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TIPS

The Dressing – Summer Totes – by Marcy Lytle

I love a good tote, and I can barely pass up a cute one when I'm shopping! And storing them can often be a challenge as well! But...summer totes are definitely a must with beach vacations, flights, souvenir shopping, or just traveling around town or even out on a date. So here are some fun suggestions, and they might already be on sale by now! Totes are great for summer...and actually all year long.

Straw Bag - Summer isn't complete with a straw bag, now is it? I found some cute ones at Walmart. I love this one because it's circular – how fun! These can be dressed up or down, and worn with a dress to lunch, or to dinner while at the beach.

Dressy Handles – I've had this tote forever, it seems. I bought it because of the dressy handles. It's large, so qualifies as a tote. But it's pretty, so qualifies as a bag for a date night out when I might need to tuck in a scarf or a wrap for a cold theater or restaurant.

Book tote with scarf – Every year, Barnes and Noble has a new tote that comes out during the holiday season. This is one of those. It's felt with cutouts, and it's a luscious gray hue. I've tied a scarf on the side, and I'm ready to go...anywhere at all.

Canvas floral – This bag was at Marshalls, and inside is a delight – so many pockets. It's the roomiest tote I own and could be filled with picnic items for dinner on the beach. Isn't the floral pattern so pretty? Marshalls always has a great selection of summer totes.

A City Bag – This was also found at Marshalls, but I've seen them on line, as well. Pick your favorite city and find a bag and wear it proud. Or if you're on vacation, purchase a tote with the city name on it, as a souvenir. Why, not? Totes make the best memento to take home to keep!

Finally, that tote in the photo at the top – well it is just an oversized fabric tote that holds everything, and the black and white goes with so many outfits. I found it (when I wasn't even looking) at one of the discount stores, as well. I stuff shoes inside, a book to read, a wrap for a cold theater, and more!

Seven for You – Sparkle List – by the Panel

There are times when life is emotional and hard and we all need a little “sparkle” (according to the Lazy Genius.) So we asked our panel to share five things that would be on their sparkle list, a list of things that bring joy in a moment, a list to pull from, a list to have on hand...when the “heat” of the summer gets to be too much. You might want to think about and create your own, and have it handy as needed!

Laura:

1. Dinner at Tony C's: if I'm feeling down, I want a break from cooking for my family and I LOVE their pizza! Also, Tuesdays are BOGO pizza, and it is an amazing deal on delicious pizza.
2. A new puzzle: I love doing 1000-piece puzzles; it's relaxing to me.
3. Sitting in my garden: I have a stool that I carry around with me, and I just sit and watch the pollinators hum around me.
4. Pasta Grannies: every Friday at about noon, I receive a sparkle from watching Italian grannies in Italy make homemade pasta on YouTube.
5. Bath & Body Works foaming hand soap: this is a splurge for me, as I am a very economical person. But I do love their unique scents!

Gloria:

The Sparkle List. AKA the *Emergency Joy List*. Each person has their own list, and oh, does it vary from person-to-person! So what someone finds joy doing, the next person says, “You’re kidding!” (and that’s kinder than saying “Yuck!”) So here’s my Top Five Sparkle List that bring me joy, albeit monetarily.

1. Make/Drink an espresso. Years ago when espresso shops were ubiquitous in my town, I became an addict to the drink - and the environment of a coffee house. Loved just hanging out, meeting new people and sipping on that nectar from the gods! Now, having an espresso machine at home, I thoroughly enjoy my morning latte in the comfort of my house, or the campground we’re summering at in Michigan. Just like sitting at an espresso shop, for that short moment of time, I feel all is well with me and the world.
2. Sit. Sit With A View. Some cannot just sit and allow the world to go on without them. I can. I love to just sit and look at God’s creation around me; whether it’s the mountains, the tall trees, the lakes, or beautiful, lush, green grass. What a calming effect.
3. Talk With My Sisters. I have three sisters, Susan, Linda and Jeanie. And they are as different as the states they live in; New York, California and Oregon. They make me laugh, they bring back memories of growing up, we bounce ideas off each other. They keep me grounded.

4. Drive Down An Unfamiliar Road. So you know the poem by Robert Frost, "*The Road Not Taken?*" I love exploring new roads & streets. If I can find a different way to get to a destination, I'm putting on my blinker!
5. Watch British Crime Shows. Alright, true confession; I love British who-done-it shows. Some of my favorites are *Vera*, *Endeavour*, *Grantchester*, *Grace*, *Three Pines*. If it's a cold, rainy day, you'll know where to find me!

Sofia:

1. A warm cup of coffee
2. Getting my nails done
3. Walking into a cool room after being outside in the 95 degree heat
4. When dogs willingly comes up to me to pet them
5. Listening to an album from start to finish
6. Being the first one to take a scoop out of a freshly opened jar of peanut butter
7. Using a blanket immediately after taking it out of the dryer
8. Hugs hello and hugs goodbye
9. A fresh pair of sheets on my bed
10. Strangers holding the door open for me when entering or exiting a place of business

Carole:

1. Sit in my hanging swing outside and...read, either Sunday lesson or Bible, write poetry or work on my next book.
2. Stay on the swing and watch the clouds and the sunset.
3. Enjoy the new swing itself! My repurposed glider I found on the side of the road. "New" things always give me sparkle.
4. Trim hedges, trees and pull weeds. I look forward to this and it's good exercise. The sunshine lifts my spirit and adds sparkle to my body.
5. Sing out loud and long, as the song goes. I'm not the best singer, but I am the boldest. I don't care who hears me, and my grandchildren accompany me. I know our singing is beautiful to Him. Praising Him adds the most sparkle to my soul.

Marcy:

1. A square of dark chocolate - it feels indulgent.
2. Walking in my backyard and observing the herb garden, even pinching rosemary or basil and smelling it.
3. Wearing lipgloss. I always forget, and a little on my lips makes me smile and feel pretty.
4. Listening to the song "Gratitude" by Brandon Lake. Love the lyrics that invite me to throw up my hands and worship.
5. Rearranging a small tray of decor in my kitchen. It's creative and it's fun, and I like it.
6. Staring at my pantry when bins are full and neat.

Shelley:

1. Ringing the doorbell at my daughter's house and hearing my preschool grandchildren yelling my name and running to the door to greet me.

2. Watching the amazing spring wildflowers grow in waves of color. (see pic of just beyond my fence).
3. Having a Trader Joe's dark chocolate peanut butter cup straight from the fridge on a hot afternoon.
4. Chick Fil A waffle fries each and every time
5. Wearing the ruby necklace my husband gave me for our 40th anniversary. I don't wear a lot of jewelry. When I wear this I feel special and grateful.

These sparkles remind me of when we keep finding sparkling glitter all around the house after a birthday party. We think we are just dusting, but there in the little places will be hidden sparkles just waiting to be found.

Gina:

1. Call my sister who lives out-of-state. She is usually available and encourages me.
2. Watch a TV show. I love home decorating shows. They give me ideas for the future.
3. Play a game on my phone. These are fun, and many are said to help with brain power.
4. Work on a cross stitch picture. It's my creative outlet.
5. Listen to Christian music. Jesus often speaks to me through music and soothes my soul.
6. Get grandkid hugs. Just thinking about grandkid hugs makes me feel better.

Cathy:

1. Feeding the squirrels on my porch. Two, Pickay and Cheeky, take peanuts out of my hand. They make me smile.
2. Looking at the little notes my daughter has sent me over the past two years. Her comments about my resilience and kind heart still give me encouragement. I keep them on the refrigerator so I see them every day.
3. Saving some plants that people have tossed out, getting cuttings to grow, and giving them to others.
4. My daily talks to my mom.
5. Making my bed. I didn't use to do this every day until I read a book that said that this one small task will help you to start your day in the right direction. It does!

Cousin Moms – Screen Time – by Charissa and Kamrin

It's summer and it's easy to let the kids sit all day in front of the screen, on an Ipad, on a phone, or watching television. How much is okay, what are alternatives to screen time, and is it bad or good to let the kids have all of these gadgets in technology? After all, we live in a world where technology rules. So we asked the Cousin Moms to weigh in with their thoughts...

Kamrin

When it comes to screens and tablets, we are honestly not great about it. Maybe we allowed more social time during Covid because that was there only time to socialize. But we are working on it!

This summer our kids have to ask permission to get on the screen, or to watch the time that they're on. They need to get off and play or be productive.

Alternatives to screen time are playing or going to the pool, or going outside. The boys, especially, love to play outside for hours with their friends in the neighborhood.

Our daughter is on the screen, but uses it to chat with friends. She and her friends recently used screen time to work on a play together, learning their lines. She really enjoys it. However, we do want her off chats and off YouTube so much. We do like that she's productive while on the screen to create or draw. She may even make stickers this summer. Otherwise, she likes to paint or swim...or make slime!

It is hard at their ages of 8, 10, and 11 and the two older ones don't really play with a lot of toys any more. This requires us to think through this. This summer the kids are in several camps, which will be good for them away from the house, doing something they love. There is church camp, baseball and football camp, cheer camp, etc. Keeping them active is vital, but it's hard. This is a generation of technology.

We do love to watch movies, and there are old Nickelodeon shows that are fun. We sometimes pick a series and watch an episode at night, *I Carly* or *Game Shakers*. Sometimes we pick a new release movie and we've picked for now *Peter Pan and Wendy*. The kids also love *Lego Masters*. This summer, we are trying to do more outings as a family during the evenings – to get out of the house at night.

It's not easy when the kids are in this in-between stage. I would say the biggest thing is to watch what our kids are doing, as we love it when they are productive. We have to watch our own phones and tablets, as the parents. We have access to all of the kids' logins and videos, we have conversations about safety on line. My daughter is learning graphic design, and they also have music apps. All three kids love taking photos! So there are good things on the screen!

And finally, the kids also play games together on their tablets – which is fun! However, if what they're doing is affecting their mood, we pull away.

We are also considering taking all technology out of the kids' rooms at night!

This is always a fluid situation as the kids grow, and it's not easy. But knowing our kids and giving ourselves grace is good.

Charissa

Electronics/screen time is such a huge discussion for us in raising our children. When I was growing up, it was Saturday morning cartoons or heading down to our local Blockbuster to pick out a new movie. Now, there is so much at our fingertips - phones, tablets, computers, streaming TV, etc. For our family, TV and screen time is a privilege/reward. We do not have a specific amount of "time" that we allow our kids to have screen time, but we do try to limit it.

With summer here, I would say our kids have more screen time than usual because we are home more, but we still limit it. They are able to operate our TV and know what they can and can't watch. Our kids are at an age where they like to watch the same thing over and over! It is pretty predictable on what they would like to see - *Bluey*, *Sofia The First*, Barbie shows/movies, *Spirit*, the Descendants movies, and several other Netflix shows. They also enjoy some YouTube videos of cooking, or family play - most of which I find very annoying but they love it!

When it comes to tablets, we reserve those for long car rides. We purposefully don't charge them unless we are headed out on a road trip. Our girls have the Amazon Fire tablet and it's perfect for their age. There are educational games, fun games, and movies/shows that you can download. It is safe and parents can choose what they can and can't see.

Overall, we believe that our kids should have access to electronics but on a limited/supervised time. They also have to have good behavior and screen time is usually limited or taken away if behavior is not. As they grow, I hope they have a healthy relationship with electronics but know there is so much more outside that world...

In the Kitchen – Pick Your Plate – by Marcy Lytle

Our refrigerator went out and we had to eat other foods, for almost a week. Not having a fridge is not fun as you know...because I'm sure you've all had the same thing happen before! Also, in the summer sometimes you don't want labor intensive meals anyway, because you're tired and hot! So these recipes we're sharing are simple and refreshing, and easy and fun. Oh, and tasty!

Chicken donut bites (not a donut, just made in a donut pan!)

Ingredients

- Red onion sliced in rings
- Grated cheese
- Chicken, cooked
- Bacon
- Ranch Seasoning

Using a greased donut pan, place the rings, cheese, chicken, seasoning and more cheese. Bake for 20 minutes at 400% - pop them out and enjoy. Dip in Ranch dressing.

Edamame Broccomole

Ingredients

- 16 Oz frozen shelled edamame, cooked according to directions
- 3 cup(s) broccoli crowns, blanched or steamed
- 12 Oz H-E-B Pico de Gallo
- 2 Large Hass avocado, diced
- 1 lime, juiced

Instructions

1. Place edamame in food processor and blend until smooth.
2. Add broccoli and blend until smooth.
3. Transfer mixture to a large bowl and add pico, avocado and lime juice. Mix until combined.
4. Serve with your choice of dippers!

Mini meatloaves in the microwave

Ingredients:

- 1 large egg lightly beaten

- 1/3 c of 2% milk
- 2 T plus ¼ cup bbq sauce, divided
- ½ crushed seasoned stuffing
- 1 T onion soup mix
- 1 ¼ lb lean ground beef (90%)
- Minced parsley

In a large bowl combine the egg, milk, 2 T bbq sauce, stuffing and onion soup mix. Crumble beef over mixture and mix lightly but totally. Shape into 5 small loaves and arrange on a microwave safe dish.

Microwave uncovered on high 4 ½ - 5 ½ minutes til no pink remains or until 160 degrees in center. Cover and let stand 5-10 minutes. Top with remaining bbq sauce. If desired, sprinkle with parsley.

Hazelnut pecan pie

When is the last time you made a recipe using hazelnuts? They're so good and this pie recipe is so easy:

Ingredients:

- 1 refrigerated pie crust
- 3 large eggs
- 1 c sugar
- ½ hazelnut flavor syrup
- ½ c dark corn syrup
- 3 T flour
- 2 T butter, softened
- 1 t vanilla extract
- 1 ½ c coarsely chopped pecans
- ½ c chopped hazelnuts
- ½ c semisweet chocolate chips
- Whipped cream, optional

Preheat oven to 350. Unroll pie crust into 9in pie plate and flute the edges. In a large bowl, whisk eggs, sugar, syrup, flour, butter and vanilla. Stir in pecans, hazelnuts and chips. Transfer to crust.

Bake 50-55 minutes til set. Cool on a wire rack. Place leftovers in fridge.

Spinach wraps

We just cleaned out the fridge and this was what we came up with, and it was delish.

- Spinach tortillas
- Olives

- Cucumbers
- Cooked bacon
- Cheese
- Carrots

The key here is to shred or chop everything so it stays in the wrap. Mix in dressing of your choice and roll it up. Fritos on the side complete the lunch!

Charcuterie Box

We ordered this recently at a food truck/stand and it was so pretty and so good, and so easy for a summer put-together for the family picnic

- Crackers
- Pimiento cheese
- Hummus or tapenade
- Jam
- Cheese in triangles
- Olives
- Dried fruit
- Tiny pickles
- Salami or other meat
- (I like to add dark chocolate and nuts)

Just arrange it all to fill up every spot and pack it to go. Or...let everyone make their own! Easy!

Pasta Salad

Not really a recipe, but more a method of what you have...using submarine dressing or any Italian dressing you have on hand.

- Cooked pasta
- Hard salami
- Provolone
- Olives
- Red onion
- Zucchini
- Green and red pepper
- Parsley
- Parmesan
- Tomato
- Dressing of your choice (I love Original Submarine – found at Walmart)

Cook the pasta, then drain. While it's cooling off, slice the salami and cheese, red onion and veggies. Toss everything all together with your dressing – place in fridge – then enjoy when chilled. That submarine dressing is the best.

<https://www.walmart.com/ip/Beano-s-Original-Submarine-Dressing-8-oz-bottle/10323693>

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

Oh my, the learning we come by, just by living. It's worth sharing and noting, isn't it? Here's this month's list:

We love Hoppin' John – have you eaten it? Sometime after the Civil War, Hoppin' John became good luck New Year's food. And black-eyed peas helped sustain Southerners during the period of Reconstruction. Who knew?

Everything but the Bagel hummus can be found at our store. Look for it. It's delish! If not, then add the seasoning to plain hummus and try it!

We just finished watching *Rough Diamonds* about a Jewish family in the Diamond District...it was so interesting. It's a one season series.

The Dollar Tree has the cutest little ice cream cups that come with tiny spoons, too!

We found the coolest high chair on Amazon that converts to a child chair; then the bottom comes off and makes a table. I'll link it here.

TRESemme' makes a great volumizing or thickening spray if you need one. I just spray and let dry, and it somehow makes each strand feel thicker. I like it!

A MOST simple dessert is to layer ice cream, brownies and strawberries in glass cups or dessert dishes. And buy the brownies already made in the bakery area. So easy! Great for kids.

A group of rhinos is called a crash. Did you know that? What an odd name.

We knew what Indian paintbrushes are, as we see them a lot in late spring. But did you know there's a flower that also appears called an Indian blanket? I did not...until today.

There's a devo book by Max Lucado for boys called *You Can Count on God*...a great stocking stuffer idea for later...or a summer gift for him.

Lazy Susan turntables are GREAT for pantry shelves, for those canned goods or bottles. Just twirl and find what you need!

NSFW – do you know what that means? Not Safe For Work – regarding viewing something on TV or online. Okay, another day, another acronym.

There's this cool belt contraption with a seat one can wear when carrying around babies, to take the pressure off your back. It's awesome!

Long matches...in a pretty jar...a trend worth considering because they look so darn pretty sitting next to that gorgeous candle in your room.

I found some tiny mitts I had been looking for at mollymoonco.com. Check them out. I love these small mitts way better than large bulky oven mitts, and they're great for the toaster oven or microwave!

Do you know what a Blue Lacy is? I did not, until we ate at a restaurant by that name. And I found out it's Texas' state dog – *what?*

Mason jars make great organizers in deep drawers for tall skinny items like tweezers, clippers, roll-on perfume, tiny tubes of lotion for your purse, etc.

Until next month...

SUGAR + Spice - The Letting Go – by Angela Dolbear

I love the shoes in this picture. I mean, LOVE.

I know they are just shoes. But they are so me. Both pairs, but especially the faux fur leopard mules with the carved wood tiki heels.

Sadly, I have never been able to wear these fabulous heels. My 50-year-old-feet say, “Uh, no, we don’t think so.” Just slipping my foot into the shoes makes the balls of my feet ache.

Sad. So very sad. But I remind myself, they are just shoes. (Lord, forgive me for my idolatry.)

Since these shoes make me melancholy, and I have been coveting them, and of course because I cannot wear them, it’s time to let them go. So I opened the Poshmark app on my phone to add them to the items I am selling there.

Just taking the photo to list the shoes makes me grieve.

“Really self? They’re just shoes!” I chastise myself out loud. My dogs look at me to see if they did something wrong. “No, my fur-babies. It’s just me trying to talk some sense into myself.”

It’s so time for “The Letting Go.”

I got the idea for this article from a Melissa Etheridge song of the same title that was playing on my CD player the moment I was considering selling these beloved shoes. I was feeling ashamed at how attached I was to them. The Letting Go. Yep. It was time.

When I was filling out all the information to list them in my “closet” on the Poshmark app, I wanted to list the shoes for \$999, so no one would buy them. That way they would stay with me! Muuuwahahaha!

But I didn’t. I listed them for a fair price. I reassured myself that they needed to find a new home where they would be worn with cute outfits and see the light of day outside their adorable pink Pin-up Couture shoe box.

It feels good to clean out my closet, as well as my heart. I wonder what else I have been coveting? I glance over at my make-up table precariously piled high with eyeshadow palettes, and baskets overflowing with primers and foundations. Lip gloss and nail polish? Yes, those products runneth over as well.

“Do I need all this?” I ask myself while surveying the cosmetic chaos. My hoardy-heart screams in a Golem voice, “YESSS! We needs it, my Preciousss! We neeeddsss all of it!!”

But I know better.

A few months back, I watched a few episodes of different cleaning-out shows on Netflix, to help inspire me for the major “Letting Go” that I knew needed to take place. I always struggle with what to keep and what to let go. I learned to let go of things that fail to “spark joy” in my life. Well, um, that would be everything except God, but I think I got the gist of the idea.

Eye shadow palettes are my favorite makeup product to receive in my sample boxes, as gifts, in the mail, etc. But I have way too many. Like way too many. Probably about 60+ palettes of varying sizes and colors.

So, I did a little online research and found [Project Beauty Share](#), an organization which ” provides personal hygiene, cosmetics and beauty products to non-profit organizations who serve women and families overcoming abuse, addiction, homelessness and poverty to help restore hope and dignity in their lives.”

Project Beauty Share has a list of the items they will accept in the link above, as well as the address to ship donations to. I was very glad to see they accept powder eyeshadow, especially palettes. I’m going to need a huge box to ship all my donations to them!

I still struggle with “The Letting Go.” I have all sorts of spiritual wisdom buzzing in my head, the loudest is the thought that I need to trust God to provide everything I NEED. Also, inanimate objects give me no validation or identity.

Style is fun, and getting gussied-up makes me feel more prepared for the day, especially on the days when my auto-immune disease has me feeling fatigued and sore. But I know makeup and shoes, no matter how fabulous, are not ME.

My identity is in Christ alone, not in my style.

Well, the tiki-heeled shoes sold. They are currently on their way to a lovely young Poshmark shopper in Oregon.

Sigh...it’s all good. Yes. It’s definitely good.

The beauty of blessings to you!

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



HOME

Practical Parenting – Their Own Thing – by Marcy Lytle

All the siblings in one family often feel so competitive with each other...in everything! Maybe one excels in academics and another in sports, and the third isn't sure where he/she fits in, so there's frustration. A little brother wants to beat the older brother so badly, but he's just not as agile. Or perhaps a bigger sister is frustrated that her younger sibling way outdoes her in a subject in which she struggled. It even happens during the summer season, if one is a better swimmer, or gets invited to play with friends...and the others are left at home and can't quite learn how to keep afloat.

Sibling rivalry is one thing. But sometimes it goes deeper, into sibling envy and this leads to loathing oneself because he can't be like his brother is...with all the accolades...or she can't perform like her sister does...because everything is so hard.

There some ways to help work through these times. They're going to happen when siblings are not clones, and they're not ever clones, so it will always happen. But parents can help their kids make it through to where all the kids can swim in their own lanes, so to speak.

Make sure to affirm each kid. If one brother is receiving an all-star status on a team and that's all the talk and all the praise, the little one is going to feel left out. Affirm each child in their own strengths. We mean to do this, but often even grandparents or others can highly praise one kid over the other.

Encourage each child to affirm the other, so they learn to recognize each other's strengths. Maybe even set aside a night a week for affirmation of a specific action or achievement. It can be how great she cleans her room, or how he makes a mean peanut butter sandwich. Every child shines in their own area.

Suggest activities suited to each child's strengths. He may want to play the same sport as older brother and that's fine. But if he's not enjoying it, only wanting to be like brother, then suggest other sports or activities or music, or art. Provide lots of options, if possible.

Have a family swim time or mini golf night or art night where everyone draws on a canvas, this month of July. If you can, pick activities that Mom and Dad aren't that great at, and demonstrate how to affirm others even when you're not so good at what's going on.

Those four suggestions spell MESH. To mesh is to be woven or knitted together, and that's what a family needs to be. We as parents need to make sure we affirm and congratulate and notice what a family member is doing and doing well. We need to encourage our children to do the same as they mimic our kindnesses to them. We can always suggest and steer our kids towards their own lane, where they enjoy something they can call theirs. And finally, we can have opportunities to cook, play, draw, sing, whatever the activity is...so that we fail and succeed in the presence of the safety of family.

Even as parents, we struggle at times with feeling inadequate with our own siblings or around friends. If our kids see us striving to be better than that person, or feeling down when we don't succeed or have what "they" do, they will follow suit. But if our kids see us swimming in our own

lanes straight ahead and happy to be where we are, they will also follow that lead as well. And we will mesh together like a strong net that cannot be broken!

I Don't Do Teenagers – The Next Thing – by Marcy Lytle

School is going to be starting next month, for most. Your teens or pre-teens might be starting a new school because they graduated out of elementary school. Maybe this is the year he/she will start driving, and you cannot even think about that. Or perhaps she met a boy and now she wants to date. Or he has decided he's going to try out for the football team, the tackle kind of football, no longer flag. The list is long on the kinds of things teens start to do because they're growing up, and it's absolutely terrifying for moms and dads.

I remember when my daughter first encountered a situation where I couldn't fix it. When our kids are small, it's mostly skinned knees or hungry tummies, and we are so capable of meeting those needs. Kids cry because they're afraid of the dark and we run into their rooms and hold them, until they are asleep. Or we carry them when they get tired. We have all the resources as parents, a diaper bag full, or ideas and games to stave off boredom, and so many more parenting skills we have acquired.

However, when they get behind a wheel or sit alone with a date at a coffee shop, or when they get on that playing field with a coach, or are the only new kid in their class that doesn't yet have an iphone...we feel lost and without any guidebook at all. And, in fact, we realize they are now going to start being away from us more than being near us, and our arsenal of fix-its and our arms that are always open won't necessarily be what they are seeking or even need!

Here it is the month of July. A few short weeks until they start these new transitions. Be encouraged with these five truths. Hold them in your heart, write them down and hang them somewhere that you can see them, and commit them to memory:

You can pray and know that **your Father** who has arms that are not short, and ears that always hear, **can be entrusted to watch over them**...when you're not there. His eyes are always open, because he never sleeps.

You are not alone, and millions of parents have survived the teen years and their teens have lived and thrived. Jesus promised to never leave us, so he's the friend that we need when we're crumbling with fear. **He speaks peace to every storm**, and winds and waves obey his voice.

You, and your kids, will make mistakes and there will be scary things, and hurt feelings, and misunderstandings. It's called growing pains. And man, do they ache. Deep in the bones. **Mistakes are not too much for God** who makes and breathes life into nothing but dust. Seriously, he's able to fix us all, and make us better than before...as we all mature.

You are not capable of carrying this load of the teenage years, and that's totally supposed to be that way! But it will be hard to let go, and you'll need wisdom on when to do this or that, and your arms that always fixed and held will now raise in praise as you realize your kids are being released to Him. And if they run, **He will always be there with arms wide open** to throw a party when they return.

You still do have influence over your kids, but now it shifts from directing and telling to living and believing for them. **Work on your own relationship with Him** as you navigate these next

years, and love your kids like He does. You've taught them and will continue to do so, but they're also now watching you as they grow...and they want to be allowed to put into practice what they've learned.

An Adage A Day - Jinx for July – by Carole Gilbert

Do you know what National Month July is? If you just thought of National Ice Cream Month, then “Jinx, you owe me a Coke.” If you’re wondering what cokes, or sodas as is sometimes used, has to do with ice cream, and especially a national recognition, then let me explain. As a young teenager, I used this phrase often, but I didn’t stop at just a Coke because I loved Coke floats. So, I would say, “Jinx, you owe me a Coke, a Coke float.” And after hearing all the talk about the new Dr. Pepper Float ice cream, I remembered this favorite phrase of mine from years past.

Have you ever used this phrase “Jinx, you owe me a Coke?” Did you get your coke or soda? It’s a fun game that is said after two people say the same thing at the same time. It calls attention to you and someone else having the same thought and if you say the phrase first, the fun continues when you receive a soda.

This childhood game began as simply, “Jinx.” Then, in the 1970’s, and some believe it was the 1980’s, it started to include the popular part of owing the other person a soda or a coke. The word jinx usually has a negative meaning about bad luck but when used in this game, it includes good luck.

As I researched this phrase, “Jinx, you owe me a Coke,” I didn’t find a lot of information, but I did come across other versions:

Pinch, poke, you owe me a Coke.

That’s not right, you owe me a Sprite.

I have said it many times and I remember buying many sodas of choice. But going back to why I thought of this phrase I must ask, have you tried the new Dr. Pepper Float ice cream? It is good but I still prefer a good old fashioned Coke float.

As I wondered about this phrase and floats, I wondered if there were any stories in God’s Word about jinxes. I couldn’t find any but there is an excellent example of what to do when someone owes you something or you owe someone. It’s also one of my favorites. In this story the man who owes goes back to work off his debt and the man owed allows him to. But first, the one owed had to give up his ill emotions toward his debtor. This story is such a great example for us. And to add to the example there is a third party willing to pay the debt if it’s not repaid satisfactorily. The story and the one owed? Philemon. The one with the debt? The bondservant, Onesimus. The third party? Paul.

So, as we’re celebrating National Ice Cream Month, and maybe eating Dr. Pepper Float ice cream on July 16, National Ice Cream Day, think about the goodness of what we’re eating and our freedom to do so, and let’s contemplate our own debt and what we may owe others. We might even find we can be like the third party, Paul, and help pay for someone else.

Psalm 116:12-14 says, *“What shall I render to the lord for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people.”*

These beautiful words tell us it’s good to help others and to repay our debts but the most important and main way to repay God is by calling upon the name of Jesus because He paid the price for us. Is that what you were thinking too? If so, “Jinx, you owe me a Coke. A Coke float.”

Tiny Living - I Have a Garden – by Leyanne Enterline

I had been holding off on having a garden until we felt more settled in an actual home. However, almost seven years later, I decided that was too long to just keep waiting! I started back in the fall with a one pot garden and have now added more for the spring!

This may not be the healthiest option for watering our plants but it works for us for now: I have four pots situated where the air-conditioning drips on each of the corners of the trailer! This works great while we travel so I don't have to worry about the garden dying or asking someone to water for us!

I started in the fall with kale and a pepper plant, and it went fantastic! We had a mini salad going! This season I have green onions, oregano, garlic and a pepper plant in one pot. Another has the kale again that lasted all through the winter. And I added a pepper plant as well, along with spinach. A third pot contains mint. The fourth has okra, spinach, oregano and a different type of kale. All seem to be coming in awesome!

These are all organic plants with organic fertilizer, so if the watering system is sketchy, hopefully I get some healthiness in there with the organic side of things...

I did go ahead and plant a bed along with some other plants along our fence line for these to climb up. They need some extra attention with the watering, but luckily we've received some rain to keep all those plants alive!

This was not my ideal situation, but I'm so happy that I went ahead and started my tiny garden! I love being outside and babying my plants, and the kids enjoy eating what we grow ourselves! It's such a rewarding experience to be able to plant a tiny seed and see it come to life!

What a blessing God gives us with plants and being able to grow our own food without having to always rely on a grocery store to produce it.

Now go out there and plant!

A Night to Remember – That’s Refreshing! – by Marcy Lytle

Why not make summer parfaits, call the family together, and talk about refreshment. After all, if you’ve been at games with the kids, their favorite spot is the refreshment stand isn’t it? The big pickles, the bags of chips, hot dogs, and cold sodas – my mouth is watering now, thinking about it. Popcorn is my favorite! But in the summer, refreshment always means something cold. And the Bible even talks about refreshment. Do your kids know that?

Preparation: Prepare parfait ingredients for the kids to assemble as they learn and enjoy. It can be as simple as blackberries, strawberries, and ice cream or Cool Whip! Provide clear glasses so they can see the colors as they layer. And red, white and blue is perfect for July!

In Exodus 31:17 we read about how God created the heavens and the earth and all things in it, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed. Who knows what the word “refreshed” means?

Being refreshed is gaining more strength and energy after you’ve been busy and worked!

After a long day of playing outside in the heat, what is your favorite refreshment?

(Place the washed berries in front of the family to drool over...) Aren’t these berries so inviting?

We often feel refreshed when we stop to eat.

2 Samuel 16 says some guys were traveling and exhausted and stopped to be refreshed.

(Set out the pretty glasses and tell them they’re about to be refreshed!)

We often feel refreshed with something from a glass we can drink or enjoy.

Psalms 68:9 says the Lord sends rain for refreshment to the grass.

How long has it been since your grass was watered with rain? Pray for refreshment!

Proverbs 11:25 says a person that refreshes someone else will be refreshed.

It’s like when we are kind to others, God’s kindness is given right back to us.

(Bring out the Cool Whip and ask the kids to help layer each other’s glasses with the goods.)

Finally, Acts 3:19 says that when we repent and our sins are wiped out, we are refreshed from the Lord.

Sin, or wrong doing, makes us feel bad and weighs us down. But Jesus and his forgiveness lightens our load and makes us feel strong and energetic again to refresh someone else!

(Enjoy your parfaits)

Let’s pray together as a family to be refreshed, and to offer refreshment to friends and neighbors.

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for refreshing us when we are tired or weary, by the good things in our home that satisfy our hunger and thirst. Thank you for your kindness toward us to forgive us when we repent and tell you're we're sorry, and ask for your help to obey. And finally, help us remember this word refreshment, and to offer to all we meet who are also thirsty and tired. We love you, Lord.

In Each Room – Tote Storage – by Marcy Lytle

I don't know, but I'm guessing that most of us LOVE tote bags (see The Dressing page!), whether it's a book bag or a beach bag, or whatever kind of bag – we love them all! I know that I do! But these bags take up room, especially because they're large and sometimes bulky. So where in the world does one store them in the rooms of the house? I once had ALL of them on the back door of my bedroom – on hooks – until our door wouldn't close any more. It was time to rethink!

- If you have a really pretty tote, just hang it on a chair in a room, as part of your décor. Change it out by season, if you want. It makes the room inviting.
- If you have a tote that matches the colors in one of your room, try leaning it up against a large basket where you have some throws hanging over...it really looks nice!
- Do you have a hall tree or hooks near your entry? Pick a few totes that you carry often for the season, and hang them there, alongside a hat or a wrap...and you've got yourself a place for totes!
- Some totes can be stored in the garage on hooks or in bins, if they're totally just for a season – like Christmas ones. Keep a tote or two in the car! Have one for storing things you buy or collect on outings, and one you take with you each time you leave.
- Back of the door is still a good place for a FEW totes that don't keep your door from closing.
- Do you have an extra large tote or beach bag? Fold and store other totes inside, and place this in your closet or even out...if you have a place for it.
- If you work from home or have a desk in a room, lean a tote up against your desk. It can collect papers and mail, etc. that you clean out once a week...or just sit there to look pretty.
- Totes that fold easily can be stashed in a drawer on their sides for easy viewing and choosing.
- Start hanging some of your larger totes on two hangers in a closet, to fill now...for Christmas later.
- One of those hall tree racks, in the corner of a guest room, would be totally cute with a FEW pretty totes hanging there as décor, and to pick up and use when you want!

With your totes spread out as décor, or placed where they can be seen and used and remembered, you'll realize how many you have and wonder why you haven't been using each one! Go on. Fill one now, or head out the door to fill it with goodies, or plan a trip to use one while away. You'll need a good book, so start with that first...and then fill your tote to your delight!



YOU

Inner Strength - Love-the Greatest of All by Michelle Lynn Schmitt

Through all the struggles I've been going through this year, and the limited time I have with the boys, it has helped me to look back and reflect on how I overcame the struggle as a new mom and made me appreciate how far my boys and I have come.

Brendan was two years old when Matthew was born, and yet having Matthew was like starting from scratch as a parent.

Brendan had a speech impairment and signs of autism at the early age of two. Matthew did not possess these warning signs, which is why I felt like a new parent. I always hoped I'd be a mom someday and then when I had Matthew I thought, "Shoot, I don't know what I'm doing." My motherly instincts took over, though, and I immediately showed him love. That was the easy part.

One aspect of parenting Matthew that I did not plan for was being diagnosed with postpartum depression. I have heard it is very common; however, it wasn't the kind of common for parents that I wanted. In fact, I didn't realize how much of an impact it made until years down the road. It crushed my heart given how much I loved being a mom. I was told multiple times, though, that it wasn't my fault and that Matthew is and will be okay. Despite going through depression, I never forgot the first time I saw Matthew. The doctor laid him next to me wrapped up in a blue blanket and I cried happy tears. Matthew was beautiful, of course.

Fast forwarding to the future, I had an epiphany that I'm going to encourage Matthew's way of expression just as I did Brendan's and that I look forward to the adventure that raising two boys with unique attributes and personalities will bring.

Now the question of where did God come in to play in raising the boys as different as they were? That is a question I can honestly say I still ask myself in this journey of faith that I and the boys have and continue to be on.

I am confident that faith is the foundation to the strength I've been given as a parent of two boys with very different needs.

Part of that faith is knowing that God has his protective arms around the boys and me at all times. Prayer is another consistent showing of faith and the love of God that has been in the boys and my lives. It's okay that they haven't always felt like praying and sometimes want to do it in their own head. I know that God is listening. It's taken strength of faith on my part to let it go and trust that God is speaking to them in His own time and way, and that as long as I do my part, the boys will feel loved - which is the greatest of all!

A Hopeful Heart - Grit and Grace – by Christina Oberon

I love how the phrase "grit and grace" evokes a simultaneous feeling of strength and softness. It's a phrase that embodies a combination of two important qualities and characteristics: resilience and elegance. Over the years, I have observed myself in this delicate dance between grit and grace, and it is where I have noticed the essence of my truest self being shaped.

Being a woman who has grit allows me to persevere and maintain a strong sense of determination and resilience in the face of challenges, obstacles, or setbacks. It's a representation of my willingness to work hard, stay focused, and push through difficult circumstances. I believe people with grit possess inner strength and a tenacious spirit, allowing them to overcome adversity and achieve their goals.

In challenging times, I dig deep within, finding my strength and refusing to give in. With grit, I feel I can rise above the darkest of days, harnessing determination, and igniting my might. Grit reminds me of a warrior's spirit that defies the odds and will never dim. Grit continues to grow in me through different phases of my life and I am thankful for it.

Grace, on the other hand, is elegance, poise, and a sense of refinement. I like to show grace by displaying genuine kindness, dignity, and respect towards others. I often act intentionally to communicate with composure and tact, showing consideration for others and embracing a sense of harmony in my actions and interactions. When I feel the urge to react, I go back to grace as a guiding light. In the words I speak and the actions I take, I try to leave an impact and a positive wake. With grace, I feel I can navigate the world with care, compassion and love.

When combined, grit and grace create a powerful synergy. They represent a balance between toughness and compassion; strength and elegance. The phrase "grit and grace" suggests that one can possess the resilience and perseverance needed to overcome challenges, while still maintaining a sense of kindness, dignity, and empathy towards others. I personally find this to be of the utmost importance because it is so easy to become hardened as a result of life's struggles. There is a specific beauty in softness in the midst of hardship.

When you embody grit and grace, you are often seen as a strong, resilient, and capable individual who handles difficult situations with poise, maintaining your integrity, and inspiring others through your actions. I believe this combination of qualities can be beneficial in various aspects of life, including personal relationships, professional pursuits, and overall personal growth.

It is in embracing both sides of me, that I truly become all that I know I am capable of becoming. Grit and grace continue to fuel my journey. With a fiery heart and gentle soul, I commit to forging a path where my dreams can unfold. I will continue to strive to live with grit and grace, hoping to leave a lasting trace.

Healthy Habits – Influencers – by Marcy Lytle

That's a word that's taken on a whole different meaning these days, from what it was decades ago, isn't it? *Influencer* now is a job title for many folks that find their work place on Instagram, and their job duties include influencing the public to buy, style, curate, cook, or live in any number of ways by following these people "of status" and copying what they do. I know, because I'm on Instagram in order to promote this magazine, and I have women and friends that follow my page. However, it's not my job, and I don't earn a living being an influencer. I just hopefully influence those that follow to eventually read the magazine.

I was thinking this morning about this word and its meaning and the following of sometimes millions of women of particular Influencers. And I started wondering about what really influences me in my life to change lifestyles, purchase something, cook a recipe, or any number of things...and about how healthy that is. Here's my list and my hopes, for a healthy type of following of anyone that influences me. Think about who/what influences you and create your own list, for healthy reflection.

1. I'm influenced to cook a recipe when it looks easy, healthy and tasty.
2. I'm influenced to copy a style, but not a budget. In other words, I may like what she's wearing, but it's not a "must-have" if it's an outrageous price.
3. I'm influenced by pretty home décor. I love to see how others style things in their house and mimic those, with my own spin. But depression because I can't have that infinity pool or those amazing homes can't be a part of my experience when browsing ideas.
4. I'm influenced by travels and places, because the food and the fun...oh my. Wouldn't that be the life? My life is wonderful when I travel an hour away to visit a small town, or a few minutes drive to a park to spread a picnic...and life is beautiful even though not exotic...and I can give thanks.
5. I'm influenced by clothes and shoes and all the things that fill a closet. And that's because I love these things. But when I have enough, my hope is that I don't feel the need to have more.
6. I'm influenced by concepts of simplistic lifestyles that are made to look romantic and carefree. I know the reality that life is hard behind the cameras, just like it is here where I live. And I enjoy, but I don't envy.
7. I'm influenced when I see women aging gracefully and beautifully, and it inspires me to love myself and my grays and my wrinkles...not erase them all and fret because I'm getting older.
8. I'm influenced when I catch a glimpse of those that dance, or laugh, or beat the odds and share their joy. I linger on these pages and marvel at the acceptance and the faith that some women share and this inspires me to sing in the rain.
9. I'm influenced by those that teach me how to be a better person, in etiquette or treatment of others. I find this fascinating and want to be a better person.
10. I'm influenced by those that post scripture, share a song, reveal a struggle...all enveloped in faith as they do...because they've lived and learned and loved and lingered with HIM. These are the pages that feed my soul for good.

Influencers aren't bad people. They're just good at what they do in sharing their craft or their specialty. And we're not bad people either, if we enjoy scrolling to see what's going on, in the world of Instagram. There's a pull to be like someone else, feel less-than when we scroll, or even panic that we don't have...but that's the case everywhere we go. So when we take time to evaluate what and who and why we watch...it helps us create a list of influencers that are a blessing and not a beast to our psyche and our souls.

What influences you?

Life Right Now – Transformed - by Jennifer Stephens

Packing up my classroom after thirty years meant our garage was suddenly overflowing with things like books, lamps, and shelves. If you know a teacher you know how much we spend on all the whatsits required to transform a sterile classroom of desks and chairs into a cozy and comfortable learning environment. But now that the time has come to bring home everything that I've acquired over the years, it's a bit overwhelming! What will I do with all this stuff?

The books will be designated donate, sell, or save. The lamps have already been sprinkled throughout the house. And the shelves? Plain boring wood shelves. Rescued from sudden dumpster death nearly twenty years ago. They lived in my classroom for years holding all the books that occupied the comfy class library. But that is no longer their purpose. Left slightly bruised after years of use, they were in desperate need of a revamp (these shelves were now older than some of the new teachers in the building!). My wheels were spinning with ideas...I had plans for these shelves. Plans to give them a new life!

First, I had to prepare. Gather all the supplies. Thankfully I already had everything I needed – leftover paint from last year's laundry room makeover, a paintbrush, sandpaper, and a drop cloth (Well, I accidentally grabbed a tarp – oops! Luckily my understanding husband forgave me.). While I would've loved to jump in and just get to painting, it was vital to prep the surface first (believe me, I've rushed the process before and the unsightly results mean doing it all over again the right way). So, I patiently sanded and wiped the veneer, making sure the paint would properly adhere to the wood. After waking up the paint with a healthy stir, it was time to let the brush take a dive into the Adirondack blue pool of color.

While sliding the brush back and forth over the tattered surface, the shelves began to come alive! But when that first coat dried it looked kind of...hideous. This definitely isn't a one and done sort of project. My hand was getting tired, but I kept at it. Making sure every crevice was covered.

Two coats in, the shelves were really beginning to shine. But on closer inspection, it was obvious there was still work to be done - touch ups here and there. Finally, they were finished! Well, kind of. I couldn't really leave them out in the garage. These shelves may look beautiful on the outside because of my hard work, but now it was time for the heavy lifting! The REAL work. And it couldn't be done alone! With my husband's help we carried the cumbersome load upstairs.

Filled with books and mementos, these shelves sit in what's become one of my favorite spaces in our house. Every now and then I notice an accidental nick in need of a touch up (I'll keep some extra paint around just in case.), but other than that, they're just wonderful. What were once plain, ordinary bookshelves covered in the inevitable dust and grime that collects over decades in a classroom, have been transformed into gorgeous bookshelves perfect for my own little at-home library. I couldn't wait to take pictures and share this transformation with everyone!

This reminds me of the work Jesus does in each of us if we let Him. That's what He did for me. That's what He can do for all of us. Those wood shelves once headed to the dumpster? I saw something worthy and useful where others saw trash. He sees the value in YOU, even if you

don't see it yourself right now. You are WORTHY. And when we invite Him into our hearts, WE are transformed. Just like those shelves.

God has a plan for each of us and when we're ready for a change, we must first prepare our hearts with prayer and scripture. We may even find everything needed to make that change has been there the whole time, we just didn't notice because we weren't searching for it yet. Change takes time. Just like my shelves looked worse after only one coat of paint, life change requires a second (and often third and fourth) coat of continuous prayer. And there will be touch ups. We are human, not perfect - we'll forever need touch ups! We can tackle these imperfections when we read our Bibles and stay close to God. Don't let past mistakes interfere - He will forgive all our blunders (just like my husband forgave me for accidentally using his tarp as a drop cloth)!

When things seem impossible, just remember, the real work is just beginning. We can't do the heavy lifting alone. Gather a support system and with God you will be transformed. Like my freshly painted shelves that sit filled with my beloved books and other precious things, you too will become a beautiful treasure filled with the spirit of Christ. And when that happens, my friend, you'll want to share the reason for that transformation with everyone!

"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." Romans 12:2

Under Pressure – God’s Ecology Plan – by Debbie Haynes

I knew very little about this topic before I started my research. But here we go...

There are so many references in the scripture to observe the Sabbath. There are Sabbath days, weeks, months and after every sixth year – the seventh year was to be a Sabbath year. Then after every 49 years (7X7) was the year of jubilee – the 50th year!

In Genesis 2 it says God rested on the 7th day after completion creation. He rested because he had completed his mission, not because he was tired. He took time to reflect on his handiwork and stated that it was good. And the Sabbath day was implemented for many until about 2500 years after creation, so I read.

In Exodus 20 God implemented the Sabbath Day of rest for man and his working beasts. They were to work six days and completely rest on the 7th. They were also taught how to preserve food from day six to use on day seven, so that it wouldn’t spoil.

Next, in Leviticus 25 God then implemented another Sabbath – the 50th year Sabbath – the year of jubilee. And laws were given to govern these years:

Completely rest the land – no planting or weeding or pruning

- Freely eat what grows voluntarily but leave the rest for the poor and the animals
- Release any bound slaves that were Hebrew in the Sabbath year
- Release all debt from brothers and sisters, wipe the record clean
- Return any land they were holding, back to its rightful owner

Why did God give those commands? I can think of at least three reasons:

- To build in appreciation by the people for God’s blessing
- To commemorate God’s power in delivering them from Egypt
- To cultivate obedience

The Lord brought his people to the Promised Land and wanted them to know that the land belonged to Him, but he would allow them to live on it as long as they took care of it according to his “plan of ecology.” God was serious about his land, to be honored and worked, so it would be perpetually healthy and provide for the people.

God’s promise of provision is the most amazing crop management plan ever – in verse 20 – and only in His ecology could this happen! God promised he would command his blessing on them in the sixth year so that there would be enough bounty to sustain them for three years, until the ninth year planting was ready to harvest.

What an unprecedented and life-changing plan this was – to have all debts cleared, all servant’s bonds removed unless they were being paid, all mortgages cleared, all properties restored to owners – and rest for the land while being fully sustained!

Sadly, for about 500 years the people ignored God's commands and rejected his plan to rest the land. So guess what? He evicted them! They were given over to captivity. And a new decree was offered "I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first," if the people would trust God's word.

Have you ever been there? I have. Blessings are promised, yet I have doubts and fears. Or I wrongly assume that they must have been intended for someone else.

If God has such an elaborate plan for rest periods for his people, animals and the land, and all other blessings besides, why would I think he won't take care of me today? Even in drought, even if grocery shelves are empty, or even when this or that...

His promises are infallible.

God's ecology plan doesn't mean that we won't see hardships. I really wish it did! But, it is the warranty on the plan that God established by his promise and his oath for those who flee to him for refuge.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Surrounded – by Bekah Holland

“When there’s a murder, the first person the police suspect is the spouse. That tells you all you need to know about marriage.” Katherine Hepburn

Like we needed another reason to love Katherine Hepburn, and then I run across a quote like this, and now I’m convinced that we might have been soulmates. What is it the kids say? #IYKYK.

This month, my husband and I will be celebrating 17 years of marriage. SEVENTEEN. Now, more than likely, most of you also will fall into one of two categories here. Group one is comprised of people who hit 17 years of “wedded bliss” a decade or so ago, and think it’s cute that we’re still young and have so much to learn. Group two, you, who are still in the toddler years of marriage and 17 years sounds like forever, therefore, assume we know what we’re doing and have this thing pretty much down pat. Spoiler alert kids, we don’t. You won’t either. You’re welcome. But you know what? That’s okay. You don’t have to have it down. You don’t have to be good at it. You just have to try not want to kill each other at the same time, be good listener and a better forgiver. That’s it. That’s all I know for sure.

Having a little bit of a competitive streak doesn’t hurt either, because there will be times that your stubbornness gives you the will to keep fighting, even if it’s just because you’re determined to get the last word. And maybe add in the ability to laugh at yourself more than you laugh at your partner...or a good enough sense of humor to do both. Still, even with that winning combination, even with the best of circumstances, surrounded by people who know, love and support you, even if you magically never struggle with paying the bills, grief, infertility, miscarriages, chose not to have kids, or oops’ed your way into a few. Even if you don’t argue about laundry, or who’s on trash duty, or have a teenager who is testing your mental stability by replacing “momma” with “bruh”....even with all the stars and planets and prayers aligning, you are going to go through seasons in your marriage that make you wonder why people get married. You will experience hurt caused by the person you’ve promised your life to. You’re going to hurt them too, which is honestly just as painful. You will likely both (again, hopefully not at the same time) think maybe this whole union thing could not possibly have been created by God unless he was in the mood for a good practical joke. But, if you are both willing to keep putting the gloves on (figuratively) and *duking* it out together, you’ll find your way out of those tough days and back into days that don’t feel like a future episode of *Snapped*.

Marriage isn’t anything any of us “get.” Don’t let the pretty pictures people post on social media fool you into thinking they don’t fight or bite their tongue hard enough to draw blood in order not to. That snapshot of them looking lovingly at each other or their kids is just that. A snapshot. A single moment captured on a single still frame. Also, side note...anyone who’s tried to get an entire family in clothes that haven’t been destroyed yet, all smiling and posing together, is much like trying to bathe a cat. It’s far from the whole picture. Even if they don’t post pictures of red, tear stained faces after an argument, or show you a Google history full of “how to get away with murder,” I promise you, they have a junk drawer of relationship struggles just like the rest of us (or a junk closet...no judgement here).

All of us have things we wouldn’t want to wear on our proverbial sign because that’s not the way we want to present ourselves. We don’t want to admit that we can be petty, or snarky or have passively eaten the last piece of pie because our husband keeps leaving the toilet seat up. We don’t announce that we got into a fight with our partner and instead of trying to listen and find some common ground, used words with the sole aim to inflict pain. But that

doesn't mean it doesn't happen. So make sure that you aren't comparing your days to someone else's. We all have our own baggage and a laundry list of faults.

Hopefully though, we do our best to surround ourselves with people who will be real with us. Who will listen, sans judgement, when we need to vent or cry or help us eat our feelings, and share encouragement, wisdom and even their own "war stories" so we know we don't always get it right the first time...or even the second, or third.

But the best couples to have in your corner aren't always ones who have been married the longest, or who's lives look like something from a Hallmark movie plot. These couples don't have any special magic the rest of us don't. They are just two good fighters, who mess up and get buried under unmet expectations but keep trying to fight better. They aren't afraid to let you take a peek at the messes that family photos don't show. They may have been married for 6 months or 36 years. Okay, 6 months into your marriage you probably still radiate with all that fresh-from-the-altar shine that hasn't been dulled by someone who refuses to put the new roll of toilet paper on the right direction (yep, not letting that go). Don't worry, you'll get there. And when you do, channel your inner Mr. Rogers and look for the helpers. Listen to the wisdom that comes from a few decades of building a life with another fallible human, and be inspired by the shiny bright couples who still beam with love as only people who haven't developed insomnia due to snoring for a few years can. And we can all use a little inspiration and romance every now and then. We can also use a little tough love and reality checks that only couples who have been through the gauntlet can offer.

Just like with raising kids, raising our marriage takes a village. Choose the right village. Keep walking toward God and each other. And each step you take will bring you closer to a life that while far from perfect, is pretty perfect for you. Whether it's been 4 months, 4 years or 4 decades, we can all step toward the kind of love that never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful and endures every circumstance...and maybe even remembers to put the toilet seat down.

Date Night Fun – The Theatre – by Marcy Lytle

I don't have many friends that say they're going to see a play at a theater. It seems to be a lost art, BUT there are many theaters around with awesome offerings! And since it's most probably one of the hottest months of the year on the calendar, you need a story and a place to escape into a story – live on the stage – this summer! Here are some ideas for you!

Small Town – The small town theaters are THE BEST. Usually there's an old-fashioned popcorn maker, the theater has SUCH charm, and the prices are super affordable. Go and support a small town near you with a theater, and enjoy the local talent found there.

Big City – We have several options for live theater in our city, and often there are classic showings. We recently saw *The Importance of Being Earnest* on a stormy night, and it was perfect to hear the thunder while we watched the play. And that play was funny!!! We even got dressed up to go!

Little Kids – Summertime is the time for theater camps. Maybe you know a kid or can find a kid performance taking place near you. Go and enjoy a kid story and encourage the littles as they act and make you laugh. What a good summer date, involving theater and laughter!

Outdoor Theater – Maybe it's an outdoor concert, or play, you pick. We have a few venues, one in particular that we love in the summer. The local symphony offers free concerts on the green, and sometimes free movies with the backdrop of downtown. Look at your local "things to do" and see if you can find a story or ensemble, and go!

Take a Drive – Got a free weekend? Sometimes, there are cool performances offered in the mountains, by a lake, or in a canyon but a few hours away. Plan your date night to be a date weekend. Look ahead, because some of the best are coming up in the fall. Make reservations for the theater and the hotel, and enjoy.

We love going out to eat before the play, as we feel all dressed up and enjoy the full experience. We recently tried a new restaurant near the theater where the play was taking place. A new restaurant you've never been to before can be just the icing on the cake...so to speak...for a wonderful date night out!

After 40 Years – Never Cuter – by Marcy Lytle

It happens. To all of us.

The refrigerator died on a Tuesday morning, only we didn't know it until Tuesday night, so all the food was bad and had to be tossed. We had trouble finding a new fridge, but finally did and it wouldn't be delivered until Friday. Excitement on Friday morning as we anticipated a new box in which to place our grocery order made that day as well, turned into frustration and impossibilities as the day went on...

He was at work, and the fridge guys came. Only they said our old fridge was too large to remove from our kitchen. (What? We got it in there all those years ago...) And the new fridge was also too large to bring in through the opening to the kitchen...so they left. They left! I had a partially moved refrigerator that had been dragged across my rug leaving something black, a jar of olives they'd knocked off and broken on the tile entry (do you know how slippery olive oil is?) and a mess on a rug where another glass had broken, as these men that came to make my day left without completing the job.

Of course, I had called Jon, and of course, he came right home and assessed this impossible situation. Over the course of the next six or seven hours (yes, that long) my husband made the impossible possible. My amazing son-in-law and grandson came over with a dolly and strong arms to help the process.

I watched this man I love use his engineering and handyman skills to remove handles and doors, shimmy things along, receive help from family members with younger arms and backs, and he didn't stop there. After it was all in place, the doors were 1/8 inch off, so he worked some more to level and sit and place, and get the water line going, and all the things...that the delivery/setup guys should have done! He was tired. And he worked some more.

My entire married life I have been amazed at the man I live with and his abilities. And one of those is showing up when others leave, to complete jobs others have left undone. He's a troubleshooter, even in his work. And he looks the MOST handsome to me when he's doing what he's made to do, using the strengths given to him to work. It's not a glamorous job, he gets hot and tired, and he has to figure things out – very often for me!

By the time we went to bed, we had the fridge in place, the doors shut perfectly, the water line was working and ice was forming. He'd listen to my tale of broken glass and subsequent phone calls to the store for help and my use of the word "idiots" as I relayed the story. He wanted to know if I was pleased with the new refrigerator, as he crawled into bed with a smile across that tired face and that exhausted body, right next to me...

And I gave thanks.

I've spent some of my married years wishing he'd be better at this or that, or more attentive here or there, or even more aware of my needs and wishes...all about me and myself. And yet he's always spent time and effort making things work and fit, and using resources he often told me came straight from above, items he needed for this and that.

We've been married a long time, and he's never been cuter or more sweet or more desirable to me than he does today...as I listen to the hum of the new machine in the kitchen and the drop of ice cubes...on a Saturday morning...in the middle of the hot summer season. And I'm about to load my groceries and give thanks again.

For Better or Worse - Cheering Section – by Kaelin Scott

I ran my first competitive race at the beginning of June, and it was such an awesome experience. I participated in a 10k, which is 6.2 miles. It was a trail race, so the course was super tough. The first three miles were on narrow, rocky, steep paths through thick woods. I thought my legs were going to fall off! Luckily, the second half of the race wasn't as tough, but I was worn out by the fourth mile. Somehow, by the grace of God, I made it through to the end and managed to place 9th out of all the women and 24th overall. Not too shabby for my first race!

But my absolute favorite part of the race was the end. I had to climb yet another hill before the final flat stretch to the finish line. I was exhausted and wanted nothing less than to run up that last hill, but the most amazing thing happened. As I started chugging my way up like the Little Engine Who Could, I was able to see my husband's head peeking over the top of the hill. Soon his whole body came into sight, along with my kiddos standing next to him. And over all the other noise, I could hear my husband cheering me on, encouraging me to finish strong.

Seeing him standing there and hearing his voice gave me the final boost of energy I needed to make it up that hill. I was able to pick up my pace and sprint to the finish line while he ran alongside me. Feeling him there with me, knowing he believed in me and was rooting for me, helped me forget about my exhaustion and my pain. It helped me charge ahead and finish the race with strength and energy.

I'm so grateful my husband was waiting for me at the end of the race. His words of encouragement were exactly what I needed, and I really think I finished faster because he was there cheering for me. I was stronger and better because he was with me, and that's what marriage is all about.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Rooted in Love – Never Alone – Kaelin Scott

Sometimes relationships don't last as long as we hope. Sometimes people let us down or hurt us. There are many different reasons, but sometimes people don't stay in our lives.

That can be a hard pill to swallow. It hurts, doesn't it? We love someone and think they'll be in our corner forever, but then one day they aren't. Sometimes it is our fault, and it's important to take ownership for the things we've done to hurt others. But for the sake of this article, I'm talking about when we're the injured party.

It's difficult not to beat yourself up and wonder what you did to make this person walk away. Why don't they love/like you anymore? Where did things go wrong? It can really hurt to cut ties with someone or grow distant from them, especially when there doesn't seem to be a clearcut reason or when there's a misunderstanding.

But what I've come to realize is that when this happens, it's usually not because of you. As I said, there are those times when we mess up and need to seek forgiveness. But usually when someone hurts you, it's not because of anything you did or didn't do right. It's because they're dealing with their own struggles or trauma, or maybe something about you triggers something in them because of their past. Honestly, sometimes people are just crummy and ditch you for no reason at all.

It's never easy accepting the end of a relationship, but sometimes it's for the best. We can look at it as an opportunity to grow. We can examine ourselves to see possible areas where we could have done better, and we can also assess what we *did* do right. It's good to look back and learn from our mistakes, but I think we should also see our own value. What did we contribute to the relationship, and how can we do that even better in the future?

Growth never comes without a little pruning. Sometimes dead limbs have to fall off before new life can begin to bloom. It's painful and sad, sometimes. Letting go can be hard. But there are seasons in every aspect of life, and friendships can be that way too. The beautiful thing is that we have the greatest friend in Jesus. He never leaves us. He never walks away.

I've gone through seasons surrounded by friends, and I've gone through seasons all alone. I've faced tumultuous family relationships. I've been abandoned by people I thought would never leave me, and I've also hurt people I loved. I've tried to fight it and cling tightly to those relationships, even when I knew they weren't healthy anymore. I've had to grieve and let go of people, choosing to pray for them from a distance. But through every season of earthly relationships, my relationship with Jesus has always been the constant, keeping me going when I feel alone.

So when you're walking through a lonely season or trying to embrace letting go, remember that you're never really alone. He's with you in the dry seasons as well as the vibrant ones. Invest in that relationship above all else, and you won't feel so empty when people let you down. You've always got a friend in Jesus.

Firmly Planted - Greedy Birds – by Dina Cavazos

As I've written before, there is no end to the garden to-do list. It's a constant challenge not to let the list dominate my life, and I fail on a regular basis. Some things are just **essential**. Now, "essential" is packed with interpretation, priorities, and caveats, and it's up to me to determine what is "essential," for me. Just this morning, in the middle of an essential task, I thought: *How essential is this?* Dove-proofing bird feeders—really? That sounds like the most *nonessential* thing in the world. But bear with me while I explain why it seems essential to me.

First, how do you dove-proof a bird feeder? Looking at the universal find-anything shopping site, I found what they call "dove guards," but they aren't quite what I need to do the job. Each of the feeders is uniquely different and needs a unique solution. What I've done is construct wire barriers that hinder the doves from perching on the feeders. I also found wire baskets and modified them to fit over the feeder. I want the feeders to look attractive, so that impacts the job. It's not perfect, but it does help.

I chose to create a garden—a garden that I hope inspires awe for the One in Three, the High Creator and Sustainer of Life. I chose this because God led me to it, giving me the desire and ability. It was a strong urge I couldn't ignore, because listening and obeying God is essential to me. Was it essential in the sense of life or death? Not physical life, but I believe it was essential to my spiritual life. It was an act of faith that has helped me to know and hear God better, and so, I consider my work in the garden essential because it's an ongoing "mission," if you will.

But still...there is always the issue of balance and weighing things out.

All life (except rats and roaches) is wondrous, but birds, butterflies, and cats have a special place in my heart. That means I have a lot of bird feeders that need to be filled often. One could say I'm helping God care for the sparrows? I buy seed in forty pound sacks and try to get the more nourishing kind with a minimum of milo, which is basically filler. Since good seed is so expensive, I shop around and buy various kinds to add to the pre-made mix. It's essential that I manage the feeding of the birds wisely, if I don't want to spend a ridiculous amount on birdseed every month. I love all the birds, including the doves, but they are gluttons and bullies. They're big and the smaller birds let them take over. They are also insatiable.

Right now, nine bird feeders are scattered throughout the garden. Two are platform feeders that I don't mind the doves eating from. They can also eat anything that spills on the ground. Three of the feeders are built so doves can't perch on them or they're protected by wire. Doves continually try to feed from the other four and can demolish the contents in one day. That's a bit much...

I love the copper feeder I bought at Tuesday Morning several years ago on sale for \$17 (originally \$65 if you can believe that!). It hangs close to my kitchen window, next to a blue mosaic feeder, sending a shimmering reflection inside when the sun is right. Another favorite feeder I bought at an estate sale. It's one of a kind and old—bell-shaped, blue hand-blown glass with a copper tray that screws on. The last one is similar but it's a simple shape, clear glass. They're beautiful and functional, but they are not dove-proof.

Which brings me to the essential task I was doing this morning: *Was it essential?*

To be a good steward of finances, wise and not wasteful, fair to the smaller birds, it's essential to find some way to conserve seed and prevent the doves from eating excessively. If I want to keep my unique bird feeders, it's essential to modify them.

But a note to self as I'm working on this tiny essential task: *What is the bigger picture here, the most essential thing of all? Help me see clearly, hear clearly, to do what you call me to do. Nothing more, and nothing less...that is truly essential.*

Moving Forward - Almost There – by Pam Charro

Am I the only one who has been waiting for things to get better since Covid?

I remember thinking 2019 had been rough, and how confident I was that 2020 would be better. Boy, was I in for a surprise, and I doubt it was just me. Financial, physical, emotional and spiritual struggles haven't seemed to get any easier.

In fact, every year since 2019, I have felt "stuck" - as though I haven't been able to get any traction in growing my new life. There has been an almost palpable oppression that has kept me from even feeling I could take a deeply satisfying breath. And, as certain as I was that this year would be better, it has, so far, been just as difficult as the others.

And yet...something is different about 2023.

It isn't easy or fun or painless, but I'm starting to sense - and even see - movement that wasn't there in the previous years. There seems to be a shift, and even if it's still hard and uncomfortable, I can feel the oppression losing its hold. I believe I'm finally about to be propelled forward, and soon all of the frustration and delays will be an encouraging testimony to help spur others on. Brand new, long anticipated good is coming.

I don't know if you can sense the same shift, but, if not, find others who can, and cheer them on. And know this: Your time is also coming soon. You and God might have different definitions of that word, but not one minute of the waiting will be wasted.

We WILL see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living (Psalm 27:13). And it will all be so very worth all of this waiting, even as we're all being made ready for it.

It won't be long, so take heart. We are almost there.

SIMPLE TRUTHS - 4th Quarter Panic – by Marcy Lytle

It's the fourth quarter of a football game and the coach calls the players of the losing team together to rally, to put their best foot forward, to correct mistakes they've made, to determine to make up the losses...all to win the game, right? Even the coach of the team that's currently winning has a stern talk with his team members, warning them to continue to be diligent, not let up, and to ensure that the victory is theirs to the end. And there will be some panic on the field, as the clock starts to run and the minutes wind down, and the last few seconds of the game are played...to see who will get the big cheers at the end!

I'm thinking that those of us who are entering the last quarter of life here on earth are doing some evaluating, and maybe even panicking, much like the players on a sports team. I know I have felt this panic at times. Which team am I even on...the winning one or the one falling behind? And what have I done on this playing field that's good, that I need to keep doing? Or what can I do better, now that most of life is behind me instead of before me? I know, I'm not ancient, but one starts thinking about these things when one's kids are aging and grandkids are growing and time is well...ticking!

However, I don't want to panic. Panic attacks of any kind are not pleasant, now are they? And the Good Book tells me I don't have to panic in any quarter of the game. So here's what I'm thinking, and maybe it will help you too, if you're in the 4th quarter panic:

I've grown in my love for Him, because finally I'm seeing the whole narrative of His love for me. This has strengthened my faith and my prayer life.

I am determined to still grow in this love for Him as it shows in my love for others, which I'm not sure I've done the best at...yet.

I've done pretty well at maintaining healthy habits, like sleeping and washing my face at night, and forgiving and casting my cares on him...so that I walk with a spring in my step.

I know that I can love better, give more, and I want to, with purpose and resolve.

I've spent a lot of my years worrying about how I look and what others think of me, and for those I'm not so proud.

I'd like to spend the last quarter giving thanks and being content in who I am and how I'm made.

I've fumbled around doing this or that, going here and there, marking my calendar full.

I'm noticing now the sun and the moon, the stars how they shine, and the wind how it blows.

In other words, lots of running around on the field, making passes that weren't completed because my arms were weak, and fumbling and falling because I carried heavy loads that weren't meant for me to carry, at all.

I read that he carries all of us, as a Good Shepherd does, in every quarter of life. And I've observed that, and yet panicked, at the same time as I've watched those at the end of the game

cross the finish line. When flesh failed, spirits soared. When minds left, songs still emerged. When identity became obscure, love won.

Honestly, none of us knows what quarter of the game we're playing in our own life. We're not even privy to the clock at the end of the field as it counts down. But we are on a winning team, that's for sure, with Him. And if we continue to pull aside, listen to His words, sit still to receive his arms of strength and kindness, then the fourth quarter won't be panic but rather peace. I'm counting on that truth. Are you?

Unearthly Thing - A History Organized – by Angela Dolbear

For Mother's Day this year, I organized the huge cardboard box that could hold a 30-pound-bag of dogfood delivered from Amazon full of family photos into plastic sleeves and binders for my mum. And then I scanned them all and gave the binders and flash drive to her.

Before you think I am some sort of saint, let me preface my mammoth organization gift with the fact that I have had this ginormous box of photos in my possession for almost 10 years. I moved the box with me from Austin, TX, to Nashville, TN. It has darkened the corner of my new office in Nashville for the past four years.

Since I am currently on a spring-clean-out mission of my whole house which has now lapsed into summer, I asked God how I can tackle this behemoth project once and for all.

See, I have started to organize and scan the photos several times over the years. One of my nieces even came over to help me scan her dad's pictures. Which was loads of fun. But I could never grasp a clear vision on how to complete this project and do it well.

I had been praying for many years about what is the best way to accomplish this project, as I mentioned. But this year I got my answer.

God is so good.

First, I purchased [clear photo sheets with pockets](#) of assorted sizes. All the sheets are 8-1/2" x 11" inches so they would fit on my scanner. I also purchased a couple of [binders](#) that are specially made to store photos. I was surprised how attractive and sturdy they were for the price.

Second, I cleared my 8-foot dining room table, and poured all the pictures on it. Thankfully, most of the pictures had already been separated into categories by subject. But there were still so many that were loose in the box.

Third, I decided on a chronological organization, which ended up being a good decision. The older photos from the sixties and earlier were smaller and fit well together in the [3.5" x 5" photo holder sleeves](#). And it was more fun when the project was finished to look through the books and watch the passage of time.

Fourth, I did it -- I stuck with it until it was done. Having the deadline of Mother's Day was motivating. I started Monday and finished Sunday afternoon, just before I was to wrap the binders in a big gift box and head over to my parents' house to celebrate Mother's Day.

This project took so long. But my Mum and Dad loved the binders, and it made my heart glad to see them so happy.

Working on this project was time-consuming, which I knew it was going to be, hence the decade-long procrastination. What I didn't expect were the emotions that came up during the process.

Sadness, hurt, unforgiveness, and grief ran through me, and set-up camp in my brain and heart, and stayed throughout the project. I asked God to help me sort through my invisible mess, especially the unforgiveness part.

But also, I felt so much love. I am extremely blessed to have a family that loves one another. We spent a lot of time together in my earlier years. There aren't many pictures of extravagant vacations, but there are many snapshots of smiling people having dinner, laughing, and loving each other's company. Great-grandparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, children. Together for a moment in time, and thankfully someone thought to snap a photograph. And this was before we carried cameras in our phones, which are on our person at all times.

And of course, there were pages of photos of our dogs! All our beloved dogs which, I like to think passed on to Heaven, and are sitting on the porch of the house Jesus is preparing for me. Waiting for my time to join them.

My dad said, "There's so much history here," when he was looking through one of the binders.

His words moved me. It's my history. The events and people who shaped me.

God is good. I will always remember this fact and be grateful for all He has given. Especially for helping me organize my family's history. Which is my own history. A great history of love.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories. Her novels are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, as well as writing and recording music with her husband Tim in their studio in Nashville, TN--listen to their music on [Sound Cloud](#). Please drop by and sign-up for news and to read new stories and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Photo credit: Marie Fucile Hembree



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Carry Cash Again – by Marcy Lytle

We recently started a new church and took a newcomers class. There was one particular section on giving back and the leader said something that has stuck with me. He said, "Carry cash, again." During that long stretch of Covid, we all stopped carrying cash because places didn't want it. It was dirty. But even before that, lots of folks stopped carrying ones and fives and 20's in their wallets, just because credit cards are so easy to use.

However, his point was that there will be times when we might feel compelled to give to someone in need and we won't have cash on us. It made me start thinking of places and times when it might be good to start carrying cash again. See what you think...

Cash for those kiddos in your family, when you just want to place a little in their hands, to spend however they want.

Cash for the one on the street, the one you feel compelled to help...not all...but maybe that one.

Cash for tips for the young guys that dry off your car in that drive-thru car wash.

Cash at church when you see someone and that little voice says, "Give \$20 or \$100 to her."

Cash for farmers markets that don't take cards...yes, there are some!

Cash for yard sales you happen to see, and happen to stop by, and happen to buy.

Cash for the vending machines when there's no card slot available...while you're waiting.

Cash for those kids that come to your door with chocolate bars, or the girl scouts selling cookies.

Cash for those tiny purchases when you don't want a credit card fee.

Cash to cover an emergency when electronics are down in a store or restaurant.

Cash to limit spending...if you don't carry a card. You have say \$300 for the week – then that's it.

But most of all, in the lesson where we were learning the value of giving, the cash was mentioned as being available. That was the point. Availability to give on any given moment. We also don't carry our checkbooks around anymore, so cash might be the only source when that little voice says to give.

I feel so sad when the kids ask for quarters for those little machines at restaurants and I don't have any, because I never paid cash and got any change.

It's something to think about, whether or not we carry cash any more. Maybe it's germey, it's a pain, and we'd rather not. But maybe it's a good thing to have cash ready to count out to someone else, or to see that person smile.

What do you think?

FRESH THYME - Change is Fun – by Marcy Lytle

Over the years, we all make changes...hopefully. Change in some areas is good, and when we cease to change, we cease to live! I've found that the more open I stay to change, the younger I feel, as well. And sometimes, changes are so good for us! So here are a few things I've changed...and why. Maybe you'll feel like making some changes after you read:

- I changed from paper towels as napkins to pretty cloth ones. I have a drawer full of bandannas, linen fancy napkins, and just cute patterns and textures. Why? Because they make even the most common meal feel fancy.
- I changed from china to melamine, for the most part. Melamine plates are SO PRETTY nowadays and they come in the cutest patterns. I have several sets because they're inexpensive, and I can change out my table for each season or whenever I want! I'm just not a china fan...unless I'm in the mood...and I'm not in the mood...well, ever.
- I changed from white bath towels to ones of color. White towels collect every speck of everything, and that grosses me out. So I don't use them. I love the colors available, so I pick one I love and those fill my shelves. Just a preference for me.
- I changed from using a nut chopper to just chopping nuts with a knife. One less thing to wash and clean; and chopping nuts with a knife gives me better size and less "nut dust" from the grinding of the chopper. And it's good exercise too!
- I changed from wearing high heels and pointy shoes to cute lower heels that are still stylish but don't hurt. This seems like a no-brainer, but continuing to wear those shoes that hurt makes permanent damage to your toes, girls!
- I changed from sending Christmas cards by mail, to sending by email. Perhaps that's bad etiquette, but it's better than no card at all. And that's what would happen if I tried to find the time to sit and write and address cards. I appreciate and LOVE those that do, but it was one thing causing me angst...so I let it go.
- I changed from lipstick to lipgloss, mostly. As we age our lips show fine lines and lipstick alone accentuates those lines and feels dry...to me. Lipgloss, on the other hand, plumps and brightens and moistens. I love it!
- I changed from smelly chemicals in cleaning products to all natural cleansers. Branch Basics was showing up everywhere in ads, and I read lots of reviews, and love the whole kit. No more running out of the bathroom to breathe, after I clean.
- I changed from short hair to long hair. Seriously, my kids have only known me with very short hair. But I feel softer and more feminine and I wanted a change, so long hair it is...for now. I can change again if I want. That's the beauty of change!
- I changed from heavy quilted comforters to lightweight layered spreads. I used to have big thick fluffy matching comforter sets, for each bed. This last time we made changes in the bedroom, I opted for layers of thin ones that didn't come in sets. They were so fun to put together!

What have you changed lately, or are thinking of changing? GO for it! Why not? Change is good, healthy, fun, and personal. And if you don't like the change, then change again...

FRESH THYME - Grab a Tissue – by Marcy Lytle

You've heard friends tell you to grab a tissue when you're about to watch a tear-jerker of a movie they recommend, and so you have a box of Kleenex near to wipe those tears when the emotions flow. Well this story is a grab a tissue kind of moment, as well...of a different kind!

I was getting ready one morning and decided to switch purses for a cute vintage wooden bag I have, one I had not carried since last summer. When I opened it, there was a small tissue package unopened, and I decided at the last minute to just keep it in there. I haven't carried a small pack of tissue since allergy season! But there it went, just in case I might need one, I thought.

It was later that day that my husband and I stopped in a store. In fact, it was Mother's Day afternoon. I stepped up to pay and the young girl behind the counter said to me, "Happy Mother's Day!" I thanked her and asked if she was going to see her mom, and she started crying...like a lot. Her mother lives in another country and is very sick. I felt so bad for her, as her tears continued to flow, and I said how sorry I was and that I'd pray for her.

And then...I remembered the tissues! I asked, "Would you like a tissue?" and she nodded her head. I was so happy that I had an unused pack and I opened it and shared with my new crying friend, as she could barely finish the transaction.

I smiled as I went to the car, thankful that I was able to share what I had grabbed at the last minute, with a friend in need. What a small trivial non-important decision earlier that morning, that turned into an act of kindness later in the day.

I'm not saying we all need to carry packs of tissues in our bags (although, I bet many of you already do!), but it was cool how she needed one and I had it. And I've needed a tissue before, and another friend has had one. Tissues are good to grab for emotional tears that flow.

I hope I don't forget to pray for that young girl's mom, and I pray that she is healed, and that the little act of kindness shown to her that Sunday afternoon blessed her and kept her feeling loved that day.

Remember that verse that says when we give a cup of water in His name, it's like giving to Him? Well, I'm pretty sure a tissue is in that same story, as we share what we're carrying, what we placed in our bags at the last minute, and what we have on hand...as we interact with those around us.

I've often been in a hurry to pay some days, or I've been checking my phone, or grabbing my keys as I hurriedly go through the checkout line. But that girl took time to say a happy mother's day to me, and her kindness then provoked me to pay attention and converse. And then the reality of the day, and the sadness of her mom's situation, came to life and tissues were needed.

Go on. Grab a tissue, or whatever it is you do in a day, all the mundane things and stuff you may think amount to nothing...and watch and see who might need what you have. And what they have, that you might miss, if you're not looking up and seeing those around you.

FRESH THYME - How Kind – by Marcy Lytle

We all thrive on kindness...giving it and receiving it...right? If someone is kind to us, it just encourages us and lifts our spirits so much! When we observe someone being kind, it's heartwarming. And when we offer kindness, we're offering pure gold to those around us. When we stop and notice, there are often so many acts of kindness happening to us and through us, it's helpful to recount them from time to time.

For example...

My husband was at Wendy's recently and as he was about to pay, he realized he didn't have his wallet. The manager there was so kind and told Jon he could have the meal, and if he was in the neighborhood again soon, he could pay then. Jon was blown away, and you can bet that yes – he did go back and pay for his meal.

We have a neighbor next door that puts out his trash cans on the same night we do, obviously, for pickup. Jon started taking the neighbor's can back up to the house, whenever he had a chance. And guess what? The neighbor does it for us, too. They just take turns pushing each other's cans back into place after the trash has been picked up. I think that's so cool. No words, just acts of kindness.

We recently were supposed to receive a legal document and it apparently went to the wrong address. Jon went to the post office and our personal mail carrier happened to overhear Jon's dilemma, and she came over and said, "I know you. I will watch for that package. Leave me a note with the tracking number." She's been our mail carrier for a long time, and she was so personal that day!

I posted on Facebook a few weeks ago how much I loved some sea salt caramels my son had at his house, and that he purchased them at Costco. However, I don't have a Costco account. A friend of mine saw that post and took the time and spent the money to send me a jar of those caramels in the mail, from Costco. What a friend, and what surprise! Made me smile so big...

I often receive texts from friends in my prayer circle, asking how my family is doing, offering to pray, or even sharing a scripture or an encouraging word just for me. I appreciate that act of kindness SO MUCH, that they thought of me, and actually acted to let me know.

One day I waited for Jon to come home and take a walk with me, but he ran really late and wasn't able to call. It was getting late in the day, so I set out on my normal walk path and as I came back to the corner, there was Jon. He had gotten home, changed his clothes, and met me on the walk. He didn't have to, I know he was tired, but there he was looking so handsome and smiling as he offered me his hand to keep walking.

In a world of hatred and spite, there are lots of people that are out there planting seeds of kindness. Sometimes, we fail to notice, but when we do, it causes us to pause and give thanks. When my friend sent me caramels just because; it made me want to send my sister a candle, just because. So I did. When a friend texts me, I want to be sure to text her later to check in on her, as well. Because that's what friends do. And when a complete stranger is kind enough to

offer a meal without paying, well that's just unheard of, but so special and wonderful. It makes me want to pass on that kind of goodness to others.

Make your kindness list, notice the little and the big things, and scatter your own seeds...and see if they don't blow back and land, and grow in your own yard.