

A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

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TIPS

The Dressing – Give Me Color – by Marcy Lytle

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Denim dress – Have you shopped at [Charlie B](#)? This denim dress is the perfect length, the best wash, and goes with literally every accessory. A must-have.

In the Kitchen – Try This – by Marcy Lytle

July is a good month to just try a new recipe, just do it, just decide you're going to buy the ingredients and try something new. Why not?

Carrots and Leeks

These are not only pretty, but they're stunningly tasty.

- 6 bunches baby carrots (3 lbs with tops)
- 2 large leeks, white and light green parts, halved lengthwise and cut into 1.5 inch pieces
- 5 T unsalted butter
- Kosher salt
- 1 t grated lemon zest
- Nutmeg
- Freshly ground pepper
- ½ c chopped mixed herbs (like tarragon, chives, mint, parsley and/or basil)
- 1 T fresh lemon juice

Trim tops of carrots. Scrub well but don't peel, halve lengthwise. Wash and chop leeks well. Melt butter in wide pot over medium heat. Add the leeks and ¼ t salt, cover and cook, stir occasionally til almost tender, about 8 minutes.

Add the carrots, lemon zest, nutmeg, ½ t salt, ¼ t pepper and ½ c water. Cover and cook, stirring some, til carrots are tender, about 15-20 minutes.

Add half the herbs and the lemon juice to the pot, season with S & P, and toss. Transfer veggies to a platter and top with remaining herbs.

Kenai Dip

I read that this is a popular recipe in Alaska. I learned that it's tasty and a great idea for a summer picnic with a group!

- 2 cups mayonnaise
- 2 tsp garlic powder
- 1 tsp cayenne pepper
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tsp liquid smoke
- 4-5 jalapeños with ribs and seeds removed, diced — should fill a generous cup
- 6 cups shredded cheddar cheese

In a large bowl combine mayonnaise, garlic powder, cayenne pepper, smoked paprika, and liquid smoke. Remove ribs and seeds from jalapeños and cut into fine dice. Stir in to the mayo blend, and then stir in the shredded cheddar cheese.

Broccoli Pepperoni Rolls

Katie Lee, a fun chef to follow on Instagram, posted this recipe. Easy and super yum, but they are best served hot...

- Nonstick cooking spray
- 1 tube (8 ounces) crescent roll dough
- 42 to 50 slices pepperoni
- 1 ½ cups frozen broccoli florets, thawed, drained, and finely chopped
- Garlic salt (to taste)
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
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Instructions

1. **Prep the Dough:** Preheat your oven to 400°F and grease an 8-inch round cake pan. Unroll the crescent dough onto a flat surface, pressing the seams together to form a solid rectangle.
2. **Layer the Fillings:** Lay the pepperoni slices in an even layer across the dough. Top with the chopped broccoli, a sprinkle of garlic salt, and a layer of mozzarella cheese.
3. **Roll & Cut:** Roll the dough tightly into a log, then slice into seven 1-inch thick rounds.
4. **Bake:** Place the rounds into the greased cake pan and bake for 25 to 30 minutes, or until the dough is golden brown.
5. **Serve:** Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese, let stand for 5 minutes, and serve.

Pepperoncini Bites

I saw these on Instagram, made them and have since made them again. Perfect for packing a lunch to go, or in little boxes to share with friends.

- Pepperoncinis – as many as you're making
- Salami or turkey
- Cheddar or brie
- Pickled jalapenos
- French fried onions, crumbled
- Green olives

Basically, just cut off the top of the peppers and scoop out the seeds. Roll up your choice of meat with a bit of cheese inside, and stuff into the peppers. Dip in the crushed onions (it adheres best to the cheese) or just sprinkle on top. Add a jalapeno pepper or an olive. Enjoy with chips.

Vegetable Pitas with Everything Spice

Oh my goodness, this is good. I ate it for lunch on multiple days.

- Everything but the Bagel seasoning
- 1 cup purchased hummus
- 1 medium zucchini quartered and cut lengthwise, then into ½ inch thick slices
- 1 c chopped red onion

- ½ c chopped red bell pepper
- 2 c chopped cooked butternut squash
- 4 whole grain pita breads, toasted
- Coarse sea salt
- Fresh thyme (optional)

In a large skillet, toast about 3 T or more of the Everything seasoning, just a bit. Pour into a small bowl and let it cool. Reserve 2 T of this. Stir in 1 T into your hummus.

In large skillet, cook zucchini, onion and bell pepper over medium heat about 4 minutes, stirring and adding 1-2 T water if needed to prevent sticking. Add the cooked butternut squash and 1 tsp of the seasoning. Cook 2-3 minutes more til squash is hot. (I used a bag of butternut squash I had roasted in the oven beforehand).

Spread hummus on toasted pitas. Top with veggies and sprinkle the seasoning on top, and salt to taste. If desired, garnish with thyme.

A Great Breakfast

I like to keep homemade almond butter in my fridge (Just process 2 cups roasted almonds and keep wiping down sides, until it's creamy – then add two pinches of salt – and process again.) Then I use this as the base for this bowl:

- Dollop of almond butter
- Sliced almonds
- Blackberries
- Cinnamon sugar pretzel sticks
- Orange juice

That's it. Arrange and enjoy.

Cousin Moms – Parent Fails – by Charissa and Kamrin

Parents sometimes feel like a failure, for various reasons. It happens to all moms and dads. However, there are ways to move forward, refocus, and keep going and loving on our kids the best we know how. Be encouraged, as you read this month's article:

Charissa

As a parent, there are many times I have felt that I've failed in my duties. But what those "failures" do is further justify my need for a Savior and my inability to live life on my own. I will never be a perfect mom, and I'm so glad my Jesus walks beside me every step of the way in motherhood.

There are little things I've done, like forgetting to bring an item to school for the girls, or running late to pick them up... accidentally shutting the car door on my daughter's hand, leaving the curling iron on when my eldest was two. All of those little things can make a mom feel defeated in the moment.

The biggest challenge I have is maintaining my patience during discipline or simply when all my kids are on a whole other level! If you're a mom, I know you can relate. Adding a third child definitely added to this challenge - she is a different breed! When my children deliberately disobey, or when I repeat myself 1,000 times before they actually do what I asked - it becomes super frustrating. There are times I have absolutely lost my cool, and I can see the shock in my girls' eyes. Those are the moments where I have to walk away, regain my composure, and pray. It's okay that my girls have seen the raw & vulnerable side of me - it shows them I'm human, and I make mistakes. As a mom, I've apologized to my girls and used it as an opportunity to teach on grace & forgiveness.

This is what makes motherhood beautiful. It's hard world, being a mom is exhausting, and Lord knows I will make mistakes along the way. However, He uses this journey to not only help me shape & guide my kids in His ways - but uses it to continually refine ME. Besides being a wife to my husband, being a mom is my greatest calling!

Thank the Lord HE is in control and not me!

Kamrin

As far as parent failure, this is a hard thing to write about. It's not fun to look at these things or face areas where we might have struggled and now moved forward. Mom life is hard in general. We wear our emotions on our sleeve and do everything to teach and protect and train the kids to be amazing adults of character, ones that seek the Lord and honor him. And while there are amazing books to read, at the end of the day it's your own home and values that are so personal. On top of that, each kid is different. I'm sure my husband and I haven't handled things perfectly. But I don't want to get stuck in a failure mentality. I think we can all be encouraged to pray and listen to Him, and not social media or even emotions.

We basically have three (one almost) teens in the house. We are often tired and stressed and super busy, and so most of the time when I feel like a failure - I'm tired. Maybe I yelled instead of having a conversation. I could have walked out and come back. Instead, I lost it, and that makes me cry. Then I wish I'd handled it differently, especially if the kids ask, "Are you mad at me?" Sometimes, there was no need to lose my voice, and I could have had a conversation.

Other times, I feel like maybe I've failed in teaching the kids enough about the Lord. We've been through some church struggles, and we didn't realize that the kids saw church as my work. I didn't have that struggle as a kid, and we've had a hard time as a family finding our footing. We spend time reading the Word and worshiping as a family. I want the kids to know Him, not just the church. And in turn, they will then want to go to church. It's taken a long time, and we even now struggle somewhat. A good fit for a church can be hard. We have had to trust the Lord a lot in all of this.

Some of that "failure" is popping up when I see the kids struggle and they don't know what decisions to make when they're away from us. I might think that I forgot something or failed. I have to constantly take my own thoughts captive and remind myself that God's got them, and he won't fail, even though I might. Otherwise, I can potentially fail them by living in my own fears and a "not good enough" mentality. We can't remember everything and we might not realize what we missed until later. When we feel as though we've failed, we can pray and ask God what's going on, we can then work on it, and grow. We can listen to our spouse when he says, "You're tired." Then don't "sit" on your feelings of failure.

There's not a *perfect* recipe for parenting. But the only perfect ingredient is Christ. We will fail. But we are loved, and so are our kids. Jesus covers us all, when we just ask for help to grow. Then we can own up to our own mistakes to the kids, and all grow together. His love heals and He has grace and mercy, not just for our kids, but for us as parents.

Seven for You – Confidence – by the Panel

Confidence is something we all need, and yet most of us can totally recall and lay out all the areas where we do NOT feel one bit confident. And it usually is a memory from childhood where something happened, we felt ashamed, and confidence waned. But then we grew up. And we learned that we DO have confidence in areas we never dreamed we would. So we asked the women on our panel, and they shared their oh-so-good answers with us this month!

Confidence is complicated. It ebbs and flows. One minute I'm radiating confidence and the next I'm a shrinking violet hoping to disappear. Can I confidently maintain a rapid pace of play with my Monday Mahjong gals? Yes! There's no question I can transform a few thrifted pieces into a uniquely stylish outfit. And I'm confident my homemade cinnamon rolls could get me to the next round on a television baking competition. But I'll never know because I lack the social confidence needed to feel at ease in unknown situations and would crumble under the self-imposed pressure to exude the outgoing, bubbly personality needed to be on said baking show.

I'm confident that when I'm determined to learn a new skill or achieve a goal, I'll put forth the hard work and effort necessary to succeed. That's God-confidence. Believing with Him I can do anything. But when it comes to self-confidence around physical appearance? That's haaarrrddd. I think most women struggle with this, especially as we age. I might have a nano-second thinking my aging face isn't hideous, but then I make the mistake of comparing my 55 year-old reflection to the 30 year-old flawless beauty walking by and every speck of confidence is crushed. It's a constant struggle to silence the inner critic that squashes self-confidence and instead invite God-confidence to prevail. – Jennifer

I was not a confident girl growing up because I thought I was chubby and therefore had no chance of being pretty. I thought pretty equaled confidence. Now, when I look at pictures of my young self, I see I was a normal weight and a cute kid. But I didn't feel pretty. I did have confidence in academics. I was a good speller, and math came easily. And I loved reading and writing. But that wasn't the same as being thin and pretty.

Now that I have arrived in my mid-century years, how I see confidence has flipped. How I view my size no longer consumes me. I have to exercise several times a week and eat only natural foods due to an autoimmune disease, so that keeps me at a steady size. I have found my style, which is vintage with a little Goth mixed in, and that gives me confidence. I feel like I am more of who God created me to be. That makes me smile, which is confidence in itself. – Angela

There were many areas where I had no confidence when I was young. I was generally shy and felt inadequate in my abilities. A teacher asked if I would be editor of the school paper and I said no because I didn't feel confident! How sad. I was also hesitant to express my ideas and was afraid everything I said sounded dumb. It took some time, but I finally learned that I have value and my ideas are often good ones.

Areas I'm confident in now are gardening, writing, and using power tools. My confidence grew as I learned more about these things, and practiced. After many years of doing them, I feel fairly confident that I can grow things, write decently, and I can fix and build things even though it's not my favorite thing to do. - Dina

I feel like I've always been a pretty confident person, and I credit my mom for that. She was a confident woman, and I feel like I gleaned from her. However, there are a couple of areas I was

never confident in, even as a young child. One is water sports. I never had a lot of upper strength, or extreme swimming skills, so I never liked going to parties where water sports were involved! A second area I was never confident in was feeling like I was enough. I always felt lacking in a lot of areas and constantly strived to be approved of by others, and by my parents. It was exhausting living that way!

As far as confidence, I do have a confident sense of fashion (again, gleaned from my mom - the best seamstress and clothing designer!). I don't really care if what I wear is just like what others are wearing - who are my age. I like paving my own way, and I really enjoy the whole process of getting dressed. It's like art, to me! I'm also confident in cooking. I didn't used to be! After my kids were grown, I started watching a lot of cooking shows and learned so much that it inspired me to create in the kitchen. It's now a hobby and a pleasure, and I love cooking for myself and my kids! Or little treats for others.- Marcy

As a child, I stuttered. Sometimes, it was severe. In school, they added classes to improve my speech, and I was always embarrassed when they called my name to attend my "special class." I was bullied throughout my childhood. My third-grade teacher hit me and made me stay in at recess for something that was out of my control. I stopped talking and turned to books. When I read, the words in my head were clear with no stuttering. I started to write when I was in 6th grade....again, no stuttering.

My Dad was in the military, and we moved every three to four years, leaving my friends behind and starting over didn't help my confidence. I climbed trees to sit and read, and I hid in the woods away from the ugly comments from the other kids. It was in the woods that I found an old Catholic priest's bible and took it home. There was history and wisdom in that book. It gave me comfort reading about His love for all of us.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Mr. Han Chee. He was our oration and speech teacher in high school. He understood me; he knew I was afraid of speaking. He asked me to stay behind my day after the bell rang and read the speech I wrote just to him. The next day, he asked me to pick two friends I trusted to read it to them and to him. The next thing I knew, I was in UIL for Speech and Debate. I lettered in Debate! What a far cry from the silent girl to the one debating in front of judges and others.

I was the Director of Training for a 10-county area where I worked....no one saw that coming. Nothing is forever...faith tells us to hold on and push for the life we want...and I pushed as hard as I could. – Cathy

I am a naturally confident and friendly person. I am pretty sure I came out of the womb bossing and connecting people. But there are a couple of areas where I lack confidence and will shy away from tasks and leadership. One is anything to do with a microphone. I don't know why, but I historically turn into a blubbery, confused mess when I have a microphone in my hand. I really hate it. I wish I could practice and get better, but once you make a fool of yourself on one of those, people tend to not hand them to you anymore...

I also struggle at parties. I am deaf in my right ear. My left ear picks up background noise before voices, so I am left feeling very isolated and unconfident in a loud, crowded setting. In order to hear, I have to be in just the right position, with my head awkwardly close to someone, then I risk breathing bad breath on them to respond, and it just snowballs from there. So I tend to avoid loud places, restaurants, etc. I'll also add that I am not confident in dressing up, so crowded parties

are just a no-go for me. I much prefer a small party or no party at all. Or give me an outdoor party with children, and I'll be as happy as a lark!

A couple things I feel confident in: I feel confident in gardening...not so much that I'll succeed, but that I will learn and enjoy it. I see gardening as a life-long science experiment. Many people think they don't have a "green thumb" when, in reality, they just need to keep experimenting. Try different lighting, location, or just the same plant in the exact situation. Sometimes it is just the plant's fault and a new one will live!

I also feel confident to pray for anyone. I will talk to and pray for a complete stranger if I feel the Holy Spirit urges me to do so. God's love I feel in my spirit for people overwhelms my fear almost every time. I believe he cares about the details of people's lives. He sees, he knows, and he cares. He is so full of compassion. Almost everyone will let me pray for them, too. Who doesn't want to be interrupted in their day to be reminded that God knows them and loves them? – Laura

I don't want to sound like a cliché, but my confidence comes from God. When I was a little girl, I had lots of confidence. I felt loved and accepted by everyone, everywhere I went.

Then my mom died. I was nine years old and all those friends started to act differently toward me. Enough so that over the next few years I lost all confidence and trust in people and in myself. I didn't have nice clothes to look presentable, and I didn't have a nice home to be happy in. But I did have, every once in a while, as I'm sure God saw was needed, some person or event that gave me just enough encouragement to keep me going. One example of this was making percussion in the band in sixth grade. And I only went to tryouts to get out of class.

Through these years, I didn't consider the things and people I encountered might've been from God. I was unhappy to the point I stopped praying to Him. Then later, as I became a young adult, I turned back to God and the Bible. I started to read how God doesn't care about what I wear or what kind of home I have. I learned what was important to Him was what I had on the inside, in my heart. As I learned more, I started to have confidence from knowing God accepted me just as I was and still am. I learned to thank Him in everything I did because He showed me how or gave me the strength needed.

I do try to look nice, now that I can afford it, and I do enjoy having a welcoming home. It's the home He gave us and it's always open for whatever He leads us to use it for. And knowing that my Heavenly Father has given me all I have now and guides me with joy I thought I'd never know, it gives me all the confidence in the world. Cliché? Maybe so. But that's my honest truth. – Carole

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

Every month we're learning and growing, because that's part of living life to the fullest, isn't it? Noticing the fun things and enjoying something new or different. Here's what I noticed and loved in the last month...

Got any buttons you've collected, or have you seen jars of buttons for sale? I recently bought a jar and embellished a t-shirt dress with them...it was fun and easy and turned out cute!

I have a trifle dish that was my mom's and since I'm sure I won't make a layered trifle in it, I saw where a little moss, some rocks and an air plant can create the prettiest planter!

A friend gave me a three month subscription to a bulb in a pot and I have loved it. It's from Harry & David.

Almond butter is so easy to make and so incredibly delicious. Two cups of roasted almonds into the processor. Blend and stop to wipe down sides, and keep doing this until the mixture is creamy like butter. Add two pinches of salt and blend again. You're done.

I've done this so many times and I love it. Put together several looks using one of your favorite tops or bottoms, and then snap some photos. Store them in your phone. Use them for inspiration when you don't know what to wear.

A really good breakfast or mid-morning snack or lunch is this: a dollop of that almond butter, blackberries, sliced almonds and cinnamon sugar pretzel sticks. With a glass of OJ. Perfection.

If you have tweens or young teens in your circle of influence, and you need a gift, see if you can find Needoh cubes. I don't know why, but they're a hit and the kids love them!

My niece told me about these large divided containers (they come in a two-pack) that she uses for her weekly veggies or salad ingredients. I bought them! I also use one for all the nuts. They're awesome.

One never knows what one will find at the Dollar General, if one never stops in! I found the cutest light up mushrooms that I added to my shelves on the porch!

Tiny egg cartons, mini cupcake liners, some twine, and little snacks. The perfect treat for a meetup with friends, the best to-go and elevated snack box for yourself, and so cute and easy to put together!

This necklace, from Amazon. Maybe one of my favorite jewelry purchases this year. It simply goes with everything from a t-shirt to the prettiest of dresses. Grab one!

I haven't worn eyeliner in forever until this...navy gel eyeliner from NYX. It adds a smoky eye effect and it glides on. You can then smudge it with a little eyeshadow. Try it!

I found the prettiest butterfly (fake) bushes in TJ Maxx that I added to some pots out back, and I love them for this season!

This pack of three oversized t-shirts in neutral hues – They're GREAT for casual or even with skirts, they're the perfect colors, and wash up great! I'm glad I got them...from Amazon.

Fishermen sandals...in black...with a silver buckle...and a heel...from Walmart. Great shoe to finish the summer and wear on into the fall. I love mine so much.

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HOME

Practical Parenting – One Day Out – by Marcy Lytle

I know that sometimes daddies take their daughters on a date, and moms do the same with the boys. I recently had a fun time hanging with 11 year old Augie on a day date, one which he planned completely. It wasn't cheap, but it wasn't outrageous either, and we had the best time.

If you have multiple children, and you have a chance (or a grandparent or aunt/uncle asks) here's what Augie chose to do on an afternoon with just the two of us:

First, he opted for indoor miniature golf which is perfect for a hot summer day. We picked out our clubs and balls, and started on the Putt Vegas course. It was fun to keep score, or not, and to watch him enjoy the challenge of each new hole.

Secondly, he wanted to shop for a Fuggler. Have you heard of these "ugly" characters? He collects them and had heard that Walmart had them. We shopped the aisles, and seriously it was like a treasure hunt to find where they were in the store. He found one and it was on serious sale! I think he felt so special to get to shop for something fun, just for him!

Lastly, Augie loves tea from HTea0 and there was one of these drive-thrus on the way home. To our pleasant surprise, we arrived during the buy-one-get-one hour, so he was delighted to grab a second one to take home to his family. I think he ordered one with lemonade in it.

I don't get to spend a LOT of one on one time with the boys, certainly not as much as with their sister. And it's a rare treat for one of the boys to choose their outing. I thought Augie did a great job of choosing...

A fun activity

A purchase

A snack

I think those three make for a perfect afternoon with one of the kids, when there's a change to be with them all alone without the other kids chiming in. And it doesn't happen often, but maybe it should happen a bit more than it does. It did both of our hearts a bit of good to chat, drive, discover, sip and hunt on a Sunday afternoon on a day out together.

I Don't Do Teens – That Transition – by Marcy Lytle

For some reason, moms (and sometimes dads) tear up at all the graduations. Graduation from kindergarten is a tear jerker, for sure. And when she starts middle school and all of a sudden she really looks like the teen she is now becoming, it's astounding! And then there's that transition from middle school to high school, when parents know their time with their kids is now on its last lap. And we all know that time flies...

It's the middle of summer and soon school will be starting up again, and maybe you have a child that's making that transition to the next level, and you're having all the feelings, and some of them are too heavy to carry. And though you know that all of life is full of one transition after another, whether we like it or not, this year one of your babies now entering the unknown world of older campuses, more temptation and oh yes...the opposite sex...it's just too much!

It seems that lists seem to work for moms/dads/teens as transitions are made. A checkoff list of sorts for both parent and child (almost adult) that might make the transition a less dreadful one:

- Pray. Every list should start with prayer. Ask your teens what they're anticipating and any anxieties they have, and write them down. Pray together and give them to the Lord. Reaffirm the goodness of the Lord and read Psalm 23, and Proverbs 3:5.
- Be informed. Visit the school. Find out the dress policies (Yes, I flubbed up on this one when my son went to high school! His shirt was too long!) Ask about lunches. Make your teen as comfortable as possible in a practical way.
- Enjoy the summer. Be sure to spend time with these transitioning teens, even one on one dates out for ice cream, shopping, movies, anything they want to do. And invite friends as well, to a few of these hangouts.
- Talk about food and sleep. Start now in the summer and talk about meal plans, healthy choices, and wisdom in both. Extend to your teens some choices to make a plan for their eating and sleeping habits, and ask them and talk to them about the benefits of good habits in these areas.
- Consider counsel. Is your teen in a youth group? Have you met the school counselor yet? Does your teen talk freely with you or another adult about their problems? Encourage your teen to open up and know their resources, should they need them, when the new school seems hard, or friends seem impossible to make.
- Boost confidence. Remind your teen that they are who they are with a purpose and a plan, and that they are loved just as they are. So what if they don't wear the latest trend, or if they're not agile like that athlete, or they just don't feel like they fit in. Teach them to hold their heads high and trust that who they are will be enough. And God will make their path light up as they walk with Him.
- Talk about temptation. There will be more temptation to enter into unclean talk, to look at the opposite sex or talk in an inappropriate manner, to get involved in unsafe habits like drugs and alcohol. Teens need to be aware, but not scared. Be informed, but not alarmed. Tell them that you are always available to talk, pray, and lead them...and let them grow up as they make good choices and communicate with you.

Finally, after you've done all the things, rest. It's not easy making these transitions that might include the time for getting a driver's license, or your son asking to go on a date, or she may want to dress in something that's not appropriate. Don't panic. You lived through your teen years, and you learned some things. You have a heavenly Father that cares about your teens more than

you do. Entrust them to Him, and ask Him to hold your hand too, as you cross into the unknown with the One who knows it all.

Rooted in Love - I Don't Have a Village – by Kaelin Scott

We've all heard the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." More than ever before, it can be beneficial to have a supportive community alongside you as you navigate your way through parenthood. Especially in today's busy and fast-paced world, it can be so helpful to rely on grandparents, friends, neighbors, aunts and uncles, etc. But not everyone has a village, and that's okay.

If you don't have a village, you're not alone. My husband and I are in the same boat. Our closest family lives nearly two hours away, so we don't have the benefit of dropping the kids off with grandparents when we have something important to do. We live on a ranch way out of town, so we don't have neighbors or friends nearby to call for help in a pinch. We've pretty much never used a babysitter and haven't been on a date in over two years.

We're pretty much on our own when it comes to raising our kids, but honestly, I don't think that's a bad thing. Of course, it would be nice to have a break or some alone time once in a while, but it's not the end of the world. It comes with challenges and obstacles, but it's nothing we can't figure out. It simply means we have to work together even better, and we know we can rely on each other during tough times. This is a season in our life that's dedicated to our nuclear family, and that's a beautiful thing.

In fact, being with our kids all the time is the greatest blessing in the world, which is one big reason why we choose to homeschool. I know it's not for everyone, so I don't blame people for thinking we're weird. The way we do things is different than what's considered "normal." Honestly, part of it is by choice because we love being together as a family, but as I mentioned before, part of it is out of necessity. To tell you the truth, sometimes I get jealous of people with close-knit families who have regular family dinners or cousin play dates. I wish we had that village; if not for the support, then at least for the connection.

Even though I love being with my kids and choose to be their teacher, sometimes I reach the point of burnout. Those are the times when it would be so nice to be able to let someone else step in, but that's not our reality. We have to push through our exhaustion and keep going, relying on God's strength and energy to help us through. And you know what? He always delivers just what we need, because His grace is so amazing. It's humbling and empowering all at once, knowing that the God of the universe cares so deeply for *little ol' me*. He is involved in all the intricate details, even when I feel like no one else really cares. He never leaves me alone. What a wonderful Father!

If you feel isolated, or if you're just plain worn out, please remember that you're never really alone. God is always with you, and He gives you the tools you need to complete the tasks He's set before you. And if you don't have a village, that's okay. There's nothing wrong with you. Your life just looks a little bit different than others, but that doesn't make it less awesome. Life is full of seasons, and this is just one of them. Search for the blessings, and remember that God put you right where He meant you to be.

Homesteading – One Day Came – by Leyanne Enterline

We finally did it! We had a huge gathering in our home!

We had waited so long to invite a large group over due to feeling like our new house was “unfinished.” When Brian lost his job, we literally put a huge stop to all the things we had wanted to get for our home. We were beyond grateful to finally be in a house, but a bit discouraged that we could not do the decorating we would like to have done. “One day,” we’d say.

And then...we just went ahead and did it! We had over 100 guests come through for Asher’s graduation/birthday celebration! I have no idea how we fit or fed everyone, but the Lord provided! Literally, He provided the loaves and fishes. I do not know how to cook for that many people and yet somehow we had leftovers!

I’m so thankful that I had started working for a friend who handles events, and we had done a wedding the day before. She sent me home with all the leftovers so I could use them for the party. That was so helpful! With half the guests being teenagers, they were flying through the food!

She had also sent me with the leftover teas and random mini desserts! My mother-in-law had even made a regular and gluten free cake and all that was gone so fast. But the kids were happy and fed. Thank you, Lord!

I was also beyond thankful that the weather held up, too! I was so worried it was going to be pouring rain that day and imagining what a mess that was going to be! But no rain fell. The kids could be outside or in the garage. We set up all our camping chairs and the kids played games out there and ate. It truly worked out great!

I was so overwhelmed with “the way things looked,” but gave it up and was thankful we had a home to host in! Never mind the wires hanging out of the windows because of the “one day” when we’ll get those shades put in! And don’t even look at our free art work, couch and rug! *One day* we’ll have something we picked out. Don’t judge my Goodwill outdoor table with my Amazon wicker chairs that are falling apart! However, I am so thankful for the gifts we were given and they were such a need at the time!

Many guests messaged me afterwards and said how much fun they had getting to see everyone and visit with one another. My heart was happy that the Lord provided, even when I felt insufficient. When I am weak, He is strong. I felt like I could not host, could not feed the people, could not do this or that, but with Him all things are possible!

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in weakness.’
Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses,
so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”
2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV

In Each Room – Repurposed Bowl – by Marcy Lytle

We finally sold my parents' house to my kids! They are creating an Airbnb, and we couldn't be more excited. In going through the house one more time, I saw this beautiful trifle dish that no one had taken, so I grabbed it. Knowing I would probably never make the actual trifle layered dish to serve, I had seen on line where a pretty planter could be designed very easily, and so I tried it! This one little dish adds so much to the dining table...but I could move it to any space at all...and love it just as much!

Items needed:

- A trifle dish (or similar glass bowl)
- Moss and rocks
- An air plant
- A mister

You can visit a local nursery and there find the moss and rocks needed for the base of the bowl. Just pick out a color scheme of rocks that match your décor. I opted for a bag that included lots of gray. There were also air plants to choose from. Some were taller and slender, and others were more spread out. Just consider the size of your bowl and choose accordingly.

The assembly is so simple. Just place the rocks and the moss in the base of the bowl, up as high as you think necessary in order to then place the air plant, so that it can be seen atop the bowl when it's set. Finally, nestle in the air plant so that it sits up straight.

I did read about air plants and their care, but do read about the specific one you choose – where to place it and how much water it needs. They really need such little care at all.

Finally, I wanted to purchase a pretty mister to water the plant, and I found the cutest one at Target for \$7.

When placing your creation in your home, just think about where you want to sit your pretty bowl, now turned planter. I chose my dining table, and placed a pretty mat underneath – one I got at a Frank Wright museum on a vacation! It's often good to decorate in groups of three, so I added a slender vase, with a bit of trailing (faux) plant over the side...and then the mister nearby.

The table where I placed my creation gets indirect light from the windows nearby, and it seems to be enough. Having the mister right next to the bowl reminds me to spray it once a week. And supposedly, this little air plant does bloom...so I'm waiting for that.

It doesn't take much to brighten up a space in any room in your house. So if you've got a pretty glass bowl, go for it. Or shop a vintage store and look for a trifle dish. Then fill and arrange and set. One of the easiest "crafts" to put together and one of the prettiest...I think. Enjoy!

A Night to Remember - The Cornerstone – by Marcy Lytle

The cornerstone of a house is the first stone laid in the construction. It dictates the position, level and angles of the structure. If it's slightly off, the rest of the building will be structurally compromised. What does that even mean? It means that the first stone laid is the most important stone of all. And if it's not laid correctly, the whole building may fall.

Have you heard the song, "The wise man built his house upon the rock..." and then the next verse "The foolish man built his house upon the sand..." and what happens when the rain falls? The house on the rocks stands firm, but the house on the sand goes, "Splat!"

That's the idea with a cornerstone of a building. If the rock isn't right, the house goes splat.

Preparation: Have a plastic tub half filled with sand, and a small box to represent a house. Also, have a few kid blocks available for stacking. Finally, grab a bible.

Let's look at our sand box and set this box on the sand, to represent a house. Over time, the heaviness of the house, rains that fall, and time...what will happen to this house? (It will start to sink or lean.) Sometimes even now, our houses sink on shifting ground and this causes cracks in the walls. (Demonstrate how the sand shifts by letting the kids push it and tilt the box...and look for cracks in your own house walls.)

Once we have big cracks in our houses, what then? (Leaks, it looks bad, can be a hazard.)

This is why it's so important that the first stone set is the level. Look at our blocks. Suppose we set down one and then decide to stack more blocks on top? What happens if the first block is leaning? (The rest of the blocks on top will lean and eventually fall. Let them lean a block in the sand and try to stack others blocks on top.)

Did you know that the bible talks about Jesus being the cornerstone?

Ephesians 2 says ,

Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Knowing Jesus makes sure your house stands when rains and hard winds blow.

What does that look like? The cornerstone of our spiritual houses – our hearts, mind and body – is the Word because it contains the truth.

Place the bible on the table. This is our cornerstone. It contains all the truth about who we are in Christ – and who He is to us. When we know these truths, we have a cornerstone for life. Our house may get rained on and winds may blow, but it stands secure because Jesus is our cornerstone.

Who is Jesus? He's our savior, our Lord, our shepherd, our light, our counselor, our king...he's everything.

Who are we? We are created by God with a purpose, loved by him and held by him all of our lives.

Matthew 7: 24-27

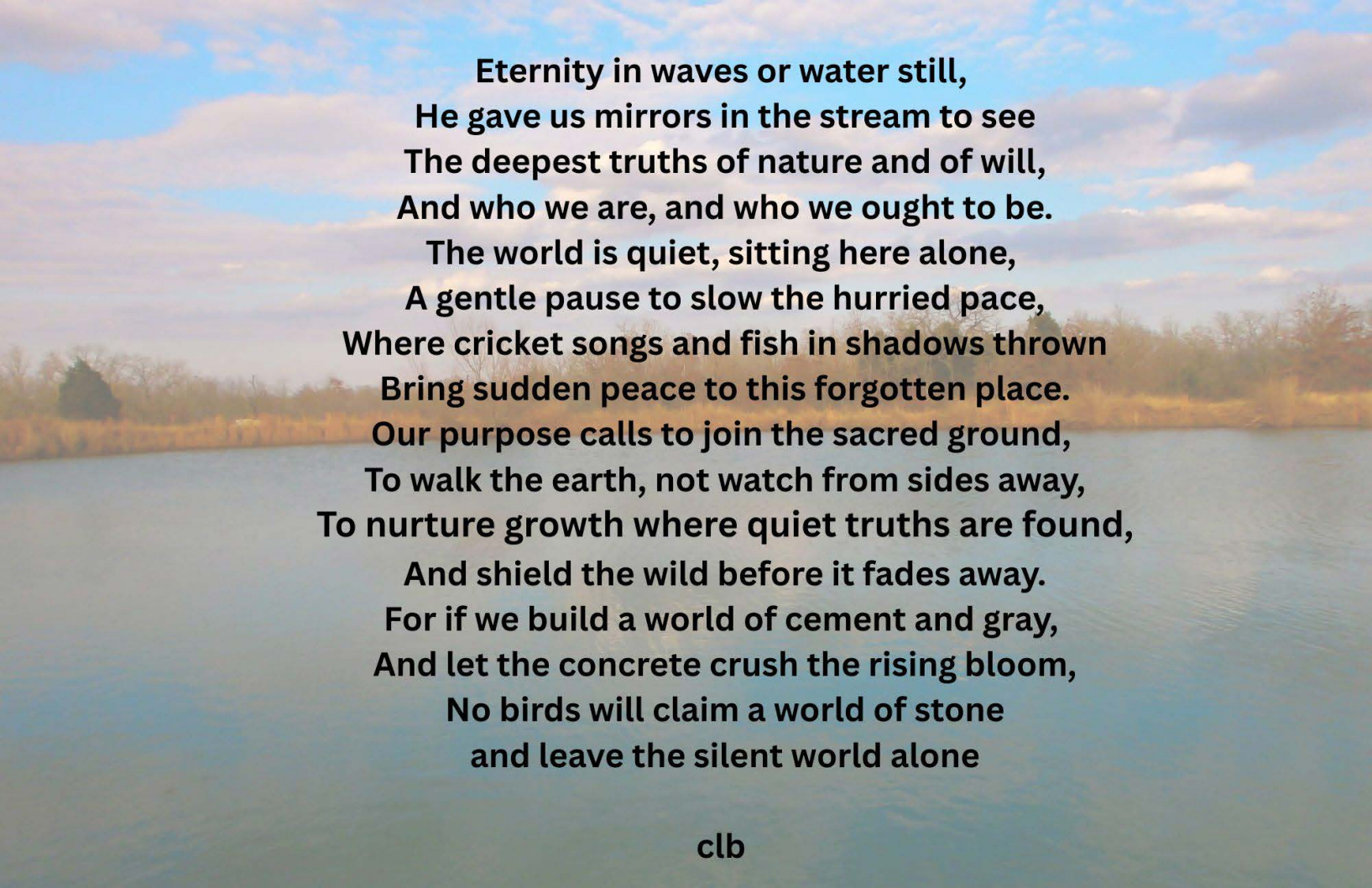
"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Let's now sing The Wise Man song together...





YOU



Eternity in waves or water still,
He gave us mirrors in the stream to see
The deepest truths of nature and of will,
And who we are, and who we ought to be.
The world is quiet, sitting here alone,
A gentle pause to slow the hurried pace,
Where cricket songs and fish in shadows thrown
Bring sudden peace to this forgotten place.
Our purpose calls to join the sacred ground,
To walk the earth, not watch from sides away,
To nurture growth where quiet truths are found,
And shield the wild before it fades away.
For if we build a world of cement and gray,
And let the concrete crush the rising bloom,
No birds will claim a world of stone
and leave the silent world alone

Inner Strength - Joyful Moments – by Michelle Wyatt

Joy can come from surprising places. Sometimes it's a simple event that comes on suddenly and sometimes it takes pushing through fear.

During our limited time together, my boys and I manage to make the most of what God has to offer and what I know is best for my boys - getting some sunlight and physical activity. It's become enough of a routine when we have our Saturdays together and circumstances allow us to, that my "indoor" son as he describes himself, doesn't react as negatively as he used to. In fact, later in this article I will share how Brendan found his joy despite the heat.

Thankfully the Lakeview Pavilion Park in Round Rock Texas, the newly renovated part of Old Settlers Park, is one that the boys and I agreed was worth checking out one particular Saturday. It has climbing features that not only keep my oldest from being too bored, but it's also encouraged my other son to challenge himself.

Matthew has said repeatedly that he doesn't like climbing as high as his brother. He has climbed as high as his brother on rounded apparatuses with plenty of places to step, but this particular tower was more intimidating. It was not as open. The steps were on the inside, where not as much sun was getting in. I'm excited to share next the joyful moment that came as he faced his fear.

He pushed past his nerves, stepped across a rope bridge and climbed up that tower! I knew he could do it. Now here's a part of the story I did not expect. While he was crossing over a rope bridge and climbing up a tall tower, he said,

"I don't trust this rope. I don't trust myself."

Now I was tempted to point out why he could trust it, but I stopped myself. It wasn't my job at that point to change his mind. My job was to be present to him and support him. I was right there with him, encouraging him and telling him how great of a job he was doing.

"You're doing it. I am very proud of you!" I encouraged.

I may not remember everything I told him, but that much I know I told him. He had a subtle smile the whole time, too. He braved through these strong thoughts and feelings behind it. I hope deep down he was proud of himself. The more he has successful moments such as this, I am confident he will build upon trusting himself. It's not going to mean as much if I tell him.

While Matthew's story of joy came from facing his fear, my son Brendan found his smile in a quick change of events. Brendan didn't last long out in the humid air of the park, so he took a break, went to the shaded table and had more of a snack. I was right there with him because, yes, it was hot. I could tell he wasn't having as much fun at this point. I know not every moment is going to be fun. It's hard for me to watch though, because having limited time together is already not fun. We make the most of it.

Out of nowhere, Matthew came up and challenged his brother to a race. It happened so fast I missed the detail on where they were going. It didn't matter. Brendan forgot about the heat and took off. Being competitive is part of Brendan's nature, so while it wasn't playing a video game, I could tell he enjoyed it.

Joyful moments don't have to last long. Even just a few seconds is enough to break up the day and move us to look out for the next joyful moment.

If I can do it, so can you!

I dedicate this story to Marcy's late beloved husband, Jon Lytle. Marcy has blessed us with stories of joy that they shared together. Love continues to go out to you, Marcy, and always will!

Life Right Now - Stars and Stripes - By Jennifer Stephens

It's the grinding rhythm of homemade ice cream churning around and around. It's the burst of colors exploding in the sky above. It's red, it's white, it's blue - the stars and the stripes. It's America and it's the 4th of July! And this year it's extra special as we celebrate the semi-quincentennial – 250 years of independence from the rule of King George III. The day we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

We'll devour grilled hot dogs, watch vintage firetrucks and high school marching bands parade through the streets. We'll gather with family and friends at the lake or backyard parties. It's also the perfect time to reflect on the rights and responsibilities that accompany the freedom we often take for granted.

When I was a first-grade teacher, we always spent time in our classroom learning the importance of being a good citizen. We learned about the United States flag. We recited the Pledge of Allegiance every single day. And we learned how to be contributing members of society.

As good citizens we follow a social contract. We respect laws. We vote. We support our community through volunteerism, protecting the environment, and being a good neighbor. Kids learn these behaviors through watching the adults around them. How can we be adults worth watching? Be a role model. When kids see their parents treat others with respect, they learn to be respectful. Follow the rules (stop at stop signs, return the shopping cart) and explain why rules and laws exist – to keep us safe. Volunteer at the local food pantry or animal shelter. This develops empathy. Pick up litter. Join a civic club. Teach children to be good neighbors. Explain boundaries and let them know they shouldn't wander onto neighbor's property uninvited. Teach kids the art of conversation – making eye contact and listening to others. Children who learn to be good citizens become adults who are good citizens.

On the fourth of July we celebrate American freedom. We eat the food, watch the parades, and gather together. We're reminded of our civic duties. Let's remember every day that the freedom we're celebrating includes honoring our social contract to be good citizens. Theodore Roosevelt said, "The first requisite of a good citizen in this Republic of ours is that he shall be able and willing to pull his own weight; that he shall not be a mere passenger, but shall do his share in the work that each generation of us finds ready to hand; and, furthermore, that in doing his work he shall show, not only the capacity for sturdy self-help, but also self-respecting regard for the rights of others."

Because we are one nation, under God.

"Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So, anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished." Romans 13:1-2

"For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

2 Corinthians 3:17

A Hopeful Heart - Handprints in the Sand – by Christina Oberon

The tide will come in. It always does. No matter how deeply a hand is pressed into wet sand, the ocean eventually smooths everything away. Yet somehow, that doesn't make the moment less meaningful.

Recently, while spending a day at the beach, my husband, my son, and I pressed our hands into the sand. Three handprints. Three different sizes. Three lives connected by love and family. As I stood looking at them, my heart lingered on the smallest handprint. This July, my son turns eight. How can that be? It seems like only yesterday I was holding a tiny newborn hand wrapped around my finger after waiting years to become a mom. Now that little hand is growing stronger and bigger with each passing year. Before long, it will be larger than mine.

The handprints in the sand reminded me of how quickly life moves. As parents, we spend years teaching, guiding, encouraging, and loving our children. Yet somewhere along the way, we discover they are also teaching us. They teach us wonder and patience. They teach us to celebrate moments that might otherwise pass unnoticed like a day at the beach making handprints in the sand.

The tide has long since washed our handprints away. The waves have smoothed the sand until no visible trace remains. But the love represented by those impressions cannot be erased. In the same sense, long after childhood has passed, I hope my son remembers that he was loved. I hope he remembers family adventures, sandy toes, laughter carried on ocean breezes, and parents who tried their best to point him toward faith, kindness, and hope.

Looking at those three handprints, I realized that while time moves forward, love leaves lasting impressions. The years may pass, children may grow, and seasons may change, but the marks we leave on one another's hearts remain.

As my son celebrates another birthday this month, I am reminded that some of God's sweetest answers arrive after long seasons of waiting. Looking at that small handprint in the sand, my heart overflows with gratitude for the child I once prayed for and the memories we are still making together. One handprint, one memory, one precious season at a time.

Healthy Habits – Hanging Out – by Marcy Lytle

No, I'm not talking about hanging out with friends.

Although, that is healthy.

No, I'm not talking about hanging out and chilling.

Although, that is healthy.

I'm referring to the psalms in the bible and hanging out there...or camping out there...to find health for your sick and weary soul. A friend suggested I do this, and it's a great idea for several reasons.

Here are seven of those reasons:

- Many laments the writer makes, and then he says "but" which indicates there's something else to consider.
- Psalm 145 alone is worth reading daily. It describes God and who he is, and the knowledge of this will be a pole to cling to, all of your life.
- You know that table mentioned in Psalm 23 – the one prepared for us in the presence of our enemies? It's a visual that will sustain us all when darkness surrounds.
- There are lots of references about giving thanks, one of those practices that brings hope and clarity and peace when the world offers anything but.
- The book of psalms is entirely relatable, it's an easy read, and there are so many verses that are good to memorize. Hang out in this book often!
- The verses in this book lift our heads and inspire us to praise. Psalm 89:8 says "...your faithfulness surrounds you." Look up!
- The psalms are full of visuals, and visuals always help in seeing the goodness of God. In Psalm 1 we read of a tree planted by the water.

All of the bible is good for us, but what if we decided to hang out in this one book for the month of July? Read about the writer of the psalms, about his life, what inspired some of the verses, what caused him to lament, and why was this writer/poet/singer called a man after God's own heart.

Hanging out in the psalms might just lift our weary souls when the heat is on...literally and emotionally and every which way...



MARRIAGE

In Unison – “Leading Pioneers” – by Terri Barnes

Chris and I were not brought up in households with biblical Christian values.
We are first-generation Christians navigating beliefs together in our marriage.
Establishing a foundation of faith in our marriage and for a future generation comes with courage & challenges to forge a new path as “Leading Pioneers.”

Sometimes, we easily ask God, “Why does it feel so challenging even though we're doing all the things... Attending church, reading scripture, and aiming for a well-raised next generation.
We often ask God, “Why is it us paving the way?”
We can easily feel uncertain about how to raise strong, capable, faith-filled sons.
Especially as we are still figuring out morals and values within our marriage constantly on this journey.

Though we face difficulty, friction, and exhaustion, we continue to experience joy, provision, and blessing as we remain consistent.
There is honor remaining fervent in faith, even when the path feels new and unfamiliar.
We want to do our best to connect with God and each other.

It is a gift to watch both our boys grow up in the church.
Noah, a worshiper & learner in Kids Church.
Nathan, his servanthood in Youth & Kids Church production.
It is a privilege to help shape, guide, and encourage our two sons.

A personal testimony close to our hearts came recently as we were persevering and continuing to move forward in faith.
One day, our son Nathan said to Chris, “Dad, I need to tell you something. I want to be baptized.”
Chris was instantly filled with joyful tears; I was so pleased Nathan was embarking on his own faith journey!

We'll continue to guide Nathan, but his faith journey is now ultimately his own.
If our marital union ever needed confirmation that what God entrusts to us will bear fruit, there it was!
Nathan attended a baptism class and was baptized the following Sunday.
Then a new rhythm of faith took root in our home!
It was a meaningful day that encouraged us to keep moving forward as “Leading Pioneers.”

This testimony shows the importance of inviting God to draw a family closer to Him and one another through love.
This testimony reflects the intentional choices and action required to focus on what matters most.
God will keep working through us as we forge a path—after all, we are “Leading Pioneers.”

Date Night Fun – Above the Fruited Plain – by Marcy Lytle

It's July, and the 4th is always a fun time to dress in red, white and blue, light the sparklers with the kids, stay up to see the fireworks...and enjoy all the fun colorful snacks in the colors of red, white and blue...if you celebrate America.

"Above the fruited plain" is part of the lyrics in the song "America the Beautiful." Supposedly, the writer of these lyrics was standing atop Pikes Peak and viewing the lush agricultural lands below when she penned this poem.

So, why not enjoy the lush fruit that's available in the summer, in the way of date night out?

Pineapples – Oh my goodness, there are pineapple drinks, pineapple upside down cakes, grilled pineapples, and even cute pineapple cups and plates to be found at the Dollar Tree. So why not enjoy dinner with another couple at home, with pineapple inspired cuisine? Do the searching together and make it simple, cute and fun

Blueberries – I think of pancakes when I think of blueberries. Plan a morning when you can get up and make these together, set out a tray and fill it with syrup and butter. Pour cups of orange juice, and head out to the patio to enjoy while the birds are singing, first thing in the morning. Even play some morning coffee shop music while you eat slowly and talk about the weekend ahead.

Strawberries – Make it a farmers market date where you buy 2 cartons of strawberries. Wear red for this outing. It can be red flip-flops or a red tee...you pick it. Find a park with a faucet nearby and rinse your strawberries well (take a small colander with you). With water bottles in hand, stay in the park and linger while you eat nothing but simple red strawberries. Swing. Take a walk. This can be done early morning or late evening. Head home and plan a strawberry shake night next week, with your second carton of this pretty red fruit.

Blackberries – This is my favorite fruit, I think. Have you had blackberry cobbler, lately? If you have it available in a restaurant near you, plan your date there! If not, plan your date at home to make a cobbler together...with ice cream. See if you can find the movie *Blackberry* on Netflix (it's rated R for language) and watch that while you enjoy your treat.

Peaches – We have peach stands all along our roads in the summer, here in Texas. And of course, peach cobbler is a staple summer dessert. But there are so many things one can enjoy about peaches! I personally love peach salsa. Search the web. There are so many options. Buy the ingredients and make the salsa, and buy the chips. Sit outside in your driveway on your lawn chairs as the sun sets and enjoy both together. Count the stars...if you can. Give thanks.

After 40 Years – One of the Best – by Marcy Lytle

One of my favorite photos I have on my phone of Jon is this one pictured here. Let me tell you the setting.

It was summer, there was music in the park in our community's local area, and we enjoyed attending so much. Often, we would meet friends, bring our lawn chairs, find a shady spot, and park ourselves for a couple of hours to listen to whatever band was playing that night. This park in our small town was one of our favorites, in that it has huge trees, and it just has an "old feel" like maybe a park you might find down the street from Andy Taylor's house in Mayberry.

Usually, we brought snacks and drinks, because there weren't often a lot of food trucks. But on this particular night, there was a food truck. Jon decided to walk over and see what it was and as he started to return, I caught sight of him, popcorn in hand. Now, that popcorn wasn't for him...it was for me. And that smile on his face was priceless. He was totally thrilled to present me with my favorite snack and so excited to bring it to me. I'm so glad I caught his expression in this photo.

All I have now is photos, memories and deep seated heart lessons I learned from living with Jon. He was a servant by nature. It was his love language, since the time I first met him. His first gift to me was a set of wooden coasters tucked inside a small wooden piano. I played the piano when we met and sang, and it was his gesture of acknowledging something he loved about me. That's just who he was, and it was not who I was.

Many times in our early years of marriage, I sometimes despised his servant heart, because he lingered to help others and made us late getting home. Or he'd volunteer to help out when we really didn't have the time to do so. And over the years, he learned a nice balance to serving others and serving his family...but always serving. And the cool thing about it was...he didn't stop to think if he should do it or not, if it would make him look good to do it, or if it would benefit him somehow. He was born with serving hands for others.

When he arrived at my chair with popcorn in hand (and a snow cone, I might add), there would have been a time when I may have reacted with, "You know I just ate dinner...that's too much." Or I may have asked, "What did you get? It's too late for me to eat that much." Or some other response that would be less than thankful.

Jon served, and kept serving, all of our married life...whether I reacted kindly or not. And the longer we were married, the more I noticed how he did the right thing without even thinking. Back when newspapers were a common delivery for most households, if we drove up to my brother's house and the paper was near the street – Jon picked it up and tossed it on the porch. I, on the other hand, didn't even notice the paper. And had I noticed? I would have thought, *My brother can get it himself*. Honest truth.

I'd give anything to see that smile again at the summer music in the park events. It's just pure and simple giving without expecting a thing in return. One of the best attributes a spouse can bring to a marriage.

Gosh, I miss him. And gosh, I'm thankful for photos.



ENCOURAGEMENT

A Day in the Life – Waiting for the Second Act – by Bekah Holland

I'll be honest. I've tried to write this article more times than I can count. But I haven't come up with a single idea that doesn't sound like a depressing cry for help or a random assortment of meaningless thoughts that would require a very patient person with a lot of time on their hands to unravel. So here I am, long past when I should have finished, triple checked, edited and sent this article over to the brilliant woman who pieces *A Bundle of Thyme* together with more love, patience and dedication than a team of people could give, wondering how I can give her, and you, dear readers, something worthy of this gift of space to fill, when I feel like I've got nothing left to offer.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't think I'm doing anything special. This tiny little column I've been gifted, as much as I love it, is not exactly full of life altering ideas that will change the world. More often than not, I'm just offering a glimpse into my far from perfect life, sharing pieces of my heart in the hope that maybe one person might feel less alone, or have a reason to smile or laugh in the middle of a season that doesn't hold many chances to drift off into a world that isn't as heavy as the one on their shoulders. Truth be told, it's a bit of a selfish act because I get to try to make sense of all the things that are floating around in my mind and heart by stringing these words together and sending them off into the world. Somehow it forces me to pay attention to little details that I often think are inconsequential; but when I put the pieces together, there's a bigger picture that I need to face. As a person who would much rather ignore her own struggles and focus on the people and things around her, this is both a blessing and a curse. But in a herculean effort to practice what I preach, here are some of the hard truths I'm coming to terms with.

Life is awful sometimes. People (I'm including myself in this generalization) can be unaware, impatient, judgmental and even cruel. No amount of planning, worrying (yes I know we aren't supposed to admit that we do that, especially as "good Christian girls" but I'm also not a good liar so yes, I worry, before, during and after prayer because, well, I'm a work in progress and a room temperature mess on a good day) will ever really prepare us for the seasons where our world crumbles around us and there isn't enough left to be able to glue it back together. People we love leave us, even when death doesn't give them a choice. Families shatter and those effects are like a tidal wave that keep trying to drown us despite how many times we find our way to the surface for air. Friendships change and those ebbs and flows can start to erode our own sense of worthiness of the kindness and forgiveness from people we've failed. The life we've worked so hard to build can come crashing down around us, burying us under the weight of all that we have lost and the losses that are still waiting their turn.

No one wants to think about the likelihood of experiencing any one of these things, much less all of them at once. It's terrifying and exhausting and whatever stronger synonyms there are out there that I can't remember. And in case you're wondering, I'm right in the middle of all of it and 0/10 would not recommend. But there are a few benefits of growing up when I did, with parents who raised me in church where we went just about any time the doors were open. Some of those stories and lessons you start hearing as a child keep coming back to your mind, and with the experience of getting older, you start to see them and understand them a bit differently than you once did.

Job's story has been on my heart lately on repeat, probably because I can be a slow learner and God is unrelentingly patient with me until I come to my senses and pay attention. Most of us know it as a story of blessings, unimaginable loss, faithfulness, and a life rebuilt. But if you look a little deeper, it's a story about struggles many of us know well. First off, Job worked hard to build a life and a family, and walked closely with God, always trusting His will. Then, like a long line of dominoes, he experienced tragic, personal, soul crushing losses, one sending the next crashing down, until everything was gone. His home, his income, everything he needed to make ends meet. Then his children were killed, and his wife, the most treasured things on this earth were ripped from him in a moment. He suffered from a painful, physical disease, his heart and mind broken from grief, and his words spoke of severe depression. But even with the loss of everything he had and loved, even with the physical, mental and spiritual emptiness he felt...even with his wife and friends who's form of "encouragement" was to judge, most likely because they were uncomfortable with his pain. Nevertheless, he persisted. He was honest with God about his pain. His prayers weren't pretty and polished. They were raw, sorrow filled words, not trying to clean them up before presenting them to God. He even asked that God end his suffering by taking his life. But intertwined with those messy prayers, he still acknowledged God's faithfulness and found a way to praise in the middle of his pain.

And here comes the eucatastrophe (*shout out to J.R.R. Tolkien for coining a term that's an infinitely more elegant way to describe the moment everything seems lost right before grace barges in*) Job's devotion and unwavering faith were blessed by God. Not by restoring or rebuilding the life he once had. But by creating a new start for his second act. He gave him a new home, new love, new family and those ended up being even greater than he had before. It's a story of hope showing us that our current or past circumstances are not where our journey ends. That we can have faith that God's plans for us aren't based on whatever mess we find ourselves currently sitting in.

So many people I know, myself included, were failed in many ways by churches and leaders that pushed us away instead of bringing us closer to a savior who gave every ounce of himself, including unimaginable pain and death, leading some to believe that meant we were being pushed away by God as well. And while I am not someone that claims to know much about, well, anything really, I do know this without a shadow of a doubt. God did not and is not pushing us away. Not now. Not ever. We may walk away, but He doesn't. He doesn't even stay where we left Him, leaving us a long journey to find our way back. He's always just a single step behind waiting for us to turn around.

And while I personally have no idea what my life is going to look like in a year, a month, or even tomorrow, and while I can't see a way out of the darkness I've found myself in, I am choosing, today and every other day, to trust that I am loved by the One who created it. That His plans are better than mine, even when I can't see a way through. And to do my best to love those around me with everything I am and everything I have, even when it's not enough. Because somehow, and some way, there's a "second act" waiting for us, too.

"There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind." - C.S. Lewis

An Adage a Day - Creatures of Habit – by Carole Gilbert

We are all creatures of habit, whether we want to admit it or not. This idiom began all the way back in the eighteenth century. It is used for someone who has a daily routine and doesn't want it to change. You may think you are not a creature of habit, but I bet there are some things that you do at the same time in the same way every time you do them. I know I have some of these habits. But I do enjoy getting out of my daily grind to head off on a new adventure. I am challenged by a bump in the road. And I love to set sail, venture in uncharted territory, even go on a wild goose chase. But then I'm headed back to being a creature of habit.

One fun story of our travels where we hit the road and took the plunge was a ski trip to New Mexico with our young teenage kids. This trip wasn't out of our habitual travels; but a little over halfway there, we did step out of our habitual way. Our oldest son asked if he could sit up front and read the map to help navigate his dad. This was long before cell phones and GPS. He reassured me he knew how to read a map. So, to the back of the suburban I went. It was nice sitting in the back not doing anything. I took a nap and enjoyed the scenery; but then later, I started to think that we should've passed this or that by now. I didn't remember ever going this way before. I finally asked my husband and son where we were.

My son hesitated to answer, and my husband said, "Wherever Ryan's taking us."

As we started looking closer at our whereabouts, we realized somewhere a couple of hours before, we took a wrong turn. All we could do was laugh and enjoy our three to four hours out of the way. But this happy accident gave us the opportunity to see an old volcano! My husband and son felt so bad about the mistake that they stopped on the side of the road, jumped the fence, and found an oversized volcanic rock to add to our rock collection at home. That became a favorite "spur of the moment" travel memory. Then it was back to being ski-trip creatures of habit.

So, what are my habits? I get up about the same time every morning. I eat about the same things for breakfast, lunch, and supper. My husband and I mainly eat the same meats and vegetables. We watch the same things on television each night and then go to bed at the same time. But we do step out and go to church and have fellowships. Sound boring? It's really not. Did you know, that's the way God made us. There are several verses that refer to God creating us for habitual living and worship.

I really like Deuteronomy 6:6-7. It sounds similar to my routine.

"And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.
You shall teach them diligently to your children,
and shall talk of them when you sit in your house,
and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."

Our favorite part of our daily living is talking and sharing about God and His word. It's become a habit. And it's a good thing. So, I don't mind being a creature of habit. It's a God thing. And that's the gospel truth.

Unprepared – Affirmation – by Marcy Lytle

You know the word. It's one we learn early on, it's something we seek all of our lives, and when it doesn't come...well...we're a mess. By definition, the word affirmation is *a formal declaration that something is true, or a positive statement of support, validation, and encouragement*. And from the time we're born and hear our parents' first words, we're either on our way to being a healthy, affirmed individual...or not.

In a perfect world, we would have doting parents that validate who we are from the time we're born, with words of encouragement and love...always. But parents are also products of the generation before them, and often they didn't get the affirmation they needed, either. Therefore, it might be hard for them to give something they didn't get. For example, parents can often project their own missing affirmations onto their kids, in the form of criticism and control. But, you already know this.

What about when we've lived several decades and we're now in our second half of life or later, and we're still struggling with words of affirmation, still longing for them, and still finding them so missing in our lives? It's a hard pill to swallow when we realize that we still long for others to notice us and commend us and validate who we are and what we do. It can come out among our family members, sounding like this:

Y'all never invite me over, I never get to see your new things (said perhaps to grown children)

I didn't have that when I was young, so why should you? (said in bitterness perhaps to the grands)

No one likes to be around me, and that hurts my feelings (said to ourselves when our kids don't call)

That's just a few thoughts or words that might slip off our tongues in disappointment that our kids or family have not affirmed us through the years, and now here we sit alone or estranged, bitter and pitiful, as we judge our kids for not filling that gap we never received when we were children, ourselves.

I'm pretty sure a lot of us grow into older years with this gap, words that should have been spoken over us but never were, and even hurtful words that tore us down instead of building us up. And once we realize this, what are we to do?

Honestly, the only One whose affirmation can heal the gaps and fill in with truth is Jesus. Remember the lyrics, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so?" There is so much affirmation in those first few words, and then we sing YES – Jesus loves me – over and over again in the song. Healing affirmation only comes from knowing the truth that we are loved by Him. That is first and foremost in staving off bitterness we start to take on, when the kids aren't as attentive as we want them to be.

Prayer is another key, and then release. If we truly feel our family is inattentive and even estranged, we can pray. We can ask God to show us any words or actions we've said or done to push them away, and then ask forgiveness. We can offer mercy to our kids and ask God to heal their hearts, too. And we can trust that He will help us while we wait for Him to do his good work in all of us.

We can surround ourselves with positive friends. Not ones that blow smoke in our faces with lofty words, but those who are confident in who they are in God and not seeking to smother others with

their needs and wants. This is a hard one, especially if our circle of friends includes those who are downtrodden, discouraged and in despair. If that's the case, then we can be the one who affirms, stands up and declares His love, and encourages all to forgive and trust again.

It's hard to undo decades of disappointment in relationships where we should have been affirmed and we weren't. Parents can miss the mark, divorce or betrayal can wound, and even the loss of a loved one can leave us feeling alone and in the dark.

There are plenty of verses in the Bible about how God sees us, how much he loves us, and how valuable we are to Him. And that should really be our only source of affirmation, when we've lived a long time seeking it from others. His word is powerful. His love is everlasting. His hand is strong and mighty. And we are the apple of His eye.

Firmly Planted - The Highest Allegiance – by Dina Cavazos

I grew up in a small town that was about 10 years behind the times. In my high school in the early 70's, girls were not allowed to wear jeans, only pant suits. Pant suits! The rage was cool bell-bottom jeans—it seemed so unfair! We protested (mildly) and staged a “walk-out.” Eventually we were allowed to wear jeans, because the times they were *a’changin*.

Personal freedom, such as what to wear, is one thing, but defying patriotic tradition? Fortunately, in our country we still have the freedom to be outwardly patriotic, or not. In high school, I refused to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. If I couldn't get away with sitting, I would stand silently. Those were the days of casting off the status quo, remember. Let me explain my youthful utopian thinking. True to my Enneagram 9 personality, I've always felt like a “citizen of the world.” My thought process: *The entire world is God's creation. He loves **everyone**. He **is** love, and so, he loves **every nation** under God. Shouldn't we have a “whole earth” mentality and pledge to bring love, peace, and justice everywhere?* In my idealistic, purely honest heart, I couldn't relate to pledging allegiance to a piece of cloth that represented only one small part of the world.

Maturity brought a perspective and understanding that made me grateful for our country and the Pledge became more meaningful. I'm grateful for the freedom, privileges, abundance and choices we have as Americans, and I try not to take them for granted. I'm fortunate to live in the USA (though what it might be like to live in France, Sweden, or New Zealand I can't say...). Even so, the idea of pledging allegiance to a flag still doesn't feel right. I can say the words (mentally striking out “flag”) with gratitude, but in my spirit, I know there's only One to whom I can truly pledge allegiance in the deepest sense of the word. I think of myself as a citizen of heaven first, the world second, and America third. God's love is for all mankind, and my allegiance to him, and his promise to one day unite his people scattered throughout the earth, overrides everything else.

But my thoughts are just my thoughts. Gazing at my small piece of the world surrounding me and contemplating in my favorite swing-chair, I think of God's love for his creation--especially people, created out of love, to love. A little farther down that path of thought I pause...*Do my plants love each other? If the trees and the hills clap their hands...well, who knows?* How does God see it and what does that world-view look like?

Revelation 7:9-10

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

Unearthly Thing - What Is God Doing? – by Angela Dolbear

I've noticed lately that the topic of God engaging in various activities has consistently come up in podcasts, church, and Bible reading. So, I'm pausing to consider: "What is God doing?" This seems like a good opportunity to write positive content about God, which excites me.

I don't mean it disrespectfully at all. But I'm curious and eager to know more about my Heavenly Father.

I know God is in control of all things. And I remind myself of His many, many promises. I also know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that He is good. I can testify to His goodness many times over. And His goodness is always timely.

That must mean God is working all the time. So, what is He doing, I mean actively doing right now, even as I write this?

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them"(Ephesians 2:10).

"Beforehand"...how exciting! Consequently, somewhere along the way in God's timing, He prepared good works for me to walk in. This makes me feel loved and blessed by the Creator of the Universe. There's the moon, the stars, meteors, and asteroids hurling through space, and then there's little ole' me God created, planned for, and is currently protecting and guiding. (Here's where I would type hearts and smiley-faced emojis if it were appropriate.)

Then I heard this beautiful verse recently:

"For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland" (Isaiah 43:19 NLT).

He's already begun His work? Even more exciting. (Author's note: I love when there are exclamation points in the Bible!)

This is one of my favorite verses because it shows God's active involvement in my life. He has assessed my situation, concluding it was time to change something, and so He did. He already did, and I shouldn't miss His working. He guides me through an easy-to-follow route (note the term "pathway") through an unknown circumstance, my wilderness. And He creates provision in that dry wilderness wasteland. His work is amazing!

During my prayer time, I asked God to show me what else He is doing in my life, so here are just a few things He revealed to me. I get the feeling there is so much more, but these points melt my heart, make me feel loved, and so glad to be His child.

1. God is healing
2. God is guiding
3. God is protecting
4. God is saving
5. God is providing
6. God is teaching
7. God is listening

8. God is loving
9. God is disciplining
10. God is sustaining
11. God is creating
12. God is fighting for me (*The battle belongs to the Lord, amen!*)
13. God is restoring
14. God is helping
15. God is vindicating me

Healing is a big one for me. As a person plagued with chronic illness, I learned to ask God to heal me. I have great doctors, but I have witnessed God heal me in “unnatural” ways and have watched the wonders of His design for our bodies to heal themselves (here’s where I can testify to His goodness!).

Have you noticed God working in your life? Can you name a specific area? Won’t you join me in thanking and praising Him for His work in us?

I’m so grateful to God for all He does and has done in the lives of His children. He is truly an attentive and loving Father. He is good.

Blessings to you!

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series and THE TORMENTOR’S TALE, as well as many short stories. She just completed the fourth book in The Garden Tales series, “The Mid-Century Breakfast Club,” and is searching for representation for it. Her novels are available on [Amazon](#) in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats. Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She is the president of the Nashville Chapter of Word Weavers International. Please drop by and sign up for news, read the latest stories, and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>.

Moving Forward – Pray With Friends – by Pam Charro

If you're like me, making time for meaningful connections with others isn't getting any easier. Life demands so much from all of us! I can easily stay so busy taking care of everything that I don't realize how lonely I feel until it suddenly hits me like a ton of bricks. And I bet I'm not the only one.

How can I consistently fit quality interactions into such a tight schedule?
How can I really make a difference today?

It's helped me so much to find a few Christ-centered friends to pray with over the phone each week. I started with just one friend years ago, and it's evolved into a type of ministry. Some have stayed for only a few weeks and some have prayed with me faithfully for months or years. But we have all been greatly blessed by it.

What better way to love God and others? Not only do we stay abreast of what's going on with one another; we also have the privilege of approaching God as siblings in the Lord. It's incredibly bonding relationship fuel! And it doesn't have to take a lot of time, either. I have to strictly adhere to 30 - 45 minutes per session. But that is all the time that's needed to help each other feel seen and valued, and to help us both feel more focused on what really matters. We confess sin, share struggles and heartache, celebrate victories, laugh, cry, pray for others, and petition God.

This connection takes sacrifice and intentionality. Sometimes we have to set the alarm and sometimes we keep an eye on the clock. It isn't always convenient. But we know that we have been seen and prayed for that day.

Who knows what the ripple effect might be?

I know that I shine a little brighter afterwards, and hopefully that helps me to better love others and bring glory to God throughout the rest of the day.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – The Main Thing – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not a doctor, or a food guru or a nutritionist. What I am is an observer. And what I observe is that supplements are a big deal. Extra powder, more gummies, pills and vitamins, boosts, and more. And what else I observe is that a lot of folks that promote these things are not specialists, either. They're just like all of us – they want a healthy lifestyle. And if it can be acquired through quick fixes, like little additions to drinks and a few pills a day, they're all for it.

I see that trend in spiritual things as well. I read a book someone gave me after my husband passed, one on grief. And it talked about how in the pioneer days, death and life were alongside each other daily. Women died in childbirth, many children died before they were adults, and trusting God for daily bread, for rain and sun to grow the crops, it was a simpler way of life. But now, with all that we have at our fingertips in the way of quick fixes, pills, and more...we have become a society that tries to prolong our lives, our looks, and our health with anything but the reality of life.

Back to the supplements. From what I read, good food is still the best way to stay healthy...without supplements. (Unless of course, you have a condition that needs extra – and you *need* them.) But most of us don't want to grow the good food, shop for it, or take the time to prepare it. We want meals delivered, frozen meals, and meals prepared for us by chefs...and then we'll go home and take supplements. I've done a bunch of the things like getting meals delivered, I've dabbled in trying little bars and things instead of meals...and I'm done. I'm just done with all that.

Let's go back to the spiritual side of life. I've also tried just memorizing verses, like a pop of a pill, so to speak. Pulling out verses when I need them. I've popped in the truth in my head through song, like we used to pop in a CD and pick what we wanted to hear. And I've coasted along, feeling fairly well (but sometimes spiritually anemic), which works. Until that unexpected trauma hits. Or that wellness we thought we had achieved isn't working out so well after all.

I'm not young anymore, but I don't think I'm old, either. I'm just always learning and leaning in, when life sucks and things are hard, and yeah – I want a quick fix to get through. But I'm realizing that quick fixes don't heal the heart or the gut. And I'm leaning towards a more simple life of looking for daily manna, moderately eating and listening to my body and preparing good foods. I'm also revisiting the joy of my salvation and the truth of who God IS...not just reading his word for comfort and instruction when I feel I've lost my way.

I've barely begun this journey, but I'm feeling hopeful, coming out of the dark. I don't have the bandwidth to listen to a million voices and I'm really trying to gaze at one Face and listen to one Voice for what I need to eat both physically and spiritually.

Life is hard. Nothing I've read or have experienced prepared me enough for the hard. And seeking out ways to avoid the hard only makes it harder when hard things arrive.

Like I said, I'm no specialist, just an observer. A wise one, I hope. And leaning in feels better than reaching for this and that all the time. More fresh veggies and lots of herbs and more water...and more of that Living Water too...the real deal. I think that's the main thing, in my humble opinion...

FRESH THYME - Who Am I? – by Marcy Lytle

Will I be seen differently, now that Jon is away and I'm still here? That's just one of the many thoughts with a question mark that circle my head, as I navigate how to stay alive when half of me is gone. The friends I connected with because we were couples, the friends that knew me because of Jon, the friends who only saw us together...and never apart...how will they see me now?

I met with a couple friend we've double-dated with for decades, and there we sat...at a table for four...only there were three. This made me sad, and I cried, and so did they. It seemed like when our table is wobbly because the legs are uneven, and we can't stand it until the waiter comes with a spacer, to make the table steady and sure. How can we move forward without our fourth conversation starter, and the one who brought the other piece of the pie to the sweetness of life?

Another sweet couple friend took me out with them to lunch and then to a stage show, and I felt so alone in the backseat. However, they made me feel loved and honored and special. We showed up to the theater where I had only gone with Jon before. Memories of plays we'd enjoyed before flashed in my mind, and again...we found our seats...three of them instead of four. The memories panged my heart and I sniffled a bit as the show began. But my friends said they loved going and taking me and being with me. And I know they meant it.

I've been meeting with some of the ladies in my small group at church because they've all reached out, shown up, and stayed and listened and shown up again, because they care. For me! I've never been on the side of so much receiving. And it's awkward, it's weird to show up to group without my arm to hold, my steady hand that I grab, as we enter and exit the door where all of these friends come together to pray and to offer hugs. It's hard. But I have to let them hug me, and I hug them back. It's because we're all grieving in some way or another, every single day, and we all need grace to grieve.

Tomorrow I'm heading out on a fun day trip with three girlfriends. One is a widow like I now am (gosh, I despise that word), one has lost a husband but is now married again, and the other is still married. They don't expect anything from me except to just be, and I can feel that acceptance. They have prayed for me, stood with me, texted me and loved me from long ago...and now...as I'm now this different person with my better half missing. I know the day will be fun because they're fun, and I'll give thanks tomorrow night when we return home...for these friends that love.

I have family far away that text me, call me, and send little gifts. I've received cards addressed just to me, not with Jon's name alongside mine, but just my single name. Because I'm single...which I haven't been for over 47 years. My heart belonged to Jon, my body, my hands, my love belonged to him, and now he's not here. He was here a few weeks ago, and now he's not. And yet people, my people that I've known forever, and some that are new friends, are still talking to me, asking me to be with them, and praying for me with fire. And I do mean fire, because they know I need help even standing and breathing, daily.

Who am I without Jon? I'm still discovering who I am, and I haven't ever even wanted to know the answer to that question. Oh, I was still my own self when he was here. I had my own daily agenda, my own lists and projects, etc. but he was the one I shared them with, talked over them with, and landed in bed with at night as he held me close at the day's end. Now I sleep alone, there's one pillow on my bed, and the silence in my room is deafening.

I don't know who I am, really. Yet. I don't know how I'm going to reinvent my life and my purpose and even face the holidays and summer without Jon and all of his fun that he added to my every minute of life. But I do know to whom I really belong, and I know that He is faithful – because He's been faithful my entire life. I can recall those times with clarity and gratefulness. And all of his Word screams of His faithfulness over and over again that He never leaves us, His splendor is written in the sky, He's leading us onward and forward, and He cares for us like no other. It's loud and clear.

That's who I am. With Jon, and now without Jon. That's who I've always been and always will be.

FRESH THYME – Who Does This? – by Marcy Lytle

I have lots of friends, and I couldn't be more thankful. I'm not sure I've been the kind of friend they deserved, but here they are being the kind of friend I need, and it blows me away.

Just a few weeks ago, one of these friends showed up at my door with a plant in hand, garden gloves on her fingers, and her granddaughter – both ready to plant a Jerusalem sage in my backyard. A plant I'd never heard of or seen before, but it was beautiful. I didn't even know where my shovel was, so this friend drove back to her house and came again, shovel in hand.

Who does that? She did.

I watched as this friend and her granddaughter dug and made a space for the plant that reminded my friend that we will see Jon again one day...in the "new Jerusalem" (heaven). She told me about this plant, how to care for it, how it would bloom soon and the flowers would be so pretty and yellow. And soon, the plant was placed, the mulch was smoothed out, and I stood amazed at what she'd done for me.

I had another friend, one I'd not seen in a long time, text me and ask for my address, as she wanted to bring something and leave it on my porch. Imagine my awe and shock when I arrived home and opened the prettiest book box that she'd taken time to create. And I do mean...create. She had printed pictures of our family from Facebook, I suppose, and hung them on the walls in tiny frames, inside this Christmas box she put together with a tree and a fireplace, both with working lights!

Who does this? She did.

I cried. It's the prettiest most intricate gift, and she made it. She took the time to think of me in my distress and make me something that's full of memories and will bless our home forever. The kids will love it, too.

A few days ago, I got an Amazon package on my porch and I hadn't ordered anything, so I wondered what it was. As I tore it open and read the note, I saw that a good friend had sent me a book on grief. She didn't ask if I needed it, she just had gotten it for herself and decided it would be nice for me, too. A little surprise on my porch that someone was thinking of me...

Who does something like that? She did.

Countless other friends, new and old, have shown up to drive me places for a fun evening, they've sat with me at outdoor concerts because I needed the company, they've visited with me in Adirondack chairs in a park, while I cried a little...well, maybe a lot. They've spent an entire day with me on an adventure, to change my scenery of an empty house.

Who does this? Friends do.

I have never needed a friend more than I do right now. And while I pray daily for Jesus to be my friend, a real tangible friend that holds me and talks with me, he has sent me his hands and feet in the form of the humans in my circle. He has shown up, given, listened, and cared, daily in the every day reality of my pain and sorrow.

Who does this? He does.

And for this, I am grateful, every single day.

