you are reading this, we are finishing up our shelter in place orders, but who knows. Only God knows! And that is so comforting because He desires good for me and for us all even in the moments where we do not understand what is going on, even in the midst of storms. He also forgives me when I forget to put my trust in Him.

One last thing... Last month we celebrated Easter. Even though this Easter was different from any other, I never want to forget what Jesus did on the cross for me, for us. He made the ultimate sacrifice by dying on the cross and rising on the 3rd day to defeat death on our behalf. This brings me an everlasting hope. I am so, so thankful that God loves me this much.

Romans 5:8

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:

while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

So whatever is going on, I will hold fast to this. I will hold fast to His love.

Healthy Habits – What Comforts You? – by Marcy Lytle

Being comforted and feeling safe and warm and all things fuzzy inside is a big part of feeling healthy. I've seen on the news lately where they have a specialist give words of wisdom on how to keep our minds healthy during this time of hibernating in our usually busy world. All sorts of thoughts and fears attack us and certainly rock the boat and destroy our comfort level, sending many of us into a sea of despair floating too rapidly downstream...

However, during any sort of storm we often take comfort in things that are not good to take comfort in! Let's look at a few of those things and offer some substitutions:

Food. While we all love comfort food, too much of it concentrated over time, without a balance of the healthy stuff leads us to feeling sluggish and overweight and depressed. Once the comfort of the taste and the smell are gone, we feel bad that we ate that huge bowl of ice cream or mashed potatoes, and then we feel guilty. We can ask for an accountability partner, or just make sure we only buy a minimal amount so that we cannot overeat.

Reading. I love to read and escape and get away into another story other than my own story at the moment. Reading is wonderful! However, when we choose to read rather than connect with our family, reading can become hazardous for the health of those we love. We cannot tune out others in favor of a good story. Instead, we can set allotted time for reading per day, and then close the book and put it away. Setting a timer, keeping a log of chapters read per day, can get us back on track with connection instead of rejection.

Television. Movies are great - especially on a stormy night – with a big bowl of popcorn on our laps. I think they're one of the best relaxation things to do! But we know that we need to be careful what we watch, and if we spend half the day on the sofa instead of moving, this comfort can become an unhealthy "inactivity" that causes us health issues down the road. And overeating can occur, as well. So it's helpful to dole out proportions and schedule movie times, just like we did when we actually went to the theater!

Reading and praying. How could we ever do too much of reading God's word and praying? I believe some do. Both are necessary, effective, and good and result in good things. However, sometimes we can become a recluse, overbearing and finger pointing, if we're not careful. Words of judgment can come out of our mouths against our leaders, our city, and even at our family – if we think too highly of our religious order of things. We can balance our prayers to God with our demonstrations of love for our family through serving and playing and giving.

Exercise. People that frequented the gyms or trails or were actively involved in sports can now find themselves obsessing over long walks, demanding time to themselves to exercise at home, and forcing their self-image routines onto kids and family time. Exercise is fantastic and healthy, but if our motivation is solely to look good to feed our vanity – and not mostly for health – it becomes evident to those around us. And we become unpleasant. Instead, we can exercise when it's a good fit for the family activities, we can ask the family to join us and tone down our intensive workouts, and we can practice a lot more breathing and smiling and laughing...all good for the soul.

All of the above things are wonderful. I love them all. But obsessing, to find our own comfort level at the expense of putting others aside, makes those things edge over into the destructive side of life. If balance is an issue that we struggle with, we can pray and ask God to show us how to consider others, relax and trust, and enjoy all things in moderation and fun.

Moving Forward - Leaning In – by Pam Charro

These are interesting and challenging times, for sure. I am, by nature, a very outgoing and sociable person and it's been difficult lately to not be able to gather with my friends. I think it's been especially hard to not be able to go to church; while I am so very grateful for technology, worshipping online just isn't the same. It's easy for me to start feeling spiritually disconnected during this time.

Yet I'm also sensing an increase of grace available to us right now. To me, it seems God understands that we are weakened as a body and he is leaning in even closer than normal so that we will rely on him in such a challenging time. While it can be tempting to eat and sleep myself into a coma, watch movies until my brain cells all die, or talk on the phone with loved ones all day long because I finally have all of this extra time, this type of "powering through" will not give me peaceful sleep at the end of the day.

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah was exhausted, overwhelmed, and afraid for his life. God showed up for him in his trial, but he was not in the noise. In the same way, I believe he is waiting for us to go into our prayer closets so he can gently whisper his peaceful assurance to us. We don't know how long this time of uncertainty will last and the only way we can endure the weeks and months ahead is to limit the distractions and be still in his presence.

Take courage my heart
Stay steadfast my soul
He's in the waiting
He's in the waiting
Hold onto your hope
As your triumph unfolds
He's never failing
He's never failing
-- Kristene DeMarco

He is so ready to be everything we need if we can just be still. He cares; and he is leaning in to be near.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Take Grace – by Bekah Holland

I hope that when you read this, the world is a little less scary and filled with a lot more hugs. However, while I'm writing this, I've been home with my family for 4 weeks, 2 days, 7 hours and counting. That's 32 days for my fellow math challenged folks.

Let me start by saying I am incredibly blessed and privileged to have a job that allows both my husband and me to work from home without a big upset. We are healthy, our kids are healthy, we have a home and food and haven't run out of toilet paper....yet. And I am grateful. That said, I don't know about anyone else, but I have been spending much more time on social media and following news outlets, searching for information, making sure we are not only taking care of ourselves, but also trying to safe guard those around us who need some extra protecting. It's been an overload of information, horror stories, desperation and real fear from people all over the world.

But what came next surprised me. It shouldn't have, I guess, but it did. People started posting some helpful suggestions. Which is a great idea, right? I mean, we need to find some good in the middle of the blah. Now while I was looking for anything that might brighten my outlook, (like the penguins on field trips while the aquariums and zoos are closed), I started running across article after article whose authors suggest readers use this opportunity to create beautiful art projects with our children, all while peacefully interacting together. And that we should take this bless-ed chance to learn a new language, and teach our children to bake bread from scratch, grinding our own flour, maybe write the next great American novel, sing kumbaya in a circle of love and harmony. Okay, I made that last one up, but you catch my drift.

Now, please please please...if you are an amazing hippie hearted soul, whose love language is baking and you homeschool your children in real life and this togetherness brings you joy....you are a magical unicorn, and I hope you embrace this and treasure every moment. In case anyone is wondering, I'm not a magical unicorn. I'm more of a one horned goat, tripping over my own feet, ramming my head into walls and whining loudly. Now don't get me wrong, I have basically been training my whole life to have a job where leggings are my daily uniform. I am awesome at that! But the rest of this is much more challenging. Like finding ways to navigate my work calendar and meetings while my husband and I share an office and us finding a healthy way to vent our frustrations. And I'm feeding these people approximately 17 meals a day as I juggle conference calls while helping my kids navigate online learning (a very big shout-out to all educators-you are the real MVPs. You all deserve a billion dollar raise. Jesus loves you. The end.).

Almost every day since early March has resulted in my crying in the kitchen. It's overwhelming, the sheer magnitude of a global pandemic, on top of trying to manage a life without freedom outside of the confines of our house. Trying to ensure my kids feel safe, and seen, and encouraged and help them navigate self-learning, and try to help with this new math, for the love of everything good and holy? It's just a lot. Too much, actually. So I decided to be real. Or real-ish.

You don't want to see my unmade bed or room-sized version of a junk drawer, or the dishes that don't get done every day. But those things are my reality. My husband and I didn't have time before to get everything done, so with all the extra stuff piled on our plates right now, my house did not magically become pristine and organized. We don't make gourmet meals (ever)

or even remember to take the laundry out of the wash before having to re-wash it again. And again. True story. I could go on.

However, in the middle of one of my epic kitchen meltdowns, my husband gave me a gentle reminder, which, bless his heart, he probably wanted to shake me, but held me close instead. He reminded me that we are in survival mode here. There aren't some grand set of parameters that make me a success or failure as a wife or a mom, or a human for that matter.

He reminded me about grace.

We all need a little grace. Our kids are safe and loved, even when they have their own meltdowns and turn into awful gremlin versions of themselves. We are always fed, even if it's cereal for 5 meals a day. And I don't just need to offer grace to my family. I need to offer it to myself as well. God didn't offer his redemption and grace just to others, He offered it to me. Freely. I need to be generous with myself because He loves me bigger than my biggest storm. Thankfully, I have a partner who loves me enough to see where I'm struggling and remind me that I'm gracefully broken, and gracefully loved and gracefully forgiven.

I needed to be reminded that this isn't a contest. I'm not vying for the #1 WIFE/MOM/HUMAN spot. And I most definitely don't need to continue competing with this small pretty picture I see from others around me. Because most people don't want to show you the mess. No one wants to post a picture of their kitchen table doubling as a laundry table and dishes sitting on the counter because there isn't any more room in the sink, or the Cheezits wrappers shoved under their kid's bed. We think those things make us look "less than" to the ladies in our book club, or their mother in law, or Karen from PTA. No one wants to tell the story about the fight they had with their spouse because all this togetherness is A LOT!

We think if we can't do it all, we aren't enough.

And yes, there are people who manage to have it all together and cleaning is your love language, ya'll keep on keeping on (although you should know I will always picture in my mind that you have a closet like Monica on *Friends* where you shove all the things that don't have a home...don't tell me it's not true...I refuse to hear you). That's awesome for you! I have stuff that makes me great at life too (but it's definitely not that). We all have strengths and weaknesses. That's okay. It's not, no matter what social media says, a competition.

Find things that bring light to you and your people during the tough times. If those things are learning Mandarin or cleaning the baseboards, rock on with your bad selves. If watching a movie with takeout for the 8th time that week is more your speed, keep up the good work. If hiding in your closet with leftover Easter candy, praying that no one finds you, that's okay too. You aren't alone. You aren't failing. There is an offer of grace right where you are. So take it, hold it, and write a reminder on your hand if you tend to forget. You are enough. You win by still showing up for your partner, for your family, your people and for yourself.

"Every time you fall down, at the bottom of every hole is grace.

Grace waits in broken places. Grace waits at the bottom of things.

Grace loves you when you are at your darkest worst, and wraps you in the best light.

Grace seeps through the broken places and seeps into the lowest places, a balm for wounds."

Ann Voskamp

Date Night Fun – May Flowers – by Marcy Lytle

I'm writing this article in April, with no idea if we will be venturing away from our homes come May or not. Or will we still be sheltering in place? It's all madness, isn't it? Last month, we provided laughing for our date night ideas, and this month we're thinking flowers – those beauties that bloom in May – might be a great focus for connection with him!

Flowers to draw: Pinterest has so many draw tutorials for flowers! How fun it would be to find a field of flowers, your own flower garden, or even flowers on line and both sit down to sketch and then color in the flowers – and then frame them – to hang somewhere in your house. Maybe on the back patio! Try baking some simple scones to enjoy while you draw!

<https://www.pinterest.com/hmary/how-to-draw-flowers/>

<https://laurenslatest.com/simple-scone-recipe/>

Flowers to eat: Remember those nice edible arrangements people order and deliver to friends? Why not make one of your own? Take the fruit you have, shape it by cutting with knives, skewer it and then arrange it in a pretty jar. Then eat it! Add cheese and crackers, and you've got yourself a picnic! Check out this video for a great idea to get started.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhLrI2bN9vE>

Flowers to plant: Order seeds and start a flower garden in pots or in your yard. Order together, short ones and tall ones, draw out a sketch of where you'll plant each (read the planting directions for spacing and sunlight) and enjoy this creative activity together! Enjoy this YouTube video before you start, for inspiration.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgbbSI24r10>

Flowers to arrange: Have you ever learned to arrange flowers “properly?” Now's the time! Or if you already know, teach him and make it a LIVE video – how fun would that be? Or vice-versa if he knows how and you don't!. If you have flowers or shrubs or branches you can trim and use, go for it. If not, make some flowers and then arrange them! I love these ideas – click here!

<https://www.bhg.com/gardening/flowers/garden-fresh-flower-arrangements-from-your-backyard-281474979506333/>

Flowers to give: Virtual flowers. There IS such a thing! If you have an evening set aside for giving back, consider sending virtual flowers to a few friends with a note of encouragement. Each of you picks another couple to brighten their day.

http://www.iflowers.com/vir/vir_newgallery_date.asp

Maybe you can think of other flower “dates” to pursue and experience with him. You could even create a garage scavenger hunt to find 7 things each and then arrange them in a pretty presentation to each other! How fun would that be?

April showers bring May flowers...enjoy.

Over 40 Years – Solutions – by Marcy Lytle

Last month I talked about road rage, when traveling with your spouse in a car over miles and miles. It can get testy for sure. And now, after being confined to our houses for weeks and weeks, working 24/7 together, there have been new issues that have popped up – both good and bad. I'm sure we've all encountered them with our kids, elderly parents, and yes...our spouses.

I found myself some days just connected at the hip to him, because in this scary life right now, I don't want to be separated. It's bad enough being separated from our kids, so I don't want to let my husband out of my sight! I took my laptop and rode with him, since he still had to inspect properties. I made sure he wore his mask, stood 6 feet away, and wiped his hands when he got back in the truck. These rides also provided me a way to get out of the house for much needed mental health!

However, I was invading his space somewhat...commenting on his driving, asking him why he did certain things, voicing my hunger at inopportune times, and more. And we found ourselves bickering a bit!

Back at home, I often felt listless and stir crazy. I'm NOT a homebody, as so many are. I talked to many friends that didn't mind being stuck at home at all. They found it satisfying to putter around and do projects and hang out, and chill. I don't mind that part of the day, but I want busyness, schedules, and lists of things to do!

So here we sat, a few weeks in, and I realized that in order to be pleasant to my husband that I was not seeing all day long and night, I needed to get myself back on track for ME – and for HIM – and for US. We both still had work to do on the weekdays, but it was the nights and weekends that really got to me and caused me to sigh, fidget and pick...

I finally made lists. I've done it for a couple weekends in a row now, and it's saved my sanity and I'm sure made my husband pleased as well. Because it restored some order to my life!

I made a list for nighttime activities we could choose from: car dates, puzzles, shows, games, small projects, long walks, back patio visits, etc. – a mixture of in the house and out.

However, the weekend schedules were and still are my favorite. My usual activity was to schedule weekend fun on Friday mornings after reading our local news with all of the events/happenings around town. However, that section now only had movies to watch and takeout places to visit. I was so over movies!

Here's what one weekend's schedule looked like:

FRIDAY

EXERCISE (we picked Jazzercise from YouTube)

PICNIC ON THE FLOOR (used fun dishes and finger food)

MOVIE (binged watched *Anne with an E*)

SATURDAY

FEARLESS BOOK/MAX LUCADO – TEXT GROUP (encouraged our friends after reading the chapter)

DELIVER PAPER TOWELS AND GIFT CARDS (to our kids who were moving, but we couldn't help!)

MAIL PACKAGE AMAZON (dropoff facility still open)

LUNCH OUT EAST SIDE SOCIAL? AND GET FOOD (a coffee shop that offered fresh bread and deli meat)

DRAFTHOUS.COM MOVIE – EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN (didn't watch this, more *Anne with an E*)

SUNDAY

WASH AND PAINT ROCKS (for our garden – gonna be so cute)

CHURCH ONLINE (staying connected and fed and challenged)

LUNCH (that deli ham and bread from yesterday)

MUELLER FARMERS MARKET - GET SUCCULENTS. (never got to this)

DRIVE BY CURBSIDE WAVES (great to see friends – just texted before we came)

AMUSEMENT PARK/SKETCH/MUSIC/EAT (no time – our schedule was too full!)

EXTRAS: CLEAN PHOTOS/EMAILS, GO THROUGH PHOTOS, UPLOAD VACAY PHOTOS

Just this simple solution of making a schedule brought me so much order to the chaos, contentment to my connection with my husband, and peace to my mind. And...we argued less because he's not struggling with staying at home – but I am. So his other half now is happy and amused once again...



ENCOURAGEMENT

Rooted in Love - Laundry Worship – by Kaelin Scott

What's the one chore that you dread more than all the others? Which one do you look forward to least of all? For a long time, I detested doing the dishes because we lived in a house with no dishwasher, and I had to wash every single thing by hand. It was a pain. (First world problems, right?) But when we moved and got a dishwasher, it wasn't so bad. And since it's essentially a daily chore, my dislike for doing dishes gradually faded away. Instead, I loathed folding laundry. Especially once I had two kids. It's crazy how babies are so tiny yet produce so much laundry. Between spit-up and blowouts, they go through several outfits a day – and sometimes mama does too. Plus there are all those bibs and tiny little socks that get lost in the washer on a regular basis. And when your husband works on a ranch, he can produce some pretty dirty clothes as well.

I do laundry on a weekly basis, and for a long time it was my least favorite day of the week. But then I remembered what it says in Colossians 3:23-24:

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord,
not for human masters, since you know that you will receive
an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.
It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

It was like a lightbulb going on inside my head! Yes, I'm washing and folding and putting away mountains of clothes for my family every week. But more importantly, I'm doing it for Jesus. And if I'm doing it for Him, then I should do it well and with a joyful attitude. If I'm working for Jesus, I should do it with a smile and be thankful for the work.

I stopped looking at laundry day as a chore and started seeing it as an opportunity to worship, and now it's one of my favorite times during the week. Sometimes I turn on worship music while I fold the clothes, and my kids join in singing and dancing around the room. Other times, I simply pray and listen for God's gentle whispers while I work. And I've found that the more I listen, the more He speaks. Several times, in the middle of folding a pair of footie pajamas, I've had to stop, close my eyes, and bow my head. I've even been moved to tears during this special time with the Lord. By inviting Him to join me during these moments, I've invited myself to experience divine joy and peace.

When I changed my attitude about doing laundry, I unknowingly changed the outcome. I no longer look at it as something I *have* to do, but see it as a chance to experience God. No, it doesn't magically make the clothes any cleaner or my folding any neater, but it brings me something so much greater. It does help that my son is out of the spit-up/blowout phase, and my daughter is getting old enough to help put some of her own clothes away. But the miracle is not the efficiency with which the chore gets done; the real miracle is the heart behind it.

Chores don't have to make us cringe. They can be a growing experience, filled with joy and pleasure, if we look at them the right way. I challenge you today to do your least favorite chore or task as if you are doing it for Jesus alone. Invite Him to work alongside you and spend time with Him while you tackle whatever job it may be. You might be surprised at how your attitude changes and maybe you'll hear those gentle whispers, too. True joy is found in the midst of ordinary circumstances, including those tasks you may not love but have to get done. Folding laundry, washing dishes, changing diapers, cooking dinner, vacuuming floors, scrubbing toilets – whatever the job may be, there are two ways to go about it. You can approach it with dread

and a grouchy attitude, or you can do it in love and make it an act of worship. The second way is much more satisfying, I promise!

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without a fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.

Philippians 2:14-16

Suddenly, life as we've known it has changed. The change was so sudden and extreme that you know exactly what I'm talking about without me having to explain. It's difficult to find words right now that convey the intensity of this moment. In God's great eternal time-table, this moment, whether it lasts two months, two years, or two hundred years, may be a turning point for many of us, and, hopefully, for the world at large. I have hope—fearsome hope—that this is true for me, and for all those who seek the things above, and not below.

Suddenly, my world-view has expanded and the world has contracted, all at the same time. More than ever, it's clear that the “the world” is shaky ground and the warning not to fix my eyes on it hits home. I can't see or understand everything God is doing, but I recognize the signs of the times. I pray into it, agreeing with God's unfolding unfathomable plan while, at the same time, asking for mercy for all those affected and for the groaning lost world. I pray for big-time mercy now and courage for the future.

For several months, even before this *suddenly* came, I've had nagging thoughts about wasting time, about habits I'd slipped into, about giving in to distractions too often. I love God's gentleness, but I also love his relentless fierce love that doesn't let me get away with slack. Suddenly, he's given me a perfect opportunity to, once again, realign myself. *Go deeper, Lord...help me not to be lulled by the comforts and pleasures of the day when things go back to normal. Let this be my new normal, acutely aware that “suddenly” can happen anytime.* This inner transformation is a constant work, but sometimes it's the removal of a splinter, sometimes it's major surgery, and it takes courage to face major surgery.

It is written that the Day would come. Many of us have longed for it and prayed for it. Is it true that a day is as a thousand years to God? It seems that way sometimes, and so it could be another thousand years. But what if it comes *suddenly*? No one can know, and so I need courage to face the “suddenlys” to come, whether they pertain to the day of Christ's return, or to the afflictions that serve to draw me closer. In some ways, I want things to go back to “normal”, and some things will—I'll eat at a restaurant, see my family and friends, shop for frivolous things—but with a new awareness. I won't be content with “normal” because this first-time-ever major surgery that's happening is changing me. If I'm reading right, there is more to come; but, I'm praying for, receiving, and taking courage. The Lord our God is with us always, and in everything.

John 16:33 “I have spoken these things to you in order that you may have peace in Me. You have affliction in the world, but take-courage— I have overcome the world”.

Moving Forward - Leaning In – by Pam Charro

These are interesting and challenging times, for sure. I am, by nature, a very outgoing and sociable person and it's been difficult lately to not be able to gather with my friends. I think it's been especially hard to not be able to go to church. While I am so very grateful for technology, worshipping online just isn't the same. It's easy for me to start feeling spiritually disconnected during this time.

Yet I'm also sensing an increase of grace available to us right now. To me, it seems God understands that we are weakened as a body and he is leaning in even closer than normal so that we will rely on him in such a challenging time. While it can be tempting to eat and sleep myself into a coma, watch movies until my brain cells all die, or talk on the phone with loved ones all day long because I finally have all of this extra time, this type of "powering through" will not give me peaceful sleep at the end of the day.

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah was exhausted, overwhelmed, and afraid for his life. God showed up for him in his trial, but he was not in the noise. In the same way, I believe he is waiting for us to go into our prayer closets so he can gently whisper his peaceful assurance to us. We don't know how long this time of uncertainty will last and the only way we can endure the weeks and months ahead is to limit the distractions and be still in his presence.

Take courage my heart
Stay steadfast my soul
He's in the waiting
He's in the waiting
Hold onto your hope
As your triumph unfolds
He's never failing
He's never failing
-- Kristene DeMarco

He is so ready to be everything we need if we can just be still. He cares; and he is leaning in to be near.

Simple Truth - Greater is He – by Erica Simmons

As a Christian I have always found tremendous peace in the fact that no matter what happens, all I have to do is choose to let go of all my problems to my Savior who died on the cross for me to have that peace that passes all understanding. I don't always make that choice immediately but I do usually make it relatively quickly. During those times, I often think of the sentiment of religion being the opiate of the masses, using my faith, trusting in it takes away the pain that so often comes with living life on this side of heaven. I am not ashamed of it and everyone (and I mean everyone) has the same choice, but not all choose faith as their option. Recently, I was faced with a deep loss of expectation that I did handle the way I have handled the curve balls life often brings. As a result, I struggled with every facet of my life and I am now just beginning to find the peace that has been my comfort, but the experience taught me some things about myself and my faith.

First, let me confess that for the last four months or so I lived the life of a hypocrite and I don't say that lightly. For years I worked the youth at our church and one of the things that I strived to help them understand is what *hypocrite* truly means. I stressed that being a hypocrite is judging or giving someone advice about something that you are actively and participating in yourself. What it is not is giving some guidance in a situation that you yourself might be struggling with. We all have our stumbling blocks, we know what to do and most times we choose the right thing. But every once in a while we might not; and when we do, we are repentant and truly work to avoid making that choice again.

For me, I purposely chose not to follow the advice that I have for years given to someone who has come to me for advice when struggling with a difficult season in their life. When I finally shared this with my life group members, one of them asked me if I was angry with God and my answer was, "No." I was not angry with God during this time. I often talked to Him and acknowledged the moments where I felt He was talking to me. I have since realized that I was in a season of mourning and grief over something that was deeply fundamental to me and having things not turn out the way I wanted was very painful for me. Even though I know my Heavenly Father wanted me to trust Him with my pain, I did not for a long time. However, He continued to meet me where I was.

Second confession...I systematically cut off people in my life that I knew would bring me comfort through God's word. I did not want to let go of my grief and in doing so I engaged in the single greatest moment of escapism in my life. I knew it and I did not care. I did not care that it was

impacting how I went about doing my job. I just did the minimum to get by and came home and lost myself in the one thing that made me happy, reading. In so doing, I was not Erica, hurting and struggling to deal with the loss of expectations. I was whatever character I was reading at the time, strong, smart and overcoming all the obstacles to achieve the final goal. As the next character I knew I would not fail, because the heroine never fails in their story. Luckily, I have a few heroines in my life, who although were being pushed away by me, knew how to pray and continue to surround me in prayers.

During this season, I was putting myself in a truly vulnerable position. There is a verse that talks about the enemy roaming around looking for those he can devour (1 Peter 5:8) and I did that to myself. I was the sheep that voluntarily separated myself from the herd. I chose to lick my wounds alone instead of trusting the God who has always proven to be faithful. Because of this choice, I made it so much easier for the enemy to target and attack me, but I also learned an irrefutable truth: *greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world.*

Even after weeks and months of closing myself off from my God, I learned that my faith is not something I establish daily; it is a knowledge that is so IN me that it cannot be diminished in seasons of famine, even if it was a self-induced famine. I know this because in the times of my greatest vulnerability I never once was tempted by my greatest stumbling block. The chains that my Father broke in my life over a year ago were truly broken. The astounding thing is that this deliverance was the basis of the lost expectations that sent me down the tunnels of despair in the first place.

One of the hardest things about hearing from God is not applying **our expectations** to His message. The good news is that through it all, God knew my heart to know and understand Him in this situation even when it looked even to me that I just wanted to wallow in my pain. I guess my final message would be this...

If we love Him, because we know He loves us, we have to trust that who is IN us is GREATER than who is in this world, and that includes this flesh we wear. God is greater than our own doubts, fears, struggles and pain, He is greater than our own understanding of even ourselves.

Unearthly Thing - “Does This Lipstick Go with My Fear and Anxiety?” – Angela Dolbear

Red lipstick is one of my favorite things. It makes me feel dressed up, and put together.

Even during the current climate of social-distancing, with sparse other cosmetics applied to my face, I will go through the steps of applying red lipstick (see the quick “How To” guide at the end of this article). The pop of powerful color on my face suggests confidence. Even when I don’t feel it...like now.

I have so many tubes in varying shades of orange-red, true red, blue-based red, and even oxblood red. There is always a tube of red lipstick (and a matching red lip liner) in my handbag.

Today’s lippie is more of a coral red. It is the beginning of spring, and the color is vibrant, like the new leaves just sprouting on trees around my home in Nashville, TN. It matches the season perfectly.

The lipstick is a new sample I was excited to try from [Guerlain](#), one of the oldest cosmetic companies in the business. Very pricey, and very French, but also, very lovely. I feel a little like Audrey Hepburn. Feminine, with a hint of feistiness.

Realistically, the “I can do it!” confidence that comes from wearing red lipstick originally stems from tapping into being who God has made me--a woman who unabashedly lives her love for vintage and retro style. Which in turn starts many conversations where I can bring up my faith! And how lovely it is when God brings me special gifts, like luxurious French lipstick for free.

I wish I was consistently aware of these gifts. But lately, not so much.

I live with chronic anxiety, like a creepy intrusive roommate. It’s a leftover side effect from a stroke I endured 2 years ago, which damaged the speech and language portion of my brain. Not good for a writer, but I can now testify with certainty that God is good, because He is healing me.

Ordinarily, I suppress the lurking disquieted uneasiness anxiety brings, since I know that it is not real. It’s just the chemicals in my brain playing evil scientist. But when a large and looming situation comes along, I am easily overwhelmed. Like now.

I feel it skulking inside me. Just below the surface. Anxiety, dense and arduous. I try to push it away. Shove it down.

At the time of writing this article, the COVID-19 quarantine persists, and will continue another month or more. This forces the anxiety back to the surface, where it tries to confine me in its thick prickly cloak.

News of the virus is everywhere. It has taken the lives of notable country music artists here in Nashville. I pray for it to leave the earth and take as few people with it as possible.

Last month, I wrote about a practical list of things to do in difficult circumstances called [**“A Practical Guide for surviving \(and thriving through\) most everything in life”**](#). I read through the list, carefully applying each step like heavily pigmented dark crimson lip color.

The anxiety begins to break up. Its opaque smothering dissipates. It is another special gift from God when He speaks to you through your own writing!

Following the first point on the guide, I opened BibleGateway.com to a verse I heard in church last Sunday. In [Luke 12:22-32](#), where Jesus describes how God provides for us:

And He said to His disciples, For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Yes! I exclaim to myself. I make a mental note to post these words on my refrigerator, and also in my dressing room, in a fabulously big font, for inspiration and memorization. Jesus continues in the passage to illustrate His point:

Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!"

Wow. The Creator of the universe is telling me, and you, we are much more *valuable* to Him than we realize. Just *wow*.

Also, I *love* ravens. They are ominous creatures, with a distinctive call. Actually, I am drawn to most things with a gothic style. When I was 7 years old, I wanted to marry Eddie Munster, of *The Munsters* television show. I liked his house, and his parents were cool. And then Andy Gibb came along, and well, things changed...

I used to suppress my gothic style, especially at church. But God always reminds me to be myself. I am useful to Him when I am my true self. The main character in my first novel, [The Garden Key](#) shares this same experience (write what you know, right?).

Remembering all the times God has used me, especially for the good of others while I was being my original created self helps ease anxiety, because I can confidently say to myself,

God is good.

The rest of the verses in Luke 12:25-32 tells me not to worry—again! (I *so* need the repetition). I love when Jesus says, “Consider the lilies...” describing how magnificently He created them, and how much more God will lovingly and exquisitely cover me, His daughter.

Such beautiful words. Worry and anxiety don’t stand a chance against the big love the Father has for us. Such total care, given to us gladly by God.

Last Sunday, while “attending” [online church](#) during the COVID-19 quarantine, my pastor said that anxious fear and faith are incompatible. Fear and faith *cannot* dwell together. *Whoa*.

I have faith in Jesus, my Savior, so I ask myself, why all this fear and anxiety?

I have seen God provide for me so many times. Thanks to Instacart, my household is well stocked with good food during this stay-home mandate to help stop the spread of the virus. God has made it so neither my husband Tim, nor I, with a super compromised immune system due to Scleroderma, need to venture out into the world. We can do our part to stay in, and we are well-provided for. God is good.

I have faith. And I see the evidence of it. So all fear and anxiety needs to go. I will seek God's kingdom (like now, as I write about it) and I will trust Him.

As our Earth proceeds on its journey around the Sun, and large space objects and meteors are hurdling and smashing about in the universe, we are kept safe by our Creator. Meanwhile He also clothes us, and feeds us, and cares for us in so many unimaginable ways. So I have true confidence in my Heavenly Father.

No need for red lipstick to feel confident and worry-free. It's just for fun.

A Quick how-to have lovely red lips all day (or at least until you eat something...I have never been able to eat and not need to reapply my lipstick after...):

1. Exfoliate your lips gently. Whenever my lips have been dry, I will lightly brush over them with my toothbrush while brushing my teeth.
2. Apply a lip balm. Just a little. I like [Carmex](#). I dab my lips a little after application, to make sure it soaks in.
3. Apply a good concealer over your lips, and blend into your face. I only use [timeBalm concealer by theBalm cosmetics](#) (I use it under my eyes too – so good!). It's a little pricey, but the company often has half-price sales. Sign-up for emails!
4. Apply red lip liner, with careful attention to your cupid's bow. My favorite lip liner has been discontinued, so I am on the hunt for a viable candidate for replacement while I guard my back-up stock of my fave.
5. Apply your favorite red lipstick, directly with the tube, or use a lip brush. So many to choose from. Drug store brands are good, or go into (or shop online at home) Ulta or Sephora and treat yourself to the quality of a prestige brand like Becca or Urban Decay, or even Lancome (smells lightly of roses, so lady-like!). Again, sign-up for emails to get the heads-up on sales.
6. Hold a tissue (or a paper towel – less lint) up, and press it lightly between your lips. This will prevent lipstick from getting on your teeth.
7. Smile! You look lovely. And know you are loved hugely, by God Himself.

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FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – A Day or Two – by Marcy Lytle

A few months back, we had some visitor at our church from a local outreach called Teen Challenge. Our entire congregation was moved to tears as young (and older) men shared their stories of abuse and neglect and sorrow, stories that were difficult to hear and even comprehend. Of course, many were prompted to sign up to support this group...after the service was over.

A couple decades ago, my daughter had learned in school about the starving kids in Africa and she too was moved beyond words with concern about them, as she came home and talked nonstop about the situation. Her younger brother heard her, too. It was quite something to listen to her share with us what she'd learned about little children and their lack and need of the basics of life.

Fast forward a few months from that visit by those men with incredible stories, and life has happened, a pandemic has swept the world, and time has gone by. Those stories are becoming a distant memory and my heart that was stirred to tears is now stirred by other things. No longer are those stories in the forefront of my mind, because other things have moved them back in the recesses...

Fast forward just a few days from my daughter and her reaction to the starving children, we were out shopping for clothes. She piled up more than a dozen outfits to try on, and her younger brother once again observed. He came over to me and whispered in my ear, "I guess she's forgotten all about the starving children in Africa." It was so funny...but not.

My point in relaying those two stories is to note how in a day or two, a week or a month, we forget the stirring that happens in our hearts. It's why we need reminders, notes, calendars, and all sorts of things to remind us of the important. This all made me wonder how long it will be, once this pandemic is passed, before we are all right back to our "normal" life and the fear of being in public will be behind us. Or will it?

I also wondered how long pain or trauma has to last before it makes a lifetime impact on our actions and reactions? If the pandemic was over in two weeks, like we all hoped it would be in the beginning, I'm pretty sure life would have resumed and nothing would have changed. But the longer the isolation and prohibitions, will we be changed forever?

Will be more cautious in the future, giving up our usual shaking of hands?

Will we avoid crowds from now on, keeping our faces covered indefinitely?

I don't have the answer to that, but I do know one thing. Hard times are for learning lessons. And if we don't learn the lessons, we might have more hard times of the same kind. I'm not quoting any scripture here. I'm just noting the obvious. Any parent knows that a one word "No!" doesn't keep a child from doing wrong. It usually takes several reprimands, loss of a privilege, taking away pleasures, and modeling of the right way to act, before a child even wants to consider changing for the good.

I'm curious to see how this plays out, when our nation resumes work fully, takes to the crowded highways once again, and frequents all of the pleasure places we have missed so much.

Will family connection still be a priority, with games and outings and pure clean fun?

Will rest and relaxation now be duly noted as a necessity in order to survive and thrive?

I don't have the answers, and only time will tell. But I really hope we don't load our arms with piles of purchases and forget...and I really hope that the tears that flowed will still flow...as we repent, pray, and look forward to a great reaction of good that lasts...more than a day or two.

FRESH THYME – Face the Day – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever awakened way too early, like 3am, and you're wide awake and cannot sleep? Once in a while that's not so bad, but waking like that when you've been stuck at home for days is not a good way to start the day. When it happened a few times, due to worry or just circling thoughts about this crazy current world, I was determined to go back to sleep. I did not want to face the day THAT early. If I got on up, by 8am I'd be ready for the day to be end...and it would be just starting!

I'm betting that most of us have not wanted to face many days, as of late.

- We don't want to face another day searching for groceries or toilet paper on line.
- We don't want to face another day of layoffs or pay cuts.
- We don't want to face another day of the news alerting us to the new "order" of things
- We don't want to face another day of increased numbers of cases.
- We don't want to face another day of being overworked, because our job is essential.
- We don't want to face another day of paying bills, when there's no money in the bank.

You get it. There are countless reasons we don't want to face the day, whether we wake up early or sleep in. Just getting up and getting dressed and showing up is an effort, when there are things on our agenda that are unpleasant and hard. And yet...we have to face the day...because the time clock is ticking and it just won't stop.

Early morning will give way to noontime lunch, and the afternoon will soon disappear with the evening sunset. And we can look back and observe whether or not we faced the day well...or we pulled the covers over our heads and pretended that day never happened.

So how in the world DO we face the day, when the day is just not pretty? We read the Word and make ourselves smile, we sing a tune, we dance few steps, and we give thanks.

Psalm 118:24

This is the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it.

This is a familiar verse, but let's break it apart. This day, whether it's one we like or not, is another day we've been given, another day he has made the sun to rise, so it's gift to us. What we do with that gift is up to us. And he tells us what to do...

We are to rejoice and be glad. Rejoicing and being glad are not just responses we can only offer when life is good and pleasant. These two can be choices we make, even when life is just not faceable (is that a word?).

I'm thinking that if we choose to rejoice and be glad, solely because this is the day – the gift – he's given us, then we can face it with determination and the will to give thanks. Even if our eyes are wide open at 3am.

FRESH THYME – Sunrise or Sunset – by Marcy Lytle

Which do you prefer the most...the sunrise or the sunset? And which do you observe the most?

I observe the sunset way more than I do the sunrise. I'm an early riser, but I never step outside to watch the sun rise. On a few occasions, when we've had an early flight, I've seen the sun rise and it's spectacular. But for the most part, 99% of the time, I see the sunset more than the sunrise. Yet, each display is tremendous viewing!

Sunrise comes right after the darkest part of the night, and it's quite breathtaking to see it rise in the dark sky and dispel the darkness. It's the definition of beauty. It reminds us that the dark of night isn't forever. We will see again and be able to walk and drive places without worry of bumping into things and causing injury. There will be warmth that comes with the rising of the sun, and often dispelling of clouds, or perhaps the heat will cause a reaction in the atmosphere to cause storms! Sunrise is necessary, it's always faithful, and it's never NOT happened.

Sunset comes at the end of a long day and offers us an invitation to come and sit, dine on the patio, take a long walk, and observe it's passing from the top of the sky down below the horizon...to sleep for the night. Often, the moon is out before the sun fully sets, and I love it when that happens. Sunset displays an array of color across the sky, sometimes peeking through the clouds to form amazing images that artists love to copy onto canvas. It's the definition of beauty. It reminds us that no matter how long and hard the day has been, night is coming that woos us to our beds to sleep and rest and forget the troubles of the day. Sunset is necessary, it's always faithful, and it's never NOT happened.

The fact that I observe the sunset more than the sunrise is something I've thought about lately. Sunset, in terms of life, often refers to the end...the last part of living on this earth. Elderly people are said to be in the sunset of their lives. Sunrise, since it happens in the morning and starts a new day, is often compared to birth, new things, the start of something fresh and fragrant and inviting!

I can easily slip into a pattern of observing the end of things, rather than the beginning. I can easily start to slide down a slippery path of worry and fear, when I consider sunset. I think that's what we all considered as the pandemic began to spread. *What if this is the end? What if the light of the day that we've all enjoyed is now coming to an end...for good?* Our focus was on the fear of the loss of the good things of the day, once and for all.

But, whether we like God's timing or wisdom or not, he put into place the sunrise and made it just as sure as the sunset. So when one day ends, another begins, equally full of promise and hope and light.

The world isn't over, yet. But even if it is the sunset of things and days and light as we knew it, there's a new day promised. Even if the end of the world is near, the biggest sunrise and the most spectacular one is promised as well. It will literally take our breath away and present to us a new order of life, one where justice reigns and all sorrow is gone. And that sunrise, I don't want to miss out on! In fact, I want to be anticipating it and looking forward to it, every time the sun goes down.

Sunrise, sunset...think about which one you observe the most and why. Think about whether you fear the end of the light of day, or look forward to the end of the darkness.

It's something to think about as you step outside and are seated once again on the patio of a restaurant to watch the sun go down, alongside many other patrons. It's something to ponder as you worry about this and that, instead of sleeping in rest knowing another day is promised...either here or there...both days that He has made...a reason to rejoice.

Who knows, maybe I'll purpose to watch the sun rise a bit more. It just might do me a world of good...

FRESH THYME – When Skies are Gray – by Marcy Lytle

I happen to love gray, cloudy, dreary days. Not every day, but once in a while. However, it seems most of us prefer sunny days – not too hot – but just right. Too many cloudy days in a row dampen more than the soil – they dampen our spirits! And that’s how it’s been during these days at home, like a long string of cloudy days where the sun is hidden and the gloom is looming.

Cloudy days are often accompanied by fog, which limits visibility. It’s dangerous to drive in the fog, so we usually are better off waiting until it “lifts” before we venture out. Especially, if we’re driving on unknown roads, we can easily not see other cars around us.

Limited visibility comes with long days of staying at home, as well. We can’t see further than a few houses down the street, there’s really no places open to drive to except for groceries, and our vision begins to wane.

But wait! The sun is still shining behind those clouds!

Cloudy days are often accompanied by a fine mist of spitting rain, the kind that’s nasty, cold, and the kind that ruins picnics. At least one thing we can do while at home is picnic outside, but dampened days make for ruined food. No one wants to picnic in the rain and eat soggy food.

But wait! The sun will soon emerge and dry up all the rain!

Cloudy days are often accompanied by lack of warmth. The temperature in spring stays cooler on cloudy days than on sunny. We have to bring out that sweater again and quicken our pace if we’re walking, so that we stay warm instead of chilly.

Long days at home, away from our friends and family and connections, also make us lose our warmth of well-being. Missing out on hugs and touching and being near and seeing each other’s faces is like obscurity, slipping away into a coldness of spirit.

But wait! The sun will warm us up again, as it burns the clouds away!

Cloudy days are often accompanied by cool breezes, covering of the sun’s hot rays in the heat of summer, and offer the promise of rain needed for crops to grow. Cloudy days often give us a chance to slow down, read a book, enjoy a reprieve from life’s harshness...

But wait! Cloudy days can be good? You bet they can!

And even though we’ve all had too many cloudy days to count as of late, there’s this wonderful promise that all things work together for good to those that love Him. Even the darkness of job loss, health issues, depression and more – things that come with isolation and distance – cannot stop God’s goodness and mercy from pursuing us. He’s the Good Shepherd, the creator of the Sun and the Moon, and clouds only mean one thing. We either need to rest, the sun is

too hot, faith needs to be reaffirmed, we need to pick up the pace, or a whole list of other things we can do on a cloudy day.

I hope we soon sing, "I've got sunshine on a cloudy day. When it's cold outside I've got the month of May."

The birds are chirping, flowers are blooming, and the sun is still shining...even when the clouds are still hanging low.