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TIPS

The Dressing – Somewhere to Go – by Marcy Lytle

All dressed up with no place to go this month? Well, think of somewhere to go, and get dressed up! Don't wait for him to plan a date, her to call you up for lunch, or for someone's birthday or another holiday. Pick your color, your fun, and wear it – wherever you go! Going shopping, even buying groceries, or hanging out and watching TV at home is a good enough reason to dress up anyway this month and go!

Red Sweater – I found this red vintage at a resale shop and I've enjoyed it so much this winter. It's a good one for Valentine's Day or just for wearing around town or on a road trip, if you're traveling somewhere for fun. Visit the resale shops!

Pearl headband – I love pearls, and I've especially loved this headband I found at Marshalls. It was great for the holiday season, but I love the way it elevates any outfit at all...jeans, tshirts, or whatever outfit you're wearing. Get you one!

Vintage Bag – This bag was a gift for my last birthday, and it's so fun to carry. We recently visited a 1928 hotel and I carried it there. A woman there commented on how it fit right in with the décor! It's a fun bag, and a fun find...

Pearl earrings - These earrings are from Target and were a gift from 10 year old Ayla, to me. I've worn them often. Pearls make you feel pretty and special, so wear them often! Even if they're costume jewelry – they're the best!

Solid black with a pop of pink – These fun pink sparkly socks look great with loafers. But any pop of pink is good for February. A pink scarf or bag or even a pair of shoes with your favorite jeans...why not?

Red scarf and hat – Oh my, I felt fabulous this day so I got out in a park and snapped some photos. A red cap and scarf on a cold February day, out and about, just feels cozy and right!

Pink prints – This dress is from Walmart, and the earrings I've had for a while. It was fun to realize how they matched the print of the dress. I'm not a huge pink fan, but when a print comes together and the pink is the hot hue, then I'm all for it.

Maybe February is a fun month for you, romantic and all the things. Maybe it's a sad month for you, or a hard month, or a very busy month or a boring month. Look at your closet, pick a color you love or find some pearls you forgot about, or go shopping to treat yourself to something new. Then get dressed up and go...anywhere your pink socks take you.

Seven for You – So Sweet – by the Panel of Women

Have you ever received a gift, a kind gesture, or just something “so sweet” from a friend, a spouse or family member? It’s fun to think back to those things that made us smile, caused our hearts to sing, or just warmed us to the core. When someone does something sweet for us, we need to note it and recall it and share it. So we are...this month!

My sweet husband knows February is my favorite month of the year. I am a hopeless romantic at heart and it holds two of my favorite days to celebrate all year. Valentine’s Day is on the 14th, along with our Wedding Anniversary being on the 22nd. For several years HE has spoiled me by daily giving me a small token of his love during the month of February! It has meant the world to me! - Pam Throckmorton

My husband, Kris, is sweet to me. He consistently makes me something to drink or gives me his drink. I am not great at sharing my food or drink, but if he makes himself a drink and notices me looking at it, he will give it to me and make himself another one. I know that’s a simple thing, but it makes me feel loved. I also love it when my kids notice I am hurting or don’t feel well and they offer to pray for me. They will lay hands on me and pray out loud for God to heal me. I always find that to be a sweet and caring thing. It certainly brings me comfort! - Laura Mercer

My husband was raised to be very independent and self-reliant, not nurturing so much. But, in the last few years he has had to take care of me a lot more because of my health issues. Not long ago, we were out to dinner with some friends and as we were getting in the back seat of their car to leave the restaurant, I twisted my leg a little causing a bad cramp. I had to exit the car for a minute to walk off the cramp. It was very painful, as cramps are, but not uncommon to me. After a short time I was able to return to the car and we were off. As we were leaving, my husband took my hand to offer comfort and to make sure I was okay. Riding there in the dark, I felt his concern and care without his even saying a word. That’s what I call sweetness. – Gina

One of the sweetest things that has ever happened to me was when I was in the seventh grade. My mom had died, and my life had been filled with all the wrong kinds of people doing all the wrong things. But, along the way, God blessed me with a handful of exceptional people that didn’t even know how exceptional they were. One of these was my seventh-grade school counselor. He knew how hard life was for me at home, so he gave me opportunities to stay away from there by doing volunteer service for our school, all the while keeping my hours of serving for National Junior Honor Society. I didn’t even know what that was. I thought I was simply working for him and my school in fun ways. And I kept my grades up all because of his encouragement.

Through his organizing, I would stay after school and help the teachers with whatever they needed, grading, sorting supplies, and filing. I got to take our school’s lunch deposit to the bank almost every day. We lived in a small town so I could easily walk there. And on football game days, I sat in the press box with him and announce the entire game, with him telling me what to say, of course. He was always there when my stepmom tried to keep me home. I remember him well and I can still see his face sitting behind his desk. I never miss a chance to tell what love and kindness he showed me, and I’ve often wondered if he had any idea how much he helped me through a very dark time. I never knew if he believed in Jesus, but I do believe he was truly sent from God. – Carole

When my dad's health was declining and it seemed the end was near, I really had a tough week and cried a lot. My daughter in law showed up at my door with a few little gifts, which I don't even remember now what they were. But the sweetness of her gesture I will remember forever, and it made me feel validated, heard, and loved. I'm sure she didn't understand fully my pain, but it didn't matter. She knew I needed a hug and she came in person to give me one. That sweetness made my day.

Another time on a Valentine's Day, actually, we had NO money and my husband melted a chocolate candy bar into the shape of a heart. Another act of sweetness I'll never forget. I still smile at the memory. – Marcy

The best gifts come with deep love attached and are not always from a store. My first time dealing with Covid was scary and I was really sick. A friend from school, someone I hadn't seen since high school, made the trip to my house with a care package of medications and food. I was told one that the best gift is not to ask someone what they need during a time of illness or loss, as this puts stress on the person to come up with something, to make sure they don't ask for too much, etc. Michelle just showed up and it was such a nice surprise! She cheered me up and showed me her good heart.

My other sweet gift was from my daughter, who lives in California, who made sure she was with me when I had a medical procedure. This meant so much to me, and means so much to all parents, especially as we age, not to face hospital stays alone. - Cathy

I have been taking care of my daughter's 1 year old son once a week for the past year. Each Tuesday when I pick him up his bag is meticulously packed with his clothes, lunch, snacks, etc. And tucked away in his lunch bag will always be a little something sweet for me. It may be homemade treat or sometimes it is a few of our favorite Trader Joes peanut butter cups. Often there is a little thank you note on the baggie. It's so funny how I look forward to whatever little treat will be in the bag that week. I know it's about more than chocolate. It is a little thank you from her for a job I am so grateful and blessed to have. - Shelley

The Cousin Moms – Different Yet Same – by Charissa and Kamrin

As parents, our kids watch everything we do, more than listening to what we say. And how we treat those that are different than we are is so vital to a healthy family. We asked the moms how they teach their kids to understand the value in others that look, act, and live differently than their families.

How do we love the different? Because, after all, aren't we all the same?

Charissa

When it comes to recognizing differences in others, it started at a young age with our girls seeing differences – like in hair or skin – or they saw someone without a leg and in a wheelchair – or kids that acted differently.

Kids are so innocent when young and might blurt out in public a difference, and I'm like – *oh my goodness*. But we do pause and talk to them...

We have tried to encourage our girls with the knowledge that we are all created differently. We tell them there is no other person like you in this world, you are unique. That is the backbone we use to talk about differences, including men/women, color of our skin, language and accents, etc. My husband loves the Spanish culture and speaks Spanish, so the girls are interested in that language in particular. God has created it all!

So, we go back to this point that we are unique and all God's children, and he loves us all. In all of our differences, we are all part of God's story.

We also teach the kids about manners and not to point, because that's offensive. We also work on encouraging others that are different, to be nice, to treat others the way they want to be treated. We ask the girls how they would feel if someone laughed at them for i.e. the color of their hair. Differences are not to be made fun of, but rather praised.

Again, it's definitely trial and error parenting in this area, when our kids are trying to figure out the world. Definitely, taking time to pause is important. Going back to the bible and pointing to Him and his creation of all of us in our differences is the best place to start!

Kamrin

When it comes to teaching our kids to be friendly and nice to others that are different than we are in lifestyle, culture, medical needs, etc.; I feel so thankful that we haven't run into major concerns. Part of that reason is that being youth pastors for 15 years, our kids were with us and born into a group of students with all different backgrounds, races and cultures. We've always had the community around us.

One of my best friends has a son with Angelman's Syndrome and he cannot walk or talk on his own, and uses a device. He's a couple months younger than my oldest, and our kids have been around him. Of course, our kids ask inquisitive questions, like asking why a man is missing his legs and is in a wheelchair. We also encourage the kids to ask people to share their stories.

Our kids have been in an elementary school that is very diverse. Our campus is the most diverse one in our district, so our kids have a wide spectrum of friends from values and beliefs to even economic status. All of the families look different. We have lots of military families represented, and their life is different, too!

The only place we do have conversations is how to be polite and kind to those with different values. We do teach them, as every parent does, about being polite to mean kids, to those that get in trouble all the time, to those that choose to talk inappropriately – do we have to be best friends with them? We don't expect our friends to be "best friends" with everyone they meet. It's okay for us to teach politeness but how to choose to separate from bad behavior and to say no. There are some boundaries in this area. But it can be "no, thank you" I don't care to be a part of that, and walk away. But, of course, they must do it out of love and respect. If our kids are uncomfortable due to conversation or behavior, then boundaries can be taught.

My kids aren't going to be everyone else's "cup of tea" either and want to be their friends. But they must be kind. And we have talked more about race in our home over the past few years, and how others do get treated badly for race or religion, and that's not okay. The stories in the news have provided good family conversations and we talk about how others do get treated badly...still.

Prejudice and racism are not okay, and we will not stand for these in our home. We don't shy away from talking and training and teaching them that differences make people unique, and make people all parts of our community, and allow for creativity and teamwork opportunities! And I love that my kids have a heart for people and befriend the outcast...and value the celebration of other students and their unique ways! Even our own kids are all three different! And we all must walk in humility and grace.

Finally, we teach them that God created everyone – their peers that are different in all sorts of ways – and we are to be polite, kind and loving to all. Love God. Love people. That's it.

In the Kitchen – Comfort Food – by Marcy Lytle

It's February and perhaps you're tired of the cold and ready for spring. However, there are weeks to go...and why not enjoy some comfort food a bit longer (including ice cream!) – with easy recipes for you and your family? The flavors of staples in your home, cooked up just right, and the smells of familiar aromas...will invite all to the table!

Blizzards at Home

All the chocolate things – We had chocolate leftover from Christmas advent, we buy chocolate clusters, we love Jr Mints and more...but we had lots of bits and pieces...so what to do? And you might have Valentine's Day chocolates soon! Make a blizzard at home!

- Blender
- Ice cream
- Milk
- Chocolate and nut/mint pieces

Chop the candies and add to blender with lots of ice cream and a little milk, blending off and on, until it's the consistency you want. Pour into a clear glass, get a spoon, and enjoy.

Beans and Mac

Pinto beans...have you made them yet this winter? Have you tried them with macaroni and cheese? You're in for a treat when you do...

- Pinto beans
- Chopped onions
- Tomatillo salsa
- Mac n cheese

Rinse the beans, place in water in a pot and bring to a boil. Season well, add chopped onions, and cook (adding water as needed) until beans are tender. Add tomatillo salsa near the end to flavor it up!

Make your favorite mac n cheese.

Serve up both and enjoy.

Breakfast Wrap

We didn't make this but rather enjoyed in a restaurant. But how easy it would be to put it together? I opted for no eggs, but most would probably like to have them.

- Eggs (or not)
- Grilled potatoes

- Bacon
- Spinach
- Cheese
- Tomato tortilla

Cook the eggs, grill the potatoes, fry the bacon, saute the spinach, grate the cheese.

Assemble your wraps in tomato tortillas and serve them warm. So, so good.

Chicken Pot Pies

I made these one evening after a long day, and it was easy and fairly fast, and OH so good. We both really enjoyed. The puff pastry provided a perfect crust, and the mixture inside was super flavorful and perfect on a cold night.

- 4 c shredded rotisserie chicken (I just used seasoned chicken breast cooked and shredded from a package)
- ¼ c flour
- 2 ½ c low sodium chicken broth
- 2 ½ c frozen mixed veggies
- ½ dried sage or ½ T chopped fresh sage
- 1 sheet frozen puff pastry thawed

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Pour chicken into bowl. In a large saucepan, heat 3 T olive oil, add flour and cook, stirring constantly, one minute. Gradually whisk in broth. Stir in veggies, ¾ t salt, ½ t pepper and sage. Bring to boil, then reduce heat and simmer til thickened about 4 minutes.

Pour veggie mix over chicken in the bowl, stir gently to combine. Divide chicken and veggies evenly into four ramekins or ovenproof soup bowls. Cut puff pastry into four squares, place one on top of each ramekin and cut a few slashes to vent steam.

Bake til pastry puffs and turns brown, about 25-30 minutes. Makes 4 pot pies.

Seasoned Pork Chops and Smashed Potatoes

Has it been a while since you had pork chops? It had been for us. And the smashed potatoes are just so fun to make (and let out a little aggression in the smash!)

The Chops

- 4 boneless pork chops
- 4 T olive oil
- 2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tsp onion powder

Preheat oven to 400, lightly grease a baking sheet. Rub each chop with olive oil.

In a small bowl mix together the seasonings and season all sides of the pork chops. Place on to the baking sheet.

Bake for 15-20 minutes til chops reach temp of 145 degrees (depends on thickness of chops).
Serve hot.

The potatoes

- Baby potatoes
- Olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- Any toppings (we used cheese and pico)

Boil the potatoes in salted water til just tender. Place on a greased baking sheet and smash with a glass, season, and brush with olive oil. Bake at 450 for about 15 minutes, then move to broiler and broil til crisp. Or roast at 425 for 30 minutes til crisp. Just before removing them, add a bit of cheese if you want. Serve and top with Pico...or Parmesan. Your choice!

Tried and True – Last Month’s Learning

Lots to learn every month, when we observe, enjoy life and just look for the new, the trivia, the interesting and the unusual. Hope you enjoy this month’s learnin’!

If you have leftover candy from Christmas, or after Valentine’s you do too...just chop it, place it in a blender with ice cream and a little milk – and make your own blizzard! We did this recently and it was delish!

We visited a new/old hotel and by the fireplace they had a little ceramic bowl with a lid. Jon looked inside and there were old black and white photos. What a fun place to store your faves for visitors to look at when you have guests!

Ever played the game Shut the Box? It’s an old game, but I found it at Marshalls. You can buy it on line. It’s fun, easy, great for couples, or just a fun numbers game when you have a night in...

A hardware plastic box from Dollar Tree – my favorite new purchase! But I don’t use it for hardware, but rather for snacks. The best thing is that the dividers are fixed to the bottom, so your snack juice (like from olives or pickles) doesn’t seep underneath on your other food.

Need a tray of snacks to take to a party? Hobby Lobby has really cute skewers. Just thread pepperoni, olives and mozzarella on some. Then turkey, Colby jack and a pickle on the others...and fill the tray!

Red fuzzy slippers to treat yourself this month of Valentine’s, why not? Old Navy has the cutest pair I’ve been wearing all winter.

Got this amazing potpourri pot for the stove that I love. I can put in all the scents (lots of options depending on the season) and see it simmer – so pretty to walk in the kitchen and see the colors.

I learned a new word - Perihelion – it’s when the earth is closest to the sun – happened in January. Aphelion is the point of the Earth’s orbit that is farthest away from the Sun. Happens in July.

Did you know that Katherine Hepburn’s last movie was in 1994 and it was called One Christmas? We watched it after Christmas...stars Henry Winkler, too! On Prime.

You’ve probably tried this. But dipping fries in queso, instead of ketchup, well...it’s just awesome. Mooyah Burgers (if you have that in your area) has the best!

And chopped tomatoes on top of Frito Pie – that’s awesome as well!

We got a Brie Baker at Christmas and used it last night. Not only is it pretty, it’s awesome for trying all sorts of toppings – like peach pecan butter and chopped pecans drizzled with honey!

There's a website called KidScriptureBooks that sells the cutest cards on a ring – or book – for kids. It arrives quickly with a personal note, and it's gotten rave reviews...by kids!

Having trouble getting in your 8 glasses of water a day? I recently gave my husband a cool 64oz Thermos and he loves it!

SUGAR + Spice Neutral Glam – by Angela Dolbear

For many years I have stayed away from neutral colors because they didn't compliment my black hair. Since I have had red hair for a few years now, I thought I would revisit the neutral palette--just in time for one of my favorite cosmetic brands, Too Faced, to have a big sale!

As I browsed the sale, I was intrigued by an eye shadow palette called [Maple Syrup Pancakes](#), as well as their new [BTS Easy Glide Waterproof Liquid Eyeliner in Chocolate](#). Brown eyeliner and not the standard issue black liner? Yes. Why not? I was surprised by the softer look the brown eyeliner provided. I applied it to only my top eyelids just like I always do, with a widening thickness, and it still looked retro, but softer.

The Maple Syrup Pancakes palette has a perfect mix of natural warm and cool tones in matte and shimmer finishes. The shadows blended so well and stayed on all day.

In my new neutral glam mission, I perused the sale lip products. In the back of my mind there is a voice, which is my own, shouting, "DON'T BUY ANYMORE LIPSTICK!" I have more than a lifetime supply of lipsticks because lipstick is one of my favorite things.

I didn't buy any lipstick (yay me), but I did pick up a lip liner, [Too Faced new Lip Injection Extreme Lip Shaper](#) in a warm chocolatey shade called "In Big Truffle." What a fabulous job it would be to come up with fun names for shades. I applied this lip liner, which does have a plumping effect, before putting on a warm toned red lipstick and it looked so lovely. Then I paired it with a subtle pink shade, and it looked so soft and sophisticated.

A note about lip plumpers: My lips are very dry and damaged by Scleroderma (an autoimmune disease), so this lip plumping lip liner stung for a bit. If you have sensitive lips, try swiping a bit of lip balm over your lips before applying any kind of lip plumping product. It helps keep the stinging to a minimum, and still gives fuller lips and smooths out wrinkly lip lines.

I'm loving the softer neutral glam look I have adopted. It's a great look for the winter and can easily transition into the spring.

The beauty of blessings to you!

Angela Dolbear, Beauty Editor, is the author of contemporary spiritual novels, such as [THE GARDEN KEY](#) Series, and [THE TORMENTOR'S TALE](#), as well as many short stories, which are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). And she loves writing and recording songs with her husband, Tim --listen on [Sound Cloud](#). She is also a self-proclaimed beauty junkie and has been since long before her mother allowed her to start wearing makeup at the age of 14. She keeps UPS and the USPS busy delivering small boxes on a regular basis from Ulta, Sephora, Amazon, and many independent cosmetics companies to her home Nashville, TN. Please connect with her at www.AngelaDolbear.com



HOME

Practical Parenting – The Struggle is Real – by Marcy Lytle

When we were opening gifts at Christmas, one of the kids got a cool gift that the other one was sure was on his list, too. And instead of being happy that his brother got the gift, the brother that didn't get that gift moped for a good bit and commented often, "But that was on MY list." Kids do this, as we all know. They want what they want and when they don't get it, they're sad. But when someone else gets it and they don't, well they're just downright mad.

We ought to, as parents, understand...because we act the same way...maybe silently, but we do. We have all experienced envy at a friend getting what we wished for, when we were sure it was supposed to be what we got instead of them!

But parenting a mopey kid, one that won't quit complaining, is hard. Telling them to stop doesn't make the envy and anger cease in their hearts.

We also had a saran wrap ball with a bunch of the kids where they had to unwrap and receive whatever fell out of the ball on their turn. Some kids squealed with delight when a cool candy or toy fell in their laps, but others completely looked downcast...like when one of the boys got a coin purse. One of the girls got a dog bone, but one of the other kids got a \$25 gift card to Amazon.

At the end of the activity, we talked about who got the best gift, the worst, the dumbest, the most useful, etc. It was all part of realizing that kids around the world are given different gifts - or experiences in life. Most of our kids receive awesome gifts, have opportunities to use their talents, get to pick which snack they want for an afternoon, etc. But kids from all over the world have different things in their laps that "fall out" of life's ball, like parents that are deployed, famine in their country, no running water in their villages, etc.

Kids cannot even comprehend the differences around the world, but when we present the truth to them, share with them and pray with them for kids all over the world...they do get a glimpse into how good they have it.

His parents corrected him – the one around our tree that was moping – and soon he brightened up. The kids in the circle with the ball wanted so badly to trade their gifts with those beside them, but that wasn't part of the game. They had to give thanks. And then we prayed for all the kids that don't get what they want, as we recalled this promise...

God works all things together for good to those who love him...even coin purses or dog bones...or gift cards or famine. We serve a big God that knows and cares, never sleeps, and his hand is never short.

If your kids often feel disappointed or jealous or envious of a sibling or a friend, talk with them. Try the saran wrap game with your family. Train them on rejoicing for others, when we feel sad. And most of all, demonstrate the quality of being content with what you receive and have...without complaint. That's a tall order, but we can do it, when we give thanks for the gifts and for the One who works it all for good.

I Don't Do Teens – Is It Even Possible? – by Marcy Lytle

I think when we become moms, we somehow inherit this whole list of worries that we never had before, because we have this incredible weight of responsibility handed to us to raise this child, keep him/her healthy and fed and happy, and meet all of his/her needs. And when that child becomes a teen, that worry list becomes ten times longer with the concerns over dating and driving and doing...doesn't it? So, is it even possible to have peace with teens in the house, and a mind free of worry, as a mom?

Let's just admit it. Teens are a lot of fun, but their rapid changes and growth and outbursts and attitudes and desires are all a bit much! So let's tackle some of the top "worries" and see if we can find a possibility of laying down those worries at His feet.

Hormones – As these rage, and interest in the opposite sex heightens, and dating becomes desirable, we have all the angst of worry of the "what ifs" of dating. There's this song I used to like with a lyric line of "I'll keep doing my best...and He'll take care of the rest." There's so much truth to this. We talk to our kids, we of course train them and listen to them, and we set boundaries. Without boundaries, our kids flounder. And of course, we pray. Then all we can do is trust. And this worry about what if they have sex, what if the person driving is drinking, and what if they get their heart broken takes a backseat to the fact that He will carry us all through the teen years to the adult ones...and we WILL survive and thrive.

Behind the wheel – I was never so scared as when my daughter took off after she got her license, without me by her side in the car. I had taught her to drive, so if she made a mistake, wouldn't it then be my fault? I mean, the parent instructions I listened to even told me so! Had I taught her every scenario on the road? Will she obey traffic signals and signs, and stay alert, and leave her phone alone? The questions are the worry instigators, aren't they? And the visions that then flash through our minds and the jumps when our phone rings, when the kids aren't home on time...it's maddening. However, remember the country song "Jesus, Take the Wheel?" I didn't like it, but it was played everywhere at the time...and it's true. We have to trust Jesus to replace us...in the passenger seat. He is with them to remind them and guide them...always.

Heartbreaks – He came home once with his lip trembling because he thought his girlfriend's parents didn't like him. It's been years since this happened, but I can still remember how my heart broke for him! I couldn't fix his hurt, and I wanted to so badly! That's the thing. We want to forever be our kids' Bandaid. But part of our continual growth, alongside our teens, is learning that handing them over to the GREAT fixer himself – Jesus – is actually the best thing we can do. We can direct them to pour out their broken hearts to him and find solace and direction and peace. It's a hard thing, but we must do it. Our fixes aren't always what's best, but His are.

So that's only three areas of the multitudes that we face as parents of teens growing into adults...and then there's that leaving the nest! Oh my, how in the world do we not worry, then?

We can read this article 10 times over, but until we just daily practice placing our kids in His hands, nothing really works. It's not a once and done deal, but rather a choice we make each morning when the worries start to surface and then take over our heart that was at rest.

Is a mom's heart and mind ever at rest? Is it even possible for us not to worry? I'm pretty sure that this world and the leaves that fall will make sure our porch is full of a mess each morning before we even step out the front door. BUT...we can sweep them away with the broom he places in our hands each morning...that of his new mercies and compassion for us...and our kids. That's all worry is. A pile of leaves. So don't let them stay there until they rot...just take that broom and sweep. And if you're too weak for that on a given morning, just invite Him to blow them away for you...and He will.

An Adage a Day - February Packs a Punch – by Carole Gilbert

This column may seem short and sweet. It's because February is the shortest month of the year, but it definitely packs a punch. They always say big things come in small packages and this month fulfills that phrase. It all starts with the first day of February. This is National Get Up Day. Yes, honestly, that's what it is called. It is a day of "pick me ups." It's a day to remember where we have persevered. And it's a day to share it with others to lift them up. I'm known to get up early, and run late, so to have the first day of February be designated as get up day, seems against my grain. I have good intentions, but it always happens. I run late. February 1 is also National Dark Chocolate Day. Now that's an event I won't run late to.

As February continues to pack its punch, we have the second day. And we all know what that day is! Groundhog Day! This celebration started around 1840. And we know if the groundhog sees his shadow, we have six more weeks of winter. These traditional days of February go on and on. Some of my favorites include National Tater Tot Day, National Frozen Yogurt Day, National Stuffed Mushroom Day, National Homemade Soup Day, Library Lovers Month, National Gumdrop Day, and National Thank a Mail Carrier Day, just to name a few.

February is also American Heart Month and speaking of hearts, it includes the favored holiday of Valentine's Day. It's thought of as the love month.

One of the biggest impacts of love in the Bible comes from the shortest man, Zaccheus. It's also a story of a changed heart. Thinking of February made me think of this story. Zaccheus starts with an evil heart but once he meets Jesus, his heart is changed. Jesus saw Zaccheus in a big way even though Zaccheus had to climb a tree to be seen because of his short stature. He didn't climb the tree to be saved, but that's what Jesus did. The story of Zaccheus shows us how big things come in small packages, just like February, and how love can conquer all in a short time but in a mighty way.

Have you ever thought about love, really deeply thought about it? Where did it come from? Who started it? And why do we love? Like February, love packs a punch too. It came from God. He loves us with a compassionate and merciful heart. He started it and "*We love because he first loved us,*" 1 John 4:19.

Looks like February is going to be a great big month after all! Its love is in the air, and we know who put it there. And this year February gives us an extra day because it's Leap Year!

Tiny Living – Somewhere Else – by Leyanne Enterline

I probably repeat myself a lot because after years of telling you about tiny living, there's only so much I can really keep talking about! Like I've mentioned before, we must do our laundry elsewhere. So for 7 1/2 years, we've been going somewhere other than our tiny home to wash clothes! Hard to believe...

There are so many negatives I could talk about, but I'll start with the positives on this subject of laundry:

- We constantly have to wash our clothes at someone's house, so I suppose the positive is that we get to visit with the person at the place where we're washing. I'm typically at my parents' house, so I get to check in with them, help with whatever they need and visit with them and their neighbors!
- I suppose another positive is that my parents are on a well system, so I'm not costing them water usage. And I will replace their machines if something goes wacky, since I use the washer and dryer way more than they do!

Now, I'll move to the negatives of doing laundry somewhere else:

- One negative is that I try and stack up the laundry so I'm not going somewhere else every day. However, this means large loads that take hours upon hours to do. I am probably away at least three times a week for several hours; or I take a load, put it in and go back home, wait an hour and return to place in dryer and continue doing that over and over!
- If we get a big rain and our clothes get wet or I have a spill or the kiddos sporting clothes need to get washed quickly, I'll have to go elsewhere even more days.
- When it's really humid, our towels for showers don't dry well so I will hang them up on a clothes line outside to dry out before placing into our laundry bin just so they don't mold while sitting, waiting to get washed.

This method of doing laundry is by no means a great situation to be in. It is very time consuming and frustrating. I can definitely relate to anyone that has to go to a laundromat. I know that must be so hard! I am grateful the family lets us take our laundry to them and I don't have to drive far and sit at a laundromat all day!

I know my laundry woes could be worse! I think about how in the old days they didn't have these modern conveniences and how hard doing laundry must have been. So I will be grateful for what I do have and try to focus on the positives of this strange, long journey we've been on, and continue the process of laundering elsewhere.

Remember! Love grows best in tiny spaces.

A Night to Remember – The Dance Partner – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when my daughter was little we danced to some Amy Grant music – *I've got the joy, joy, joy where? Down in my heart!* And it was great fun. I still dance to good music with good lyrics that talk about the One that loves me dearly. That love inspires me to get up and move, raise my hands, twirl around and it does my heart so much good!

So...in this month where hearts are out there (in every way), why not train and teach our kids proper dance etiquette on the dance floor...with the best Dance Partner they'll ever have!

Preparation: Pick some peppy and gentle worship songs that you family will love, five or six, and have them ready. Ask everyone to show up in dancing shoes (that may look different for each person!)

Dance partners encourage each other. (Play the first song and let everyone free dance in worship – note the ones that struggle and the ones that thrive – because there will be both in one family!) Not everyone feels comfortable dancing, but we can encourage and never discourage our partner. That's what Jesus does...always offering his hand to lift us up and even hold us and twirl us! (This time play a gentle song and ask everyone to close their eyes as they envision Jesus taking their hand and holding them as they sway to the music.)

Don't be a Showoff. Sometimes when people are dancing, they want to be seen and noticed, so they demand attention by doing dares and even moves that might endanger their partner or those around them. Jesus won't ever embarrass you with his love. He's a gentleman of the highest measure! As we draw closer to Him, he will gently lead us or we might leap together, but always in worship and admiration of the Father. Never asking everyone to "look at me" but rather, look to Him. (Play another song and sit – just worshiping silently with hands lifted or not – get up or stay seated – whatever each one feels like doing.)

Be Thankful. If a person asks another to dance, it's always polite to thank that person at the end of the song. It's just common courtesy. Part of dancing with Jesus is giving thanks. It's sort of like a dancing heart. When we are sad, worried, lonely or frustrated and we start looking for reasons to give thanks, our heart suddenly comes alive and we feel like moving. (Play another song, with everyone seated, and only move feet to this song – up and down, tapping or swinging, whatever!) Having a thankful heart makes the feet happy, too!

Be willing to Learn. Maybe you're not the best dancer, you don't know the moves, you don't really have rhythm, and you sit and envy those that do. Jesus always wants to dance with you, because he has made each one of us in his image and delights in his children – always – whether we have rhythm or not! Music fills the air with truth about His love and when we listen to the lyrics, it causes us to lean in and say yes, Jesus, teach me to love like you do, give to others, and obey and be blessed. (Pick your last song – a familiar one - and dance together as a family, singing the lyrics aloud that you know.)

Psalm 150 says:

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

With Jesus as our dancing partner, we will always know that we are chosen, of great value, and loved more than anyone else could ever love us. He's got the moves and the music. All we have to do is listen and take his hand.

In Each Room – The Desk Drawer – by Marcy Lytle

So many of us still work from home, or at least have a desk at home, where we pay bills, work on other projects, etc. and the drawer in that desk might be the last thing in the house we pay attention to or keep organized! And if you eat at your desk (like I do) well, you can imagine the mess when little crumbs fall inside the drawer – the worst!

I recently found some things to help my drawer look neat and organized...and stay that way!

First, I took everything out of my drawer. I think I threw half of what was in there, in the trash!

Secondly, I measured the depth of the drawer and ordered some organizers from Amazon, ones in pretty colors, to fill the spaces! I love them. I started filling them (before I placed in the drawer) with notepads, pens, cords, cards and more.

Thirdly, I also had purchased some ties for ALL the cords we now have to charge things! There are a lot and they had been driving me nuts! Now, they're all neatly wound up and sit and fill one of the organizers so nicely!

Fourth, I began placing everything back, with my yearly desk calendar going in first. I ordered it from Ruff House and love it. It's a week's glance at a time with boxes to fill in – which I do every Monday morning – to empty my mind from all the to-do's onto paper, to have right in front of me.

Fifth and last, I began placing all of the little bins inside my drawer. I was glad I had measured, because some of these bins you can buy come in different depths. I have a shallow drawer, so the one inch bins were perfect. Turning them different ways, finally, they were all in the drawer and everything was in its place.

One of my favorite gifts I got last year was this tiny vacuum that now sits in the right corner of the desk drawer. I just plug it in my laptop and vacuum all the crumbs away and keep my drawer nice and clean.

Oh! I also added some hand lotion and lip gloss and a hair tie, just in case I need a fresh look, soft hands, or to put my hair up...as I work away!



YOU

Inner Strength – Space to Calm – by Michelle Wyatt

Last month, I wrote about my son Matthew's fort.

He told me that he wanted to take it down; so when the boys were with their dad, I started that process. When Matthew arrived back home, he was upset that I did so. I learned that, especially in a shared custody situation, kids want to have control when they can.

Because of how I took parts of the fort down, the ball pit balls went everywhere. I'm used to Matthew causing that to happen. This time, I was responsible for picking them up and putting them where they belonged.

After Matthew got over being upset at me, he said, "Mom, I want to build another fort in my room!" He had been tearing up the ping pong paddle he made and was proud of. I honestly didn't like that my son was frustrated and took it out on what he made. Upon reflection, though, I realized that tearing up cardboard is actually a very healthy way to let out anger and I needed to accept where he was and how he was feeling. Sure enough, after he let out his frustration, he made another paddle out of cardboard with a smile on his face.

It really concerned me that he had gotten that upset. That's where the inner strength comes in and placing ourselves in our kids' shoes. We all have real emotions and kids may experience them intensely because they haven't learned how to process life's challenges the same way as adults.

It's okay. The important thing is to keep our children safe, support them through tough times, teach them (whatever lesson we can) when they aren't in the heat of the moment, and give them space to calm themselves down.

Matthew went full circle from taking pride in building a ping pong paddle out of cardboard to tearing it up as a release of his frustration to then building another one when he was calmer. And I learned that parents aren't perfect...a good lesson for me.

A Hopeful Heart – Leapling – by Christina Oberon

Celebrating my tenth leap year this month holds a unique milestone, given that my birthday only appears on the calendar every four years. As a child, the concept of being a *leapling* was more of a mystery I grappled with understanding, than a distinction. All I knew was the prolonged wait for my birthday, a day that seemed elusive, and the teasing that accompanied the notion of not having a "real" birthday, which shaped an early perspective on the distinctive nature of leaplings.

The probability of entering the world on Leap Day, February 29th, stands at 1 in 1,461, considering the 1 in 4 chance of any given day being February 29th.

The significance of leap years goes beyond individual birthdays. Understanding the concept of leap years adds depth to this experience, realizing that these periodic adjustments maintain the synchronization between our calendar and Earth's orbit. Leap years play a crucial role in preventing a gradual misalignment of seasons. Without leap years, our calendars would slowly drift out of sync with Earth's orbit. Over time, seasons would lose their alignment, and eventually, summer could become winter. Leap years keep our calendars in harmony with the planet.

Beyond the scientific rationale, February 29th carries multifaceted meanings for different individuals. Some find spiritual or symbolic significance in this day, viewing it as a time for renewal and reflection that aligns with the cyclical nature of the calendar. Others interpret it as an opportunity for personal growth, embodying a leap of faith into the unknown. I personally find significance in each of these areas. For me, the energy surrounding a Leap Day hints at potential major events, creating a feeling of excitement and anticipation.

As age brings wisdom, the perspective shifts to appreciation for being part of an exclusive "time-traveling" club. The annual jokes about my age, questioning if I'm "like 5 now," have become endearing reminders of the unconventional nature of my birthday. The bonus day of celebration during non-leap years adds a touch of joy to compensate for the less frequent acknowledgment.

Embracing the differences associated with being a leapling has become a source of pride. Instead of feeling down about the perceived unfairness of not having a birthday every year like others, I've learned that being different is what adds spice to life. Diversity, in all its forms, is the essence of what makes life interesting. The journey from childhood confusion to an appreciation for being born on a rare day has been transformative.

In essence, being a leapling isn't just about a rare birthday; it's about navigating life with a distinct perspective. It's about understanding the intricacies of time and celebrating the uniqueness that comes with being part of a select group that experiences time in a way others don't. Being a leapling has become a celebration of individuality and I enter this tenth leap year with hope and happiness.

Happy birthday to all the leaplings!

Healthy Habits – A Bit of Chocolate – by Marcy Lytle

Once I heard that a square of dark chocolate a day is good for your heart, and that made this heart sing! Of course, it's hard to keep it to one square! But you know what I mean. We don't have to stay away from all things sweet...we can enjoy a treat now and then. And February is the month when treats are available on every shelf. So, what's good...in the way of chocolate? I bet you have your favorites, but here are a few of my "healthy" ones...in moderation.

Dark chocolate walnut clusters – OH MY GOODNESS. I get these in the bulk section of the grocery store, and sometimes they have cranberries in them, too. I try not to buy too many, and limit myself to only one during the day.

Dark chocolate covered peanuts – These are hard to find, at least for me. I did find some at an Amish store north of town, where their shelves are lined with dark chocolate options! They're like the candy Goobers, only covered in dark chocolate not milk.

Lindt 70% dark chocolate bar – Yes, there are darker percentages available but I don't like them. Too bitter. But go for it, if you like! The 70% bar is my fave. I love to break off a square or two, bite in little bits and let the flavor linger on my tongue...

Dark chocolate chips – I slice an apple, pour a bit of caramel sauce in a tiny cup, and dip the apple slices in the caramel. Then I dip that into a few dark chocolate chips. The key is to only place a few on your plate. Don't sit with the whole bag next to you! Fruit AND dark chocolate...a great combo!

Dark chocolate covered almonds – Almonds and nuts are the theme of this story! Nuts are good for us! Dark chocolate almonds seem to be our choice to go with popcorn at the movies. I like the ones again in the bulk section, better than those bagged on the shelves. We limit the amount by placing them in a baggie. And I like to bite off the chocolate and then enjoy the almond in my mouth...

Dark chocolate dipped cutie slices – Just peel a cutie (tangerine), melt some dark chocolate, and dip the slices and let them dry on wax paper. Keep these in the fridge and indulge as you wish. We sometimes take these to the movies, too!

Dark chocolate fondue – When's the last time you made this? Pick a recipe, purchase a tiny pot for two (otherwise you'll eat too much) and pick your dippers – like angel food cake and fruit like strawberries. And if you want...a few pretzels.

What's your favorite chocolate? I used to only like milk chocolate but once I made the switch to dark, there's been no going back.

Happy February!

Life Right Now - I Heart Thrifting! - By Jennifer Stephens

Whenever somebody compliments my outfit, I'll almost always respond with something like this, "Thanks! I found it at the thrift store!" And I'll usually overshare to the complementor, excitedly telling them exactly which store, how much it cost (three dollars!), and maybe even an anecdote about a run-in with an interesting character from that day's hunt (because there's almost ALWAYS an interesting character...). It's like when a football fan describes some great play from the championship game. They remember all the little details – who, when, what, how. Isn't that what we do when we love something? And I heart thrifting! So come with me! Let's go thrifting together...

The first thing you'll notice is the smell. Step inside almost any thrift/vintage shop and that distinctly overwhelming odor created from the mixture of accumulated perfumes, "house scents" and, well, people, suddenly washes over all who enter. It's like granny's attic went to a smoky rave. Ick. Next the harsh overhead lighting infiltrates the countless racks of clothes and chaotic heaps of stuff. So. Much. Stuff. A mishmash of shapes, sizes, and colors assaults your eyes. Some of my friends will scrunch their noses and run straight to the fragrance filled, dimly lit department store. But others - me - we feel the potential in the air and eagerly enter this unlikely Neverland again and again...

Why? Why is thrifting such a beloved experience for so many?

First, I'd like to acknowledge that while thrifting is a necessity for some, I am fully aware at this moment in life it is a choice for me. Growing up, our family always bargain shopped, hit the surplus stores, and made our dollars stretch as far as possible. Rarely have I ever purchased anything at full price (I'm looking at you, clearance rack!). It was in 1986, when Molly Ringwald's character Andie Walsh, walked on the screen in her thrifted "volcanic ensemble" in the movie *Pretty in Pink*, when my love for thrifting was born.

It's a modern-day treasure hunt. Each trek to the store an adventure into the unknown, yet filled with the possibility of finding a unique otherwise out-of-reach object for mere dollars. Like the brand-new Eras Tour concert tee I snatched up for \$4.00 this summer! Or the Lululemon leggings I snagged for \$6.00 (I wouldn't have even entertained purchasing them at full price!). Once I found a red sequin dress for our Vegas vacay for only \$7.00! Of course, I don't purchase everything I find. I sadly had to leave behind the vintage pink prom dress. Apparently, a middle-aged woman doesn't really NEED a pink prom dress. Even if it was vintage perfection. Sigh.

But it's not just about the great deals. It's the people. Thrift shoppers may have varying motivations for shopping there, but I've discovered that no matter their reason for being there, treasure hunters are some of the kindest and most generous people around. It's not like shopping at regular stores, where perusing the shelves among strangers is standard. When we enter a thrift/vintage shop we're suddenly surrounded by friends. Fellow adventurers. We'll chat with each other about this or that while strolling the aisles – throwing compliments and admiring each other's cartloads. A couple weeks ago I was lost in thought, mentally debating about buying some snowman dishes (I didn't), when I overheard the lady next to me handing money to a little boy. As I listened a bit longer, I heard a mother telling her son to keep looking for his wallet (apparently, he'd laid it down and now couldn't find it). The kind stranger heard this and

handed him ten dollars! Then, another lady chimed in, giving him another ten dollars. The excited little boy exclaimed, "That's twenty dollars! I didn't even have that much in my wallet!" Sometimes the people inside the thrift are the real treasure.

Another reason to shop secondhand is the sustainability factor. Several years ago, I watched a documentary on fast fashion and saw pictures of the mounds of unwanted clothes that are sent to other countries, taking hundreds of years to decompose and causing all kinds of environmental harm. These haunting images encourage me to seek resale and vintage items instead of buying brand new whenever possible. It's the elementary principle of "reduce, reuse, recycle." And hasn't God given us the responsibility to take care of, and not destroy, His creation? Now I don't mean the "glue your hands to a famous painting in the name of environmental causes" type of behavior, I mean let's each do our part each day to make the world a better place.

In Genesis 2:15 we read, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." To take care of it. When we shop secondhand, we are helping to do just that. I like this quote from Billy Graham, "When we see the world as a gift from God, we will do our best to take care of it and use it wisely, instead of poisoning or destroying it." Whatever the reason for thrifting (and there are so many!), choosing to thrift allows each of us to cultivate a unique, affordable wardrobe while practicing sustainability and honoring God by serving as stewards of His creation.

Under Pressure – The Great Performance – by Debbie Haynes

Take it or leave it...in regards to His word? Let's think again about ever leaving it.

In the book of Jeremiah, God calls and commissions this guy to convince Israel to turn to God, because they kept turning away and were about to face harsh judgment. We read the term "backsliding" 13 times throughout this story. And the constant theme was that there would be judgment without mercy, if the Lord continued to be defied. But their destiny could be changed if they turned toward God instead of away. What a heavy, disheartening message but one of hope!

Eventually, Jeremiah challenged the people's unholy alliances with fake gods and idol worship. It may be why Jeremiah has been called the "weeping prophet." He had a heavy assignment. However, God had equipped Jeremiah, stating in chapter 1 that before he was born, he was consecrated. God touched him and said he put His words in Jeremiah's mouth. And it wasn't Jeremiah's personal resume that caused God to choose him for the job. It was God's touch and his words that qualified Jeremiah to speak.

Once God gives his word, it further says he watches over it and performs it.

This is so encouraging!

God takes his own words so seriously that he, himself, doesn't trust these words to another...but he stands and to make sure they are fulfilled. It isn't even our job to fulfill them, but solely his. He watches over his words to perform them!

We get discouraged waiting, sometimes. Other times, God swiftly performs his words. But no matter how long the wait, or how dire our circumstances, we know this:

God is committed to seeing his word performed.

God still gives us his word today. Words of encouragement, admonishment, assurance...that he is in control, he sees all, and he will perform his words. His call to all of us is to look to him, not to another, and to love him above all else. He will never leave us or forsake us; he's always walking with us. He is in charge, he sees the evil in this world, and he will take care of it.

In John 6, we read that the words Jesus speaks are spirit and life. And Peter told Jesus there was nowhere else to go...because only Jesus had the words of eternal life.

We must hang on to every word He speaks, for his words are life! And all words that are spoken to us must be in alignment with The Word.

Back to Jeremiah. He cried, he complained, he bellyached for all the hardships...and the Lord spoke to him to remind him. He guards his words, he is perfection, and he has equipped us for the job of living here in this life to help spread the word so others can hear and believe, as well.

Lord, thank you for watching over your word to perform it,

and that you own that job and we don't.

Enable us to be still to listen and hear well, so that we don't miss a single word.

Thank you for loving us so much to share your words that we can consume and live by.

Keep our ears close to your heart.

Amen.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – The Hope List - by Bekah Holland

I know. It's February. I also know that I write a marriage column. Which means that I should be writing about romantic dates and flowers and shiny things. But, that's not really my style. With the beginning of a new year, lots of people are still riding high on their resolutions. Gyms are full, organic produce is depleted from the market. So I'm sure I could also talk about that. However, I like New Year's resolutions even less than I like Valentines Day, so we're just going to jump in to something a little different. This last year (actually five) have been hard. Our family has been hit with loss, grief, trauma, fear, loss of jobs and teenagers. Maybe I shouldn't add teenagers to my list of challenges, but if you have ever raised one and survived, you know. I said what I said.

I tend to be a pretty happy and easy going gal, pushing through to see the silver lining on every cloud. But lately I've been thinking a lot about my mortality. Death is not exactly a sunshine-y kind of topic and not one I tiptoe into very often. And talking about it when I should be talking about open communication and *lovey dovey* stuff is not exactly the most "normal" train of thought I've hopped on, but here we are.

Mostly though, I've been thinking about what I want my husband, kids and loved ones to remember when they remember me. So stick around for a little bit, and see where this takes us, because your guess is as good as mine.

When I'm gone:

- I hope they remember that I tried. I failed more often than not, but I never stopped trying.
- I hope they look at a beautiful sunset, and the sky painted a hundred different shades of gold and pink, that they breathe in and thank God they still have a breath to take and never take it for granted.
- I hope they remember that kitchens are for dancing, grace is enough, and a good cup of tea pairs well with both apologies and forgiveness.
- I hope they find ways to look for the good in others but also trust their hearts when the good no longer outweighs the bad and they have to walk away.
- I hope they laugh through the tough times and also are never afraid to show their tears.
- I hope they bring home flowers for no reason, light the expensive candles, and use the good towels.
- But most of all, I hope they always fight for justice, always offer mercy and learn to walk humbly with God.

There are so many things that I want to teach them while I can; although, I know I've failed them so many ways. And when they do look back and remember, I want them to remember me. Flaws and cracks and all. No rose colored glasses. I want them to remember that I lost my keys at least twice a week, got lost in our own backyard, cried in the closet next to my emergency wine and chocolate stash, rarely remembered what I was doing, never once forgot the lyrics to "Ice Ice Baby," but once did manage to burn water. Because that's me.

One day though, when they see me only in their dreams and memories, I pray that they'll never forget when I taught them they could fly on their own and take every opportunity to soar.

"Unable are the loved to die. For love is immortality."

Emily Dickenson

Date Night Fun – Valentine’s Night at Home – by Marcy Lytle

Sometimes, it’s easier to stay at home on Valentine’s Day for a number of reasons. Maybe you have kiddos and can’t get a sitter or it’s too expensive to get a sitter AND go out. Perhaps, you don’t like fighting the crowds because you forgot to make reservations, or you just need to save dollars. Or it’s too cold to go out! It all makes sense that some years, staying home is the best option! So if that’s you this month...here are five ideas to keep Valentine’s Day romantic and fun...staying in.

1. Pillows and Pretzels – Whatever throw pillows or bed pillows you have, pile them up, with blankets, on the floor for staying in. Purchase frozen Auntie Anne’s Pretzels and bake them. Cut them into bites. Grill some sausage or heat some links and cut into one-inch slices. Skewer the pretzels and the sausage on toothpicks and provide mustard for dipping. Add other snacks on a tray and enjoy on the pillows...while you play romantic music and chat about your day, offer compliments to each other, and snack away.
2. Movies and M&Ms – Make it a marathon of sorts, if you can. Watch a movie with the kids, put them to bed, and watch another. Use M&Ms, plain and peanut, minis and regular, and toss them in a big bucket of popcorn. Enjoy. Hold hands. Discuss the movie afterwards. Oh, and pick the movie ahead of time so you’re not wasting time arguing, searching, etc. (you know it happens.) Make an early morning V-Day and watch a movie in bed, with a plate of pastries!
3. Puzzles and Pizza – Have you put together a jigsaw puzzle? Find one that is just 300 pieces, doable in an evening. Go shopping for it together, and pick up pizza on the way home. This might be a good double date idea if you have another couple you want to join on Valentine’s Day with...or not. Provide some fun drinks, and put together the puzzle, snap a picture and post on social media your Valentine’s Day creation!
4. Charcuterie and Classics – We recently watched an old Agatha Christi black and white film *And Then There were None* – on Prime. We love watching the old classics. And we love charcuterie. So if we love both of those things, then Valentine’s Day is an easy plan! Bake brie, topped with pecan butter and pecans, drizzled with honey and serve with crackers. Add some hummus and chips with carrot sticks and cucumbers. Dark chocolate, too! Make chocolate caramel sprinkled apples to enjoy, as well!
5. Dips and Dancing – You know how some restaurants have sampler plates in the appetizer section of their menus? You often get three dips, with your chips. So do that at home! Maybe queso, guacamole and some sort of jalapeno ranch? Or maybe you like cream cheese dips you make (there are so many to choose from!) Pile the chips in a huge bowl, set out the three dips and enjoy together, as you search for a song for dancing. Dance, then dip some more, dance, then dip some more...you get the picture.

Staying in provides lots of options. And if you plan it together, that even makes for a night of closeness for sure. And saving money might make you both happier if it’s tight times. Whatever you do, if you end up staying home, make it a night to remember...make a list of what you do and add to it often, so you have a list to choose from each year!

After 40 Years – Why Not Dance? – by Marcy Lytle

Neither of us was raised in a family where we danced, neither did we see our parents ever dance, and so therefore, Jon and I don't know how to dance...properly! However, we have come to love an impromptu dance or two, or a planned dance in the living room, and even stepping out at a wedding...being perhaps the worst dancers on the floor!

Sometimes, we dance in our bedroom (or even the bathroom) first thing in the morning...just for a few minutes. Somehow, that closeness and the hugs and the movement set our busy minds and hearts in the right mood. Because sometimes, one of us wakes up with a full mind of a long to-do list and can start right in on busyness (I'll let you guess which one of us does this!)

Other times, we play music in the evening and get up and dance in the living room...slow dancing closely. We do know one particular step fairly well (not sure where we learned it) but it's like a waltz. So we pick music that has a 1-2-3 beat and we waltz. We listen to the lyrics of the songs, or not. Sometimes it's just an instrumental piece. And often, it's just something on YouTube we've got playing on the TV in the background. Yes, we're tired, but dancing slowly before we go to bed is invigorating and relaxing – all at the same time.

We have been known to watch dance lessons on the TV and practice them so that we can then learn something like the Fox Trot (is that even a thing anymore?) And other times, we choose hip hop or something fast and catchy – where we aren't dancing together – but we're moving and grooving – and getting exercise in! I like this particular one, because sometimes I'd rather dance than work out or walk...if there's inclement weather outside.

February is a good month to take his hand and dance. Maybe he won't ever choose to take yours. Or perhaps he's the one that initiates the music and the moves. It's so easy to lose this part of ourselves as couples, as we age. But there's a couple I observe on Instagram, and he's in his 80's and she her 70's and their dance is something to admire.

If you learned to dance as a kid, as an individual or at school dances, or wherever, I bet you enjoyed it. Maybe he did, or he didn't. But how can holding each other close any time of the day be a bad thing? It seems to melt away hurts and hurriedness, and heals even creaky knees and sore backs. It doesn't have to dipping and jumping (although go for it if you can!). It can be any kind of music at all...and it's so intimate and special and lovely.

Last night, we put on worship music and danced with Him.

Dance this month. Dance often. Dance again next month. And keep the dancing alive. Let your children see it, and your grandchildren join in. And find a reason to dance with him...because our feet were made for dancing. Weren't they?

For Better or Worse - Married Young – by Kaelin Scott

My husband is the only real Valentine I've ever had. We were really young when we found each other, and we got married only a month after I turned twenty.

I remember when we were dating, or even when we were engaged, so many people thought we were crazy. I heard several times that I needed to be careful. A lot of people weren't shy about telling me I should be focusing on school and starting a career, not chasing after a boy. I can only imagine what kinds of things they said when I wasn't around. I was the crazy, lovestruck girl, in my own little Cupid-infested world.

People meant well when they said those things. I get that. They didn't want me making decisions I would regret, and they didn't want to see me get hurt. There was plenty of time to get married, and I was so young with so much life to live. Now that I'm older, I can understand where they were coming from.

But I'm glad I didn't listen to them. Getting married young was hard. Really hard. Harder than I thought it would be. But if I had the chance to go back, I wouldn't do it differently. I would still choose my husband every time, even knowing how difficult it would be. Because I'd rather face every challenge with him by my side than wait until things were "perfect" before getting married. We've grown so much together over the years, and I'm grateful for that.

Obviously, I know that everyone is different. Young people can get into unhealthy relationships, and using caution is wise and healthy in those situations. I'm not saying everyone should get married young.

What I am saying is that I wouldn't change a thing about my love story. God's plan for my marriage was unique and special – and yes, maybe crazy, too. His design was something I never could have imagined for myself, but I'm so glad He's smarter than me. Marrying the love of my life at twenty years old was one of the best choices I've ever made. And it's a choice I continue to make again every single day.

If you're married to someone special, I'd love to hear in the comments about how God brought you together. And if you're still waiting on God's timing for marriage, I pray He comforts you as He works out his master plan. Whether you get married at twenty or at fifty, God's love stories are always worth the wait.

And speaking of love, I'm so grateful for everyone reading this story. I love you all. XOXO



ENCOURAGEMENT

Rooted in Love - Onion and Avocado – by Kaelin Scott

Not too long ago, I was at the grocery store with my family. We didn't have too many items, so we went through the self-checkout really quick. When we got outside and started unloading the bags into our truck, I found an onion and two avocados at the bottom of the cart. They weren't in a bag, and I didn't remember having scanned them. Apparently, they had somehow escaped my notice as I was checking out. To my horror, I had walked out of the store without paying for these items.

I was mortified, and I was also irritated at the oversight. But I knew what I had to do. Grabbing the onion and two avocados, I walked back into the store. It was pretty awkward, I have to admit. I went back to the self-checkout line, smiling at the attendant who had literally just seen me two minutes ago. I scanned my produce, paid for it, then left the store again. I couldn't help wondering if someone was watching me on the security cameras and wondering what in the world I was up to. I mean, honestly, who walks out of the store only to come back a moment later with a handful of vegetables? Even though nobody else probably noticed, I was really embarrassed.

The whole thing only lasted about five minutes, but as we were driving home, I realized that it was important. The avocados and onion only cost about five dollars, and I easily could have said oh well and just gone home. Nobody would have known, and it would have saved us a little bit of time.

But the easy thing isn't always the right thing, and my children got to witness a moment of honesty. I'm not saying this to toot my own horn or anything, because really, I shouldn't have missed the items in the first place. But it was an opportunity to show them how to react when I made a mistake. It was a chance for them to see that Mom isn't perfect, and sometimes even grownups have to choose to do what's right.

Setting a good example for our children doesn't mean we have to make big, grand gestures. We don't have to work at it or overthink it. It's as simple as living our lives and making those choices when situations arise. Sometimes I wonder if I'm doing a good job of teaching my kids what it means to follow Jesus. Do I talk about God enough? Do I read the Bible enough? So many questions can plague me and cause me to doubt my own worth as a mother and woman of God.

But then little things like the grocery store incident happen. I think God orchestrated that just so that I would stop for a moment and realize that my kids are watching me in the little moments too – the everyday, ordinary moments. And yes, I make a lot of mistakes. Yes, I sometimes falter or make the wrong choice. But there are also a lot of things I get right. There are little moments that will hopefully make a big impact on their growing hearts and minds.

Never doubt your worth as a mother. You may make mistakes. You may mess up. That's okay, because you're human just like the rest of us. It's how you react to your mistakes that really matters; and your children see your heart. They know you're not perfect, but they notice the little things you do. You're setting a good example just by being you.

It's dreary outside. More than dreary, it's a scene of disarray and clutter. That's what my garden looks like during winter freezes. It's my choice. I choose to have several plants in pots scattered throughout that add color and interest, and I've planted several non-natives and not-so-cold tolerant plants, like Loquat, Leopard plant, and Pineapple Guava. These things must be covered to survive this kind of weather, and it's not pretty.

Last spring I converted an old three-tiered fountain into a succulent planter. Considering the record heat we had, the succulents fared pretty well, thanks to the shade I provided each day when the sun hit full force. For the winter, I transplanted the survivors inside and replaced with pansies and ajuga, which are cold hardy. They've thrived, until below freezing temps hit. Even they can't survive low twenties and teens. Now they are sheltered under a frost cloth tent with Christmas lights for warmth. They look lovely at night with the lights shining through. We'll see if that actually keeps them from freezing.

I had the idea to hang an insulated curtain across the entryway of my front porch, thinking I could use a heater to create a mini-greenhouse to protect the plants I have there. I ordered a beautiful scenic curtain online that reaches from top to bottom—longer even than Ikea curtains. It wasn't wide enough to reach all the way across, so I added a curtain panel on each side and cut up another panel to add length. It's not as insulated as I wanted but it looks pretty nice. Question is: will it do what I intended? Come below freezing temps and slight wind...it helps some, but the wind blew it open where the panels came together, so I had to clip it together, tape the sides to the wall, and weight the bottom down with scrap wood. Air seeps through too many places to use a heater effectively, so, all in all, it didn't work according to plan. But the scenic trees hanging across my porch look nice.

As the wind blows, I hear my assorted chimes making melody. A not-so-melodious sound breaks through, and I look towards the back patio where the sound is coming from. It's the glass leaf chimes I recently bought at a thrift store. They're quite pretty—possibly the prettiest chimes I have—but their sound doesn't match their beauty. In fact, the most beautiful sounding chimes are the plain black metal pipes. They make "a sweet, sweet sound in my ear", as the song goes.

Funny how beauty is often hidden beneath surface appearance and beauty often hides dysfunction. My beautiful garden is hidden behind blankets and covers—it will reemerge in the spring. My beautiful tree curtain is pretty, but it doesn't do what I designed it to do. The ugly chimes make a beautiful sound whereas the pretty ones make noise.

I hope I'm like a beautiful hidden garden underneath my humanity, which we all know is flawed. I hope God's light shines through my frost-cloth exterior, creating light and warmth in the darkness. I hope I'm more than a pretty curtain and can accomplish what God intended me to do. And truly I say: I'm okay with being plain black pipe chimes instead of beautiful glass leaf chimes—if only my sound is a sweet, sweet sound in His ear.

Simple Truths - Silly Sadness – by Marcy Lytle

I'm pretty sure a lot of you can relate to this, but then I do have some friends that don't suffer from this at all. It's that week after Christmas and New Year's is over and all of the décor was coming down, all of the lights were being put away, and our homes were quiet once more and seeming bleak...as winter settled in. I call it "silly" sadness because we've just come off the "most wonderful time of the year" and yet we are sad. So, it seems silly, to me.

However, it's real. It doesn't last too long, but it's this sinking feeling. A friend always texts and tells me she's feeling it, and we both agree that it's just so sad to put all of the fun things away that we took so long to put out! I just did all of this today, and the house looks so dark now!

I've found that when I have this silly sadness, where I'm sad when I really have no good reason to be, there are a few things that help me pull myself out of the doldrums. Sometimes, we feel it after a great vacation. We had all of this fun, a great escape, and back to home to the mundane routine and we're sad...for a bit. I'm wondering if it's a First World problem, and I really don't like that I feel that way, but there it is...I've confessed.

And now, here's my list:

- I often make sure I have lots of light in my house, after the holidays are over. Candles, lanterns, even string lights...still hanging. I left a cute pomp om string on our headboard, because I enjoy it so much. All the way through Valentine's Day – at least!
- I "shop my shelves" to rearrange and redecorate, bringing in other things for the new season...so in January I placed a few cozy blankets and a snowman nightlight in the guest bath...things like that.
- Now it's February, so there will be some red accents and a few wooden heart trays on which to serve charcuterie.

I'll stop the list for a moment say that by the time I actually publish this article, I'm sure I'll be fine...but that silly sadness can creep in anywhere...after a high...when we get back to normal life.

- I plan, I write down ideas on the calendar, and try to have the next thing to look forward to on the schedule...before we return from the vacation or the fun times.
- I pray and I express thanks, so that my silly sad heart realizes the blessings and lifts itself out of the pity party into which it took up residence.
- I start some projects, but I leave others until I'm ready. After Christmas, I did put away all of the décor, but I will tackle organizing all of the giftwrap mess in July. It's something I look forward to doing then...and not now. So it's okay to save something for later.

We all have silly sadness at one time or another, where it just doesn't make sense, but we feel down. I don't like that I feel this way, but it happens most every time after a big high of fun...when we're back to the day to day work, cleaning and cooking.

However, if we can make that daily routine come alive with color, sights, sound (who says we can't play music all the time?), plans, gratefulness, etc... then the silly sadness is just a moment rather than a season that defines us.

If you're one of the ones that eases into all of the changes of life with gusto, good for you. I admire you. My husband is one of those people. But if you're like me and you need a boost way too often, don't beat yourself up for how you are. Just sigh and breathe, even cry a silly tear or two, and make plans to enjoy today and what you just filled in on your calendar!

Moving Forward - Freedom from Chaos – by Pam Charro

From my talks with people, it seems I'm not the only person who has experienced lots of transition and loss lately. I must confess, all of it has left me feeling somewhat disoriented and not as on top of things as I would like to be. It shows, too! My finances, my weight, my apartment, and my ability to sleep are all showing signs of disarray. I'm so thankful for new beginnings! But I'm especially thankful for the steadfastness of God's love and his word.

1 Corinthians 14:33 says that God is a God of order, not chaos. So I know that I will be able to find my peace as I draw near to him. But I also know that it might take a little time and patience, especially after so many painful and uncomfortable experiences in a short period. How I miss "strong Pam" in times like these! But I wonder if feeling this way might be a blessing in disguise. If I were always strong enough, I would probably never allow myself to need anyone else ... even God!

Now is the opportunity for proof of how safe I am with him even in my weakness and vulnerability. And I'm actually okay with it. Okay with slowing down from all of the social engagements, from feeling like I must always be "enough" when I can't. I imagine approaching him as he invites me to sit near the fire and just ... be. A candle gently glows on the coffee table. He smiles at me and wraps a blanket around me. We are both glad for these moments, just to be together. And I feel my soul begin to recover.

As my insides calm down and heal, my outside world also begins to slowly take shape. I eat better and the inflammation goes down as the pounds come off. I spend 5-15 minutes a day organizing my car and apartment. My finances no longer are in shambles. I sleep better. Bit by bit, slowly and patiently, I regain my strength. Small changes are enough as my faithful God brings order back into my world.

He is gentle with me in this season. He died to bring us order and to restore us, for all of us who need it as we continue in 2024.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Always and Forever – by Marcy Lytle

I'm still thinking about Christmas...and it's been weeks since then...as February is already here. But that's who I am. I mull over, ponder, and wonder about events and things we do, and why we plan them the way we do. I woke up one morning thinking about how many hours we plan, the pains we go to make things "perfect," and the planning that is almost as good as the event itself...

I start in July, organizing my wrap, shopping for deals for stockings (because they add up if I wait until December!) and then it seems that fall is here and it's time to start making the real lists, planning for the family, etc. And before we know it, it's December already! I mean, honestly, I think the earth is spinning faster each year...

But those last couple weeks before the family gathers to open gifts, eat food, celebrate Christmas and enjoy the day are full of the most intense preparations of the year. I clean places I haven't touched all year. I make sure I have all of the things that make for great ambience, from light to texture, to color and height on the table. I make my meal preparations, and it's a tiring job cooking and baking, but yet so fun as well. I begin wrapping weeks ahead, so that I can mark off lists, check them twice, to make sure all – naughty or nice – have treats to open, to feel, to wonder at, and to love.

There are SO MANY things that go into preparing for family at the holidays. We change bedding, place out or purchase new towels. Oh, and the yard and the porch! We add new decorations and twinkly lights so that the kids squeal when they run to the front door. Candles are bought and sniffed, to make sure they're holiday scents that will fill the room. And the food is finally in the oven, the snack trays are filled, and everything is ready for the doorbell or the knock...to open and invite them all in.

Only, sometimes...a person gets sick and can't show up at the last minute. That just makes the heart sink. Or perhaps flights are canceled or weather prohibits entire families from gathering, and that delays or even puts off the gathering altogether. Families cry, because they so wanted to spend Christmas together. There are other times that the family arrives, everything is perfect, and someone does or says the wrong thing and hurt feelings ensue and ruin the special moments. Or what about that ungrateful little one that slaps away the gift that someone else so painstakingly shopped for or made?

Christmas preparations take up so much time, and when it all comes together, and people show up, love their gifts, eat the food and stay the day...it's still sad when it's all over and cleanup then takes place, and we're tired, we miss the company, and sigh...winter's chill sets in.

So where am I going with this description of what we all experienced just a few short weeks ago? When I awoke and thought of all of this, I was reminded of the big celebration being planned for by Him. It's not talked about a lot these days, but it's really going to occur, and the prep has been going on for centuries. The food, the music, the family reunions, the miracle of healing after years on earth of sickness, those who will greet the guests running and leaping instead of bound in wheelchairs. It's going to be quite the event...the event of a lifetime!

And guess what else? There won't be an inclement weather to stop us from arrival, no bad attitudes at the table, and no sickness ever...ever again. Just merriment, worship, and praise for the One we all just celebrated at Christmas. The table will be set, a place for everyone who believes, and the sights and sounds will be like nothing we've ever experienced before. I cannot even imagine it and don't even try, because it's just too much.

But the thought I keep thinking is how we don't have to do a thing except believe and love the Host who's having us over. And we don't have to show up with a dish or a gift, because He's the gift. We won't get tired or weary, because that season of life will be over. And the best part is that the party will never end, the Gift will keep on giving, and we will finally be satisfied to the core and grateful from the deepest places of our hearts...for the One who prepared and invited us to come.

And never again will we suffer, grieve, or be disappointed. Because we will be at this celebration always and forever...

Blows your mind, doesn't it? It does mine.

FRESH THYME – Anticipation – by Marcy Lytle

Oh. My. Gosh. Anticipation for good things is just stifling isn't it? And yet it's invigorating, as well! I think the thing I anticipate most is vacation and Christmas. And it's probably because I plan so long for both. Christmas prep begins in the summer for me. And we plan vacations ahead of time by months in order to get the itinerary just right!

Young teens anticipate that first kiss or date, which sometimes doesn't come until much later than all of their friends...and it's hard! As we become an adult, we anticipate that spouse we hope to find, the house we long to build, and the job we are waiting to hear from.

Anticipation might be one of the most lived experiences we all face on a daily basis.

We anticipate the next meal, especially if it's a big deal like a birthday or a night out. I personally love any reason to celebrate, so as soon as one celebration is over...I start anticipating the next!

The definition of anticipation is excitement...eagerly waiting for something we know is going to happen.

And when that something doesn't happen...our stomachs hit the floor...and we decide that we will anticipate no more. This is one of the saddest states in which to find ourselves on any given day. Giving up anticipating because what we hoped for, over and over, never occurred.

I have friends that have anticipated marriage, only to see that hope fading as they approach 40 years of age.

We that are aging may feel like what's the reason for anticipating any change or good thing, because life has flown by and what is there to look forward to, now?

Kids that have anticipated moms and dads reconciling, only to find divorced parents that bicker and trade the kids off, shut down and hope no more...even into adulthood.

It's understandable. But without anticipation, our souls die. We fail to thrive. And life becomes a chore.

Here's a list of things we can anticipate, get excited for...always and forever.

- We can anticipate that all things will work together for good, if we love the Lord.
- We can anticipate that He is the righteous one and justice will occur in His timing.
- We can anticipate that all of our needs will be met according His riches, not our efforts.
- We can anticipate that the return of a grateful heart will be contentment and joy.
- We can anticipate that our image is becoming more like Him...as we grow and learn.
- We can anticipate that He will be with us always...sustaining presence...always.
- We can anticipate living without guilt or shame, because we are forgiven.
- We can anticipate eternal life...after death...because death was conquered by Jesus.
- We can anticipate new mercies and compassion from His hand every single morning.

- We can anticipate suffering that produces life...not suffering that ruins our future.

It would be so cool if we could grab hold of these truths and anticipate them with gusto, and be excited for what God holds in store for us daily, but the tragedies and disappointments in life often cloud or dampen any excitement at all.

Anticipation makes us wait...and waiting doesn't come easy to the human race in which we run...as we all are "chasing a finer day" as the Carly Simon song says.

Every morning we are given new light to anticipate a new day full of promises from the above list. And every morning there will be reminders of the things we anticipated that never occurred. And that's when we look up, we give thanks, we tell our hearts the truth, and we lie back in his arms and breathe.

God is good. All the time.

I grew tired of hearing that, as it became so trite for a season, and people said it so much it became annoying. Why? Because I probably didn't believe it.

I don't know what today will look like and neither do you. But I do know that anticipation...making me wait...can be renewed with excitement when we look to Him. Always. And the thrill of His presence will somehow overtake us in our sorrow and cause our hearts to hope again.

FRESH THYME – Discontented in Minutes – by Marcy Lytle

We recently visited a castle and a hotel that the *Fixer Upper* couple Chip & Joanna Gaines recently featured on their shows. We didn't even know about them, since we haven't watched their show in years, but after visiting Waco and touring both places, it renewed our interest. After all, the hotel was amazing with its library and coffee shop and amazing food in the restaurant. And the castle was absolutely beautiful, especially all of the fireplaces! What these couples can do to a place is amazing!

After we got home, we decided to google and see if we could watch the restoration take place by finding one of their shows, but instead we found an interview with the both of them just as they were about to tackle the hotel restoration. In that interview, they told how they met, how they were broke, how Chip has grand ideas and Joanna is more reserved and cautious.

But what happened after I watched and how I felt made me uncomfortable. I began to reevaluate my own achievements or lack thereof, to wonder what's wrong with me that I hadn't become wildly successful in my own ventures, and to become critical of myself for not being more daring, or not smart enough to do what they did.

What? Where did that come from? I even expressed it to my husband and went from there to questioning so much!

I went back through my job as a teacher, then as a writer and publisher of a few books, then to even this magazine and its reach and success...all measuring myself against one of the most successful couples around. I even wished I could have a dining room like the one in the castle, or all new floors and well...everything new in my house!

I became so discontented in a matter of minutes, after watching that interview!

If I've learned anything, I know that it's not wise to compare with others. There's no wisdom in wishing and looking back and beating ourselves up for what we could have done. Sure, there are lessons to learn. I've learned so much about the publishing industry I wish I'd know back then. So lessons are good, moving forward is wonderful. But angst and self-degrading thoughts only send us down to the pit of despair, where no one wants to live!

I know that God has directed my steps, he has asked me to obey his voice and write; he is always with me, and desires that success is mine. BUT success is not in making millions – never has been! It's in listening and obeying and settling and loving Him...and then others.

I had to quickly look close at myself and why that interview upset me so much. I had just eaten at the restaurant in the grand hotel, and had just toured the castle and found myself lacking and wanting. And then this staged interview made this couple look like the perfect combination, the perfect storm, the perfect mix to create a massive empire...which apparently I wished I had.

When we got back to our home after our weekend away, I walked in to the reality of my small house, no dining room at all (only a space) and all of the fixing up that still needs to be done...and I sighed. I then had this choice. Wallow in my misery of not being like them, wonder

why and where I went wrong, or put away all of those W words in favor of contentment and peace.

I guess we all need to prepare ourselves for how we might react when we go and do and see and observe, and indulge and get away...because that seed of discontent can pop up anywhere at any time. And it only produces weeds when it's left to grow, weeds that suffocate and kill.

Joanna even mentioned her humble beginnings several times and how she constantly checks their balances, lives "safely" and all the things. The truth of the matter is that couple, like all of us, struggles day to day like we all do...and there's no fruit in envying what others have that we don't. We have everything, when we have Jesus. That's the truth, and that enables us to enjoy everything we have from his hand, every day.

Yes, I'm telling that to myself too, not just writing it here to you...