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TIPS

## **Seven for You – Gifted** – by Marcy Lytle

We asked our panel of women to share their favorite gifts they received for Christmas. After all, Valentine's Day is this month and hopefully you will pamper yourself with a gift or receive one from a friend or spouse! But as you'll read below, even if your other half is not good at picking out a present for you, pick out one for yourself! Hope you find a treat idea among our list of our faves!

Two gifts I bought for myself! My husband is not a gift giver, so I usually pick things out myself and buy them. I had been looking at a cute Fossil bag for a while...waiting for it to go on sale. It finally did right before Christmas!! And my next gift to myself was a Smartwatch. Having a son in the military, I never know when/where I might get a call. I wanted to be able to receive that call anytime/anywhere. I am not one to carry my cell with me everywhere, so the watch gives me the convenience of seeing/answering his call quickly. This was also quite expensive; and unfortunately not on sale. However, they were my "Merry CHRISTmas" to myself!

My favorite gift this year was a new Bible. My old one was falling apart. I wanted a study Bible of some kind, and spent several weeks looking at different versions. I finally settled on the NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible. And it's pretty too! That was also one of my wishes - to have a pretty cover.

<https://www.amazon.com/NIV-Cultural-Backgrounds-Study-Bible/dp/0310431581>

I always buy gifts for myself for my husband to wrap. That way I can try it on or pick something I need or want. There's an area I really like to shop in Southlake, Texas, and I timed my shopping perfectly this year. I was in Soft Surroundings the weekend after Black Friday and everything was marked down even more than usual. I found a blouse I really, really loved and what I loved more was it was only \$20.00. I wouldn't have bought it at its regular price! It was a Merry Christmas to me!

This may sound silly, but my husband gave me two new Calphalon cooking pans and I love them. I had needed them but just didn't want to go spend the money! I was very happy that he heard me saying what I needed and then went and got it for me. The other gift I am excited about is some gift cards to Alamo Drafthouse. We love going to the movies but don't seem to get there often enough. This will get us there! The last gift was really just a sentimental one but Millie (my granddaughter) made me a Christmas card and it simply said *Mery Christmas Nana I love you*. That was the best!

My favorite gift has a bit of a story behind it... In the early days of my mother's retirement she took up painting. Over 30 years ago she created a small oil painting of her living room decorated for Christmas. It was an amazingly detailed image of her beautiful mantle and Christmas tree during the holidays. It was the scene that my children grew up knowing as the place that Christmas magic happened. Several years ago, as she prepared to move into an independent living center, I became the owner of the very special picture. And every Christmas it now finds a

place of special importance among my decorations. So this Christmas, my precious daughter-in-law painted a very similar picture of our Christmas tree and mantle complete with initials on the stockings and everything just as it is, during our Christmas Eve celebrations. Now I have the painting of my mother's home that reminds us of the many wonderful memories from many years ago, near the current painting of my home, which I hope will create that Christmas magic going forward for my grandchildren as well.

This year my favorite Christmas gift was a set of soy candle votives. The smell is so light and fresh and healthy. It was an unlikely gift from my hubby. I appreciated his effort to find a product that he was unfamiliar with. I specifically asked for SOY candles. Also, I bought a little wooden nativity for myself, on sale. I was surprised how cute it was after I put it together. The candles are from Lulu Candles. The Nativity is from JOANN Fabric and Crafts.

<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/shop/product/luxury-scented-soy-candle-8715876>

Since my husband passed away in October, I was not in a festive mood this Christmas. Besides, all my decorations were in the attic and I just couldn't ask anyone to go up there and get them. But, mostly, my heart just wasn't in it. Then a sewing forum I belong to on Facebook released a tutorial about how to make these "festive fabric trees" and about a week before Christmas I made a whole bunch of them for gifts, including this trio of different sized trees for my own table. I think they are so cute and they really cheered me up! <https://www.patternsforpirates.com/product/fabric-trees/> Anyone can join this sewing forum and then download the free pattern.

My favorite gift for Christmas was my beautiful Vera Wang purse and matching wallet from my daughter! It's everything I love in a purse; well made, roomy, several compartments to organize items I carry & stylish!

One of my favorite gifts was a cuff bracelet from ZYMBOL. We saw it at a festival and it ended up under the tree! You'll want to read the story behind the jewelry. The cuff comes in different sizes for all wrists, and it's so beautiful. I love it!

<https://www.zymbol.net/>

Both my daughter and daughter-in-law gave me a necklace. One was from Madewell, and the other from Jimani. Both are so beautifully made and I love the length, they're so fun to wear!

We travel a lot, so my husband got both of us a travel pillow that unzips, and inside is a blanket! And...he found some travel shoe bags that he gave me, as well. We are headed on vacation later in February, so these will be great!

<https://www.amazon.com/BlueHills-Premium-Airplane-Pillowcase-Backpack/dp/B07GTBS7D2>

My favorite gift I gave this Christmas were small wooden plaques I had made by an artist in Round Rock, Texas with "And I Think to Myself What a Wonderful World" written on it. I have a bigger version that she gave me a while back and every time I see it I smile and start humming

the song. For some reason, it just makes me happy. It was a big hit with family members and friends. I need to order a lot more!

## **The Dressing – Pretty in Pink – by Marcy Lytle**

Pink might be one of my least favorite colors, maybe because it used to be that girls were all dressed in pink and boys in blue. That drove me crazy! When my daughter was small, I traveled out of town to find her clothes that were NOT pink! I seriously had a problem with labels. However, I do have a few pink items in my closet that I love, now. I've outgrown my annoyance and embrace this pale hue, in moderation, as I add it with other colors.

This month we're suggesting pink purchases, and ways to pair them up with what you already have!

A pink throw – This fringed pink throw from Urban Outfitters is so comfy and cozy and pretty. It would look absolutely divine thrown over a gray or navy sofa, or chair.

<https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/amped-fleece-fringe-trim-throw-blanket?category=SEARCHRESULTS&color=006>

A pink graphic tee – What's cuter this time of year than a pink tee that simply says "love?" And this tee from H&M is only \$4.99! It may not be made to last, but if you only wear a few times this season, it will be worth the five bucks! Try pairing it with jeans and a black cardigan – beautiful!

[https://www2.hm.com/en\\_us/productpage.0717490008.html](https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0717490008.html)

Pink Sneakers – Just a different color on your feet sometimes is all the pop you need! Pink sneakers from H&M for the win! These can be paired with any of your favorite skinny jeans, and try a pretty gray sweater on top, or even a navy one. Navy and pink - a great pair!

[https://www2.hm.com/en\\_us/productpage.0622966009.html](https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0622966009.html)

Pink clutch – I love this clutch with the ring handle from Nordstrom! She's wearing it with gray, but you could totally wear it with brown as well! That tortoise handle is the bomb...

<https://shop.nordstrom.com/s/bp-ring-handle-classic-clutch/5329405/full?origin=keywordsearch-personalizedsort&breadcrumb=Home%2FAI%20Results&color=pink%20blush>

Pink coat – This is the time of year to get coats on sale! This pink suede coat from Zara looks stunning with a crisp white tee underneath. That makes it great for this time of year! This is soooo pretty!

<https://www.zara.com/us/en/suede-look-coat-p02712626.html?v1=13167447&v2=1428608>

Pink blouse – This flowy blouse from JCP is pretty for February. There are lots of options for prints, but the way it's made looks soft and comfy and yet dressy. It's paired with jeans here, but a pair of white trousers would look stunning as well.

<https://www.jcpenny.com/p/ana-womens-v-neck-long-sleeve-blouse/ppr5007805226?pTmpType=regular&catId=SearchResults&searchTerm=pink+blouse&productG>

[ridView=medium&urlState=color%3Dpink%26product\\_type%3Dshirts%2B%252B%2Btops&badge=onlyatjcp&selectedSKUId=84222060042&facetSelected=color](https://www.kendrascott.com/products/pink-cuff-bracelet?view=medium&urlState=color%3Dpink%26product_type%3Dshirts%2B%252B%2Btops&badge=onlyatjcp&selectedSKUId=84222060042&facetSelected=color)

Pink cuff – I absolutely love cuff bracelets and have several, as I prefer wider bands. However, I know that so many women adore Kendra Scott jewelry. There's a pretty pink cuff bracelet that is feminine and pretty, available this season. How stunning it would look on your wrist, to dress up any outfit at all!

[https://www.google.com/search?q=pink+cuff+bracelet&rlz=1C1CHBD\\_enUS839US839&source=Inms&tbm=shop&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjPpuXdIPTmAhXEG80KHeVYDGIQ\\_AUoAXoECA0QAw&biw=1600&bih=708#spd=4768024848483075166](https://www.google.com/search?q=pink+cuff+bracelet&rlz=1C1CHBD_enUS839US839&source=Inms&tbm=shop&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjPpuXdIPTmAhXEG80KHeVYDGIQ_AUoAXoECA0QAw&biw=1600&bih=708#spd=4768024848483075166)

Maybe you're a fan or not, of pink, but I hope you consider wearing something bright and colorful to bring you cheer this month! Try adding one little accessory, a fun coat (you'll need it – on into spring), a new pair of shoes, or a bag! Smile, you are loved...

## Selah's Style – Sisters

Elizabeth, age 10, has always been drawn to athletic workout style clothes including unique sneakers or more eclectic fashion ideas. She loves to have leisure clothes as she is an avid runner. Her unique personality shines through, in her unique style. She has a huge heart for others and a willingness to serve anyhow and anywhere she can.

Abigail, age 9, has always been a fashionista. Even before she could walk she would crawl to the closet and beg for shoes. Abigail loves to dress fancy and is always decked out with accessories from jewelry, to bags, and bows. She doesn't know a stranger and has a gift of bonding with others and making them feel included and special.

Dressing up: As you see Abigail takes dressing up seriously, full velvet, tulle and glitter. Accessories include a black glitter cardigan and pink glitter ballet flats. All from The Children's Place. Elizabeth has a more laid back look on glamour with a bohemian style dress scattered with a flower print and fringe tie front. She completes her look with white sandals. Dress from Justice, sandals from Kohl's.

Twinning moment: Elizabeth and Abigail still find it fun to match. Especially when they can rep their favorite dude, dad! They went all out on this *twinspiration* with matching white canvas tennis shoes and maroon bomber jackets. T-shirt, jacket, and shoes from The Children's Place. Black leggings from Target.

Leisure: This is how you'll find Abigail and Elizabeth on a typical Saturday. They spend all week at school in uniforms, so they love to be comfy and cozy while being bold and bright. Liz has always been drawn to blue while Abby has always been drawn to pink. They found "their" colors in tie-dye crop top sweaters and coordinating leggings. Staying true to themselves, Liz completes her look with tennis shoes while Abby embraces the glitter ballet flat. Sweaters and leggings from Justice.

Abigail, the individual. Bow, earrings, bracelet, boots. Yellow floral print dress with flounce sleeves for that extra touch. With Abigail, it is all the individual pieces that make the outfit complete. She gravitates to dresses and feminine style and rocks it with confidence. Dress and boots from Kohl's

Elizabeth, the individual. Jeans, with sparkle to make them special. Ombre colored shirt with cross back, in blue of course. Black combat boots to complete the look and make it her own. This is a girl who can conquer the world. Shirt and jeans from Justice. Boots from The Children's Place.

Elizabeth and Abigail's parents are Joshua and Karissa O'Brien. Joshua works at Lockheed Martin working with the assembly of F35 fighter jets. Karissa is a financial analyst with the University of North Texas Health Science Center. In their "free" time Josh and Karissa work as children's ministers at their local church for ages birth-14. Sharing how to grow a relationship with the Lord to the next generation is a great passion of theirs. Abigail and Elizabeth also serve in ministry helping to set-up and tear down on weekdays and services and for special events. Willing to jump in wherever needed to make sure things

run smoothly for every service. In their FREE "free" time The O'Brien's love to do anything they can together as a family. Especially spending as much time as possible at Six Flags for family fun and thrills.

## **In the Kitchen – Favorites** – by Marcy Lytle

Rather than share recipes this month, I decided to share my faves in the kitchen. There are always new products that are advertised around the holidays and then we buy them, and they end up in that junk drawer – at the bottom – never to be used. Mostly, it's because they aren't that great, they are too difficult to maneuver, or time-consuming, or just odd! However, there are some things in my drawers and on my shelves that I use over and over again, because I love them! So, why not share?

**A tiny colander** – I love having a few of these for holding fruit – either in the fridge or out on the counter. And since my kitchen is orange/gray I love this tiny one for holding cuties!

[https://www.amazon.com/Calypso-Basics-08650-Durable-Colander/dp/B07FMBXKSD/ref=sr\\_1\\_10?qid=1578590030&refinements=p\\_n\\_feature\\_twenty\\_browse-bin%3A3254105011&s=kitchen&sr=1-10](https://www.amazon.com/Calypso-Basics-08650-Durable-Colander/dp/B07FMBXKSD/ref=sr_1_10?qid=1578590030&refinements=p_n_feature_twenty_browse-bin%3A3254105011&s=kitchen&sr=1-10)

**Spreaders** – I have seasonal spreaders, but I absolutely love this new set I found at World Market. The colors are fantastic, and they are heavy duty. They're great for spreading jam, or butter, or whatever! Just google and search for some you love...

**A ladybug timer** – My oven timer is never loud enough, and sometimes I just need a timer for other things. Sure, I use my phone quite often, but this ladybug – she's SO cute!

<https://www.bedbathandbeyond.com/store/product/kikkerland-reg-ladybug-kitchen-timer/1017285033>

**Tiny mitts** – A friend made these for me, but then I looked on line at christmas and found more on Etsy! They're great because they have a magnet inside, they're tiny for grabbing items from the toaster oven, and they come in such cute fabric choices!

[https://www.etsy.com/listing/629479302/ready-to-ship-2-mini-microwaveoven?ga\\_order=most\\_relevant&ga\\_search\\_type=all&ga\\_view\\_type=gallery&ga\\_search\\_query=small+oven+mitten&ref=sr\\_gallery-1-14](https://www.etsy.com/listing/629479302/ready-to-ship-2-mini-microwaveoven?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=small+oven+mitten&ref=sr_gallery-1-14)

**A salt/pepper box** – One of my longstanding faves! Kosher salt in one side, ground pepper in the other – for cooking and pinching – and looking pretty on the counter...

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/olive+wood+salt+cellar+with+swivel+lid.do>

**Olive oil flask** – This one is from Rachel Ray's cooking collection – again orange because I like orange! It looks pretty by the stove, so much prettier than the olive oil bottles from the store. And it holds a lot! It's from Target.

<https://www.target.com/s/rachael+ray+oil+bottle>

**A tin box with a chalkboard** – This box sits in the corner on my kitchen counter and holds all those bottles like balsamic and apple cider vinegar, flavored oils, and more. And the chalkboard is our message board to each other! Check Hobby Lobby!

<https://www.hobbylobby.com/Home-Decor-Frames/Storage-Organization/Boxes-Trunks/Galvanized-Tin-Box-Set-with-Chalkboard-Labels/p/138186>

**This box!** – I've talked about this before, but this file box is from Lakeshore Collections and I have two of them in the kitchen! Inside I have all of my clippings and printed recipes organized by categories. The best!

<https://www.lakeside.com/Books--Crafts--Office-Supplies/Office-Organizers---Supplies/Blue-Chic-File-Organizer//prod2700616.jsp?fm=search>

**These pouches** – I found these magnetic pouches for the fridge at Target. I bought three and hung them in a column on the side of the fridge, mostly for holding notepads and pens. I change out notepads each month! Not sure Target has them anymore...but check Amazon.

<https://www.amazon.com/Kicode-Refrigerator-Magnet-Storage-Organizer/dp/B073GX4ZTV>

**Utensil organizer** – It doesn't take up much space, there are lots of cute options, and it holds those items I use over and over again – so it's a quick grab and a quick put away...

<https://www.kirklands.com/product/Ceramic-Utensil-Holder/224109.uts>

**The zester** – I realize a lot of people don't have one of these! I love to zest lemon and lime for dishes – and I hold it with the grate on the bottom, so I can see how much zesting is accumulating on top. Works!

[https://www.target.com/p/oxo-softworks-zester/-/A-13775733?ref=tgt\\_adv\\_XS000000&AFID=google\\_pla\\_df&fndsrc=tgtao&CPNG=PLA\\_Kitchen%2BShopping\\_Local&adgroup=SC\\_Kitchen&LID=700000001170770pgs&network=g&device=c&location=9028263&gclid=EAlaIqobChMI05W7p4X35gIVf\\_jBx2g\\_AT\\_EAkYByABEgLCzPD\\_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds](https://www.target.com/p/oxo-softworks-zester/-/A-13775733?ref=tgt_adv_XS000000&AFID=google_pla_df&fndsrc=tgtao&CPNG=PLA_Kitchen%2BShopping_Local&adgroup=SC_Kitchen&LID=700000001170770pgs&network=g&device=c&location=9028263&gclid=EAlaIqobChMI05W7p4X35gIVf_jBx2g_AT_EAkYByABEgLCzPD_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds)

What about you? What are your favorite kitchen items unique to your space, that we might like to try? Leave a comment below!

## Tried and True – Be the Gift – by Marcy Lytle

In a group of friends that we gather with every other week, we recently talked about “being the gift.” One of the friends asked, “Just what does that mean?” We were discussing how we could show up at church, at work, in life, and at home as the gift for someone. And we even talked about the characteristics that make a gift a good one! If it’s something we need or wanted, it’s a great gift. If the giver made it, we treasure it...things like that.

In a month where gifts are expected from those we love, tokens of love are hoped for, and gestures of adoration are longed for...it might be good to stop and realize that the greatest pleasure comes in not receiving...but in **being**...the gift!

To remind us all about being the gift to someone else, here are 10 tried and true ways to truly be a gift to someone else and reap all the joy, feels, and satisfaction of giving. Giving away joy and expecting nothing in return is awesome, because HE sees our hearts and HE rewards us with all good things much better than a box of chocolates...

1. **Be present** – Make eye contact, listen, genuinely hear what your kids, your spouse, or your friends saying. This requires hiding our phones...
2. **Give anonymously** – Maybe there’s someone that truly needs to know they are loved “out of the blue” – so pick up a candle and set it on her desk or have one delivered to her home. Just sign it “From someone that loves you and prays for you often.”
3. **Pray** – and then let that person know that you thought of her and prayed. Praying is awesome, but letting that person know that you prayed is even more awesome.
4. **Offer a scripture** – Actually buy a box of cards and ask God to give you an encouraging verse for someone, writ it out, and place a stamp on the envelope and mail it. Any age, any gender, any person LOVES receiving a personal note in the mail.
5. **Affirm that person** – This means just pray and ask Him to give you His eyes for that person and then encourage them with kind words. Speak them out, leave your friend a voice mail, and lift her/his spirits. You too, will be refreshed!
6. **Volunteer** – It doesn’t have to be a full weekend job where you build an entire house! Just offer to run an errand for her if you’re already at Target. If you have a free evening, see if that single mom might like a couple hours to herself and offer to watch her kids. Just say “I’m here” and offer your time for any increment that works. It doesn’t have to be an eternity...
7. **Text** – Use that phone you’re on constantly and when a thought of that friend and how nice she is, or how cute she looks, or even how tired she seemed, text her! Tell her what you’re thinking and that she’s loved.
8. **Show him** – Maybe you tell him you love him daily, but show him by doing something unusual or out of the ordinary. Surprise him with a mint on his pillow. Hand him tickets to an event and take him out, instead of waiting on him to take you out.
9. **Coffee** - Do you have an hour that you could text her and see if she can also take an hour to catch up? Just meet, sip, smile, and enjoy each other’s company. What a gift!
10. **Email** – This might be something a bit longer than a text, where you actually want to write out something to a particular person. Maybe you have an experience or story to

share, one that will encourage them like it encouraged you! An email like this, instead of a dozen junk ones, will bright up her inbox on a Monday morning!

What else can you think of to give away this month? Proverbs says whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. Sometimes, we think we have no energy or time to refresh anyone, and barely have time to refresh ourselves. However, little acts of kindness like one of the above only takes a few minutes and a redirection of a time, and we will actually find ourselves with a little skip in our steps as well!



HOME

## **Practical Parenting – Add a Pearl** – by Marcy Lytle

When I was a kid, my mom started me an “add a pearl necklace” and she’d give me a new pearl on my birthday each year, and on other occasions with the hope that when I became a grown woman I’d have this full strand of pearls to wear, ones that had been collected over the years. Unfortunately, that strand of pearls was taken in a burglary the first few years of my marriage, as intruders broke in and took everything I owned in the way of jewelry. Sad story, right? It is, but the beauty is the love that my mom gave me when she started the necklace. While I’m sad that the necklace is gone, I still remember her love and the purpose behind that love.

We recently decided to do something for our grandkids that parents can do for their kids, as well. So if you’re reading and you’re a parent or a grandparent, this is a fun idea that you can start now, or any time, with the kiddos you love.

We purchased some really cute gift cards (blank ones inside, animals on the outside) and since we have three kiddos, we purchased a couple of boxes so we’d have plenty. We decided that once a month we will write each kid a personal card and send it in the mail to “add a pearl” of wisdom to their little lives. Or maybe you prefer to call it “stacking stones,” like the people did in the Old Testament to remember God’s promises. Hopefully, the kids will keep each card and in a year they’ll have 12, and if we keep going, they’ll have an entire set when they’re grown!

Inside the cards we’re writing:

- Memories of how God took care of their parents as they were growing up
- Scriptures that will encourage them at night when they’re afraid to go to sleep
- Encouragement in sports or learning when failures or losses occur
- Promises of God’s love and faithfulness always
- Stories that we make up, of kids and a lesson learned
- Real life ways that God showed up for us
- Prayers we’re praying for them
- Character qualities of their heavenly father

Each one will only take us a few minutes to write, as we are writing in their language and making it a short story they’ll want to read.

The hope is that they will look forward to their “pearl” or “stone” each month in the mail. Maybe sometimes we will add a sticker or pin in the envelope, with the card! We are only just beginning, and I don’t know if they will keep them all, take care of them, or even value what’s written inside, but I pray they will.

It’s little acts of kindness to our children and little pearls of wisdom and little stones of remembering that will serve as a big and wide foundation when they’re no longer little and small.

## **I Don't Do Teens – The Art of Cleaning – by Marcy Lytle**

If you have teens in the house, you only have them a few more years before they exit your home for college...and then for good. They will then clean their own toilets, beds, clothes and bodies, without your constant reminders. And teens can be downright dirty in the way they eat in bed, throw their clothes on the floor and leave the bathroom a wreck when trying to get ready for a date or visit with friends!

Cleaning really can be an art, something enjoyable, and it has to be taught – whether or not they completely learn it or not. If we show them the way, hopefully they'll get sick of their filth and remember that way and walk in it (we can hope!) Of course, some teens are clean freaks by nature, but most of them are not...and neither were we!

### **Here are a few ideas for teaching your teens the art of cleaning:**

First, sit down with your teens and talk about cleanliness and what is expected as long as they live under your roof. Don't belittle them or despise their filth, but rather just state the facts – if they want to be trusted, gain privileges and be helped out with gas and fun, then they will contribute to a clean house. Period.

Let them buy the cleaning products for their own bathroom and take ownership for that space. Maybe they can learn a skill of making a DIY cleaning product that's safe and effective. Perhaps they'd like to set up a caddy with their own supplies that are not yours. They might enjoy buying a specific fragrance to spray or candle to burn. Once their space is really theirs, maybe they'll keep it clean.

Teach them to use the washer/dryer and give them a day of their choice that's totally their day to wash and dry. If he's working and only is off on Monday evening, then that's the night that the washroom is clean from our own things, and open for his. Make this happen weekly, so that he can strip his bed, wash his clothes, and put everything away. If possible, provide teens with two sets of sheets, so they can switch one out for the other. Affirm them, notice their closet that's straight, thank them, and love them. Again, allow the teen their own choice of products, perhaps a wrinkle releaser, cute hangers for the closet, and suggestions of places to give and donate old clothing.

Good hygiene is a must for our teens, especially as they start to interview for jobs. Also, if they play sports and work out, smelly bodies are not attractive! Don't make them embarrassed, but shop with them the first time as they choose deodorant, shampoo, wash cloths, makeup removers, hygiene powders and other products for their faces, bodies and feet. The theme in this article is ownership. Let them choose (within a budget) their own products and provide cute caboodles or cool zipper pouches to house their personal products.

One of the best ways to train our teens in the art of cleaning is by being good stewards of our things and ourselves, as well. Sure, we will all have piles of laundry, stinky bodies, and dirty sheets on weeks where life gets crazy. But as a general rule, they need to see us try to maintain good health spiritually, physically and in the spaces where we live. We can always

offer to pitch in and help them on weeks that are busy, and hopefully they just might do the same for us when they see us under pressure.

Teens are fickle sometimes. Teens can be terrible at taking care of what they own – did I mention the inside of their cars? They will fail, they will get behind, and we'll all scream a time or two, "Clean up this mess!"

Art takes skill, time, patience and enjoyment. And so does cleaning. I hate unloading the dishwasher, and he doesn't mind it, so he often does it for me. I love ironing, as many of my friends know and wonder about, but I do! So I iron his shirts and keep our clothes buttoned on the hangers, and straight. Teens will learn by example, by patience and by giving them ownership and accolades. Yes, we all need a little "Good job" now and then...

## **An Adage a Day - Labor of Love – by Carole Gilbert**

By the time I was four years old I had composed my first poem in the form of a song. I can still remember the words and the tune. That's probably because I sang it over and over and over and, well, you get the picture but it was to the enjoyment of my grandmother and mother, or so they said. It was short and it was about love. It went, "Oh beware of the little white dove. Because he's coming for all of your love." I don't remember why I wrote this but I must've been in love with something.

Our world is filled with adages, old and new, and thoughts of all kinds about love. And we all know where true love originated. In fact, true love is what the greatest commandments from our God is all about. Jesus is asked about this in Matthew 22:35-39. He replies, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." If God says it, we should do it, especially if He commands it. And I don't have any problem loving. It's always good to be crazy in love with someone or something, somehow.

I'm a sucker for true love stories also. I'm a romantic at heart. And I remember writing the popular Elizabeth Barrett Browning phrase, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways," on several, if not many, Valentine's days growing up. She must have been a romantic, too.

Another popular phrase this time of the year, "Love is in the air," originated from a song with the same name. It was a 1977 disco song and sung by John Paul Young. Since then it has been used as a movie and TV show episode title as well as a favorite everyday expression for that feel good feeling we have when we or someone we know is in *loooovvve*. But do you know how February became the love month or even know how February 14 became Valentine's Day?

It's February, love is in the air.

It's time to show your loved one just how much you care.

Valentine's Day was started, about 270 A.D. in Rome, by a true love story,  
From Valentinus and his love for God and God's Glory.

You see, Valentinus wouldn't bow to other gods, so off to prison he did go.

But a jailer showed compassion, and Valentinus he got to know.

The jailer told Valentinus about his daughter, Julia, and that she was born blind.

He asked Valentinus to teach her anything that came to his mind.

Being a man of knowledge, he taught her Rome's history, and arithmetic too.

He also taught her about God and everything, for her, God wanted to do.

And from the story, we know, Valentinus and Julia fell in love.

It was a love so deep, because it came from God above.

She saw beauty from his eyes, and from him felt a strength to begin.

It didn't take long for their love to grow, and for her, a love for God within.

So Valentinus prayed with her to be saved and that moment God sent her light.

Not only light in her heart but also light in her sight!

They wouldn't have long, the fourteenth was his execution date.  
They would have to rely on something like the phrase, "True love waits."  
On the Eve of his death he sent her a note,  
"Stay close to God, from your Valentine," he wrote.  
After he died, Julia planted a pink-blossomed almond tree in Rome.  
It was to keep their love growing, until together in heaven, their forever home.  
A beautiful bride she was never to be since execution took him as was known and foreseen.  
That true love story from 270 A.D., will be celebrated forever because of them on  
February fourteen.  
So on this Valentine's Day, remember who you love,  
But remember most of all our God up above.  
And an adage for you until we meet again,  
Is, "love is in the air," from the beginning to the end.

## **Tiny Living – Sunday, Sunday** – by Leyanne Enterline

Okay, all of you mamas with kiddos still living at home...

Why does Sunday morning always seem the most hectic? Since we've had kids, my hubby has worked at a church. So maybe it's the fact that I'm on my own getting everyone out the door that makes it a bit chaotic for us, and now add dogs into the mix - I'm really struggling! Is it that the devil is on guard and more ready to attack on Sundays?

Tiny living does not exclude us from the challenge. Perhaps maybe getting out the door is even more of one, since we're so jammed packed!

I'm constantly:

stubbing my toe on a dog crate...

ramming my knee into a space heater...

trying to squeeze through a door full of coats hanging on it...

moving trash and recyclables out of my way to open the pantry...

It's a bit tight!

This past Sunday was a doozy! After getting myself completely dressed and waking up the boys, I let the dogs out and fed them. Of course, I put my nice dress shoe into a pile of wet dog poop! Nice! I left that outside to deal with later and rushed back in, to change. Back inside, I have my 12-year old crying that he's wearing *high-waters* and can't go out in public like this! I think boys grow overnight!

As I'm scrambling to find something that will fit him, the other son can't find his shoe. Where do they go in a tiny space? Surely, they can't go far! The boys only have two pairs each, to eliminate space, so the shoes must be somewhere close. I remember when they were babies one of them always spit up on their nice church outfit or had a blowout that caused us to be late. Now, the bigger they are, and with us the parents, there are more people moving around and maybe more chaos than ever before!

I'm praying for all you mamas out there on a Sunday morning, parenting alone or not, living tiny or large. Sunday (and every day!) is a challenging day for some reason, and we all need all the prayers we can get...

## **A Night to Remember – Hearts on a Wire** – by Marcy Lytle

Kids can make hearts at an early age, because they're easy to draw and cut out. Kids' hearts are also easy to mold at shape, if we do so at an early age, before they're wounded and bitter adults. Family devo time this month will include talk about hearts, cutting out hearts, and hanging hearts on a wire.

**Preparation:** You'll need a wire or twine that is hung up where it can stay for a couple of weeks, like along a wall in the family room or playroom. You'll also need pink, white and red hearts cut out of construction paper, plenty to choose from while you learn. Let the kiddos cut them out. And if you can find a pack of tiny clothespins, that's ideal. If not, paperclips will do! Everyone will need a pen, crayons or a marker. Finally, hide a few hearts in the room.

The idea is to study and talk and learn, and hang hearts on the wire...like this:

Proverbs 4:23 says *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*

Place the first heart that's cut out inside an envelope and write on the front – “sealed with a kiss.” Remind kids that our hearts are sealed to Jesus and his safekeeping all of our lives...when we believe and love him with all our might. Hang up the heart...

Jeremiah 29:13 says *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

Let the kids find the hidden hearts in the room and hang them on the wire, and remind them that seeking Jesus (by reading and praying and loving) will fill us with joy like nothing else.

Psalms 51:10 says *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

Find the white hearts in the pile and hang on the wire. This heart represents purity – no anger, hurt, hatred – because Jesus creates and erases and heals when our hearts get dirty, bruised and hurt.

Proverbs 3:3-4 says *Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.*

Did you know that our hearts are tablets? We write in them God's faithfulness to us so that we remember that HE is always good and loving. Write down 2 things you're thankful for on a heart, and hang up your heart tablet.

Proverbs 17:22 says *A cheerful heart is good medicine...*

Draw a smiley face and hang your heart. And ask everyone to smile, to practice smiling, and realize and remember that it's healthy to be cheerful. When we're not cheerful, we can ask God to cheer us up.

Psalms 19:14 says *May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

If our heart is good, our words will be good. Draw an open mouth on your heart and hang it. Pray together for God to give you clean and helpful words, not nasty and mean words.

Look at your hearts on a wire often, as you pass by this month. Remember to keep your real heart pumping and alive as you love Jesus, and love others, all year long.



YOU

## Strengthening Your Core - All You Need is Love – by Marcy Lytle

You know that old song, “All you need is love...love is all you need.” And yet we know countless individuals that loved someone passionately and then left their spouses. We ourselves have loved and been hurt, and fallen “out” of love. So apparently, love is not all you need to thrive in marriage, in relationships, or even in our walk with Him.

Falling in love with someone is one of the highlights of life, isn't it? I remember when I fell in love with my husband. One night we both kept our phones off the hook (you know, those old phones that plugged into the wall) so that it could feel like we were by each other all night. We were crazy in love!

I have loved to spend time with a certain friend, only to find out she's moving or she's moving on, and she's not so interested in spending time with me. Ouch, that hurts, and though my love is still there, our relationship suffers.

Loving God seems such a given and something that should be so easy to do – if we truly believe He is good all the time. But we step in and out of that belief don't we? We love him, but we sure don't like Him when he says no or tells us to wait.

I got this bracelet for Christmas that was started by a lady that wrote the phrase “Love is all u need” using the letters right on top of each other, so that it created a symbol. You can check out their story here. I thought about that phrase all during the holiday season.  
<https://www.zymbol.net/>

With Valentine's Day upon us, love will be present in the air again. There will be proposals made, young love will be voiced, and chocolates and hearts will bring love to little kids as well as grown adults. Love is presented in so many pretty ways with rings, sweets, notes and hugs. But...wait until the day after Valentine's Day when we're disappointed that he forgot to make reservations. Or maybe we have an argument and love is the last thing we feel for that person or this kid!

Since we often have “lost that loving feeling...” (another song!), what kind of love is **all** that we need?

It's that love that lays down your life for another. That love that Jesus had, that made him willing to obey his Father's command to come down to earth and love the very people that would crucify him. That's the kind of love we all need. I realize daily how much Jesus loves me when I get angry, spout off to my husband, feel an angry thought about a friend, or just feel absolute hatred at something someone said! My kind of love is dependent on others and how they treat me and how they demonstrate love to me.

And people, as long as we live on this earth, are going to disappoint us. Love is not all we need. We need grace and mercy and compassion that *moves* us to love - period. We need a fresh experience of that love he gave to us so freely and willingly, the love that keeps on loving when we are not lovable one bit.

I think I have that kind of love for my children. They do make me mad sometimes, but because they're part of my flesh and a gift from God, and they were created out of love, they belong to me. I cherish them. I'd never want to see them suffer and hurt, if I can step in and help. But even a mom's love isn't perfect. We hover, interfere, and love too much and not with pure motives. Love isn't all we need.

I don't know where you are this February on the love scale, but if you're like me, you probably could stand to improve in your love for others. The bible says there's no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend. I'm not sure if that means literally and physically, but I'm certain it means to lay aside grievances, hurts, wounds, and judgments – all of them – so that love can run red for everyone. Laying down our lives must look like giving up our time and our possessions in order to love on others, including our spouse, our children, those we meet in social gatherings, and even the stranger on the street that flips us off because we're driving too slowly.

The heart is deceitful and wicked, except for Jesus. Because he laid down his life for us, we too can lay down our lives at his feet, and for others. I don't know how, but I know that we can. And I know that we won't do it perfectly or consistently, but that's okay.

Happy Valentine's Day as you feel his love, and extend that love to all that you know and are about to meet...

## **Upper Quadrant – Will I Know? – by Marcy Lytle**

Observing my parents as they've aged and my in-laws as well, I've wondered a few things. In talking with other women my age, it seems they are wondering too...

Will I know when I'm too old to drive and willingly give up the keys?

Will I realize that I need to keep bathing so that I'm presentable and fresh?

Will I know that my clothes are dirty and unkempt?

I sure hope so...

Will I know when I need a cane and humbly grab one instead of stumbling around?

Will I realize I need help and ask for it, without feeling like a burden to my children?

Will I know that I'm losing my hearing and seek for aid, or grumble at the table?

I hope I will...

Will I know when to call it quits and when to keep pursuing...work and activity?

Will I realize that compliments to the younger generation are better than criticism?

Will I still know to give and expect nothing in return?

I wonder...

I know that my generation observed things in the older generation and made changes...for the better, I hope. We talked more to our kids, loved our spouses better, and hopefully smiled a bit more. But then, maybe the older generation had more reasons to frown (The Depression!) and were told to marry for money (The Depression!) and didn't have skills like we do now. I also know that I've made new mistakes with my kids, ones that hopefully they will correct with their children.

It's maddening and frustrating when our elderly parents won't listen to us, won't realize they need help, and won't stop letting those words fly out of an unfiltered mouth. Can they help it? If they'd known what we know now about God and life and love, and getting rid of bitterness and not letting it take root, and working on being teachable and not stubborn, could they be different now that they're old?

We do not get to choose what ailments or shin splints we experience at the end of our race here on earth, although we can take care to stay as healthy as possible. Because of hurdles and storms and others on the race beside us, there are sure to be wounds and scrapes near the end. I can hardly bear to think about being a burden to my kids or realizing that they no longer enjoy my presence because I'm cantankerous and fragile.

We can sit and wonder all day if we are going to be able to change and be an asset and not an ass, and we still won't know. All I do know is that really want to be pliable and teachable and forgiving and loving, and I want to never stop learning and growing...and I hope that helps.

I pray for all of us in the throes of parenting our parents, a job that's not fun or pleasant or pretty. But then maybe that's a hurdle and a curve in the track that we're supposed to run so that we can become stronger and better and more loving and caring...just for them...and for those behind us.

## **Healthy Habits – Life by Chocolate – by Marcy Lytle**

We switched over from milk chocolate to dark chocolate only, a good while back. We used to take a box of Goobers (chocolate covered peanuts) with us to the theater to enjoy with our popcorn. Then we went to a chocolate factory and learned that if dark chocolate bars are a certain percentage of cacao, they are really good for your heart! At first the taste was a little bitter, but now we actually prefer the dark over the milk!

I decided to do a bit of research to find out just how healthy chocolate can be, since this is the month where chocolates are flying off the shelves and landing in our mouths!

I'm not a chocolate maker or a doctor, but here are some things I found out about chocolate from the American Heart Association, Healthline, and WebMd.

Milk chocolate contains about 10% cocoa. Cocoa is the heated version of cacao (I did not know that!) Cacao is the raw form of chocolate and the percentage in a dark chocolate bar is often printed on the paper cover. White chocolate only contains cocoa butter – no cocoa solids at all!

If we choose a milk chocolate bar versus a dark chocolate bar of the same size, we will get about the same number of calories. However, the milk chocolate bar will contain about twice the sugar.

There are some that suggest that the bigger percentage of cacao in a dark chocolate the more heart healthy benefits there are, but it's not conclusive enough to suggest downing huge amounts of that dark sweetness. Dark chocolate is loaded with compounds that do function as antioxidants. And if it does indeed lower blood pressure as some suggest, it's very slight. And dark chocolate can improve risk factors for heart disease, including lowering cholesterol. Some studies show that the flavanols in dark chocolate can help protect our skin from sun damage!

All of the above is interesting and probably worth noting, BUT it doesn't mean we can consume excess amounts of dark chocolate and call it healthy! Bummer, I know.

However, making a switch from milk to dark might be a good start as well as these other ideas when the box of candy lands in your lap or on your table:

- Enlist the help of a disciplined person in the house (or a friend) to hold you accountable for only eating one piece per day and no more!
- Eat your meal, wait a while, and see if you're still craving chocolate. Sometimes we eat it right after a meal and then feel stuffed.
- Include a few squares of the dark chocolate (70% or more) in your diet daily, until you no longer have a sweet tooth for the milk or white chocolate. It will take a while, but it will happen...
- Consider eating one square of chocolate with a few nuts, instead of an entire chocolate bar. The nuts are good for you, too!
- Drink a large glass of water before consuming chocolate. You'll feel full before you start with the first bite.

- Don't skip meals. Skipping meals cause cravings. And cravings cause indulging. And indulging causes guilt.
- Have you tried chocolate tea? Some say it satisfies the craving without the calories.
- If stress is creating the craving, take a walk, lie down, and mediate on the Word...instead.

My favorite 70% chocolate bar is by Lindt. I've tried several other brands and this particular one is creamy and tastes SO good, alongside a few peanuts or almonds. We gave up butter on our popcorn long ago, and now just plain popcorn with a few squares of dark chocolate and a few nuts really serves as a fun meal while the action plays in front of us on the big screen, and we snuggle together when the last piece is eaten...until the credits roll.

<https://recipes.sparkpeople.com/recipe-detail.asp?recipe=1954608>

## **Created for Life - Justice Found – by Ginny Hurley**

The headlines scream of lies, hidden agendas, falsified documents, and the list goes on. Crazy media scrambling for the next best story to expose someone, so that they can receive applause and be discovered, is dominating our airwaves. Our street corners and sidewalks are flowing with homeless and vulnerable people asking for handouts. Again, the list goes on. We can quickly pass by, close our eyes, or make a false judgment that we know nothing about. These are all people created in God's image, carrying within their hearts a heavenly knowledge that there is something greater.

Recently, we saw the movie about the security guard that was accused of the 1996 bombing during the Atlanta Olympics. It appeared that no one was really looking at any other perpetrator. All eyes were obsessed with Richard Jewell. Of course, if you know the story, justice was served and righteousness prevailed, but how long did it take? The toll placed on those involved was enormous.

As I was pondering these things, Isaiah 59 came to mind. Verses 14-16:

*Justice is driven away, and righteousness stands on the sidelines, for truth has stumbled in the public square and morality cannot enter. Yes, truth has disappeared and those who turn from evil become the next victim. And then He was astonished that there was no champion, not even one who would rescue the oppressed. So then His almighty power was released to deliver, and His own righteousness supported Him.*

Verses 20-21

*He will come to Zion as a Kinsman-Redeemer...*

Truly, He has done it! He has brought the One who has become sin, so we can be filled with Truth and Justice!

Real, actual, total, complete, finished FORGIVENESS has carried our pain and sorry into the Sea of Forgetfulness! When there was no champion, God sent His Champion! Now, we are filled with JUSTICE, TRUTH, and FORGIVENESS! Stories are flowing out of our prisons and jails of captives being set truly free! Transformed lives are rising up out of the ashes! Ministries for the homeless and orphans are beginning to bring Holy Spirit's love and power for the forgotten. By His Spirit living within passionate believers, God is bringing restitution and revival, and it's growing and expanding more than ever before.

Psalm 7: 10-11

*God, Your wrap-around presence is my protection and my defense. You bring victory in all who reach out for You. Righteousness is revealed every time You judge. Because of the strength of Your FORGIVENESS!*

People in politics, media, and these systems of men, are individuals with choices. The problems are huge with no one person to blame. Many called into these areas are there for great purpose. I want to support my leaders with honor, whether I agree with them or

not. I want to make a difference, so I will pray and decree the truths that I know to be real and full of life for everyone.

I do not have to fret or worry about injustice, but I can join the crowd of transformers and dive into purpose and passion. There is nothing too difficult for Him and no person too far gone. The least of the least are hearing the call. It is impossible to be excluded from His divine love and compassion. And that, my friends, is irresistible!

**Justice has been found!**

## **Life Right Now – Observing Today** – by Bethany Gomez

I wouldn't know yet, but I've heard that when you have kids of your own, you think they are simply the cutest kid(s) in the world. That is just how I feel about the students in my class. They are the cutest students in the entire school not just because of their itty bitty size, although that is one of the things that makes them so cute. But honestly, every single one of them is adorable and really sweet.

I am currently an assistant teacher in a special education preschool classroom at an elementary school in Round Rock. This is my 2<sup>nd</sup> year at this school, and I'd like to share my thoughts on my job...as I experience it each day.

I work with a lead teacher and another assistant teacher and every day is an adventure with our now, 15 students. Our lead teacher is out on maternity leave at the moment, so it is an even bigger adventure. We are literally counting down the days till she returns, with none other than a brightly colored paper chain.

I love what I do, even though it gets exhausting at times. The days are long and sometimes the weeks feel like they will never end. However, I look at the calendar and it tells me we are already half way through another school year. It shocks me every time how fast time goes by.

My schedule is a little different than all the other assistants on campus. Our classroom includes a childcare program for the teachers' kids, called "Together We Can" and I am the one that stays with the "TWC" kids, (as we call them) until they get picked up after school. I go into work at 8 and leave at 5. Due to those hours, I get a one hour lunch break. I have come to like this schedule even though my days end later than I would like. I have never had an hour lunch before and (let me tell you) it is kind of nice! I usually have the break room to myself at that hour, so it is peaceful and quiet. Sometimes, I put in my headphones and watch a show on my phone to decompress. Recently, I have taken to reading a book while I eat, since one hour is long enough to read a significant amount of a good story. I am intent on reading more this year, so any suggestions on must-reads are welcome!

If someone were to ask me what I love most about my job, I would have to say being able to help create a safe and loving environment for these little students to learn and grow in. Sometimes I worry if I am making a difference at all, but then I see one of the children coming out of their shell a little more and learning new things. Maybe I am making a difference, after all! And there is nothing better than walking into class every morning

and being greeted by several little voices, almost in unison. It gets even better when instead of a chorus of, "Hi Miss Bethany," it is mostly "Hi, Miss Befany." Some of them can't quite say the "th" sound yet and that brightens my day.

If someone were to ask me what I love least about my job, I suppose I would have to say it is the lack of friendships. I was hoping to make more good friends here like I did at my old school, but for whatever reason that has not come about. It could very well be me and my introverted tendencies. Or it could be the fact that everyone is in their own little classroom bubble (including me) with very little time to get to know one another. Don't get me wrong. Everyone I do talk to is very friendly, but that does not mean they are open to a new friendship. I feel like a little kid telling my mommy that no one wants to be my friend at school. It would be nice to have at least one true friend and to not feel so alone and unseen at work, since it is where I spend the majority of my time, but I will still try to make others feel seen and love them - no matter what.

I have come to realize that around the same time I've been feeling discouraged about my lack of friends at work, I have gained a few more friends outside of work. God has brought a few amazing women into my life. They go to my church and they are all beautiful, encouraging women of God. We are slowly getting to know each other. I already know that when I need prayer for anything they are there to offer words of encouragement and prayer. They are reminding me that I am always seen by the One that knows us all the best and loves us the most...Jesus.

A day at work, observing and learning and teaching, and then thinking and thanking and loving...I'm reminded that all of my experiences are seen and noted and led by my best Friend of all.



MARRIAGE

## **In This Together – One Single Day** – by Bekah Holland

Ah, February...the month of love. Every store front from the Dollar Tree to the doctor's office is filled with hearts and flying babies sporting their weapon of choice.

I hate Valentine's Day. HATE IT! Seriously.

And that leads us to our useless info of the day portion of this show. Did you know that Valentine's Day stemmed from a Roman festival to celebrate the beginning of spring, honor the god of agriculture and fertility by pairing off women whom the men had won by lottery? Super romantic, right? Funny enough, that's not where my loveless relationship with this holiday begins. And before I delve into why I'm a love day scrooge, let me just say that if you love *love* and love this day then I will pray it rains down glitter and heart shaped balloons on you and brings you joy. You do you!

Also, full disclosure, I totally fill my kids' valentine morning with love notes about how special they are, all the candy, and all the stuff. Yes, *every* year. One year I even added a new sticky note to their door every single February day with something that I love about them. All the mush and sap. My husband gets a kiss and a reminder to take out the trash (I'm mostly kidding.)

When I was younger, I was completely caught up in the mania. In school it always felt like some kind of competition to see who got the most cards and candy and flowers, which obviously meant they were the most loved. As an adult, I realized that, to me anyway, it felt like the same popularity contest just on a more expensive scale. I felt myself basing my value and worth on some forced grand romantic gesture...and I created unrealistic expectations of my poor, unsuspecting husband, who just thought I'd like a food processor! (Actually, I really did love the food processor, and I had tossed all my roses and candlelit dinner plans out the window many years before).

Not that the cards and the words and the romance isn't nice. It is. And I love it any and every other time of year. But I decided that in my marriage, I didn't want a designated day of the year that forced us to put on a show. I wanted to think about my husband on a random Tuesday and grab his favorite candy bar on the way home.

My favorite days are ones that aren't planned, and to anyone else, they don't look like anything special. They aren't filled with candy and champagne and fancy dinners (unless candy, champagne and fancy dinners are available for delivery!) The days I feel the most loved are when I get a text from my husband in the middle of the day just to say I love you, or when he puts on a TV show that he knows I like instead of ESPN. Just the other night, we kicked the kids out (no one panic...they just went upstairs where there is more than enough entertainment) and watched a movie together on the couch. We laughed until we cried, and then we watched the gag reel and laughed some more. There wasn't anything special about our evening. But laughing together was like a huge sigh of relief. In fact, it made my whole week. It's what works for us.

I would pick staying home in stretchy pants with take-out over a night on the town 10 times out of 10. I have friends who itch to get out and ditch the kids and live big. They put on their dancing shoes and party like it's 1999. We like to party until around 9pm or so...with an obscene amount of carbs and ice cream. I've both dined out on Valentine's Day and served

people who did. I've eaten a multi-course dinner and also driven through McDonalds. We've run the gauntlet with this mandated date night.

However, I'm most content, and feel the most connected, not on a big manufactured holiday, filled with red and pink and (shudder) glitter. I feel most connected in our moments together that look and seem simple. I no longer base my value or worth as a woman, wife, lover on what happens one day during the year.

*Because it's just that....one single day.*

I would rather a hundred small moments than one big grand gesture. I'll take a sticky note on the mirror over a store bought card (I mean, I still really love a good card, but they cost as much as a #4 at Whataburger, so, priorities). And if the big hoorah is what makes you feel connected, then go big or go home (where I'll be). Just make sure those moments don't define how you gauge your relationship. All of the little moments add up to a great big love and a great big life.

"What we do every day matters more than what we do once in a while." John Gottman

## **Date Night Fun – In and Out – by Marcy Lytle**

Some like to spend big on date night. Others are overwhelmed by the cost of babysitting (for parents with young kids), eating out blows their budget, and trying to decide where to go (and deal with traffic) is not fun – one bit! This month, we thought we'd share some date night ideas on a budget for the stay at home couples, as well as the city roamer folks. Whether you stay in or go out, enjoy yourself without being overwhelmed. Just choose something from the list below and make it happen!

### **Out:**

1. Get all dressed up and get your favorite fast food, bring some fancy plates, and park on a hillside near sunset. Open the back of your car or just sit on the hood and enjoy yourselves. Take some fun pictures. After dark, get back in the car and listen to your favorite tunes.
2. Make the meal all about dessert! It won't hurt to do this ONE NIGHT. Search your area and find a good pastry, some fantastic ice cream, and great coffee. Make the three stops, and play a different game at each place.
3. The bookstore might be for you! We've mentioned this idea before, but here's a different twist. Browse the cooking section for a new cookbook on the bargain shelf! Sit down and pick out a favorite drink and dessert. Head to the store and get the ingredients, then arrive at home to make it together and enjoy...by candlelight.
4. Pick a street. Find a street in your town (or one nearby) that has lights, sights, brews and stews. Walk from one end to the other. Stop in a couple of places. Hold hands. Head home.
5. Taco Tour. Find three taco places and plan to purchase one at each restaurant. Either go in, or enjoy in the car. Play Latino music. Finally, either buy or find a place that serves churros to end your themed date.

### **In:**

1. Vintage games. Dig out the old games you haven't played in years, or if you have none – head to a place like Marshalls – that sells retro games. Plan a snack like graham crackers, strawberry cream cheese and fresh strawberries (tastes SO good!) Let your competitive streak flow!
2. Breakfast and Puzzles. Make breakfast together (even if it's evening) – your faves. Settle down in front of a jigsaw and complete it (get 100-piece). Clean up together and snuggle in for a movie.
3. Color Together. Get out the kids coloring books (or if you prefer, adult ones) and color using crayons or markers or pencils! The evening attire must include cozy socks and comfy pants, and a pizza delivered at your door!
4. On the Floor. If it's cold where you live, have a fire going and spread out a blanket and a couple of large pillows. Make milkshakes together and serve them in really cute tall glasses from the Dollar Store.
5. Irish Dancing? Yes! Move the furniture back, search on YOU TUBE for tutorials and learn to Irish dance. It's SO FUN. Enjoy Irish nachos, they're tasty and easy!

<https://www.delish.com/cooking/recipe-ideas/a51636/irish-nachos-recipe/>

## **After 40 Years – One Single Day** – by Marcy Lytle

I hadn't written my article yet, when I got an email from our writer on the other marriage article "In This Together." She expressed strong opinions about the V-Day and about how she's not a fan of celebrating one single day, but rather all year long. I LOVED what she wrote, and I know many women (and men) that feel the same way. They'd rather be purposeful all year long, remembering niceties and kind gestures every day, not just on V-Day.

I thought I'd write an article with the same title but with a different feeling towards the day of red hearts and pink roses. I do not like either of those things, by the way, but I really do love celebrating holidays of any kind, all year long. And...I also like celebrating each day. I guess you could call me selfish, self-absorbed, or self-driven...but I want to be taken out and our love to be celebrated on Valentine's Day.

The cool thing is that the writer of "In This Together" and I are super great friends, and we still are, even with our difference of opinion! And that leads me to my spin on this holiday, and others like it, where we are pushed, prodded, and pointed to all things commercial to buy and experience to make that someone feel special.

My husband and I are very different. I plan to the detail, over plan, and over stuff fun days. He goes along and enjoys each thing we do, because he's a contented man. He seriously is. He knows that I love getting out of the house and traveling and running around town, experiencing new things. And he has learned that I DO want a date night (but not flowers and roses – nope – don't like those) on Valentine's Day. And he knows that I love celebrating every single holiday that's on the calendar, with fun food, outings, and fun. That word – fun – it's important to me!

*Our differences don't keep us from enjoying life together.*

*Instead, we've learned what floats the other boat and we've jumped in for the ride...*

I grew up in a rather legalistic environment and somehow in my head I equated fun with sin. Yeah, not a fun childhood to talk about. It "seemed" that all the things I wanted to do (aside from be at church at every event) were either not proper or evil or unholy. Imagine my freedom when I finally realized at age 30 that going to movies wasn't wrong, it was a delight! And over the years, I've experienced freedom to enjoy life and not feel guilty. My husband didn't grow up that way, so he didn't have these hang-ups, but he listened when I explained and he got it.

I'm guessing that's why I long for and look forward to the very next event on the calendar. Now I don't care if we spend big and stay out late, I just want to do something FUN. Can I say it enough? FUN! And while staying home with a movie and a candy bar was fun when the kids were at home, I want to leave the house to create a different ambience and cheer!

I read the other article and smiled, because I thought...*How cool is that?* Both she and her husband relish their relationship over revelry on any given celebratory day. That's a solid marriage. And I thought about how we enjoy getting out and I do quite desire that he plan something for us to do – on THE day. And that too is a solid marriage.

A solid marriage does not mean that my marriage looks like yours, or that yours looks like mine. What it means is that communication has taken place and each knows what the other loves and is willing to give and serve, and enjoy the journey. I know that my husband loves it when I plan a birthday day surprise for him, and he doesn't want to know anything ahead of time. He loves the surprise! I, on the other hand, want him to plan but I want to know and have input and not be surprised. We are different. And when I try to change him or he tries to change me, we have a problem.

If you're staying home on Valentine's night and that's what you love doing, enjoy every minute of it. If you're lonely and have no one to celebrate and all of the hoopla has you depressed and down, call a friend or plan an outing that you ENJOY. And if you and your husband are dressed up and out dining and dancing, look around...you might see us there as well.



ENCOURAGEMENT

I've never been a planner. As a child I spent a lot of time constructing cloud pictures, taking long walks in the woods and playing with ant lions in the dirt. Each day rolled from sunrise to sunset in haphazard bliss. As a teen, idealism and searching for answers to life's big questions were intensified by the 70's culture. I was determined not to follow the status quo. Problem was, I didn't have an alternate plan. I enrolled in college but at the last moment changed to another school in another town, which changed the direction of my life forever.

How can I describe the state of my being at that time? To sum it up in two words: total confusion. I had zero confidence in myself, zero direction, zero comprehension of "the real world", zero experience. I dropped out of school because I had no idea what I wanted to do—I just knew I wanted something different. I felt empty inside and didn't know how to fill the emptiness. I met someone who filled the emptiness with everything alluring...someone different. This was the first twenty years.

The next twenty years were spent getting educated in the school of Life—all courses were mandatory, no electives in this school. Again, there was no planning ahead. During times of pain and struggle, it's enough just to get through the day. The silver lining is that this "dark night of the soul" led me to turn towards the Light. The Light came into my life and began to illuminate everything that had to go. This is where the emptiness was truly filled—not with the alluring, but with Truth. Four "unplanned" lives gave me purpose and courage. We hadn't planned them, but God did. Towards the end of this time period I began to plan—to leave.

God is gracious, full of mercy and compassion—I've seen it over and over; but he's fair and not a pushover. The next twenty years were full of regret and sorrow, but also healing and hope. The reaping of what I had sown wasn't over. There were devastating effects of the choices I'd made in ignorance, in darkness, in confusion...choices that affected my four innocent and beautiful children, and extended family. It's been a time of transformation, restoration, and consolation—a time of overwhelming thankfulness and joy because of God's goodness. I've experienced more forgiveness and grace, especially from my children, than I deserve...but that's what grace is, isn't it.

Light came in and delivered me from the darkness. That simple statement doesn't convey the complex process that began and never ends while on this earth, just as this simple story doesn't convey the complex details and timeline of our lives. I've come to know the reality of GOD WITH US. There's much I don't understand, but I believe God was working out his plans all along. I feel like a tool forged in the fire for a purpose, and I'm *planning* for the next twenty years.

Be encouraged! When you step into the Light of Christ, he begins to dispel the darkness and makes a way where there seems no way.

## **Simple Truths - The Power** – by Erica Simmons

As I was on the phone with a friend, I approached a 4-way stop. The person across from me was next, but they hesitated so I started to go, but then stopped and waved the rightful person with the right of way to proceed. As I was doing so, I mentioned the situation to my friend and shared with her that I was becoming the very thing I hated.

I have this thing about people not waiting their turn at stop signs.

I have always viewed it as them taking something that is not theirs, and I detest takers. So...I started taking what was someone else's to keep that someone from taking what I felt was mine.

I shared this in a prior article and shared that the root cause is from my childhood where my parents took things that were mine and gave to them to my siblings. Therefore, deep in me, I have allowed the enemy to use this root to steal away my joy - in the blink of an eye. Years ago I became aware of this and made a conscious effort to break this mentality. The initial reaction still rises up in me on occasion, but I squash it quickly. I have also begun to realize that in order to prevent it from happening...I have become what I hate.

This made me examine and identify other areas of my life where my past has led me to become someone I am less than proud of, in that area. I would like to say there were no others, but unfortunately I can't. The echoes of a father's word, words meant to hurt, words meant to demean from one of the two people who were supposed to love me unconditional. The million pieces of shattered dreams, dreams of being a wife, dreams of having a partner in life to raise the children we both so eagerly wanted. Dreams shattered by rejection and violence. These and many more come together to create the threads of fabric of a lie that became all too real to me: *I am unworthy*. This lie became the foundation upon which I would go on to build my life for many, many years.

I just finished reading a three-book series about a female detective who was working in the sex crimes division. The character is everything I love about female characters. She is strong, fierce and broken. I found I like to read series because I can follow the story of the main characters as they grow from what they are to individuals that overcome their shortcomings and limitations and become better versions of themselves.

In this particular series, the lead character discovers she is not who her parents tell her she is. Intertwined in this story is the beginning of a new relationship. She goes on the quest to discover who she is and how she ended up placed in an anonymous box for unwanted children at the age of four. In the course of doing so, she makes choices that cost her career. In the final book, she struggles to create a new life for herself that does not include being a detective, which she loved and also played a huge role in defining who she was. She does this by working toward a PI license and takes on a case that in the end reveals to another character that she too had a life that was built around lies - shattering the character's life as she knew it. In a conversation between the two, the question is asked,

“What matters, then?” “What truly matters if life is built on lies?”

In which the lead character replies, “Truth matters.”

In the beginning of the story the main character was starting to struggle with her life. At the end of the story, she was happy, truly happy, for the first time in her life.

This story depicts a perfect picture of what a life built on the lies of the enemy looks and feels like, compared to a life built on the truth of God's word. You see, the emotions of what happened to me at a 4-way stop sign had nothing to do with the action of my mother taking my hard earned money and using it to buy clothes for my brother for college. It had to do with the lies that the enemy was able to get me to build my life upon. Lies that I am not worthy, that I am less than, that I don't deserve the best, because the clothes I had to settle for were cheap clearance item clothes.

So the task ahead of me is more than not becoming what I hate at a 4-way stop, it is also about the hurt of a father's words, and the pain of rejection. I have had decisions to make, to tear down the lies of the enemy that I have built my life around and to seek truth, God's truth, about who I am. I can rebuild my life around that truth, or continue to have a life in some areas that are less than. Less than what God has for me, because He can't make me let go of the lie. I have to choose to trade it in for His truth.

"I am unworthy" is the biggest lie, and it is the foundation of so many parts of my life. For the last month, I have been looking at the life I built upon it and now I am asking myself, "Is destroying it worth it? Does it matter now? It only affects me." I would love to tell you that the answer is a resounding "Yes!" but I can't. I can say, however, that it is a very strong "Maybe," and every day it gets stronger and I know it will get to an affirmative, as I allow God's truth to do the work it does on me in so many areas of my life; transforming me.

That is the choice we all have to let God exchange our bad for His - oh so amazing - GOOD.

What choice will you make?

## **Moving Forward – Every Single Moment – by Pam Charro**

Regardless of how you feel about it, it's almost Valentine's Day again.

I know that not everyone feels the way I do, but I think it's a super fun holiday. It's a great reminder for couples to appreciate and celebrate what they have. And even though I don't have that special relationship right now, I look forward to and believe in that fun aspect of love. Roses, candy hearts, pink champagne, diamond jewelry, steak dinners with chocolate covered strawberries...so much fun!

I don't have to have it to enjoy that other people do.

But we know that love is not always fun. It's staying up all night with a sick baby, taking care of an elderly parent or spouse, working two jobs to put food on the table, driving all night to be with someone in a crisis situation. It's giving when you're exhausted and sometimes it's taking risks when there's no guarantee that anything will be understood or returned.

Love is often uncomfortable and even painful.

God knows all about the not-so-fun aspects of love.

1 John 4:10 says,  
"Now this is love:  
Not that we loved God,  
but that he loved us and sent his son as an  
atoning sacrifice for our sins."

How that was worth it to him is something we will probably never wrap our heads around until we see him face to face, but it does mean we have a Lover who is way crazier about us than we are about him. And he is excited about what he is getting out of the deal. It wasn't something he did with his hands on his hips thinking we'd darn well better appreciate it. He did it for the joy set before him. And we, in all of our imperfections and distractions, are that joy. He did all of that to win us over.

So, if, like me, you aren't getting any roses or candy hearts this year, just know that a very important someone is head over heels loopy for you and is always patiently waiting to be a little closer to you. He gave of the very deepest kind of not-fun love so that you would know what it means to be his beloved. He smiles at the thought of you. He is excited about your tomorrow.

You are treasured.

You are precious, every single moment of every single day.

You are loved.

## **Best of the Mess – Potty Progress** – by Ashley Zanella

The last few months, this page has been all about my fitness journey after having two babies. If you want to read about that, check out our archives!

This month I'm taking a sharp turn into *momville*. Specifically, I want to share the long, crazy, frustrating, exciting and rewarding journey of potty training my 2.5 year old.

When he was about 18 months old, Axel started to show signs that he wanted to use the big boy potty. He followed us in there, he'd try to pull himself up, he'd indicate when he had to go to the bathroom and started wanting his diaper changed anytime he went. I thought "Wow.... I don't know if I am ready for this.." but the more research I did suggested that it's better to start when they show signs instead of following a predetermined time that you set. I had to have been 6 months pregnant with Jaxson when we started this process. And let me tell you, there have been SO many lessons learned. So, I wanted to share those. Obviously every child is different and boys are vastly different than girls, but if I could go back and save myself some of the frustration, I would in a heartbeat.

**Lesson #1:** Be all in, or just don't. When we started, I was 100% dedicated when we were at home....but not so much when we got in the car, went to the store, the park, the gym, church or anywhere really. This ultimately led to months of confusion and frustration for my little guy. I didn't know it was causing confusion, I just knew that when we would get home and I would take his diaper off, it was like I had to retrain him. Every time. Finally, one day about 6 months in, I decided to line the car seat with towels, get a foldable potty seat and leave the diapers at home. There was a little learning curve, and I became an expert at removing the car seat cover, but the progress I had been desperate to see for months finally came. If I could go back and do it again, this is probably the biggest thing I would've considered - whether I was ready to go all in, or to wait longer before even starting.

**Lesson #2:** Stickers, stickers, stickers. When I decided to start potty training, I was flooded with all the suggestions. "My son loved M&Ms when he went potty." "Mine liked to aim at Cheerios." "Mine would get a new toy from the dollar store." You name it, I heard it. So I tried them. The M&Ms resulted in tantrums because he would just want them, forget about going potty, and then have an accident while I was trying to calm him down and explain how to get an M&M. What finally did work, was sticker charts! Pinterest has a bunch of great templates but I just made my own using a marker and paper. At first I made these huge elaborate charts that had a trail of spots for going pee, spots for going poo with the famous poo emoji all over, and spots for accident-free days. I wanted to keep him motivated with the stickers, so I would get different kinds of stickers with different fun characters. Then I started using flashcard paper for his charts so that we could take them to the store when he filled it up and trade it in for a hot wheels or Play-Doh. Almost immediately after I started using stickers, we made a huge transition from me taking him to the bathroom on a schedule, to him actively telling me he had to go potty. Or more, he'd yell "I gotta go I gotta go!"

**Lesson #3:** Be open and if anything, over communicate with childcare. When I work out or go to church, there is a team there helping care for my son. One of the biggest struggles has been him having accidents there. It wasn't until I found that sticker charts worked so well, and had the childcare workers willing to use them, that he started going accident-free there, too. It also helped that I had switched to flashcards because I could put one of the cards and a sheet of stickers in a baggie for them to use. I had to make sure to show him where the potty was and check if he needed to go before I left him there. I'd show him the stickers and remind him and the workers how he would earn a sticker. Once that consistency was there, the accidents stopped.

So here we are. He's just over 2 ½ years old and not only have the accidents almost entirely stopped, but now Axel has become super independent. He will go to the bathroom, use his stool to turn on the light, close the door, take off his pants and go potty all by himself! Now we are working on putting his pants back on by himself, and we are a very long way from when we started.

Needless to say, this mom is SO happy with his progress!

## Real Stories - Don't Forget to Play – by Dena Dyer

Carey, my husband of 25 years, is a comedian—in both the best and worst sense of the word. He makes me laugh so hard I snort; this is a good quality. However, he also has favorite jokes he has repeated—ad nauseum—for two decades.

Two. Decades.

For instance, if one of us is eating a Caesar salad, this man of mine can't help himself from grinning and quipping, "This salad is so good, I could et tu" (as in "Et tu, Brute?"). See how funny that *isn't*? I do appreciate a good joke, but not when it's repeated hundreds (maybe even thousands!) of times.

That said, I am grateful for a mate with a sense of humor. Laughter keeps us bonded in fun ways. It has also provided us with countless, priceless memories. (Even doctors say laughter is good for your body. It increases blood and oxygen flow and even works your abdominal muscles. Score!)

While pondering this topic, my friends and I came up with some ideas about ways to keep the laughs coming in a relationship:

- Play miniature golf, arcade games, or bocce ball (or just do some old-fashioned bowling).
- Do a "Goodwill" date. Each of you takes \$20 and finds the other person an outfit. Then you both must wear what the other picked out while you go to dinner.
- Send each other funny memes, texts, videos, or gifs.
- Play pranks on each other (but ONLY if you know the other person is okay with it. Some people hate to be pranked!)
- Buy your partner a funny gift. For Valentine's Day last year, I got Carey chattering teeth. He loved them and keeps them in his office!
- Be spontaneous once in a while...and not just in the bedroom. Take a road trip with no map—just drive and see where you end up.
- Watch funny movies, comedy specials, or favorite sitcoms together.
- Try not to take yourselves too seriously.
- Tease one another...up to a point. Have a code word or "look" when things get to be too personal or annoying, so you don't upset the other person.
- Buy "googly eyes" or other fun cheap items and put them in strange places. Jackson, my 15-year old, put a pair of stick-on eyes on our coffee maker, and it makes me smile every morning.

Truly, laughter lightens the heaviest load. In fact, Proverbs 17:22 (NLT) says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person's strength." Both Carey and I are in ministry jobs, and we sometimes come home burdened. It's a real blessing to have a fun atmosphere around the house.

Our sons are young adults now, but when we do sit around the dinner table, it's a lively place, full of puns and wordplay. I hope the boys will continue to bring laughter into their own homes when they marry and have kids. I also think they've learned that it's dangerous to go too far when you're ribbing a family member. It's all good fun, until someone gets hurt--so it's wise to know when to quit.

And while it can be infuriating at times that Carey is young-at-heart (I do feel like he gets to be "Peter Pan" while I am the level-headed one), I wouldn't trade his optimism and good humor for

anything. I can tend towards negative thoughts and worrying. If left to my own devices, I'd probably drown my sorrows in tortilla chips and the latest sad movie too often, and he is good about pulling me out of my seriousness when I need it.

So I'll quote him to end my encouragement to you about playing together: getting older is inevitable; growing up isn't.

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*This article was adapted from Dena and Carey's book, [Love at First Fight: 52 Story-Based Meditations for Married Couples](#) (Barbour). Dena Dyer is the author or co-author of ten books for women and hundreds of articles in magazines, newspapers, and websites. She lives in Texas with Carey and their sons Jordan and Jackson. She loves bargain shopping, decorating, and traveling. Find her on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#), or at her [website](#).*



FRESH THYME

## **FRESH THYME – Lights Out? – by Marcy Lytle**

I walked into the bathroom early one morning in the dark and since I knew right where the switch was (behind the door), I turned it on and there was light. However, when guests come over, I have to alert them to the location of the switch – as they have walk into the dark room to find it. Also, early in the morning I walk through our den to the kitchen, only illuminated by a light over the stove that we leave on during the night. Although I know the pathway to the kitchen, it helps to have that tiny bit of light to give me shadows to see...

As I was thinking about this, I realized something cool and applicable to my spiritual walk, as well. (God is so good to speak to me practically, and I love it!)

The REASON I know how to walk through my house and into the bathroom, without stumbling or falling in the dark, is because I've walked through it a million times in the light!

It stands to reason, then, that when dark times come, or clouds roll in, or all the “power” seems blown for the moment, we don't have to fear. Not only is the LIGHT with us, he has given us light to walk in when the sun is shining, the power is full...and we have learned some important things!

What are they?

- We can memorize his word and hide it in our hearts, so that when darkness falls, we remember his mercy and grace and truth to lead us through the dark.
- We can recall just where we stepped and walked when the lights were up, so that can carefully walk without falling. We remember where things were placed and we step around those, into the room where there is light. (Thinks like trust, faith, and obedience in Him.)
- We can enter the darkness in confidence knowing that the switch to turn on the light is right where it was last time the room was dark. The Light of the World is always with us!
- We can thank Him for the tiny illumination he too leaves on to guide us through a dark place, that illumination of hope and blessings and promises and truth.

I don't ever want to go through a dark period of life without having learned how to walk in the light. But I can only learn that as I lean into Him, read his word, walk in his footsteps and place things so that there's a path between them.

Next time you wake up and walk through your house in the dark or into a dark room, give thanks for what you learned while it was light. And if you do stumble and get a bruise on your thigh from the edge of your bed (that you've hit a thousand times!) just rub your thigh and let out an “Ouch!” and keep walking toward the light.

The power never subsides, there are never blackouts, and transformers never blow – with Jesus. Any time it's dark it's only because he's calling us to remember the light and step carefully, hold his hand, and remember that HE IS GOOD.

## **FRESH THYME - Slow Down-** by Marcy Lytle

This year I'm really trying to slow down. I'm a person that doesn't require a lot of sleep, my mind constantly ticks and clicks, and sitting and doing nothing is NOT something I enjoy – at all. However, running at that pace does make me tired and cranky sometimes. I was putting on my mascara this morning and realized that I actually do slow down for some things, because it just doesn't work to hurry up the process.

For instance, you just cannot hurry when:

- Putting on mascara
- Threading a needle (does anyone do that anymore?)
- Changing a dirty diaper
- Getting across a parking lot in the rain
- Driving in traffic that's not moving

So just how do we slow down? I don't really have the answer to that question, but I have observed some of my friends that live a slower paced life and seem less stressed...and here's what I've observed. I'm trying to learn from them this year, although it's super hard. However, when I do succeed in doing one of the following things, I breathe a little slower, sigh in relief, and smile a bit more...

A slower pace of life might look like:

- Gardening for beauty and fun
- Reading a good book that's an escape, not a how-to or self-help
- Walking the dog or with a friend, not to burn calories, but to observe the sky and the trees
- Baking a loaf of bread, kneading, and waiting for that rise...
- Taking a nap in the car with just the right amount of sun warmth on the window
- Getting out of town without an agenda, with only the purpose to roam and discover
- Writing a journal for fun, to empty our hearts and our minds and remind ourselves of the Good
- Alone time or time with a friend, whichever is missing from our lives at the moment
- Listening to music that soothes, without any lyrics
- Creating something with colors or paints or wood

The song says you "can't hurry love" and "love don't come easy" and "you'll just have to wait." It's an old song by The Supremes. Loving others is also a way to slow down and enjoy life. Yes, we've all been hurt and disappointed by loving and losing. But we are created to be loved and to love, to work and to rest, and we need a good balance of it all...not just all work and no play.

This month, slow down with me. Breathe, love, create, and notice the foliage as it struggles to try and determine the season, whether to bloom or to wait. We were made to bloom, just like the trees in the dead of winter, as they wait for the consistent warm days to come out in full

array. And remember...there are no beautiful blooms without the cycle of rest being present in our lives of busyness.

## **FRESH THYME – Til the Water Runs Clear**

It's an activity we all do...multiple times in multiple ways. For me, it was this morning when I rinsed my makeup sponge. I do it every Friday, and I have to use soap and squeeze and squeeze until the water runs clear. It's also something we do when coloring our hair and applying conditioner. We wash and squeeze and let the water run through until it's clear once again. That clear water indicates all of the product is gone and out, and we are squeaky clean! It also means my sponge is clean and ready to be used again for another week...

I don't know why, but as I was squeezing the sponge this morning I thought about how unpleasant that squeeze would feel if the sponge were a living being and could speak. I'm sure it would say, "Stop, that hurts," as I squeezed again and again. Perhaps it would step away from the flow of water and demand to be put back in the drawer and left alone. Or at the very least, after a couple of squeezes, I'm betting the sponge would say, "Enough, already! I'm clean!"

However, my eyes can see when the sponge runs clear water, and I don't stop until it does!

I was thinking about how we gather dirt and filth and "extra" junk every day as we live, and it weighs us down, gets stinky and renders us unfit for good use –just like that sponge. We have to stand under the warm water of his grace and mercy and forgiveness, which actually feels great. But we also have to undergo a squeeze to get every last drop out!

For example, some days I end up fretting over the future, gathering thoughts that are lies about myself and God's view of me, soaking up disappointments in relationships and swiping every last ounce of my own strength to get through...until my sponge is super nasty! Have you had days like that?

That blending sponge or bud, or whatever you call it, is a great resource for applying makeup. However, if it's left uncleaned and unsqueezed, it can become a petri dish of bacteria and become bad for me!

Just this past weekend, I was that dirty sponge, all covered in usage. And to be honest, I'd rather not undergo a good squeeze or stand under the full force of warm water. I'd rather hibernate in the drawer, in the dark, and be left alone with my thoughts. Squeezing means pressure, and it can be tight and uncomfortable. Staying still under the water until the holder of the sponge decides that it's clean is also hard. I want to determine when that moment is that I can go back to being myself without the *cleaner* up in my business.

It's just a fact, I think, that life sprinkles lots of dust on us throughout the day, even as we are being used for good purposes. But it's also a fact, I think, that unless we let Him squeeze and wash and observe until the water runs clear, our good purposes will produce bad effects. Not only am I good for nothing to myself, but I shun others, growl at them and frown at everything, when I refuse to settle in and let the water flow and the squeeze happen – until the water runs clear.

I'm going through that squeezing process at this very moment, which isn't pleasant. Warm water alone doesn't clean a filthy sponge. The sponge has to be squeezed over and over again...until that water...runs clear.

Clear of lies, clear of mistrust, clear of disappointment, clear of hopelessness.

Analogies like this, simple but dirt makeup sponges, speak to me. I learn from the practical and God is so kind to use little everyday objects and experiences to show me His faithfulness to pursue me, whether or not I want to be pursued. He also is the good shepherd that tackles me and follows me constantly offering goodness and mercy – that clean warm water – to wash me clean. And that squeeze? It's never meant to hurt me, only to heal me.

So I'm hoping I can stand still long enough today and tomorrow and again next week, each time my heaviness and saturation of the filth of the day makes me a good candidate for the squeeze and the flow.

## **FRESH THYME – Two Months Down – by Marcy Lytle**

It's been two months now since we made our New Year's resolutions...if we made any. I rarely do, but I did decide a couple of things since the New Year began that I'm happy to say are sticking with me! One decision came after reading *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp, and the other decision was made during a fast our church was participating in...

The book I read was written by an author that decided to write down her observation of thanks until she had 1000. I thought that was an incredible feat. And when I thought about 365 days in the coming year, if I started writing down three a day, I'd have over 1000 by the end of 2020. The best place for me to do this was in this beautiful planner I ordered from Good Housekeeping. It not only is a planner but it has photos, inspiration, recipes and more. I started with 1-2-3 on January 1 and continued from there, each morning or evening writing down little, or big, things for which I was thankful.

Honestly, it wasn't as easy or dynamic at first as I thought it would be. I found myself thanking God for obvious things like the usual – food, a good day – things we all give thanks for at least every so often. And some days if I forgot, it required me to think back about the details of that day, to stop and observe. As the days went on, I began thanking God for things he was doing in my heart and my soul, not just the external blessings I could see. It's been an awesome journey, giving thanks for three items a day, and I just penciled in #84! I look forward to looking back to see God's faithfulness as the year rolls on...

The second thing I mentioned was a fast. Some people fasted food or time from electronics or social media, but I couldn't really get into any of those. Finally, on the third week I felt like I was to fast from petitions – asking God for things. Here's why:

I pray a lot, I count it a privilege to pray for others, and an honor. However, if I'm not careful my entire prayer time is spent begging and pleading for answers and healings and provision. And when I'm done with that, I'm exhausted and don't feel like sitting and listening and praising and being. So I felt prompted to at least for one week, to only give thanks.

Boy, what a week it was! Illness, super-sized needs, a death of a friend, and so much more happened in one short week. My usual response would have been to fall on my face and moan and groan, cry and squirm while I pleaded with God for help. That's not a bad thing, but it had become my only thing.

Turning those requests into declarations of thanksgiving did something. I tasted pockets of peace that I hadn't tasted in years. Somehow, giving thanks that he is my Father – he's up there in heaven with a different perspective – and His name is hallowed and great – settled my soul. No, it wasn't a fix-all where I gave thanks the first day and I was at peace all week. It came daily as I gave thanks, and then the next day and the next.

Two months have now passed and I'm still going on the thanks in both areas – written in my planner – and spoken on my lips.

There's a reason, I'm sure, that he said "in everything give thanks" and I see that it's not only to declare our trust in Him but to experience life without constant upheaval on stormy seas. Before that phrase in that verse, it says to rejoice always and pray continually. This is His will. And later it says, "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it." Do what? Sanctify us through and through. That means we will be set apart from all else – and that includes fear.

Join me in writing down your thanks and changing your verbiage during prayer...let's see how we are transformed together. Pretty exciting stuff...