

April 2025



Seven for You - Influenced - by the Panel

We're all influenced by something, at some point, that changes us. Maybe it's our children, the news, social media, life experiences, just growing older. We learn or observe or take in that which is before us, and we walk a new path.... We asked the Panel to think about what has influenced them and how, and to share it with us!

Even as we get older, there are so many opportunities for growth and change. Some are more difficult to navigate than others, especially if our values seem to be challenged. Watching my children grow into adulthood has influenced me to be less judgmental. Some of their choices were not what I considered appropriate or wise. But, I had to love them anyway and let them choose their own way. I had to place them in God's hands.

Other growth, for me has come while traveling a difficult health journey. I knew that God would walk with me through thick or thin. This experience has caused me to lean into his promises and trust his care.

On a lighter note, I have learned to enjoy online shopping. Generally, I hate shopping because I don't have the energy and I am too indecisive when faced with so many choices. However, online shopping helps me find and order items that I need from the comfort of my own home and at my convenience.

It works for me.

I think it's good to learn and grow from our experiences. It's a gift from God. - Gina

PAIN. Pain is what influences me to make changes.

Can't fit into my pants? Guess I better eat more veggies and take a few more walks!

Having trouble relating to my family and processing my emotions? Better text my therapist.

Tired and grumpy? Guess I better put my phone down and get to bed on time.

I'm turning 49 years old this year. You'd think something besides PAIN would influence me. Alas.

Laura

About 12 years ago my husband and I went to see a cousin in Oregon. She was quite a bit older than me. She showed us all around the area and she could walk circles around me all day long. I asked her how she was in such good shape, and she told me about a book with a healthy for life eating plan. It's called The *17 Day Diet*, by Dr. Mike Moreno. When I got home, I bought the book and in the next few months I lost about thirty pounds and felt amazing. It even tells you what to do for those times you mess up.

Another thing I've started doing recently is what I call cleaning for my kids. I have a long way to go but I've started going through things in my home and getting rid of them. Some things that I know my kids want, like family heirlooms, I've started giving to them. This way I can see them enjoying it.

The third thing that has changed my life was something I heard. It was during a Beth Moore Bible Study. She gave the suggestion of wearing a cross bracelet to help us remember to pray and

think of Jesus throughout the day. This was something she did. My first thought was *I already do that*. But after hearing this I started to notice how little I did go to God during the day. So, I tried it. I got several cross bracelets, wore them daily, and it really changed my life. I have graduated from a bracelet since I'm at home more. I now wear a cross pinky ring every day. I put it on immediately after I get up and I actually don't feel dressed without it. — Carole

I'd say I've been influenced by three things in the past decade or so that have helped me change some ways for the better...I think! First source is my kids. They let me know when I'm using verbiage that's out of date. At first I was offended, but then I realized it's a good thing to learn from them a more kind way to say certain things. Secondly, Instagram has practically influenced me as a grandmother. There are so many cool ideas to try with toddlers and they're fun! And thirdly, we've been attending a new church that teaches through the bible using context and history, etc. that has blown my mind and drawn me closer to Him. I feel like I'm thirsty for more every week...-Marcy

The first thing that stands out in my mind of an incident that influenced me was when I met a person who expressed that I seemed, and these are my words because I can't remember exactly what he said, "high maintenance." I asked him why he thought that and he said it was because I always had my hair and makeup done every day, wore designer clothing, and had jewelry throughout my hands, arms, and ears.

I did not like the impression he received, but appreciated his honesty. It really made me think about how I would like to be perceived. Don't get me wrong. I still do my hair and I won't go out of the house without makeup! But the jewelry, I must confess, was an effort to show people that I was something more, perhaps? Anyway, after much thought, I put all my jewelry away and have not worn it in the past 20 some-odd years. I like myself better now, there are no façades, no pretentiousness. I am who I am. — Anita

A wonderful group of ladies that I do weekly Bible study with have challenged me to change my way of thinking on several issues including the programs I watch/listen to and how I navigate forgiveness. Watching my mom go beyond her 98 years has challenged me to floss more, take better care of myself and enjoy being the age I am even with its limitations. My grandkids have challenged me to find the fun wherever we are and no matter how imperfect the situation. - Shelley

The Dressing – Spring Sneakers – by Marcy Lytle

I've never liked wearing sneakers as an adult, except for playing tennis or walking. Not with dresses or out shopping. However, I think ever since Covid, women are wearing sneakers literally everywhere with every outfit, and they look amazing. So...I figured why not invest in some. And since aging feet don't fare well in heels or tight shoes anymore, and considering there are so many choices of sneakers out there, I opted for some cute ones. In fact, I only packed sneakers on our recent trip to Nashville, and they worked out great!

How did I style them? Well, I'm glad you asked:

Pink and Pretty – I found a pair of pink sneakers at TJ Maxx that I bought, wondering if they'd go with much. They do! They can dress up a black and white outfit, for sure! They also look great with denim, and yellow...and a pretty oversized pink scarf for the season!

Flowers, Yes! – I found this cute pair of sneakers on Amazon, and they dress up any neutral or solid outfit and give you a spring in your step, in every way! These are very comfortable and are great with skirts and/or shorts, and all of your spring solids.

Neutral with Orange Trim – I found this cute and comfy pair of sneakers at Tillys! Do you ever shop there for shoes? I love them! They don't really look like a sneaker, exactly, but they're so cute with jeans, skirts or shorts! The brand is Hey Dude, and they're so comfortable.

Black and White – Need I say more? This is a classic pair of sneakers you need for your closet to wear with any print at all. Black and white is a classic, don't you know? I wore these a lot, and we walked for miles, and my feet never hurt.

Red All Over – Why not add red to your black and white outfits, yellow outfits, blue outfits...all your outfits? They add that pop of color you didn't know that you needed! Or pick another color in your favorite hue.

Brown – I ordered these from Zolara, as I'd seen them advertised as a great buy. They are very cute and a basic pair of sneakers, yet with that flat sleek look that's so popular right now. They're cute with denim, or with all your white tees and brown belts, with gold accessories!

Shop Amazon, hit the discount stores or Target, or step into the mall and shop just for sneakers, and add a few to your closet this spring/summer. Then pack them for your next trip, and see if your feet don't thank you when you're out and about. And...be creative with them as you put together your outfits. I even wore sneakers to two performances at night, with a dressy outfit!

Cousin Moms – The World of Trends – by Charissa and Kamrin

Any mom that scrolls the web sees lavish parties for kids, reads about new parenting techniques or products that are must-haves, or looks as photos of perfectly put together children in clothes that are the cutest. You name it, there's a trend or a band wagon to hop on, so that you feel in the know and on the go. We asked our moms to share something on how they've been influenced by a trend and then made their own way through it as their own family, with what fits for them.

Kamrin

Birthday parties...this is hard...if I'm honest. Having three kids that are lose in age and two of them being back to back birthday and one by Christmas, it's very difficult to budget. When they were little (they're now 13, 12, and 10) we just had parties at home, because it was simple. We didn't do big events. As we've gotten older, it's harder because the kids are involved in activities and our daughter wanted to start having sleepovers. We then shifted gears because it was just too much to have that many people involved. We then did park parties with pizza for the boys, so they played outside, or sometimes we just had snacks instead of a meal. Our daughter is very social and loves to plan, so her birthdays are big – with décor and sleepovers – at our home. We had a Hollywood theme, a Taylor Swift theme, which were super fun. We even rented little teepees one time, where each girl slept in one.

Now...in this season we're shifting towards smaller birthday parties and more events. They now save money and buy things, they have Christmas, etc. We are running into "milestone" birthdays - double digits, 13, etc. We've now given tickets to a sporting event, to a concert, or a bigger gift like a refurbished laptop, etc. But our daughter still loves to plan parties.

So finally, we had to change things and here are my tips: 1. Budgeting is very important because it's easy to compare to others and what they're doing for parties. So have conversations with the kids about all this. 2. Talk to the kids beforehand so that you can plan ahead of time with money and scheduling, and give them options. 3. The party doesn't have to be on their exact birth date because of other activities. It's not wrong to move a party to the summer months when time is there and money can be saved up for then. 4. Maybe nix sleepovers, because as your boys get older – the parents don't love having their girls come over. And it becomes too crowded, and that's okay.

The last thing we do now is to create traditions, even if you can't do like "others" do. Every year, when our kids wakeup they get a big number balloon, a gift, and a fun breakfast. They also get to pick dinner on their birthday. Those traditions stay even in lean times with money, or it stayed even during Covid, it's a base tradition. And once in a while we add an event like a football game or an escape room, but it's okay to just celebrate with the family

It's so easy to get lost in Instagram, and Pinterest and other things, but it's good to do what you do as a family to create memories and celebrate each other.

Charissa

We are so bombarded with social media and how other parents are doing things that I often remind myself that social media is a highlight reel – where others show the best or the good things. So I try to stay away from comparing myself with all the *other* parents. We have not jumped on the bandwagons, overall. We look more towards our own experiences, as we have

amazing parents and utilize their examples, and we lean toward biblical principles from books or podcasts. These have been more of the influence on our parenting.

However, we have utilized trends with organization or trips to take with our kids, or different traveling hacks:

One trend is trying to be more simplistic, so we do have the rule with one toy in, one toy out - to simplify play. We do notice that when there is a lot of "stuff" it's more overwhelming than a joy for the kids.

Another trend on Instagram is having baskets for each kid and their stuff. I throw things in these baskets on the floor that are theirs, and then it's the girls' responsibility to empty.

Chores! I've given the kids age appropriate chores and I've looked at trends on this.

I enjoy travel hacks in the car and saw organizational bins for the girls to hang on the back of the car seat. These are fun and enjoyable!

And finally, our oldest is age 8, but we are holding off on cell phones and social media for a long time, which is a trend, too. Especially for the girls. We don't want them to enter the world of comparing at a young age.

In the Kitchen - Good Bites - by Marcy Lytle

It's April already. Do your tastes change when spring is here and do you then change what you prepare to eat? I do. And sometimes, I just want something simple to make that's tasty to eat, and even fun. Here are a few ideas for April bites, and they're good!

Fried Pickles and Shakes

There are some specific tips for getting the fried pickles to turn out just right. And there's a shake we keep making on repeat. These two make for a great meal – when nothing else sounds good.

- Dill pickle spears
- Flour
- Egg and milk
- Canola oil
- Ice cream
- TJ's chocolate covered strawberries (freezer)
- Milk

For the pickles:

First, pour the oil in a skillet and start to heat it. That's the first tip, the oil needs to be hot for that first pickle when it hits the pan. Mix one egg with milk in a bowl, place flour in another, and start the double dip. Twice in each bowl. Place them carefully in the hot oil, so as not to crowd the pan. They cook and brown quickly. Remove to a paper towel lined bowl, sprinkle with salt and pepper. Serve with Ranch or Ranch mixed with salsa (my fave).

For the shakes:

In a blender, place vanilla ice cream, the strawberries and some milk, and blend to the consistency you like. That's it!

BLT Turkey Salad

This was easy to put together and one of the most tasty salads. I halved it for the two of us. And it was perfect.

- ½ c plain yogurt
- ½ c mayo
- 2 T sugar
- 2 T red wine vinegar (or balsamic)
- ½ t garlic powder
- 6 c torn romaine lettuce
- 4 c cubed turkey
- 1 ½ c chopped tomatoes
- 1 ½ c shredded mozzarella
- 1 ½ c shredded cheddar
- 10 bacon strips, cooked and crumbled
- ½ c chopped green pepper
- ½ c chopped red onion

• ½ c chopped cucumber

In a large salad bowl, whisk the first 5 ingredients. Add the remaining, and toss to coat! That's it!

A Tray of Snacks

If you have a long tray or a charcuterie or cutting board, just use it as your base for whatever you have in the fridge that night! Here's what we had.

- Leftover pimiento cheese
- Can of biscuits
- Fritos
- Leftover taco dip
- Pickles
- Jam

All of that lined up on a tray, looked pretty and inviting, and it was perfect for a night at home while we watched a good movie. The biscuits were so good with the cheese and jam! And the fritos were perfect for the dip.

Skillet Nachos

I made this in a cast iron skillet and it not only looked pretty, it was easy to serve just as it was, in the pan, with the chips alongside in a big bowl.

- 1 lb ground beef
- 1 14.5 oz can diced tomatoes undrained
- 1 c fresh or frozen corn, thawed
- ¾ cup uncooked instant rice
- ½ c water
- 1 envelope taco seasoning
- ½ t salt
- 1 cup shredded Colby Jack cheese
- 1 pkg 16 oz tortilla chips
- Toppings like sour cream, fresh jalapeno slices, shredded lettuce and lime wedges

In a large skillet, cook the beef until no longer pink, crumbling, and drain. Stir in tomatoes, corn, rice, water, taco seasoning and salt. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer covered until rice is tender and mixture is slightly thickened, about 8-10 minutes. Enjoy with the chips and toppings as desired.

Steak Bites

We had these with a salad and they were delish. I think the only way I'll eat steak now...

- 1 lb beef sirloin steak or beef tenderloin
- 2 T lemon juice
- 1 T olive oil
- 1 T Worcestershire sauce
- 1 T apple cider vinegar
- 1 t onion powder

- 1 t garlic powder
- 1 t salt
- ½ t black pepper

Dice steak into bite-sized pieces. Trim off any excess fat or sinew. Place steak bites into a gallon-sized resealable plastic bag or a shallow bowl for marinating. Add in lemon juice, olive oil, Worcestershire sauce, vinegar, onion powder, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Toss to coat, cover or seal, and refrigerate. Let marinate 1 to 8 hours.

Use tongs to add half the steak to a skillet, leaving behind the marinating liquid. Cook, stirring a bit, til bites are seared and browned. Remove and set aside. Then cook the other half. Don't crowd the meat. Return previously cooked bites and add butter and crushed garlic to the skillet. Let the garlic toast 1 minute.

Bookstore - Free at Last - by Kaelin Scott

Free at Last is my latest novel, but it's the one I needed to write most of all.

I actually started writing this book before I wrote *Game Set Love*, the book I published before it, but my mind wasn't centered and I couldn't get the story right, so I put it to the side for a while. Yet after writing *Game Set Love*, my mind kept wandering to *Free at Last*, and I knew I needed to go back to it. I actually started over with a fresh new page, back at the beginning, praying that God would direct me as I wrote this story.

I have to be honest, it ended up a lot different than what I'd originally imagined, but it's so much more than I ever thought it could be.

The story follows Kallie, a young woman who's spent most of her life hiding in Witness Protection. She desperately wants to be free, so she decides to venture out and create a life of her own. But the darkness from her past follows her into her new life, making it harder than she thought to start over. Making things even more complicated, she runs into Milo, an old friend from before she went into hiding. He doesn't recognize her, and she's too scared to tell him who she really is. They start spending time together and their feelings grow into romance, but Kallie can't fully open her heart because half of her is still stuck in the past. She struggles with self-harm and fears she'll never be able to shed her chains and step out of the shadows.

But Milo has something Kallie doesn't have – he knows Jesus. His life is evidence of the greatest love of all, and he's determined to share that love with Kallie, especially once he finds out who she is. But he can't make the decision for her. Kallie has to find her own faith if she truly wants freedom from her pain.

I wrote this book for anyone who's ever felt lost or broken. I want them to know that they are loved beyond measure and that no one is beyond repair.

I also wrote this book for myself. It was a healing process. I shed so many tears while writing it, but it helped me to find closure and peace in some of the hurting parts of my heart. Some important relationships in my life are very broken, and I don't know if they'll ever be reconciled. So part of my purpose in writing *Free at Last* was to put my heart on paper. To make my story relatable to someone else, someone who may be hurting too. It's not technically my real story, because I made it up. But pieces of it are pieces of me, and putting them into this book helped me move on. It helped remind me that God is enough. I am loved and treasured by Him, and I am never truly alone.

I hope that this book can touch even one person's heart and remind them of those truths. Because if Kallie's story taught me anything, it's that shining His light does matter. There are lost and broken people in this world, and they need someone to show them what love is really about. In a nutshell, that's why I wrote this book. And I hope it glorifies Jesus, my Savior, my entire reason for writing. The One who loves me no matter what.

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

Every month I learn and I share. I hope you do that as well, with the circle of people around you. Sharing, telling, encouraging...it's all part of good living.

We have a new fast food restaurant near us called Pollo Campero – do you have one near you? It's fast food empanadas – and they're tasty!

Next time you make nachos at home, try some sturdy potato chips as the base instead of tortilla chips! We recently had pulled pork nachos at a restaurant like this, and they were delish!

We recently learned that Andrew Jackson's main slave was buried next to Jackson, and that he outlived Jackson and became the first tour guide once the Hermitage opened for visitors! So interesting...

Have you ever heard of Thomas Dorsey? Apparently, he's the father of gospel music! If you knew that, I'm impressed...

Did you know that the pews in the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville are original? How cool is that?

Sometimes, you can find the cutest things in the dollar spot at Target, like these woven totes! Five bucks, and you've got yourself the most fun carryall to take with you in the car and on trips or just out shopping.

I saw in a store a cute way to display rings – in case you have a bunch! Look at this book, open with rolled back pages, and rings arrayed throughout – so cute!

We stopped in a British bakery and found the best store bought cookies ever! You can find them on line, too. Seriously delicious! They're called Hobnob's – have you tried them?

I saw these hashbrown sticks in the freezer at the store and tried them – they're easy and a great addition to any meal – and so yummy! The kids will like them, too!

Erin McDermott Jewelry – she has sales all the time – and her stuff is the cutest for the spring season. I got these blue pieces and these stretchy bracelets I wear a lot!

I'm adding fake flowers again in with the real ones, in my pots, because of drought conditions. I never thought I'd do such a thing, but it works and it's pretty.

I saw on Instagram an idea of how to put on a bracelet that's hard to fasten because it keeps slipping off. Just add a hair tie to your wrist to keep the bracelet in place, fasten it underneath, and remove the hair tie! I tried it and it works!

Did you know that the 27X27 scarf is in this spring? They're bigger and they're more versatile, and so fun (until it gets hot...)

Michaels has the cutest pudgy pens up front as you walk towards the register. I bought a couple packs and keep them on my desk to use, and give as gifts, too! Aren't they so cute?

A couple lemons sliced, a few springs of rosemary, a tablespoon in vanilla, in a simmer pot on the stove makes for a clean smell for spring in your kitchen!

Black Bag. It's a methodical slow thriller, but intense. We wondered what "black bag" means – look it up – I think I knew that but now I remember it.

We recently stayed in a room at a resort that had a "pet in the room" door hanger. I had never seen that before. Have you?



I Don't Do Teens - Evening Chats - by Marcy Lytle

I think the early teens are difficult for parents and for grandparents, as well. The kids are growing up, hanging with friends, talking on their phones, interested in lots of activities with others, and very finicky and moody...and yet...they're still young enough to hang with and enjoy who they are becoming.

We recently had our daughter's kids for the evening, and two of the three are just entering the teenage years. I have often wondered if they're outgrowing time with Ella and Mister (our grandparent names), but at the same time I know that they loves us, and know that we love them. So here it was, Friday night, and their parents were going out on a date...and we got the privilege of hanging with the three of them in our garage.

We started this routine months back, and I thought I'd share more detail, now that they're getting older, in case you need a connection point with your young teens.

We gather in the garage around a card table and order pizza, and we talk. We ask them about school, their friends, what's been happening, and guess what? They open up! They share some frustrations with friends, they talk about their extracurricular activities and how those are going. We are so careful to just listen and encourage, as it's really not our job to reprimand or scold.

We also talk about a character of God, and the last one was KIND. God is kind. We read the story of the 10 lepers and how only 1 returned to thank Jesus. We also read the story of the rich and the poor in the New Testament and how giving preference to the rich over the poor is not being kind, at all. We even had the kids act out each of those stories. We drew green spots on two of their hands, and one acted as Jesus and healed them. One ran off, and the other stayed to thank Jesus. One dressed as a poor man and the other donned a fancy ring (from my jewelry) and the third asked the rich one to sit up front, and told the poor guy to go to the back. (The sister enjoyed telling her brother to "get on back!")

We then just talked about kids at school and if it was hard to be kind when kids are mean, and if kids are mean to them...and two of the kids shared stories of their friends saying unkind words. This gave us an opportunity to listen and tell them we'd pray for them.

We also washed each other's feet – something they did not want to do- but they got the message of serving with kindness.

At the end of their stay, we played a game. This one was Double Ditto. And It was such a blast, they wanted to play it over and over again.

Yes, it was Friday night and all of us were tired. But we kept it to a couple hours and no more.

Yes, at first the kids just wanted to lay around and pick fights and be silly, but we eventually settled into a rhythm of chatting and loving and learning about the kindness of God.

Yes, our hearts were full (and we hope theirs were, too) as they went home with their parents.

Yes, we prayed for them, gave thanks for them, and smiled as we drifted off to sleep at some of their funny sayings and interactions with us and each other.

The point of this story is that teens still need us, from the time they hit 12 and start into the teens years...until the time they leave for college or get married or step out on their own. And if we

make it simple and routine, loving and kind, I think they'll be open and willing to sit and visit and feel the love of God shown to them by their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and friends...

Practical Parenting – Smiling – by Marcy Lytle

Do your kids smile at strangers or sneer? What about grandparents or other older people? When they are smiled at, do your kids smile back or shy away and hide their heads? I think all little kids do all sorts of things when smiled at, depending on their moods. But smiling, just like learning to walk, communicate and all other skills, is something we can teach our kids to do...and to respond to.

Let me tell you a story. I was in line at a store and there was a little girl sitting in a cart in front of me. Her mom wasn't really paying attention to the toddler, because the mom was looking at items in the cart. I smiled at the little girl and at first she just stared at me. She kept looking at me, and each time I smiled she reacted in different ways. She did sneer, she looked away, she acted out...and then she smiled. And that little girl was my friend in a matter of minutes, as she kept smiling at me while we waited for the next available clerk.

I remember my own kids' kids reacting similarly to strangers or even people we knew. Sometimes I was embarrassed because the kids were spoken to and smiled at nicely and then just stared back at the person smiling. Have you encountered that as well?

Maybe smiling is a learned activity that we can all practice in our families so that in public, we are nice and courteous to others, as well. After all, manners involve big smiles, don't they?

First of all, we live in a culture that doesn't even notice those around us. If we walk on a trail, for example, many have earplugs in their ears, never look at anyone, and there's not even opportunity to smile. And...we teach our kids not to talk to strangers...so they're certainly not going to be inclined to smile.

But here's what we can teach them:

Smiling at someone when they are smiled at is pleasant and courteous, if Mom and Dad are nearby, if the person is family member, or a helper in the store. When people smile at us, it's a way of greeting us, and sneering or turning our heads away is discourteous. We can even practice with our kids at home, while eating and passing our food, or when we're at a park and people pass by. We can smile and say hello, so that our kids see our kindness and follow suit.

Sneering at someone is something all toddlers may do, but we can help them as they grow, to grow out of that response to a smile. Not in front of that person, but maybe when we get home, we can talk about why the kids sneered or turned away, and how that may have made that person that smiled feel.

- Smiling and turning up the corners of our mouths shows that we are pleased, and smiling also lifts our moods and the moods of those we smile at.
- Smiling is contagious, sort of like a yawn. When someone near us yawns, it often makes us yawn. It's the same with smiling. It can make someone's day when we smile at them.
- Smiling can improve our health. The Bible says a merry heart does us good like medicine and brings healing. Smiling at someone can make them feel better about themselves and their day, even if they don't smile back at us.
- Smiling is just plain attractive. A smile is much better to wear on faces than a frown or a sneer.

I believe that because I kept smiling at that little girl that seemed irritated and ready to get out of that store, she finally smiled back, and this broke the ice between us.

Talk to your kids about smiling, the benefits of offering one, and the blessing of receiving a smile from others. And remind them how we should never sneer or turn away when someone offers that special gift of a smile.

Rooted in Love - Glowing Embers - by Kaelin Scott

"For You will light my lamp; The LORD my God will enlighten my darkness." Psalm 18:28

Earlier this year, when it was really cold outside, my family enjoyed having a fire in the fireplace. It's so nice to do our school assignments next to the fire or just sit and drink hot chocolate.

I don't know why, but I really like the process of starting a fire. I like crumpling up pieces of paper or cardboard and laying them on top of the grate, then piling sticks on top of that. Then comes the real test – lighting it and coaxing the sticks into catching fire. And when you've finally got enough heat built up, you can start to add bigger pieces of wood, stoking it and watching it grow. Eventually, you'll start getting hot coals that keep everything nice and toasty, and you won't have to tend to the fire except to add more logs.

Being the writer I am, I can't just make a fire. I have to mentally compare it to life. Specifically, I found myself comparing it to walking with God.

You can't just jump right to the flame. First, you have to have a foundation. There has to be something to burn. And that's just like a relationship with Jesus. You have to build a foundation first. You have to learn about who He is. You have to understand your need for Him, realizing that life is pretty pointless without Him.

Then you can light the flame. You can give your life to Him and watch His light start to shine. Sometimes there are false starts. Sometimes things burn out before the fire really catches, so you have to start again. Uncertainty can suffocate your flames, leaving you choking on smoke. But you can always try again. There are no limits to how many times God will welcome you into His arms.

Only after putting in the work, stoking the flames and feeding the fire, will you truly begin to burn. Your heart becomes something entirely new, forged and fashioned after God's desires instead of your own. You start to radiate a warmth from the inside out – a light that you could never emanate on your own. It's His light and strength that live in you now, His power that resides in your heart. And the longer you lean on Him, the easier it becomes to trust Him in everything.

Not that faith makes life easy. It doesn't. And having faith also doesn't mean that you won't sometimes burn out. That happens too. Sometimes the pressure of life can be too much and it can snuff out your flame. But underneath the ashes, there are still hot coals just waiting to be breathed back into life. All it takes is a little bit of stoking, and you're burning once again. Because God's light never goes out. He's always shining in our hearts, even when it's hard to see it. Even when we feel cold or empty or afraid. Even when we mess up or fail or take the wrong path. No matter where we go or what we do, we can always trust Him to revive our hearts again.

All we have to do is surrender ourselves to Him, again and again and again, knowing that He is the only true way. Without Him, we are nothing but ashes blowing in the wind. But through His strength and His grace, we are glowing embers. Burning for His glory. Bringing His light and warmth to the world. And that's something we can always get back to, if we only stoke the coals.

Homesteading – Double Emotions – by Leyanne Enterline

This year of 2025 has started out a little more chaotic than I had hoped for!

We started the holidays off with some sick kiddos, tried to partially move into our home that is just not quite finished - so it's been slightly difficult. And my husband just lost his contract with the gig he's been on for almost seven years!

In one thought I am overwhelmed by God's goodness with this beautiful home we finally get to have after eight years in a trailer. Then in the next moment, I'm overwhelmed by the burden of my husband trying to find a new contract as soon as possible, to pay for this amazing home! I am literally giggling with joy; then on my knees crying in desperation. I do not like this emotional roller coaster! Many verses come to my mind, and fasting and praying have been daily for me...

"Every good and perfect gift comes from the Lord..."

James 1:17

"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will be anxious about itself."

Matthew 6:34

I was seriously about to buy a house full of furniture because at the moment we only have mattresses and bar stools for the island, nothing else! I held off one more night before I clicked "buy" and we got the news that my husband's job had ended. It was a blessing in disguise that I did not buy all of that! But totally heartbreaking at the same time, as we were getting ready to just live in a normal house with basic furniture needs that we had to put on pause. I had never been so frustrated and excited all in the same moment.

I have no idea what God has planned but He knew this would happen at this exact moment and knows what we need and what we need to do. Now for us to figure out what that is! And we hope to do so in a hurry, because these house bills are hitting quickly!

"Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lords purpose that prevails."

Proverbs 19:21

In Each Room - Spring Shelves - by Marcy Lytle

I love changing out my décor, even in the smallest of ways, after the seasons change. After Christmas, I left out twinkling lights and some winter scenes, but now it's really the time for fresh and spring-like additions – some new and some I already had! And the first thing to do, is clear the shelves completely, wipe them down and start fresh!

Three shelf areas for spring:

Mantel – If you have fireplace mantel, you'll want a spring look. If not, you can pick a large shelf in your living area. I love decorating with light, texture, color and height, most anywhere at all! Yellows and oranges and even pops of red are good – fresh or fake flowers – your choice! And as for vases, look around at what you have or shop for something different. I found metal box vases and one that was decoupaged with napkins!

A mirror and a large piece of art might provide a pretty background. You can shop vintage for both! And of course, light. I found cute wooden candle sticks on clearance at World Market. I also found some draping greenery I added to the boxes, along with the florals.

A table shelf – If you have a sofa table or other table to decorate, and it's against a wall, here are some suggestions. You'll need light for sure. I have kept these green topiaries up all year for the past 18 months or so, because I love them with twinkly lights for all seasons! I also love a big scented jar candle and yes, more candle sticks.

I love using what I already have, and this wooden salad bowl made a great vessel for folded cloth napkins that were previously stored away in a drawer. They look so pretty and inviting in the bowl! And a vintage print hangs on the wall behind it all.

On the lower shelf I stood up some books and used some heavy pieces I already had as bookends. A concrete elephant and a round vase worked, and balance the entire look against the wall.

A counter – If you have a shelf or counter to decorate, consider a tray and then place a trio of pretty things. I used a vintage tray from my mom's house, a candle a tiny plant, and some lemons stacked in a trio.

An open shelf – We took off a cabinet door in our guest bathroom and decorate it instead of using it for storage. I had this huge bowl from my mom's collection and had no idea what to do with it. I had a stick on light in this cabinet and when I turned it on, above the bowl, it made the prettiest shadows! Inside I just placed a tiny rock tree.

On the bathroom counter, I placed a small mirror as a base and used a candle cylinder to hold my bracelets. When I'm not burning another candle, an air plant looks pretty inside, and a couple of big bangles just lay together to complete the look.

Use what you have, buy something new, add light and texture and color, and bring spring to your shelves this season!

A Night to Remember – He is Not Here – by Marcy Lytle

I recently purchased a really cute wooden Easter set to put out for the season. Maybe you have one, or not. And I decided that it would be fun for the kids to use the pieces to tell and learn more about one particular aspect of the Easter story, and that is "He is not here." In other words, Christ isn't dead, he's not inattentive or asleep, and he's not inactive. He's alive!

<u>Preparation:</u> If you have some manipulatives, use them. But if not, just copy and print out or draw two angels, a cross, a tomb with the stone rolled aside, a guard, and the women. Let the kids draw and cut these out before devo time with the family. Or just draw the scene as you tell the story, on a white board, on a chalk board, or on paper. Use your own imagination to have the kids interact this month.

Let's act out the story of the Resurrection Morning and see in a fresh way what it means to hear the words that "He is not here."

The story is from Luke 24, where you can read along as the kids act out the truth of Easter.

Luke 24: 1-3 Women went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried after his death on the cross. What they found was the large rock was rolled away from the tomb! (Kids act or draw this part of the story.)

Why were the women going to the tomb? What do you think they thought when they saw the big rock was moved?

Luke 24:4-8 Two gleaming figures stood beside the women and at first they were afraid and bent down to the ground (Ask the kids to draw or act this out). The figures spoke and said "he is not here – he is risen!" And they told the women they would not find him among the dead. And they reminded them of how Jesus said he would die and be raised again on the third day.

Let's stop here. If Jesus told them he would rise again, then why were they surprised that the stone was moved?

If Jesus had just died, here's the kind of God we would serve:

One who doesn't hear us when we pray, because he's not alive.

One who doesn't care about and meet our needs, because he's not alive and moving.

One who doesn't move in our lives to bring us closer to Him, because he's not alive or awake.

That's the kind of god others serve who do not know Jesus. They pray to other gods who aren't alive, they hope in things that can't help them (like money and fame), and they ask for help from sources that aren't even able to help them!

Do you see the amazing story of Easter in the fact that our Jesus, our Lord, our Savior, is not where the dead are? He's alive and well and that makes him personal, available and ready to take care of us and keep us all of our lives!

Why do we pray? (Let the kids answer). We pray because God told us to, and because He's alive and listening.

Why do we not worry when bad things happen? (Let the kids answer). We don't worry because our God is alive and working all things out to meet our needs for his purposes and for our best.

Why do we never have to feel alone or afraid? (Let the kids answer). We don't have to feel alone or afraid because the God who sent his son to die and then brought him back to life is now with us, near us, beside us, and in us...at all times in all places.

That's the story of Easter and those four little words "He is not here." Jesus isn't among the dead gods of the world. Jesus is the One True God, the Son of God, the Savior, and we belong to him when we believe!

As you look again at the stone that was moved, bow your heads as a family and thank Jesus that he died on the cross and overcame death, so that we could live with him, free of sin and shame, alive in Christ.



Fig Tree Promises:

Fig Trees ready to bud In celebration of life and the New World I see them going in the frost One and then another To the grander land We hold tight yet they leave us Dance at their passing We mourn When we should rejoice We understand loss but not rebirth As the time comes nearer In His generation In the hour He knows clb



Inner Strength - A Story of Compassion - by Michelle Wyatt

It all started with two squirrels, chasing each other, fighting over an acorn.

"We rounded up acorns to make it easier for them," Matthew said. Apparently, Brendan and Matthew's game of baseball had gotten interrupted by the chase they witnessed.

A couple days went by. "They started to wash away, so we put rocks around them to hold them together." I was intrigued so I went outside and checked it out. I could tell the love and compassion that was put into making this. God was definitely in the center of Matthew's heart.

Psalm 116:5

The Lord is gracious and righteous. Our God is full of compassion.

Isaiah 63:7

I will tell of the kindness of the Lord, the deeds of which He is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us...according to his compassion and many kindnesses.

Psalm 145:9

The Lord is good to all. He has compassion on all He has made.

After some time had passed..."I'm going to check on our pile," Matthew said. He had been gone for quite a while. Just as I started to check on him, he came through the door excited. "It sat on my shoulder while I fed it." What? I couldn't believe it! "It didn't bite you?" I asked, obviously knowing the answer. I was just shocked. "No, it was hungry."

I noticed days later, at least half of the acorns in the intact pile were gone. Matthew came out. "They are sleeping now. You can't really see them." He was right. I couldn't see them.

You know how I said that the boys stopped their baseball game to watch squirrels chase each other? Well, one of the many amazing things about this story is that Brendan, who really wasn't in to the game, by being open to playing with his brother, witnessed the opportunity to show love and compassion to one of God's many beautiful creations.

We have a responsibility to honor and respect the world around us. God needs us to take care of his creations. I am so blessed to have sons that understand that. It is a great reminder for me. I share this story in hopes that it gives us all strength, courage, and motivation to keep doing what we do, as hard as it is sometimes.

If nothing else, the next time you go outside, look for an acorn or a squirrel and let yourself smile!

If I can do it, so can you!

A Hopeful Heart - Little Walks That Matter Most – by Christina Oberon

Last weekend, my husband, our six-year-old son, our dog, and I embarked on a grand adventure, otherwise known as a walk through our neighborhood. To the untrained eye, it may have looked like a simple stroll, but in our world, it was an expedition. There were snacks to be packed (because, of course, a 30-minute walk requires provisions), water bottles to be filled, and the mandatory pre-departure negotiations about wearing a sweater and proper shoes. Meanwhile, our dog spun in excited circles, sensing that his favorite part of the day was about to begin.

These are the moments I really treasure, the ordinary ones that become extraordinary simply because we're together. Today's world can pull families in a million different directions, so, being intentional about family time isn't just important, it's essential.

I'll be the first to admit that I sometimes get caught up in the idea of the "perfect" family moment; the Instagram-worthy adventure, the unwrinkled outfits, the picturesque outing. But real life with a six-year-old (and an enthusiastic dog) looks a little different. It's more like stopping every five feet to inspect a rock, picking the brightest flowers and fruits, racing each other to the next streetlight, and trying (unsuccessfully) to keep the dog from chasing after every animal he sees or not tangle his leash around our legs in his excited twirls.

The truth is that the best memories aren't carefully planned, but unfold in the messy, joyful, unpredictable moments of life. More than anything, my son doesn't need perfection, he just needs me fully present, not distracted by my phone or lost in my to-do list. Just there. And I've come to realize that creating these meaningful, uninterrupted moments often requires a conscious choice to say no to distractions, obligations, and the pull of busyness, so I can say yes to what matters most, like these family walks.

Quality family time doesn't have to mean elaborate vacations or picture-perfect experiences. Quality is found in engaged bedtime stories, the joy of outside play, the spontaneous dance parties in the living room to our favorite songs, or playing eye-spy while eating dinner together.

Kids don't measure love in grand gestures. They measure it in time spent, in laughter shared, in the way we show up for them day after day. And honestly? The same goes for marriage. It's easy to let the busyness of life push quality time with our spouse to the back burner, but those small, intentional acts like, holding hands on a walk, sharing a quiet moment after the kids are asleep are what keep a marriage strong.

Before I became a parent, I would always hear how time moves far too quickly when raising kids, and this has proven to be true. One day, you're rocking a baby to sleep, and the next, you're trying to keep up with a six-year-old on a scooter. There's no pause button, no rewind. But there is now.

So I'm taking in the adventures, big and small. I'm soaking in the giggles (and tears), the sticky hugs, the late-night whispers of "one more story, please." I'm embracing the beautifully chaotic reality of family life. The messy middle. The adventure-filled neighborhood walks. I'm realizing that in doing so, we give our son, and ourselves, the greatest gift of all - the gift of being fully present, fully loved, and fully known.

Healthy Habits - Morning and Night - by Marcy Lytle

We have been reading again the story of creation and how after each day of God's handiwork coming into existence, he said it was "good." Morning and evening were another day and each work's activities were good. I thought about routines that we perform mornings and evenings also set the tone for our days, and whether they turn out good...or not. Healthy...or unhealthy.

Morning:

Waking up with a grateful heart and voicing our thanks to God as we see the sun peek through the blinds is paramount to having a good day. We get up with a spring instead of a limp.

Washing our faces with cold water sends that burst of awakening our senses to a new day, a fresh start, that cleanses and brightens the image others see when we enter the room. A fresh face and bold and open eyes set the atmosphere for a good day with others. We put our best face forward, so to speak.

Those bites we savor before we get busy are important. When they are full of fruit and nuts and grains and healthy goodness, we feel good and full and whole. When we aren't rushed but can sit down with a family member and savor each bite, the day is even better, rather than being hurried or stressed and bothered. We take time to enjoy his bounty.

The clothes we wear make us feel put together on the outside, but often reflect how we feel on the inside. Finding the bright colors, the accessories, the cute shoes and the perfect bag gives us confidence to face the good day before us.

Pausing to pray for the day ahead, for the others around us, for opportunities to shine His light, and for peace among the chaos we're about to enter gives us (and others) a sense of hope and the ability to face the day expecting His goodness to follow us all day long.

Night:

A good cleanser for that same face we washed this morning, the one that braved the elements of wind and dirt and rain today, makes us feel completely wonderful before our heads hit the pillow. A good cleanser makes for a good night.

Time to unwind and read the Word or listen to music soothes our weary souls from the hard work, the disappointments, the hard things, and the worries that may have seeped through the cracks...and the truth sets us free to sleep without fear. A good way to end the day.

Fresh linens on our beds and comfy pillows ensure that we are tucked and comfortable and breathing and dreaming as we drift off to sleep. Maybe it's time to get new bed sheets or covers! Make our beds a good place to lay...

What about what we wear to bed? There's nothing sweeter than pulling out cute pj's, comfy and cozy nightwear, something that's pretty and makes us feel pretty and loved. There are lots of cute sets to be found on the racks at the discount stores. Pull them out with pleasure, and wear them with a smile, as you end your good day.

Finally, words of affirmation to your spouse, to yourself, or ones you hear from Him, before you fall sleep make the good day even better. Tell him/her how much you appreciate them, what you

love about them. Tell yourself that you are loved and the apple of His eye. And tell Him you love Him, and hear his voice resound with a sweet whisper about how He adores you as well.

Make each day good from morning til evening, and smile as the goodness of God in your life, every single 24 hours that he gives you and me to breathe, awake, and fall back asleep again in this rhythm he set forth when he created our world.

Life Right Now - When We Fall - by Jennifer Stephens

Before the sun rises, the trucks begin to arrive. Each one filled with baskets and boxes of that week's harvest. Some bring freshly picked vegetables. Others have honey jars collected from a bee farm or fragrant flowers grown, cut, and bundled into beautiful bouquets. The vendors work in quiet rhythm setting up tables and tents, ready to greet each customer as they wander through the outdoor market.

Some of us get to frequent farmer's markets throughout the year (lucky!), but here in the Midwest we wait for the ground to thaw under the warm sunshine before the market is ready to open for the summer season. It's always such a treat to abandon the grocery aisle and support our local producers for the items on our shopping list! Like eggs. We're always on the hunt for farm-fresh, pasture-raised, pecking and scratching whenever-they-want-to, happy (obviously – because farm-living is chicken paradise) eggs. And aren't they the most gorgeous farmer's market eggs you ever did see?

Eggs. Each one selected for THAT particular carton. All shapes and sizes. Not one exactly like the other. Despite their outward beauty we have no way of knowing what's happening on the inside (if you've ever cracked open a yucky egg, you know what I mean). Each one ready to be transformed into something new. Scrambled? Hard boiled? Baked into a cake? Oh, the possibilities...

But, be careful with them. Right now, they are so very delicate that one careless move, however unintentional, could crush that beautiful shell. If that egg falls to the floor, we'll never know the *amazingness* that could have been for that egg. And each one of those eggs is meant to become something more.

Thinking about eggs reminds me of the kids I taught over the years. Each one selected for *my* particular classroom. Not one exactly like the other. Some eager to be there...some would rather be anywhere else. And we have no way of knowing the hurt and trauma they may be carrying with them on the inside. The yucky stuff hidden beneath the surface. But it was my job to gather them all up, love them, teach them, and guide them. No matter what. So, I tried to be careful with them - sure to catch them if they start to fall. Because each one of those kids is meant to become something more.

Isn't that also how God protects each of us? We can be fragile. Sometimes we fall. We bring a lifetime of hurt – damaged hearts, wounded souls. Occasionally we shatter into a million pieces. Like Humpty Dumpty, we long for a gentle hand to put us back together again. Psalm 46: 1-3 reminds us that gentle hand belongs to God, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."

Like delicate eggs in a carton and precious children in a classroom, we are fragile. Breakable. But as a teacher becomes a cushion for her students, God is our merciful safeguard. He'll catch us when we fall. No matter what. And He knows exactly how amazing each one of us is meant to be.



Date Night Ideas - All Over the World - by Marcy Lytle

In our neighborhood and within five miles around, we have all sorts of ethic food stores. I've wanted to visit them all, and have visited many already! And it's so fun to incorporate all these foods and places into date night, even if you don't the stores to visit! But if you do, then visit them and enjoy these ideas for March and beyond:

Venezuelan – We have a Venezuelan restaurant near us called Arepitas and they serve the most beautiful and tasty arepas. You could even make these together at home, as there are recipes on line. We even tried the Guava pie at the end of our meal. I read that Venezuelans don't leave a gathering without saying good-bye to everyone one, and "thank you." My husband asked to see the chef and thanked him for the delicious meal, and we talked with our server as well. Then we posted and tagged them on social media. A fun date, indeed!

Mexican – This is a given, isn't it? Mexican food and date night? We have a Mexican market store near us and we stopped in and purchased some things we don't normally see or try. We tried frozen plantain chips – delish! And we bought freshly made churros and made caramel sauce at home to drizzle. There are so many ideas to try, so gather up a grocery cart full and head home for a Mexican meal with all the trimmings, decorate your table and enjoy with another couple!

British/European – Do you have a British store near you? If not, World Market has options, and you can order on line. We stopped in a British bakery recently and purchased some of the best cookies I've ever eaten. We then decided one night to have these cookies with tea, and watch an Irish movie. We watched Owd Dog – a good one – and we enjoyed our "biscuits" and tea – as well as cucumber sandwiches and chips. It was so fun!

Indian – Not a fan of Indian food? Then find an Indian movie at your theaters (we have tons) and choose one. We have found that they're way "cleaner" than American films and include a lot of dancing! If you do like Indian food, purchase some snacks and enjoy those with your popcorn. And greet the other people watching the movie. We have often been asked by our Indian community friends there why we're watching the film, and we start up a good conversation!

Surprise – Start out at the bookstore and go to the travel aisle. Pick a country and grab a book. Read it together while you enjoy coffee and a pastry. Talk about what you learned and how interesting that place was (make sure it's a place you've never been!) Maybe try Australia! Google a recipe or an Australian tradition and try it. In March, they celebrate harmony week. Read about and see how you can create harmony on your date – it could be listening to music together!

Aren't these ideas fun? Consider picking from this list once a month all year long!

Worth Repeating - That's Not My Husband - by Marcy Lytle

I remember back when we were first married, when I compared myself to others because that's what young wives do, right? In that cesspool of comparisons, I also at times compared my husband to other men. Comparing ourselves among ourselves is not wise, so we read, but most of us do it anyway...and suffer the consequences of poor self-image and discontentment with the blessings that we have.

One time I looked at guys who dressed up for work in suits, how pressed and distinguished they looked! For a moment, I wished I had a guy who looked dapper on the way to work instead of heading off with tools in hand...

But that's not my husband.

I do remember observing other couples and hearing the quiet way their husbands spoke, and wondered if their homes were quiet, peaceful, and if he always was the calm, demure young man he appeared to be in public. I wished my spouse had a lower decibel when he spoke, because his voice boomed even when he tried to whisper...

But that's not my husband.

There were times when I even assumed some of the guys in our circle of friends made lots of money, more than we probably had, and I envied the lifestyle they brought to their wives, one with lots of shopping for whatever and whenever. I secretly harbored disdain in my heart for the job my husband had, one that paid our bills and more. I wished he too made the bigger bucks...

But that's not my husband.

I've been married for a few decades now, and I hope I've matured and adjusted my eyes' lenses and see a bit more maturely as I look at others and mine. Oh, on occasion I still have a wandering mind that goes back to comparison, until I shift and realize such good that belongs to me, and I need to take note and recognize them – and give thanks.

I now see a man who wears a uniform to work with pride, receives accolades for a job well done, and who is one of the smartest men I know who can fix, reconfigure, and manage any sort of building out there or our home here, and comfort my fearful heart over and over...

That's my husband.

I listen to his voice that rises above the din no matter where we are, the voice that speaks encouragement to a crowd of people to love God more, and one that is heard above the noise of the discouraging world around me, and I smile...

That's my husband.

I watch him work hard, I take his pay that is hard-earned, and I pay bills, I plan outings, and together our incomes meet all of our needs and more. Our lifestyle is one that is all our own,

one that he enjoys immensely every day in every way, and he pulls me in toward being thankful for all that we have...

That's my husband.

We can all become quickly dissatisfied with the guy sitting next to us in the car, lying beside us in the bed, or standing near us in line to eat...when we look around to see what we're missing and what we wish we had. Or...we can choose to look in his eyes, grab his hand, and lie next to him and breathe, knowing God is good and all good gifts come from him...including our husband. With all of his uniqueness, his funny mannerisms, and his lame jokes (I forgot to mention that one!), we can choose to admire him instead of wishing he was a wax figure we could melt and remake.

No, that's not my husband – that guy over there.

This is my husband – this guy right here.

Rooted in Love - Hide-and-Seek - by Kaelin Scott

Our kids are ages 6 and 9. They're growing up fast. They're at an age where they still want to play with us, but we know they're not going to be this little for long. So when they asked to play hide-and-seek, we said, "Yes!"

The first few rounds I hid by myself, waiting for what felt like ages in cramped and awkward positions until someone finally found me. But finally I got a fun idea. I told my husband we should hide together. So we ran to a big closet and climbed in together.

Maybe it wasn't exactly romantic, sitting there in a dark closet, crammed behind an old mattress. But it was actually pretty fun.

We held hands and whispered and giggled together as we listened to our kids' voices while they tried to find us.

It was only a few minutes, but I think I'll remember that forever.

Sometimes it's the little things that mean the most. The small moments that make you smile and forget about everything else for a little while. Those fun things that add up in your memory like coins in a bank.

Not everything in marriage is big news. It's not always exciting or adventurous. But it's a life spent together in the little moments that mean the most to your heart. And that's something I'll always be thankful for.

After 40 Years - Better Traveling - by Marcy Lytle

We've changed a few things about our travel as we've gotten a bit older, just because we realized that some things were easy to change...so that we can still go and enjoy! And sometimes, just a few little differences can determine whether the vacation was a blast or a bummer. I thought maybe you'd like to read these and try some, and share your own in the comments after you read!

Switch credit cards. – We did this years ago. We found a credit card with our bank that also had travel miles. We use it to pay for everything, and we pay it off weekly, and then the points add up. Most of the time we have enough travel points to cover our lodging and rental car, for two longer trips a year!

One hub. – We used to travel from hotel to hotel each night or every couple of nights, packing up and leaving and driving. That used up so much of our time and energy. So now we pick a place as our hub. We map out day trips from there (the main attraction) to other small outings, within an hour or two at the most. That way we're back at night in our one space, instead of packing and lifting those heavy bags every day.

Mostly Airbnb houses instead of hotels. – We still book a hotel for one night stays sometimes. But if we're flying to a destination for a week or more, we book an Airbnb instead. We like breakfast we make on our own and leisurely sitting in living rooms instead of our beds, to watch TV or relax. We enjoy the homey feel and the cutesy places available, and...they're really not much more than a hotel! We look for those with SUPER HOST on their site, as they seem to be tried and true, and the best!

Read the fine print. – If you only like a shower, and not a tub, then see what your lodging has available. If there's no elevator and you have to lug your luggage up stairs, you might want to reconsider. If there's a train that travels all night and commenters (yes, read those!) say it keeps them awake, that too is a deterrent. Do your homework before you book.

Help each other. – My husband has a neck issue to where he's not supposed to lift heavy things, so we try to pack lighter and help each other (we both lift together) when placing bags in the back of the rental car, or up on a luggage rack, things like that. One time we had a flat and he twisted and threw the tire in the back…no, no. No more twisting or heavy lifting alone!

Share meals. – Not only does this save dollars, but we don't need three heavy meals a day when traveling. We often share, or eat something light at night. Of course, we don't agree sometimes on what to share, so there's that! But when we do, we feel so much better after we eat!

Walk a lot. – When planning our trips, we love walking, but of course we make sure to read whether it's an easy trail or not. And how far places are, etc. And we pack a pair of shoes made for walking! Traveling and sightseeing and touring is so much fun, when outfitted properly, and planned ahead of time.

Rent a car. – We've done this for years, because we'd rather not have the wear and tear on our own car, we like the fun of driving another car, and then the rental car company is responsible should something go wrong with the car! It's a win-win. And again, we use our travel miles to save up for this convenience.

What else have you changed as you've both gotten older, or tips you've used as you travel that make life easier and more fun? I'd love to hear!



Under Pressure - God Things – by Debbie Haynes

I define "God Things" as events in our lives that we really have very little input into, not by us arranging them, and when the outcome is so powerful – it could only have been a "God Thing."

Here are a couple of "God Things" from my own life:

At age 17, I got my first professional job at Bank of America. The rule was that everyone worked late Friday night, so it was normal to get home around 9pm and...we were not ever to ask off work for Friday. I had told my manager I was the church pianist. She was from a well-to-do Catholic/Italian family and her nickname was Pep (short for Chili Pepper, as in someone with a red hot temper!) Our choir was invited other places and you guessed it – these performances were on Friday nights and involved travel time. I told my manager in advance about this, because the pianist had to be present, or the choir didn't sing! Pep grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me into a conference room where she slammed the door shut, got in my face, but then...she spoke and said,

"All right. You can go, but don't you tell a single soul about this...and do not make it habit!"

Of course, I was thankful and had that same conversation about five times total, and her answer was the same every time.

That was a "God Thing!"

After I left the bank, I worked for Ernst and Young for 13 years. During that time, one of my sons played football in high school and part of college. I had a boss that hated just about everyone (I'm not exaggerating). But for some reason, he did love my husband and me, and he loved football. When our team had an away game, he let me leave work early. He never charged me for the time or required that I make it up. And of course, when he asked for help on a Saturday to do a few things, Jim and I often showed up, happy to assist. On Mondays, he asked, "How did you do? Did you win the game?" And he wanted to know all about it.

That was a "God Thing!"

Psalm 37:23 says,

"The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives.

Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the Lord holds them by the hand."

We don't always recognize this direction because we're so engrossed in life. But we need to follow the advice in a very old song that says "Not my will but thine be done..." words that Jesus prayed. This needs to be our prayer daily for Jesus to guide our feet, hold our hands, all the way.

That's how I believe "God Things" happen to us. When our heart is in the right relationship with God and others, he moves our feet along the pathway of life he's chosen for us.

I could tell of so many "God Things" over the years, like when I got laid off a job of five years but through relationships there our son got admitted to law school when there were no openings to be had. Or how when buying our house, the ugliest house on the block, it was in the best location and had great remodeling potential. And how moving across the country when we did, my husband immediately got a job and I also got one too, not the one I wanted, but the best one for me.

All things that happen along our way are not necessarily good when isolated on their own, but God takes them and uses his divine handiwork and makes them work together to accomplish his perfect will in us. We can see this so clearly in scripture.

Moses, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Elijah, Jesus...and more...like Paul. Paul's "God Thing" not only changed his life, but radially impacted the world!

We can see that the whole worlds stands in need of a "God Thing" right now. But we know that even when things are awful, God performs and acts in ways that human minds cannot imagine. In famine, he provides manna and meat. In drought, he provides rain for things to grow, and in war he provides victory. In chaos, he sends his presence as peace, and in unrighteous governments he brings his scales of justice.

Romans 11:35 says,

"For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things."

God is still doing his thing. He never changes. If you can recall a "God Thing" in your life, savor it. It will help you trust him again and to stay encouraged. Delight yourself in Him. Trust Him to perform "God Things" in your life and in the lives of those you love.

An Adage a Day – I Lost My Marbles – by Carole Gilbert

My brother was five years older than me, but we were very close. I loved him so much and thought he hung the moon. I loved him so much so that I would do just about anything he asked. At least the first time or two. And living in the country in the 1960's, we did a lot together. Sometimes, the things I let him talk me into got me into trouble, and him too. I even let him put grass snakes in my boots to scare our Momma when she took them off me. This was one of those things I only did twice! And sometimes we got mad at each other and argued. This always seemed to get us into more trouble.

Those times we got into trouble together Momma would send us to our rooms. Our bedroom doors were across the hallway from each other. One of my favorite things I remember doing with my brother happened when we got into trouble and had to stay in our rooms. We played marbles across the hall. In this game, you thumb marbles toward each other. The object was to hit the marbles until they were all in one room or the other. Whoever ended up with all the marbles won. If any stayed in the hall, you had to hit them quickly so Momma wouldn't see. That was part of the fun, keeping her from seeing what we were doing. If she saw us, we'd get into more trouble, and she'd take the marbles. It never failed, every time, either from my brother or Momma, "I lost my marbles."

This idiom *I lost my marbles* or *they've lost their marbles* means that someone is acting unlike their normal self. They may be acting irrational, out of sorts, or maybe they're just acting in a crazy fun way. The phrase started in the 1800's from the children's game called Marbles. I thought about this idiom when my preacher gave an interesting example from Anne Ortlund's book, *Up With Worship*, using a baggie of marbles and a baggie of grapes. You would think, as godly women, we should be like the marbles, firm and standing strong. Be touching each other, and mingling. But our mingling can be superficial, with no real interaction. We're only scratching our surface. And you would think we should not be like the grapes tossed around in the baggie getting all leaky and messy, but this is to the contrary. We should be like grapes, seeping our insides together, meshing with each other in fellowship and encouragement. And it's interesting that marble and grapes both have important roles in God's Word.

Marble was used to stand for something strong like the pillars in Solomon's temple. And grapes have a mixed but metaphorically major meaning. In Revelations they refer to judgment and in other places they refer to growth and being meshed with God Himself as Jesus states about the grapevine in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

I like this illustration. My brother and I were definitely grapes. We smashed up together all over the place. We had true fellowship seeping our lives into each other. And we meshed with God seeping our insides with Him. I can say I lost my marbles with my brother, my momma, and with God, figuratively and literally, and I'd do it all again.

A Day in the Life - My Own - by Marcy Lytle

I love Instagram, mostly for inspiration for style or food or home décor. But sometimes, in fact oftentimes, influencers post what they call "a day in the life" where they share what their normal day looks like. Why do we care about that? Is it because we enjoy just peeking into another person's life...and then what? Do we compare, care, or laugh, or what? I don't know, but I also enjoy watching those videos. Maybe I relate or give thanks for my normalcy or even slow down and consider things. All sorts of reactions occur, possibly depending on how my own day is going.

I'm 67, and here's a day in my life (a weekday), if you were to peer in my kitchen window:

I get up early, I love walking into a quiet kitchen and making the same breakfast I eat 90% of the time – homemade granola with berries on top, and milk, in a bowl. I sit at my laptop in the quiet of the darkness and I catch up and organize and plan the day or the week.

By 7:30-8:00 am I'm back in my bathroom getting dressed for the day, and then I make my bed. I just can't have a good day unless my bed is made! I then snap some pictures for Instagram, post them (and wonder why I do what I do) and get on with my day.

My paying job then takes over for a while, and that could take me one hour or more, and I often have to hop in the car to retrieve more work from a location or drop off some. I enjoy this outing because I often stop at Target or Marshalls on the way back.

If my husband is working from home that day, I try to get back to make us a scrumptious meal which we both enjoy while watching an episode of a crime drama or something like that. It's our midday break which I love, and actually miss if he's working in town. I love having our bigger meal midday instead of at night.

The afternoon is spent finishing work, organizing or decorating or out in the yard, or a long walk. I might wait until he gets home to take the walk, or I might go alone. This is my down time to look up, worship, admire His handiwork, and give thanks, while moving my body to get exercise.

By 5:00 p.m. I'm ready to think about dinner or going out. Sometimes we go to a movie, sometimes we go for a long walk, other times we meet friends for dinner, or go shopping. And still often, we stay home and create atmosphere while we watch a show. I think that's my favorite. Maybe a charcuterie tray for two, a blanket and pillows for a floor picnic, candles lit or not, or just really cute paper plates and napkins that match. And we snack instead of dine.

Around 8:30-9:00 pm we enter our front guest room and sit in two chairs, books in hand. We read aloud to each other, we pray, and we listen to music...then we head to our bedroom. The day doesn't feel so heavy, and our load seems lighter, after this activity.

Baths, teeth brushed, conversations had, hugs and kisses, maybe watching King of Queens if it's a funny episode, and the lights are out by 11pm most nights.

That's my day, usually. Except for Thursdays. I'm with the littles that day. And everyone knows that sometimes life is interrupted and days aren't normal for a while, until finally they are...once again. Maybe a new normal or maybe the same.

Hope you enjoyed a day in my life.

Firmly Planted - A Hard Lesson—by Dina Cavazos

One good thing about upheaval, turmoil, disruption (pick your word) is that it typically results in change. This has been true in my personal experience, and usually, it's good change. Change can be unpleasant and takes effort to initiate. It's easier to coast along...but then one day you realize your metaphorical garden is filled with metaphorical weeds. When those weeds get too high to ignore, then comes the work of change: chopping, clearing, digging, etc. But how nice it is to have a cleared garden with room to plant new things!

The past year has been like that for me. Not huge, terrible upheavals, but enough to shake up my life a little. It didn't come from outside forces--the responsibility is all mine. I confess that I'm a compulsive thrift store shopper, the first of the 12 Steps, and it was only this past year I realized the power it had over me.

My daughter started a re-selling business which offered a perfect opportunity to go thrifting and "help" her find things! It was a fun common interest we could share. The problem was that the hunt for treasures began to control me—FOMO demanded I go every single day. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) can become a tyrant if you let it. I found lots and lots of things, and wasted lots and lots of time. Eventually, I realized that my daughter didn't really need my help and I began to back off, but it took a while to break the desire and habit of daily thrifting.

I've been aware of my weakness in the area of thrifting—God has dealt with me about it before. It just kind of crept back in. I believe when we're truly committed to following the way of the Lord and letting him be King in our lives, he's faithful to put us back on track no matter how many times we mess up. This time, he let me have my fill of my chosen fruit until I was sick of it. The result of my habit was bags and bags of goods with forgotten contents. Bins and bins of vintage fabric and sewing paraphernalia filling the closets and living room. When I came to terms with the fact that I had to deal with the things my daughter didn't need or want, it really began to feel like a weight.

In the midst of that, I decided to get new flooring in my house, which meant clearing everything out into the garage. Then afterward, putting it all back. This was an opportunity to downsize and clean out yet again. Besides this bittersweet chore, I had outside projects, inside projects, writing projects, and other activities that demanded time. Too much stuff cluttered my space, which clutters my mind and robs my peace. I was *sick of stuff* and sick of not spending my time wisely. The things I feel called to do, writing and gardening, had fallen by the wayside. Everything felt out of kilter and I was overwhelmed.

It wasn't just the number of projects and the amount of clutter that overwhelmed me. It was the feeling of being out of step with God. Honestly, it was a struggle for a little while, and I found myself thinking what it must be like to have a true addiction. I have more empathy those struggling with that than I did before.

Slowly, I got my priorities straight, regained control, eliminated most of the clutter, and returned to my usual and healthier routine. Have I gone cold turkey and completely quit thrifting? No, but I go out of choice not compulsion. Most of the time I don't buy a thing. It was a lesson in what

happens when we let our desires and compulsions get out of hand, one I don't want to repeat. I'm back to gardening, writing, and occasionally thrifting with my daughter for fun.

Unearthly Things - Geography Lessons - by Angela Dolbear

Spending my life in different places has been like living geography lessons. I've learned so much about people, their ways of life, and their views.

I have resided in three different regions of the United States. It has helped me develop an appreciation for the various environments and people in the places I lived, the wildlife, and the weather.

Growing up in Southern California, specifically in the Los Angeles area, my best friends were first-generation coming-to-America kids from Vietnam, Cuba, and the Philippines. I experienced different foods, household customs, and languages when I visited my friends' homes. This was my first lesson in accepting and valuing people different from myself.

People from all over the world moved to the Los Angeles area to pursue their dreams. It is hard for some people to have new cultures move into their corner of the world, but it's an excellent opportunity to meet new people, especially if you are into sharing the Good News of Christ.

It's like in the book of the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible, which I am currently reading. I can see how God moved people out of their comfort zones to keep them close to Him, so they stayed tuned into doing His work, which spread Christianity. Several apostles were moved to foreign places to share the gospel with people different than themselves. It was part of God's plan to bring the Good News to everyone, everywhere. It's amazing to remember that most of these men grew up in Galilee, probably thinking they would spend the rest of their lives there, probably fishing for fish, not people.

Moving keeps you on your spiritual toes. You develop extra reliance on God like a deeper layer of trust is needed. I think about Abraham when God called him to leave his homeland for a place that God was going to show him. He didn't even know where he was going, but he went, trusting God. That amazes me.

Currently, I live in the City of Nashville, but I do most of my business and errands in the small town just north of us. The traffic is never an issue, and the folks there are very kind.

I recently visited my dentist's office in this small town. Amongst the small talk with the hygienist and dentist, there was a strange—let's call it curious—vibe between me and my dental experts, who had both been born, raised, and lived in this small town for their entire lives; I'm guessing between fifty to sixty years. While this seems unimaginable to me, I got the sense my long-term vagabond life seemed odd to them.

However, moving to different places has allowed me to witness many miracles during my relocations. I saw God provide financially each time. He also gave me things I didn't know I

needed and things I never dared to ask for. He also gifted me things I didn't know I would love. But He knew.

My 1959 ranch-style home in Nashville has large windows in the open living /dining space with views of trees on each side of my home. It's like living in a tree house. I love it so much. I regularly thank God for my beautiful views.

The trees are grey and barren in the winter, with their own beauty. Soon, spring will be here, and the green of the grass and trees will be so vibrant it almost hurts my eyes. The beauty of it fills my heart with gratitude to my Heavenly Father, who gives me this daily gift I didn't know I would love. But He knew. He's good like that.

Along with moving locations, I've also learned geography lessons from traveling. One of the most important aspects of traveling is always to be a shining light to everyone. In Berlin, Germany, I took a break from sightseeing and stopped at a little café to get a sweet treat and a coffee.

All the tables were outside, which was fine with me; as you can imagine, the view was as interesting as the people-watching was, and the weather was nice for July. A sweet college-aged woman brought my order out to me, and we chatted a bit in English (I must look American, hmmm.) Her German accent was heavy, so I nodded and smiled. I believe that's universally polite to do.

When I finished my food and drink, I brought my empty plate and coffee cup back inside the café and put them in the dish bin, which I noticed when I walked in. The young lady looked shocked (bummer) and said, "Thank you" exuberantly. I returned her smile, and attempted a butchered "danke schön" ("thank you very much"). German is a tough language to learn and speak. But I've been told English is, too.

To wrap up my musings on traveling and the lessons of living among people of different geographic origins, here's my Top 5 list of my favorite places I've visited, and some of my recommended things to do there:

- 5. Boston, MA, U.S.A. Go to the North End (think little Italy), preferably at Christmas time. Get a cannoli at <u>Mike's Pastry</u>. There are so many to choose from; you might consider two or three. Also, Boston's <u>Old Town Trolley tours</u> (a "hop-on-hop-off" tour) through Boston are fantastic. There is so much history there.
- 4. Berlin, Germany so much to see and history. <u>The Wall Museum at Checkpoint Charlie</u> is fascinating, as is the <u>Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church</u>. It's eerie to see bullet holes in the side of the building from WWII. Also, there is a photo of Kaiser Wilhelm's funeral, with a certain infamous Austrian dictator attending.
- 3. <u>Negril, Jamaica</u> So beautiful. The snorkeling is tropical fish everywhere. The local people are so kind. If you stop and talk to them, showing genuine interest, they say to you, "Yeah, mon,

respect mon." The food is fantastic, with such fresh, delicious fruits and vegetables. My favorite pepper sauce comes from there, <u>Grace Hot Pepper Sauce</u>. HOT, but it's so tasty as a dipping sauce for pizza and burgers. It's always on our dinner table.

- 2. New York, NY, U.S.A. The New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street is one of my favorite places on earth. The iconic Rose Main Reading Room is my favorite place to write and think. The worn wood table, chairs, beautiful windows, and painted ceilings inspire me. You've probably seen it in a movie or two. Outside the library is Bryant Park, one of my favorite places to bring something to eat and sit, people-watch, and relax. There are so many great museums, too. My favorites include the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and if you are into fashion, visit the Museum at FIT NYC. Explore displays of beautiful vintage designer clothing.
- 1. Southern California Don't we all have a special place in our hearts for the place where we were born and grew up? My favorites include <u>Disneyland</u>, <u>Newport Beach on the Balboa Island Peninsula</u>, <u>Olvera Street</u>, <u>Canter's Deli</u>, <u>The Queen Mary</u> in Long Beach, the <u>Aquarium of the Pacific</u> (also in Long Beach), and any In-N-Out burger location for an Animal-style Double burger. It's not on the menu, but they will know your request. It's oh-so-good.

Happy living and traveling, and as always, blessings to you!

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories. Her latest release, The Mid-Century Breakfast Club, is the fourth book in The Garden Tales series and will be released in the Summer of 2025. Her novels are available on Amazon in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats. Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, and writing and recording music with her husband Tim in their studio in Nashville, TN—listen to her new album STORMS on your favorite music streaming service. Please drop by and sign up for and news. read the latest stories. hear new original music at http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm. Blessings to you!

Moving Forward – I Want to Live – by Pam Charro

Ezekiel 16:6 Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood, I said to you, "Live!"

When I was a little girl, I was mad. I didn't know why yet, but I often had intense reactions when I felt hurt or frustrated. It has taken me many years to better understand myself and control all of that emotion, but there was definitely a fighter in me at a very young age.

However, as I approached my teen years, the sadness and feeling of powerless began to intensify, and depression set in. Not only was I still mad and sad, but there didn't seem to be anywhere to direct all of it except inward. I felt betrayed, rejected, and helpless. What was the point of living except to continue experiencing all of this pain, for which there was no cure? I would tell you that I wanted to die except I instinctively knew, even at 13, that I would continue to exist if I took my own life. So death was not an option.

As I grew older, I continued looking for hope, but found I was destroying my own life in the process. The anger kept hurting me and anyone I began to get close to. I wanted to dream, to have joy, to succeed in life; but nothing I experienced was ever good enough. I still didn't see the point of all of the difficulty, and, in my desperation, I made bigger and more destructive mistakes.

I'm grateful to God that he revealed himself to me when I was only 24, but I still had to struggle with anger and insecurity after that. I continued to feel sad and lash out at the people I loved, and I still doubted my own value. My heart was still broken, and I didn't even realize how victimized I felt by my own pain.

But something new began to develop in me as I learned to agree with God's perspective. I realized that my enemy was not myself, other people, or even life! I had a true enemy who really did try to destroy me, and I started to see him for the bully and liar that he was. How dare he steal my life from me?! God is the one who put me here, and he said it was very good. I have important work to do and gifts to give to this world, and it will be better as a result of my existence. Because of that truth, I can find meaning and enjoyment in life, and I can love myself and others. The journey is worthwhile.

I still have days that I feel I barely survive. It's tough here! But I have fewer and fewer days when I feel like a victim if all of it. I'm not only winning the battle over depression, but I'm continuing to push back at the lies of the enemy when he whispers that I don't have a reason or right to be here. I know that God put me here on purpose, and I agree with him that it's good.

I want to live. I'm going to live.



FRESH THYME - How Much is Too Much? - by Marcy Lytle

We listen to nightly local news, we read pop-ups on our phone, and sometimes my husband listens to the radio in his car. Other than that, we don't follow a lot of news stations or reporters or any of those that relay the news – whether it's a slant FOR our president and his actions or AGAINST everything he's doing. We try to stay informed the best we know how. But honestly, how much news reporting and listening and reading is too much?

First of all, everyone has their own source(s) they "trust" and it's not the same across the board. Some believe their source is the only one trustworthy, while others say no way – their source is more accurate. It reminds me of the pandemic and how people were so divided on whether or not to believe the government, health officials, churches, or anyone at all. And we were certainly divided on that one! Some even lost friends during those years...geez!

While it's important to have sources that relay the news accurately, are there really any that do, completely? I like to remember what my mom always said: Believe nothing you hear and only half of what you read. Maybe that's a good idea!

Secondly, listening to the news of the hour that relays the state of the nation is stressful, no matter which source we think we trust. And while we want to be informed, we cannot let ourselves be burdened to the point of consumption equals...exhaustion...equals worry and fret. This is not healthy for our bodies, minds or spirits, and it weighs us down and can even cause sickness.

While it's important to be in the know with current events, it's more important that we know that no matter what we hear, we ultimately have to do our best and trust God with the rest. Maybe that's cliché, but it's so true. No source of news on this earth is going to be totally truth, without some sort of skewed reporting...so we do what we can and REST.

Lastly, some think there's never too much knowledge to be had. And that's it an indication of being a good citizen, a good Christian and a good person to listen to everything we can and take it all in. But there is such a thing as too much knowledge. And how do we know when we're taking in too much? When the balance is tipped and we're on the down side of tipping over.

While it's important to gain knowledge, part of that knowledge is knowing that we are held, guided and cared for by Him, no matter what the news and the reporters and the leaders say...whether wicked or righteous. And it's not up to us to judge either one, thank goodness.

For me personally, there's so much other knowledge that I need to know, like how to be a kinder person, how to trust Him more, and how to love others as I should, etc. I want to grow in that knowledge and trust that the knowledge I take in elsewhere is enough with His good hand, to guide me to safety and rest.

FRESH THYME – Junk Journaling – by Marcy Lytle

Last year we visited some museums in our city and one had a large table strewn with magazines, scissors, glue and tiny moleskin journals. Visitors were invited to sit and create a cover for their own tiny journal, so I snipped and glued and created a travel journal, not sure how or when I'd use it.

On our most recent trip, I decided to use it as a junk journal, because I'd just learned what that is. It's a new form of scrapbooking without all the fanfare! I never did scrapbook back in the day, because it seemed laborious and like it took a lot of finesse and time. But junk journaling, I thought I could do that!

On our trip, I just consciously collected the following each day so that I'd have enough to cut and tape (I chose tape instead of glue) each evening when we returned to our Airbnb. Here's what I collected:

Brochures

Ticket stubs

Stickers

My own itinerary which I cut and pasted

Programs

Business cards

Wrist bands

Store bags with logos

When I got back to the Airbnb at night, I took out my little collection from the day and I snipped and taped the day's activities in my little journal, with the bottom edge showing the date and our schedule. I had made that before we left and printed it out, so I just cut and taped from it each day.

Each day's activities told a story of what we did, when we did it, and the things we saw and experienced. Before all of this, I used to arrive back home and write it all out in a journal, but this junk journal full of color and all sorts of shapes and sizes was the most fun ever!

The tiny moleskin book was the perfect size, and I see that on Amazon you can get a pack of 12 to use for all of your adventures throughout the year – maybe one each month?

This was my first one and I love how each page came alive and made me excited to put together the next one. I didn't need borders or cardstock or expensive stickers or a large notebook. I just collected "junk" throughout the day – things I may have otherwise thrown away. This did the job, and now I have a record (the cutest) of our entire vacation that I put together in just minutes each night.

Look up junk journaling and get inspired to make your own. If you travel a lot, maybe do what I did. If you thrift or have a hobby or go on road trips, or just flit around town, and you want a record of what you do and see (maybe for your kids?), then consider junk journaling.

I never knew that scissors and tape could be so much fun as an adult, as much fun as when I was a toddler just learning how to use them...and I'm so much more adept with my hands and creativity now!

FRESH THYME – The Mental File Box – by Marcy Lytle

I know you have folders in your email boxes. Maybe ones for house repairs, trip ideas, kids activities, taxes, etc. Folders for email are a life saver for me. I can easily find what I need for that specific category. I bet you have file folders in your garage or your bedroom or your office, where you have labels and in between the file folders are important papers you might need one day...or not. And if you work for any sort of business, there are files, files, files, because all of that info that we receive daily while working has to be put somewhere or we become full and explode!

I recently thought about folders and how they can relate to the thoughts that fill our minds, as well. Just like all of that junk mail that piles up from the mailbox, that becomes a mountain we cannot climb at all, our thoughts are the same. And I thought about how there are days when my personal thoughts are so many, so varied, so vast, and so annoying, that it might help me to have a mental file box.

Here's what I mean:

Some thoughts are just downright lies. Like thoughts about not being loved, not being good enough, not being of value...you know them. They enter your mind when you fail, or when someone doesn't react as you thought they would, or when you just feel like a nothing and a blob. These thoughts can go in the *Lies* folder – the folder where we place the thoughts that are simply not true, and we file them away to remove them from cluttering up our heads.

Some thoughts are fearful ones that stifle us and spook us, out of the blue, on any given day. These start with a whisper like "what if..." and then the blanks are filled in with death, loss, disease, you name it...all the scary things that lurk in the dark world around us. These thoughts can go in the *Fear* folder – where we place the swirls so that they land somewhere else – instead of in our minds and into our hearts.

Some thoughts are self-degradation thoughts, that might be true about ourselves, but they're not healthy to think. Maybe we failed as a parent yesterday, or we were rude to our spouse, or we messed up big time at work and caused the whole team to suffer. We all make mistakes, and we start to think bad of ourselves and define ourselves by our mistakes, rather than our successes. And these thoughts can go in the Self folder – where it's all about us and who we aren't – and how we don't measure up. They need to be removed and placed somewhere, so put them there.

Some thoughts are prideful. We feel as though we're better than she is, we deserve that award that he got, our home and our clothes are beautiful and we're so proud that we have the best of the best, because we feel good when we shine in the neighborhood, or step into a room and receive praise. Nothing wrong with loving to be loved, but pride can swell up and cause us to think bad thoughts of others, preferring certain folks over other people...all because of how good we are and how bad they are. These need to go in the *Pride* file – away from our minds – so that we can truly be humble and grateful for any blessings in our lives.

Do you get the picture?

When I started thinking in this regards, to where I could file my thoughts at night before I go to sleep, I felt like my mind was in order. Like things fell into place. Like the desk in my brain was cleared, and there was nothing out for me to read or see except perhaps a little sign in the corner, not on a piece of paper, but rather on a block of wood to remind me:

I have the mind of Christ

What in the heck does that mean anyway? It is a mind that knows no insufficiency, does not operate out of pride or fear, but rather sleeps during storms because of the connection that mind has with the Father. It is a mind overflowing with love, so that nothing else clutters or covers up that love.

It might be a good exercise to make some mental file folders in that brain box of ours. Organizing the thoughts of the day and seeing them just disappear into their individual folders, so that our mind desk is clear and clean at the day's end.

Isn't that a cool picture to behold? I think it is. And I'm practicing this kind of filing, and it feels good.