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THYME
For Every Season

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TIPS

The Dressing – Cozy and Warm – by Marcy Lytle

I'm all about cozy, aren't you? Snuggly blankets, warm and soft sweaters, cozy shoes with a little fur tucked inside, and a warm cup of hot tea...all by the flickering fire. We absolutely love fires in the fireplace, because they're not that often here where I live. So when the temps fall below 50 we're on it! What about you? Are you looking for cozy this season? I forgot to mention cozy sleepwear!

Here are seven little cozy additions you might want to add to your wardrobe this month of the cold weather season:

Those pj's: After Christmas, you can snag some real deals on cozy sleepwear, especially at Target. I love this plaid set! And if you buy some, you can wear them now, and then again next winter when Christmas comes 'round again!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-family-pajama-plaid-pajama-set-blue/-/A-54516528?preselect=54445685#lnk=sametab>

Snow booties: We rarely have snow here, but I'm really loving this pair of fur-lined booties/shoes to wear in the house on cold mornings or to sit outside sipping tea, if it's not too chilly. Aren't they cool? There are several colors and styles to choose from, from Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/SITALE-Waterproof-Outdoor-Slippers-Sneakers/dp/B074L3WDQ5?ref=fscpl_dp_2

Sweater weather: This pullover sweater by New Day is so cute and I really like this color, but there are others to choose from as well! It's got that asymmetrical hemline and being oversized, it's sure to be comfortable!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-casual-fit-crewneck-pullover-sweater-a-new-day/-/A-54470665?preselect=54410054#lnk=sametab>

Cozy blanket – This blanket is a little pricey, but we're hoping it will be on sale in January. It landed on a top cozy blanket list, and it's from Crate and Barrel. Don't you LOVE the stripes! It would look amazing over the back of your sofa!

<https://www.crateandbarrel.com/carreno-multicolored-throw/s148435?SID=1025X1552619X6677f68b8c51139f0cba970082676072&si=2617611&aff=cj&cjevent=074b96cf16a811ea81c402530a240610>

A Sherpa Coat – Okay, I have one of these, and they're not easy to clean. However, they are amazingly soft and cozy, and this price point at Target is awesome. So snagging one, even just to wear this season, might be a fun buy!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-long-sleeve-button-front-sherpa-pea-coat-wild-fable-tan/-/A-77418271?preselect=77374955#lnk=sametab>

Comfy pants – Jogger pants with pockets in black, are the best. You can dress them up and wear them shopping, or just sit on your sofa and read all day. This pair got great reviews. I love the look!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-beautifully-soft-fleece-lounge-jogger-pants-stars-above-black/-/A-77361656?preselect=54580383#ink=sametab>

Around the neck – Cozy and gray just go together like peanut butter and chocolate. I love this plaid scarf from Target, and it's got a few strands of light blue, so can be worn on into the early spring. It's not too thick or bulky so that it's uncomfortable, but it looks just right!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-39-s-plaid-oblong-scarves-a-new-day-8482-gray-one-size/-/A-54566459>

Maybe you received some cozy pieces for Christmas under the tree...or maybe not. Maybe you got a gift card! Go out this month and buy one piece for yourself that speaks your name and calls you to the fire to sit, or out in the cold to shop for sales...all while comfy and warm!

Seven for You – Words – by Marcy Lytle

This month we asked for book recommendations or lyrics or any words that our panel of women read that were encouraging to them, so that we could then share with YOU. Reading is a pastime and a privilege that many of us don't have, if we're raising kids, working, serving, and all of those things that women do. However, it's sometimes like a breath of fresh air if we can sit down and read a tiny bit each day, to escape, heal or be escorted to inspiration and hope...

During my cancer battle of this past year, a lot of people sent me scriptures and encouraging songs. One song stood out to me especially and gave me HOPE because it seemed to encapsulate the message of so many scriptures AND the battle I was fighting. That song is "Something Good" by Levi Smith (Gateway Worship). One of my favorite parts of the song says "When I'm broken and down to nothing, I know that you are always up to something good". Whatever the reasons for walking this road, I trust God to bring something good out of the bad. I am already seeing it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDRfVmtMotI>

In answer to this month's panel question, I'm really not a reader. What I like to do and read is research so I guess you could say I spend a lot of time "googling." I do enjoy reading the columns at *A Bundle of Thyme*. I also enjoy Bible studies and my husband and I just finished leading a group at our church through the book, *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby. Several people in our church have done this study on their own. So whether alone or in a group this is a heart opening book to read!

<https://www.amazon.com/Experiencing-God-Knowing-Revised-Expanded/dp/0805447539>

The Giver of the Stars was my book of the month choice in November and I really loved the story. It's about the women that started libraries by riding horseback through the woods, to deliver books to families so that they could read and learn, and be exposed to new ideas and inspiration. However, those rides and visits were hard to complete, when many others were afraid that books were causing young minds to be open too wide, and that these "libraries" should be stopped. The story focuses on two women who form an unlikely friendship, as they face their hard lives together. It's a great read!

https://www.amazon.com/Giver-Stars-Novel/dp/B07QQ3J91J/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=giver+of+stars&qid=1576499520&s=books&sr=1-1

Have you read Ann Voskamp's *One Thousand Gifts*? It's not a new book, but it's a stirring message – one of giving thanks in all things. The author is a farmer's wife with seven children, and she has experienced her share of hard things in life. You can also get the study guide to go with it. She writes with a poetic voice and says so many heart-piercing things, you'll definitely need to read it over and over again, as I'm hoping to do. I want an attitude of thanksgiving to be my bridge to joy, but it takes practice...a thousand times over.

https://www.amazon.com/One-Thousand-Gifts-Fully-Right/dp/B004KTJWH4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=ZOSJWB2NQ0EG&keywords=one+thousand+gifts&qid=1576499541&s=audible&sprefix=one+thous%2Caudible%2C200&sr=1-1

THIS song: *This Girl* by Lauren Daigle "There's a God shaped hole inside of every persons heart; and if you sense that there is something empty inside of you- the reason that you continue to look for life all throughout this world and yet something can't seem to satisfy the hole in your heart...it's because your heart is longing for its maker, Jesus Christ." ~Timothy Ateek

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56uSOVEV0mY>

I don't mean to sound cliché but I have been really listening to the song "Mary Did You Know?" The words to that song just speak to me and I don't think I ever really listened and let the words of that song sink in. The words to me are powerful.

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=mary+did+you+know+pentatonix+

I have started really liking the magazine *Real Simple*. Not sure why, but I have enjoyed reading it the past couple of months. This magazine says it shares "good to know information" and inspiring ideas.

<https://www.realsimple.com/>

The book *Woman* has been a very impactful book for me this year. The author uses the "knowledge is power" approach to help the reader understand how we are so intricately designed and sheds light on the danger of chemical components in mainstream health and beauty products. It's fascinating, empowering and informative!

<https://www.amazon.com/Woman-Designed-God-Amanda-Hess/dp/1937498484>

These lyrics have been an anthem for me this year!!! In every thing life brings - Raise a Hallelujah!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2XtRuPfaAU>

*I raise a hallelujah, in the presence of my enemies
I raise a hallelujah, louder than the unbelief
I raise a hallelujah, my weapon is a melody
I raise a hallelujah, heaven comes to fight for me*

*I'm gonna sing, in the middle of the storm
Louder and louder, you're gonna hear my praises roar
Up from the ashes, hope will arise
Death is defeated, the King is alive!*

Selah's Style – Cute Camden

Camden Bayer is a little girl from Kentucky that loves to play with her daddy's tools during home fixer-upper projects and is Daddy's little spotter during in-home workouts. Camden is currently taking "princess lessons" from her favorite Disney character, Sofia the First. She's sharing some of her fashion finds with us this month!

Camden has the same enthusiasm for Moana and mint LifeSavers as her mom does for tiny babes in plaid flannel!

<https://m.kohls.com/product/prd-3831444/toddler-girl-jumping-beans-henley-babydoll-top.jsp?prdPV=22&userPFM=toddler%20girls%20plaid%20&diestoreid=725&selectShip=true>

As a redhead, I'm partial to Olive Green but this jacket is just as multi-functional as it is cute! The inner lining is a light fall zip up jacket at then combined with the green outer layer, it's the perfect coat for all weather types!

https://www.walmart.com/ip/Wonder-Nation-Toddler-Girl-3-in-1-Systems-Jacket-Coat/482328580?variantFieldId=actual_color

Handmade by Reginna Osborn

Cute matching cousin ear-warming headbands delicately made by "Gigi", my mom, come in real handy when visiting family in Chicago this time of year! Their love for Minnie Mouse runs deep!

https://m2.hm.com/m/en_us/search-result.html?q=Pink+toddler+sweatshirt

<https://m.kohls.com/product/prd-3745250/toddler-girl-jumping-beans-print-leggings.jsp?prdPV=7&userPFM=toddler%20girls%20leopard&diestoreid=725&selectShip=true>

Call me basic but I love pairing oversized sweatshirts with leggings, especially pink unicorn sweatshirts with leopard leggings! It's my favorite cozy weather wear!

<https://www.vonmaur.com/Product.aspx?ID=1504871&pos=3&pg=1>

There's only one way to get daddy's fancy uniform but it sure pairs well with Camden's warm, fuzzy vest! She makes dressing up so fun!

Camden is the newest 4-year old around town this very month! Her parents, Brian and Erin, have their work cut out for them with this sassy girl but that's also what makes her so fun! The Bayers live in Lexington, Kentucky where Erin works as a kindergarten classroom aid, making

this season of motherhood very enlightening. Brian is a licensed electrician as well as a specialist in the Army National Guard.

In the Kitchen – The Potato Bar – by Marcy Lytle

At the end of December, we had a potato bar with our extended family. We decided on this food option last Christmas and we liked it so much, we did it again! It's a great setup, as everything is served buffet-style, it's kid-friendly because each person gets to choose their own toppings, and it's a food spread that can be planned ahead of time, with each guest bringing something for the bar!

We thought it would be fun to share how to put the potato bar together, what items are tasty to serve, and inspire you to try it with your family this January, while the temps are cold outside, but it's warm and cozy inside!

The potatoes:

Use your slow cooker to make the potatoes, and include a few sweet potatoes for those that might want them.

Prick each potato with a fork, rub with butter, and sprinkle with salt. Place each one in aluminum foil and place in the slow cooker for 8-10 hours. If you want the skin a bit crispy, remove after baking, unwrap and place in a 350 degree oven for 10 minutes.

Here are some awesome toppings:

- Chili (mix), pulled pork, or rotisserie chicken, or taco meat, pepperoni
- Broccoli
- All the usuals:
- Red onion
- Jalapenos
- Chopped tomatoes
- Bacon
- Cheese: goat, cheddar, mozzarella, pepper jack
- Sour cream, BBQ sauce, marinara, mojo
- Avocado
- Black beans
- Salsa
- Grilled corn
- Roasted red peppers
- Butter
- Fresh basil, cilantro, or chives
- Seasoning salt, cumin

You could even print out a sheet and have it on an easel or in a frame, so guests can see who to put different flavor profiles together for a tasty potato! They can cut their potato in half and try two! We've included one below!

Finally, the set up. Our décor was Christmas, and since we had the event after Christmas, I was able to get fun black/white checkered trays and decorations on sale! You can choose your own theme for your own taste!

Always add height, texture, color and lights to your table!

Height can be added with tiered trays or vases with greenery (just cut some branches off your own bushes or trees!)

Texture comes with layering the table with clothes or runners, and providing cloth napkins or even garland.

Color is provided by your food! But you can also add pretty plates and napkins that coordinate, as well perhaps pretty colorful nametags for your food!

Lights are always a welcome addition in the form of candles or twinkly lights. Or use the backdrop of your own fireplace.

Just pick a theme/color and go from there. You could do black and white with just a few pops of color, you could choose all natural type décor including pinecones and twigs and branches and pieces of wood. Maybe you like gray! Make that your backdrop and add pops of gold and white for contrast. Just have fun and do it!

Finally, our family did have so much fun trying new potatoes. My niece's husband cut a potato into fourths and topped each one with one of the choices in the frame – so fun! Me – I opted for just picking and choosing from all the toppings.

A potato bar is easy because you assign each person/family something to bring, and then just set it all out and enjoy! The host usually provides the potatoes, and the guests all the rest.

TRIED AND TRUE – Memory Tricks – by Marcy Lytle

Isn't it fun to have little tricks that you learned as a kid that serve you well as an adult? My best trick is the way to remember how to spell separate, a commonly misspelled word for sure. Here's what I was told that I've never forgotten: There was nothing in the house "sep a rat – e!" (except a rat – eeekkk!)

Since it's a new year and all that jazz, I thought it would be fun to share lots of ways and tricks to remember all sorts of things, in case you have a little time on your hands by the fire and want to take these and set them in your memory, as well!

- Have trouble remembering how to do percentages when shopping? Stores often provide charts but if they don't, just remember 30% is about 1/3. So if an item is \$30 then 1/3 off would be \$10! 40% sale? The easiest way is to multiply the cost by 4, for example if that same item \$30 is 40% off then $3 \times 4 = 12$, so it's \$12 off! OR....take 10% and multiply that by 4. 10% of \$30 (just move the decimal over one space) is \$3. $3 \times 4 = 12$! 20% is 1/5 so 1/5 of \$30 is \$6. It helps to refresh your memory on math facts when shopping sales!
- Can't recall where you parked at the mall or in the shopping center parking lot? Use the notes on your phone to write where you are, what row, middle or end, etc. I try to make a mental note of where I am before entering, but sometimes it's helpful to note it, so you can forget it while you shop! And most often, I park on the same row each time so I'm always at the same entrance.
- Just met a new person and then you walk away and forget her name? Two things I've heard from friends that work are to say her name back when she introduces herself, then say it again as you walk away. And then...again use your notes and jot it down – along with a description of who she is. The more of your senses that you use, the more likely you're to remember!
- I recently read a trick for remembering to add that extra "s" when you spell dessert. It's not desert! That's a wasteland. Dessert has a double "s" and you can remember that because desserts are **So Sweet!** Isn't that a cool trick? And stationery with an e can be remembered by the fact that "e" is for envelope! The other kind is stationary, and the "a" can be for anchored! Pretty cool!
- Losing your purse or laying it down somewhere in a store and realizing it after you walk away? Never go shopping without a crossbody bag. Keep it by the door to switch your purse items into, when you're shopping. This way your purse is on your body at all times, no chance of you leaving it in the cart or on a shelf!
- This next trick is genius, for helping us all out with pints, quarts and gallons! Look at this figure! 2 cups in a pint, 2 pints in a quart, and 4 quarts in a gallon!



- One memory trick for several items, like things you need to get at the store, should you not have your phone for notes, is to make up a song! For example, if you need milk, blueberries, and sugar, you could sing, “Twinkle twinkle blueberry, with some milk and sugar be...” or something similar. It’s a great tool that teachers use as well, with students! Have you heard the presidents’ song?
- One of my pet peeves is emails that are not responded to, or texts! I know that it happens often because we read our phone while we’re out or busy, and we forget then to respond when we have the time! Two helpful hints (besides paying for an app to remind you!): Set a time right before bed (or another down time) to respond to texts. That way it’s a routine you keep. The other hint is to say “Siri remind me to text at 8pm” or some other time that fits your schedule. Your alarm will go off and you will read your text and respond (and apologize for being late!)
- Going on a weekend getaway or trip soon? How in the world do you remember all of the things you need? For toiletries, pack them as you use them, the day before. When you’re getting ready, pack all of the items you use, and the same goes for nighttime. Then the next day when you’re getting ready to leave, you work from your packed bag and everything should be there! Write out a list of outfits for each day, including accessories. And finally, make a checklist that you keep by the bed, because you’re going to recall something right before you fall asleep! Or check out this site for comprehensive list! <https://www.smartertravel.com/the-ultimate-packing-list/>
- Finally, what about birthdays and special occasions? Of course, we can write them on a calendar in our phone or on the fridge. But how do we remember to write them or record them? It’s a fun thing to do January to go through each month and fill in birthdays on your calendar right then. This way you’re not doing it month to month. There are apps and online helps, but if you’re not into that, make it a point to do a simple fill-in at the beginning of the year. Make a list of all your friends and family that you want to remember, and note it...in January...NOW. A paper calendar affixed to the fridge is my fave for recording EVERYTHING. And it saves on marriage disputes as well because it’s right there – for him to read! ☺



HOME

Practical Parenting – All the Stuff – by Marcy Lytle

Christmas is over, the presents are unwrapped and all the new “stuff” is now in your kiddos’ rooms waiting to be played with...or broken...whichever comes first! Some parents clean out their kids’ rooms before Christmas so that room is made for all the new. That’s a great idea. But sometimes, it’s overwhelming finding a place for all the toys and noise and parts!

A few ideas that might make your sanity return...

For the Legos and other toys that have tiny pieces – Provide bins with lids for each set. Label them. Don’t let them toss all Legos or pieces into a large bin where everything gets mixed together. I don’t know why toy companies don’t provide organizers with each toy! There are tiny pencil boxes that snap shut for tiny sets, and there are larger boxes like plastic shoe bins for the bigger sets. Then place all of these SETS in one place, training them to only get down one at a time to play with (good luck with that!)

<https://www.michaels.com/plastic-pencil-box/MD044198S.html>

For the Barbies and all of the accessories – There are all sorts of organizers you can purchase, but sometimes they’re expensive. Consider drawstring bags from Dollar Tree. Barbies can be stored in one, clothes in another, and accessories in a third (and inside can be tiny boxes if you like). Hang them on three hooks, provide a cute label, and there you go!

<https://www.dollartree.com/bulk/Drawstring-Backpack>

Those big toys – Make space on the floor of their closets, like a tiny parking garage, and even tape off “parking spaces.” Make sure each night before bed that each dinosaur that roars or Barbie van that rolls is parked and asleep when lights are out.

Books and shelves – Hopefully, the littles received some new reading material this Christmas. They can be added to an already packed shelf where books fall off daily, or you can organize them another way! What if you made a rotating “library” of books that you change out daily? Maybe 10 a week in a bin that they can choose from, and then the next week you rotate them out for 10 more. And the big shelf with all the choices is way up high, where only Mom/Dad can reach!

<https://www.walmart.com/ip/Storex-Interlocking-Book-Bins-12-6-x-5-3-x-14-3-5-Color-Set-Plastic/45755116>

Art supplies – Pencils, markers, crayons, scissors, color books, paint pots, brushes, stickers – oh my! A nightmare of artistry waiting to scare even the sanest of moms! There are these cool bathroom caddies (I found at Big Lots for \$2.50!) that can house lots of these artistic items. One per kid would be ideal, with their name on the front. Then store these in a closet up high, with a larger bin of the coloring books and paper beside. Again, let them ask or you provide the caddies when they’re interested in art time.

<https://www.biglots.com/product/clear-bath-caddy-with-handle/p810445669?N=376914851&pos=1:85>

A lot of angst can be avoided if parents put things away and kids have to ask for them, in order to use. Then, parents can monitor and not allow another toy out until that one is put away. This solves the problem of multiple messes all over the floor.

A lot of screaming can be spared if kids are required to put away every single toy they've gotten out each night before bed. It needs to be routine. Otherwise, messes are out of control and no one wants to clean that mountain before them.

A lot of organizing can bring peace, if the kids are involved in helping you out with labels or pictures, and choosing bins and places. Offer them ownership and reward them with wonderful words and hugs when they obey and put away.

Happy New Year to all you parents that are sitting and wishing for an elf to show up and shape up your house. I hope that happens, but if it doesn't, try some of the above ideas!

I Don't Do Teenagers – The Five C's – by Marcy Lytle

Age appropriate activities, clothes, gadgets and more can be quite daunting. And our kiddos will never agree with us on what's appropriate, as they will push the envelope in just about every area. Can't you remember doing that with your mom? I know my kids pushed it with bed times, curfews, body piercings, where they could go, what they could do, and eat and all that jazz! It's hard on kids that desire to be adults and decide on their own, and it's hard on parents that are trying their best to be wise...but not parent out of fear!

Here are a few areas where it's hard to navigate teens and a few suggestions that might help you this new year:

Clothes: Always, always have conversations with your kids about why they want to wear that outfit that you don't want them to wear. If she wants to show her stomach or he wants to shave a part of his head, and those things are part of a rebellion or just to be like others, or because of insecurities, talk it out. Always, always get to the root of why your kids are drawn to baring it all or standing out in a crowd. Sometimes, that's all that's needed for a healthy conversation and decision between the two of you.

Curfews: Teens that aren't driving have curfews like when lights and electronics need to be off, and eyes need to be shut. Teens that are driving need curfews of when to be home from a night out with friends. And the family unit needs to come first, so that all can rest and stay healthy all year long. It's good to have discussions with teens about curfews, but it's ultimately what's best for mom/dad and the rest of the family. And if teens cannot obey, they don't get their electronics, and they don't get the keys. It's that simple.

Cheetos: That's the name of this category because it's referring to junk food and what's healthy and what's not. If we don't purchase all the junk and have it in the house, at least while our kids are home, they'll grab an actual ball that's called an orange, instead of those orange balls called Cheetos. If we provide an array of healthy food, along with fun snacks, so that there's a balance, our kids won't crave junk when they're away. (At least, that's the hope!) And if we eat healthy food in front of them, they will watch and consider that what we say is what we do.

Cells: Those phones are in a category all to themselves, aren't they? Rules have to be set up when teens first get these jewels, and we must obey the same things like: No phones at dinner, only certain times at night are on the phone – the rest is family time or homework or fun time, no phones after a certain time at night. Have a family meeting of all those with phones and stick to your rules. If teens see parents on phones while in bed and not talking to one another, or their parents repeatedly send them away because they're on the phone, kids will follow suit. Our teens are watching...

Character: This is a big one, isn't it? We only have a few short years to build character in our children, and two big things affect how their character emerges: How we present their Father to them, and how we exhibit our own character in front of them. Kids need to know the attributes of their heavenly Father from the get-go – so read up and share. Teens need to see us exhibit

those character qualities like honor, honesty, love, obedience and faith. They need to hear us apologize when we fail, make an effort to never slander, and pray often about everything.

That's only five incredible C's that affect our teens and where we must set up parameters, rules and boundaries. But none of the above will be valued by our teens if we don't value them, their opinions, their desires, and listen to their hearts. We can listen and then pray together, and build relationship to where they honor us as their parents. That's huge in setting up age appropriate behavior and lifelong character and graces that will be with them for a lifetime. And prayer and patience are two virtues we parents need for sure...

An Adage a Day – I Call it Stalling – by Carole Gilbert

There's an old adage, or idiom, I find most fitting for a New Year. It's one we all need to hear and do some time or another. It's one I have to tell myself very often and I don't always like it. This adage is, "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today." I find it funny I never have any problems doing what I like to do but those things I prefer not to do, or maybe it's something someone else wants me to do, I put off. I call it "stalling." Oh, I'll get it done but it may be at the last minute, just in the nick of time, but definitely, always, with a smile. This is called procrastination.

Are you a procrastinator? I bet I could go out on a limb and say all of us procrastinate about something, sometime. Just so we don't feel like the only one, did you know, Mozart, who wrote such beautiful operas, composed his famous *Don Giovanni* the night before it was to premiere? The story says the ink had not even fully dried on the sheets of music. There wasn't even time for rehearsal. And another, Leonardo Da Vinci, took 16 years to complete the painting of his *Mona Lisa*.

Although this idiom is attributed to Benjamin Franklin first saying it, a rendition of it appears in a poem written by Hesoid, an ancient Greek poet, to his brother, Persus, an avid procrastinator, around 700 BC. He wrote, "Do not put your work off till to-morrow and the day after; for a sluggish worker does not fill his barn, nor one who puts off his work: industry makes work go well, but a man who puts off work is always at hand-grips with ruin."

And we also read in Proverbs 6: 9-10, "How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest-and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man."

There are more famous procrastinators but I want to plead my case for the non-procrastinators, those of us that lean on never putting off until tomorrow what we can do today. After all, getting ourselves in gear for doing those things we put off is nothing more than a habit we need to start. Once we start, it becomes routine, and then it becomes as easy as pie because we don't worry and think about doing it. I learned this the hard way.

All of my adult life until I was pregnant with my first child, I would procrastinate about making my bed. My mother always made our beds and when my brother and I were old enough she taught us how. I never knew why but I knew it was what I should do. Then, adulthood set in and the first thing I didn't do was make my bed. I would procrastinate about it. I'd think, "I'll do it later." But later never came. Then when I was about six months pregnant with my first child, I was in a maternity clothing shop and I overheard a customer and saleslady talking about making their beds. Go figure why I heard this?

They were discussing all the benefits of a better night's sleep from clean crisp sheets that had been made all day and tucked away from the dust in the air. The customer told

the saleslady it was the very first thing she did every morning as she got out of her bed. She said that it would then be done. How simple, I thought, but I'm six months pregnant. I turned to look at her and she was due any day, so much more pregnant than me! On my way home I thought, "If she can do it, I can do it!" That procrastination became a habit, a part of my morning routine, something I did every day, and still do to this day, not putting it off until tomorrow.

What do you procrastinate about? What do you put off until tomorrow that you can do today? Just as Arnold Schwarzenegger must not procrastinate, I will not, in this New Year. At 72 years old, he made another Terminator movie, *Terminator 6* (Dark Fate). That's a lot of physical action for a 72-year old, even with a stunt man, something we all can learn from. He always did say, "I'll be back."

So I'll get back to not procrastinating whatever it is and stay with it every day. I hope you'll join me in this resolution and "Just do it!"

Again, Happy 2020!

Tiny Living – Clarity – by Leyanne Enterline

2020! Here it is!

My husband said to me, “It’s gonna be a year of clarity!” I thought that was genius, but he said he’s pretty sure that’s what everyone is saying. 2020 vision!

Like I mentioned last month, 2019 has been a roller coaster of emotions for us. Instability, too many decisions that are not clear, losing focus, isolation, sickness...

But also, exciting adventures have happened!

As I type this, we are headed back from a two week trip to California and Hawaii! I cannot complain! But so much “baggage” came with this trip. I heard someone once say, “There’s a curse that comes with every blessing.” I thought that sounded kind of contradictory, but the more I think about it, that may be right.

I’m so thankful for my husband’s job that allows us to go with him sometimes on trips, but on the flip side there’s a lot of travel time that we’re apart. And that part I don’t dig. We’ve basically come to the conclusion that we can’t do that anymore. So unless it’s a super short trip, the kids and I will start going on every trip Brian has to go on, or he doesn’t go.

Some people can handle the long separations, but for our family it doesn’t work. Maybe the tiny trailer living has drawn us so close that when one is missing we feel like we’ve lost our arm or leg. We just can’t do it anymore.

Through the separation times; however, we have learned so much about each other and how the separation has drawn us closer...and closer to God. We truly have to rely on Him when we’re apart.

I have to do a lot of praying (not to pull my hair out) when dealing by myself with two children, two dogs, school, sports, and my own work. I truly have an appreciation for single parents. It’s tough! God designed us to raise these kiddos together and I see why!

It’s the same with Brian. Being on the road with a group of people who do not have similar beliefs can be a challenge. So lots of prayers, encouragement and accountability are a must between the two of us.

I feel like 2019 was a time of growth and now we’re ready to reap the benefits and take what we’ve learned and put it into practice and grow stronger together. Praying for 2020 vision for everyone!

This will be the year of clarity!

Amen!

A Night to Remember – Wise Wisdom – by Marcy Lytle

Kids and wisdom, those two words seem like opposites, right? Kids run out across parking lots, they scream in public places, and they pick up food from the floor and eat it. Not very wise...but they're little and don't know better! It's hard to teach wisdom to kids, but it's necessary, and a brand new year is the best time to start! They can learn what wisdom is, what it looks like, and how to acquire it...all in a fun and effective way with the family!

Wisdom is making good decision when presented with lots of options. And the only way we gain wisdom is from gaining knowledge about the world and around about the Word within us.

Preparation: Ask the family to gather, and to bring one Christmas gift for show-and-tell.

James 1:5 says this "But if any of you needs wisdom, you should ask God for it. God is generous. He enjoys giving to all people, so God will give you wisdom."

Let's stop now and ask God for wisdom (Pray together as a family)

Psalms 16:7 says this, "The way you counsel and correct me makes me praise you more, for your whispers in the night give me **wisdom**, showing me what to do next."

Have you ever heard little whispers in your ear when you're about to do something you're not quite sure is right? (Let the kids answer and give examples.)

Hand a piece of paper to two kids, and ask the other one to look as if he's copying answers...

What if you're thinking of cheating on a test at school? What might be a wise whisper that you hear in your ear? If you obey that advice to turn away from cheating, that's a wise decision.

Psalms 73:24 says, "You lead me with your secret **wisdom**. And following you brings me into your brightness and glory!"

How many love a good secret? Let's whisper a secret around the room and see if we still have it correct with the last person!

Whisper "Wisdom makes our little light shine and makes us have a happy heart," only once...and let each person whisper it to the next.

Did we get it correct? We might need to ask the first person what they actually said! We must always go back to the Word to read what God says about wisdom, so that our whispers are good and true.

Psalms 104:24 says, "O Lord, what an amazing variety of all you have created! Wild and wonderful is this world you have made, while **wisdom** was there at your side. This world is full of so many creatures, yet each belongs to you!"

Ask each person to look out the window into the yard and observe nature in the wintertime. Let them each note something spectacular in their view!

God was very wise when he made seasons. During the winter, plants go dormant and roots grow deep so that when springs arrive, blooms are everywhere! What a wise God we serve!

Psalms 119:36 say, "Cause my heart to bow before your words of **wisdom** and not to the wealth of this world."

It's enticing to want money and things and gifts. In fact, we just had Christmas and did we get EVERYTHING we wanted? Perhaps, not.

Ask each person to give thanks for one of the gifts of Christmas with a bit of show and tell time.

It's a wise person indeed that realizes that every good gift comes from above, and we should always give thanks for God's word which brings life. Gifts break, we lose interest, and we grow out of them. But God's word lasts forever!

Proverbs 2:7-8 says, "For the Lord has a hidden storehouse of **wisdom** made accessible to his godly lovers. He becomes your personal bodyguard as you follow his ways, protecting and guarding you as you choose what is right."

Did you know that famous people have bodyguards? Why do you think that is? Because they're wealthy and well-known, often crazy people try to do them harm or hurt them.

Ask two kids to act out one being a bodyguard for the other.

When we obey God's word it's like our own personal bodyguard. Loving others, being kind, listening to His whispers, obeying what he says...all of those things protect us from harm.

Pretty cool!

Wisdom is something we learn as we grow all of our lives, IF we stay in God's words and obey what he says when he whispers in our ears good choices to make. And if we aren't sure what choice to make, we can always ask Him and ask a trustworthy adult for advice.

Wisdom in 2020 – a good plan for the wise – and that's us!



YOU

STRENGTHENING YOUR CORE – The Mind of Christ – by Marcy Lytle

The man knows his own mind because his mind is one with himself.

The Spirit of God knows the things of God because he is one with God.

– Matthew Henry

We attended a crafts fair recently and there was an oracle booth near the exit, where consumers could sit down and have their “cards” read to them about their future and their lives. Those types of readings are attractive to people, because inside all of us is a spiritual being crying out for meaning and purpose for our existence. In great loss, we grasp to find the meaning and purpose of that dark season. Every human has a spiritual seeker inside their hearts/minds. It’s how we were created, a human, with a spiritual nature that seeks fulfillment in our hearts and souls.

I’ve thought before, long and hard, about the verse in the bible in I Corinthians 2 where it says we have the mind of Christ. And yet, days and weeks go by when I feel as though my mind is anything but His mind – because it’s riddled with worries, fears, questions and even doubts about who God is and why he exists, and the how’s and why’s of who he listens to and how he answers our prayers. Haven’t you pondered these things, as well?

Lately, I’ve been telling myself, when I’m having a bad day in the mind department, that I have the mind of Christ. But then I stop and ask the question, “Just what is the mind of Christ?” And if I have it, then why am I thinking things that are so contrary to what the son of God would think about his Father?

I decided to look at the entire chapter from which this verse came, which is a good thing to do, instead of pulling out one verse and trying to bank your existence on a few words without a framework. That kind of life is floppy and unsure.

In this chapter, Paul (the writer) reveals that he was afraid and “trembling” and not a great speaker, at all. He also mentions that he resolves to know nothing except Jesus and him crucified. He says there is no way to know the mind of God except through his Spirit. In fact, there is a wisdom that comes from God that we cannot know, unless his Spirit dwells within us. And his Spirit always points us back to the Father and his words, his character, and his truth.

If those who crucified Jesus had only known the character and words of God and believed them, they would not have crucified him. It was because of their lack of understanding that they crucified the One who could save them from sin and death.

That’s where I stopped and paused...

Discernment through the eyes of the Spirit, the presence of God that dwells inside of me, is what enables me to have the mind of Christ.

In other words, the days where I’m doubting and fearful and questioning and despondent are the days when I’ve looked away from the character of my Father and allowed my mind to

wander over into human judgment and parentheses. I begin to hem in circumstances in life into little boxes of my own understanding and then shake them in defiance and ask why these boxes aren't full of grace and mercy and peace.

I shake them in his face...

No one but I know the thoughts I think when I'm alone, the thoughts that reside in the deep recesses of my mind. And when those thoughts take up residence, I begin to look at God's ways and call them foolish, forfeiting peace so that I can understand and make sense. But who am I to instruct the Lord? It didn't fare well for Job, and it's not going to fare well for me, until I consider the works of his hands and the gift that came from those same hands...

Jesus. And him crucified.

It's when I'm still in the quiet of the morning and I consider the Father that gave his Son and freely gives his Spirit to reside in me that the mind of Christ begins to emerge once again.

*“What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived”—
the things God has prepared for those who love him—
these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.*

I want to see those things with my mind's eyes, don't you? Especially, as a new year begins and an old one fades from view. I want to relish and adore this Jesus on a minute by minute basis, so that I'm listening and hearing those things revealed to me by his Spirit that resides in me, that always point me back to Jesus and the gift he gave to me, so that I can live, fully sane and fully unafraid, in a fully sound mind – the mind of Christ.

Upper Quadrant – All This – by Marcy Lytle

I recently heard someone make the comment that everything we possess in life – houses, things, senses, money – will be taken from us at the end of our lives. And that comment made me sad. While it's true that all of those things will fade with time, it's sad to think about that day when they all fade away. And yet, as we age and observe our parents lose interest in things that once brought them life, and as they move into situations that require them to give up so much, it's disheartening and frankly quite scary to think we're on that same path toward that same end.

This is why we've got to live today.

I also recently read about a mom that was worrying about her son leaving for college the next day and already missing him, when her friend said, "You have him today. Enjoy." And that's so true, as well. We can enjoy what we have today, give thanks for it, and let time and old age creep in when it will...knowing full well that newness and life is on the other side.

That's the crux of my discussion in this article – today. With the passing of another year and a new one before us, we can all look at our parents, at our own future, at the possibilities of what might happen as we too get older and we can panic and fear and lose out on all of the grace we've been given today by worrying about tomorrow. I'm the world's worst at doing this. When I'm surrounded by God's beauty on any given day, whether it's sitting with my family nearby, or watching lights twinkle on the Christmas tree, I can ruin those beautiful moments with the thought of *what if this happens* to destroy all of this beauty.

I'm reading a book called *1000 Gifts* by Ann Voskamp. I'm pretty sure I'm way behind, as many of my friends read this book, years ago. It's a beautifully written book, but it's a hard read. It's because she reminds us to focus on "this" – those moment by moment graces – of "this" day. Not on what if "this" happens. That's a lot of references to the word "this!"

However, by definition "this" means a person or thing close at hand, or a specific situation just mentioned. And that is what we're supposed to be noticing, relishing, and rejoicing in.

Psalm 118:24 says *This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.*

John 15:12 says *This is my command that you love one another as I have loved you.*

John 13:35 says *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

There must be 100's of verses that have the word "this" in them, drawing our attention to the now, the close at hand, the present situation.

We've been given today. Will we rejoice or worry? Will we be glad or sad? We've been given purpose in our lives – to love others like Christ loves us. This is our reason for living. We've been given the opportunity to make a difference – by the way we love others.

I need these kinds of reminders daily.

When I wake up early in the morning, sometimes my mind races about everything. Seriously, I don't know where all of these thoughts come from, but they do! I have to physically get up, read, pray, and focus my attention on the "this" for today. Somehow, seeing all of the paths out there in the future create this big spider web in which I become entangled until I turn my focus back to this day, this moment, this grace.

When I leave my house and have just received two texts of God's grace of healing on two of my friends in the same day, I cry tears of joy. And then immediately I think of the others that haven't gotten a good report, the ones still awaiting their healing, and I cry for them, as well. Those thoughts can sink me down into a pit of despair until I then remember that this day was good news. And who's to say that tomorrow's news won't be better?

When I lay my head down on my pillow at night wondering what the next season will hold, if my kids' needs will be met, if my dad is going to make it another year, if we are going to retain our health, and if friends are going to be near, my mind can become a whirlwind of activity that just stirs up so much dust and clutter I cannot see this – the day I was just given – the day I just lived – the breaths I just breathed. This day was a blessing, and I can count those blessings as I drift off to sleep...

We know the givens in life...death and taxes...as my mom used to say. It's like the givens in a math problem, the fixed values that cannot change. But those variables that change when we insert different numbers always produce different outcomes. And those variables are the different ways we choose to give thanks in noticing this moment, this day, and this gift. Today it might be the gift of health we are giving thanks for, and tomorrow it might be the sunrise. In fact, the sunrise is a given. Variables and the givens make for endless supplies of problems that can be worked out by the master mathematician who created all things in right order and with intricate design, and variations of color and size.

This day, I'm typing this article early, and I'm giving thanks for:

- Friends that text in the early morning just to say hi
- A sweet husband that rubbed my back just before falling asleep
- Ingredients that await me on the stove to fill my house with the aroma of winter smells
- A plaid headband to wear for the holidays
- The opportunity to share and to write and to send hope to you that read

This is your day. It's your turn to give thanks. For all this.

Healthy Habits – Winter Walks – by Marcy Lytle

Walking. It's the easiest, most natural way, of keeping our health in check. It pumps the heart, it moves the body, it's fun to do alone or with friends, it's a time to notice nature, and it's so much more – it's something we can do anywhere, anytime, at any place. However, January – that month where frigid temps keep us indoors – is a hard time perhaps to find a place to walk. So there we sit, in front of the television, behind our laptop, or with phone in hand...doing nothing...except snacking.

I'm determined this winter to keep moving and walking, and I've thought of several ways to help us all get moving and stay moving even when days are short and temps are cold! And then when I'm done, I can sit by the fire, put my feet up, and relax!

- **The mall** – I never thought I'd see the day when we joined the ranks of mall walkers, but it's actually a great way to exercise. We often determine that we will walk twice around without stopping in any stores. We look at the stores, the people, the sights and we think about where we might want to stop on our third journey around.
- **Target** – There have been days that we've walked every aisle in Target at a fairly fast pace, just to get in our exercise for the evening. Maybe the cameras pick up this "strange couple" and employees laugh, but we enjoy it! Again, we walk every aisle and then go back and pick up what we need AFTER the walk is over. Target is a big place, and there are lots of aisles, and it takes a while!
- **At home** – Instead of walking in the house, we dance. We either watch YouTube dancing videos or just put on music and move for a certain amount of time. This gets the heart pumping and is actually quite enjoyable and makes us both laugh. It's good for our hearts!
- **Outside** – If the weather isn't too frigid, we bundle up with scarves and hats and coats and walk anyway. We find a trail, we pick a day that's not too windy, and we pack a thermos of something to drink and we go. It's fun walking trails, even when the green of spring is not yet here, and we like hearing the crackle of dead branches under our feet. And we pick a day when the sun's out so at least there's a little warmth to be felt!
- **Up the stairs** – Perhaps your house has a set of stairs, or there are stairs (or even an escalator) at a store you frequent, or stairs at your office. For one day's walking activity, take the stairs off and on, several times a day. Get your heart pumping and purpose to not ride the elevator, and to go up and down with your actual legs so that you get in some movement and muscle workouts!
- **Around a square** – Take a winter's drive to a small town that has a square, and pick a day that's not too blustery. Hand in hand, walk the square several times, and end the walk with a stop in a quaint coffee shop or diner. What a fun outing you'll have while you exercised, as well!
- **An outdoor shopping center** – Even though it's cold, you'll have places to enter as you walk. Determine a distance you want to walk and keep track of it, jutting inside stores when you're freezing, just to warm up, and then move again. Park your car far from the stores and walk from strip to strip. It might be fun to take \$10 cash each and see what you can find along your walk that day.

Make walking an adventure that you both enjoy, with your spouse or with a friend, or even go it alone. Walk in different places and vary up the scenery. Walk at different paces, up and down, or around the town. Use those seven ideas above and try one each day of the week! Whatever you do, this winter season, keep your sneakers by the door and walk some more...

Life Right Now – I Resolve – by Bethany Gomez

First things, first. Happy New Year! Also, I just want to wish everyone luck, including myself, when trying to change the number 19 to a number 20. I can't believe another year has come and gone and I can't quite get over the fact that it is a new decade. Crazyness.

I wasn't sure I wanted to make any New Year's resolutions this year. The times that I have, I have failed miserably at them. *So why make any*, I thought? Because even when I fail at keeping my resolutions, there remains the fact that I strived to accomplish them and through the very striving I learned something through it or grew a little bit.

In 2020:

I resolve to get more sleep; to put my night owl ways aside. I have a bad habit of not only getting into bed later than I should, but then picking up my phone one last time. Yes, I am well aware of how unhealthy that is. I have read articles and heard people talk about the negative side effects of screen time before bed, so that is why I am bound and determined to stop scrolling and start snoozing. I have a feeling I will be a happier, healthier version of myself when I do.

I resolve to make a dentist appointment. I am not going to tell you the last time I went to the dentist that is because I can't remember when that was. Am I a little afraid of the dentist? Yes. Am I afraid of how much it will cost? You bet. You know that saying. If it's not broken don't fix it. Well, I have kind of adopted that as my reason for not going to the dentist. If there is no pain happening in my mouth then why go. I am totally aware that that is so bad on so many levels. There are at least three things I need to start telling myself about the dentist: he is not the enemy, going to the dentist is preventative care - not "wait till something goes wrong" care, and it will cost less if I go sooner rather than wait for an emergency tooth extraction or something of that nature.

I resolve to be better at budgeting my money. I recently had to add a car payment to my long list of bills and with that came an increase in my insurance bill. Sometimes I am struck with so much worry over the possibility of there not being enough money to pay all of my bills. It blinds me to the truth that God has always and will always provide everything I need. He is a good father that gives good things to those that ask. I will keep praying for provision, but at the same time do my part by being wise with what is ultimately God's money.

I resolve to be a better neighbor. I want my love for others to increase. I don't want to withhold kindness from anyone. One of the last movies I saw was *It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. First of all, it is a wonderful movie. Tom Hanks was perfect as Mr. Rogers. The film had a lasting impact on me just like the Mr. Rogers show had a lasting impact on me growing up. His kindness and inclusiveness is something I admire. One of my favorite quotes from him is, "To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is. Right here and now."

My final resolution is not just for this year, it is a life resolution.

I resolve to strengthen my walk with the Lord. I pray that God will put in me a strong desire to read His word. I want to spend more time getting to know Jesus and to find out what He wants me to do next. I struggle with not wanting to stray too far off the path that I stall out and don't budge for fear of straying off of it. I fear that I am going to somehow miss where I am supposed to go next.

Psalm 119:105 says,

“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light to my path.”

If I just stay in His word and take the time to hear His words my path will be illuminated and not dark where I cannot see where I am going.

No matter what happens in 2020, whether I accomplish some or all of my resolutions, I can't do any of it without Jesus and I don't ever want to.

Created for Life - Running Toward Freedom – by Ginny Hurley

This has been a season of incredible stories of miracles and incredible testimonies of abundant transformations. At the same time I hear about a stunning victory, I receive a text or email to pray for someone going through extreme trauma and difficult circumstance. Recently, I went through a surprise surgery and found myself in a new circumstance that I had never experienced. My family has experienced various trials and trying circumstances requiring daunting warfare, but I had never had any physical trial or ordeal. As I was being taken to the surgical area I can say that I truly felt the comfort and protection of the Lion and the Lamb. I felt held and drawn into a new level of trust. I was not afraid.

Patience has never been my best trait and being commanded to a period of non-movement, I quickly realized how much I can learn from the place of, 'be still, rest, and wait.' To say that I passed with flying colors would be a far truth, yet I really did embrace God's goodness through trials. That He makes us stronger through difficulties is true. It just is! As my faith is stretched, it grows.

As I was watching the movie, *Harriett*, based on the true story of Harriett Tubman, my heart pounded as her feet flew swiftly through the woods escaping cruel captors, literally running toward freedom. I found my feet moving back and forth and calling out, "Go, go, go!" I knew the story, but the picture of her hearing God's voice and submitting completely toward His directions, gave me such joy and excitement. I realized how Harriett was born for just such a time in history. Her bravery and ability to listen to God's voice transformed this nation and saved hundreds from the horrors of slavery.

At one point she is told that her desire to save more was absolutely impossible! The fact that she had no map, no directions, and couldn't read did not dissuade her and her reply was that the Lord would show her. And He did! Time after time! Nothing could stop her and she wasn't afraid of death, as she had already experienced so many hardships that freedom's call rang louder.

After the movie, I would close my eyes and see running feet, pounding toward freedom. I felt the Lord say that we are in similar days ourselves and that He has created us for just such a time in our age and culture. Our call to set the captives free and break down the barriers of hatred and sin is here right now. Now I hear the pounding of horses' hooves and am quite convinced that He is speaking very clearly. We just need to wait, listen, and obey when we hear.

Our trials and tribulations have made us strong. They have built our faith and given us a testimony. We have been through many and various circumstances and He has prepared us for courage and obedience. These are the days spoken of long ago, and those least in society are coming first. They are flocking toward freedom, and more will come. They are advancing toward relationship, love, and freedom.

Therefore, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Nothing is too difficult for Him. Listen to the running feet and the pounding of hooves toward freedom. He's calling us into intimately hearing His perfect voice.

“My fellow believers, when it seems as though you are facing nothing but difficulties, see it as an invaluable opportunity to experience the greatest joy that you can! For you know that when your faith is tested it stirs up power within you to endure all things. And then as your endurance grows even stronger it will release perfection into every part of your being until there is nothing missing and nothing lacking.”



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Connection, Please – by Bekah Holland

If you are anything at all like me...or most people who know other people and celebrate Christmas, right now, you are just plain old stick-a-fork-in-me DONE. I don't think I remember the last time I sat down for more than 10 minutes before bed. In fact, currently, I'm standing in my kitchen, making a pot of gumbo for my husband's holiday party, meal prepping for the rest of the week because I didn't do it on Sunday (it's currently Wednesday, by the way), on a conference call for work, while writing my (extremely) late article about the joys of marriage.

So yeah, done.

What's funny is, every single year I look forward to Christmas time and the beginning of a new year. I love the lights, the movies that I keep hidden until Thanksgiving and the joy that comes from giving and fresh starts. But honestly, by the time we make it past Christmas morning, I'm ready to hibernate. Way too often, I'm so busy that I forget that the person I chose to do life with 14 years ago has received about 5 minutes of my attention in the last month. And if I'm being perfectly honest with you (and myself), if I'm not careful, time with my husband can feel like just one more item on a checklist that I'm constantly failing to complete.

And just so you know that I am an equal opportunity destroyer of love and joy, my daughter yelled at me tonight that I never check to see if she's okay, and she says she is most definitely not okay...not that I asked. I of course bristled at that, reminding her of the approximately 147 questions I ask her every day, trying to find out more about her day and her life, without much success other than the perfunctory 12 year old responses of, "Fine." But my questions aren't the right ones that make her feel valued and understood. And that's on me.

I need to slow down and see what is meaningful to my husband and my kids, not just checking in from an emotional distance. At this point, I'm semi confident that the only non-neglected member of this household is our big clumsy dog Harley, who forces his way into my face regardless of my busy schedule and nudges me until I love him back.

So how do I deal with these kinds of less than warm fuzzy self-revelations?

Currently I'm eating my feelings, which taste a lot like Ghirardelli chocolate and sadness. However, I'm going to make some suggestions for you and me and whoever else feels like they're missing the mark during and post holidays. Stop. Just stop. I find myself busy, while everyone else is lounging on our wonderfully cozy couch. I need to join them more. Or else bring my people in from their comfy spots to be with me. **Because, people, we need connection.**

That word has been resonating in my heart for weeks. We are most definitely connected to Netflix, and Disney + (I mean, seriously), our phones, our email, social media, our work. But the more we're connected to the outside world, the less connected we seem to be with those right here in the same room (okay fine, rarely is anyone ever in the same room in my house). And maybe I'm just talking crazy. Maybe I'm the only one feeling like there isn't ever enough of me to go around and never enough time to just be with my husband and my kids because my list is never done. But just maybe I'm not alone on this island.

So here's my plan. This year, we try to make some changes in the way we do things and what things we choose to give our time to. Now I'm not talking about New Year's Resolutions. Because I hate them. They rate somewhere around laundry on my scale of things I love. So

I'm not proposing we sit down and make a list filled with things we aren't going to do and then feel guilty about not doing. Do we really need another useless list?

1. Run a marathon
2. Lose 20 lbs
3. Give up sugar (kidding-that's never been on my list)

Unless that's your thing. If it is, then you go make that list and cross off that marathon! I'll be your biggest fan, most likely while eating the junk food you gave up. But if not, how about we just pick the thing that's the most important. For me, that's connecting with my husband and my kids and the people in my inner circle. Because I know that the laundry and the dishes, the cleaning and every other inconsequential thing will still be there tomorrow, or the next day, or Thursday night when I can't stand the mess any longer.

However, we aren't promised a single extra moment, so when I look back on my life, I want to look back and know that I took advantage of the time I had. I want my husband to know that I was intentional about the time and space I made for us and our marriage. I want my kids to look back on their childhood and know that despite my mistakes and messes, I always did my best to love them in a way that made each of them feel irreplaceable, safe and understood.

This is our year for connection.

This is our year for doing one thing better than before; for not beating ourselves up when we forget, but just taking a deep breath, owning our humanity and shortcomings, and then trying again. And again. And again. Maybe while we're working on connecting more with the ones we love, we'll also find that we have more connection with God and even ourselves.

"Paradise has never been about a place.

It exists in moments.

In connection. In flashes across time."

Victoria Erickson

MARRIAGE – Date Night Fun – Black and White

Isn't black and white a great combo? I mean, one can add a pop of color and an outfit shines with the black and white background. A black and white "affair" is where people are dressed to the nines and there's a feast and fun for all. Black type on the pages of a book invites us in to a story and beyond. And black and white cookies? Well they're the best! If you haven't tried them, please do!

For January date ideas, we're sending out black and white ideas for you to try – for fun – to get your new year started off on a fun note – with a little pop of color! Which one will you try?

Black and white all over – Remember that joke "What's black and white and "red" all over?" The answer is a newspaper! ("read" all over.) So why not actually purchase a local newspaper (yeah, the paper kind) and read it from cover to cover, pick a place to eat that's advertised in it, use a coupon, do the puzzle, read stories aloud to each other, and plan your entire date from the black and white print before you! How fun would that be?

Black and white cookies – I mentioned these above, because they are seriously one of my favorite cookies ever. We first had them in New York. They're not so fast to make, because they require icing each side with black and white icing. So buy the ingredients, make a date in the kitchen together and bake some, decorate them, then sit down for a winter movie by the fire and enjoy. Here's the recipe.

<https://www.food.com/recipe/new-york-city-black-and-white-cookies-180805>

Black and white outfits – You know where I'm going with this. Go shopping together, in your closet, or in the stores, and pick out a black and white outfit for a night out on the town! Find a concert to attend, a sporting event, or a fine dining establishment and dress up and go! Look your best, feel your best, and offer your best to each other.

Black and white with a pop of color – January is a great month for a celebration of the new year. So invite a couple or two over for a black and white affair – and ask them to bring a decoration of a solid color and a food of that same color. Add those "pops" to your décor and your table, and enjoy a night together playing a game that involves dice. (You know, those black/white cubes?)

<https://www.thespruce.com/best-dice-games-4164423>

Black and white type – Go to the bookstore for date night and purchase a calendar with black/white squares and fill in outings and vacations and all sorts of things in the spaces provided. Purchase a new book with black/white type and sit and read together in the coffee shop, while you sip on a dark roast or hot chocolate. Purchase a piece of dark or white chocolate and enjoy bits of that along with your hot drink. And finally, end the night praying together about those "gray" areas that you're facing this new year – decisions that you need to make – and trust him to make it as clear and black and white.

After 40 Years – In Sickness – by Marcy Lytle

I'll be the first to admit it. I'm not a good nurse. You don't want me as your nurse when you're ill or hurting. I faint when you look like you're in pain, and I'm impatient and gag at the sight of blood. I am so thankful for nurses and doctors, and even more thankful that I am not one!

However, we are called to love our spouses in sickness...and in health. I cannot even imagine what people go through with spouses that are chronically ill. I have several friends in that season, and I pray for them often. But we ALL have spouses that are ill from time to time. It cramps our style, they can't help us out like they usually do, and they need attention. All of those things require us to slow down and be still and just love.

Every winter season it seems that one of us gets a sinus infection or a flulike bug, and we're down for a couple of days. He recently had this, and we actually had to stay home one night – imagine that! I'm used to getting out each evening, since I work at home, and this night we needed to stay in because he wasn't feeling well. Like I admitted above, I'm not a good nurse or a patient one.

However, that night we got out a board game. *An American Trivia* board game. We watched a Hallmark movie together. I wrapped presents in front of the fire. I even made myself a fun snack, and he sat all cozied up in a blanket on the chair. We were together, in the house, just chilling.

Some of you may be thinking, "We do that all the time!" But for me, it's hard for me to sit still and be present in the moment...at home. I enjoy being out on the town, seeing and doing and experiencing something new and fun.

- He's been with me when my mom was sick for weeks.
- He's nursed me through long nights of coughs that required shots of honey/lemon.
- He's helped calm my fears by praying for me and holding me close.
- He's listened when I just needed to unload all of the heavy cares of the day.

He's just better at loving in that way than I am, but I have to learn. I have to give in seasons sickness, as well as in health. *Always*. And in that loving and being still and noticing and caring, and stroking and settling, and praying and again loving...we move closer.

I'm so thankful that he got better, and we're back to outings again. But I'm very aware that there are many people sitting by the bed of a spouse, waiting and serving and loving, who are weary. There are some that have no good prognosis on which to hang hope, while they wait and they sit by the one who is sick. And then there's the spouse that's the one who is sick. He or she is tired of the illness, feels bad that he cannot help, and longs to feel better so he can once again be a part of the duo that lives and moves together.

The longer we live together the more opportunities we will have to serve each other in sickness AND in health. We can make each other feel worse by our impatience and harsh words (I've done that), we can feel pitiful that we are causing the other so much worry by our pain, or we can choose to pull out the board game, light the fire, and make a fun snack.

Who wants to be a shut in, or serve a sick spouse, or be an ill partner? NO ONE. EVER. But neither do I want to be the one that makes my hurting husband feel worse when he's already hurting...EVER.

I'm praying for you today, whoever you are, if part of your duo is sick. I'm praying for healing. And I'm praying that while you wait that you find the strength that comes in the waiting...from the Servant of all servants...that serves you.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Simple Truths - Turning Points – by Erica Simmons

I have never used the holidays in my articles, but with the New Year here I thought I would use this month's article to just highlight the God-things from 2019.

God wants nothing more from us than for us to lean into Him to truly desire Him and to learn to trust Him. That's it. That's all He wants. As I look back at 2019 and all the ups and downs, I notice the last couple months are surrounded by two things: Joy and Peace.

How did I get here?

Let's take a look back at some key turning points in my walk with my Heavenly Father for the answer to that question:

I am a very analytical person and I love math, which has taught me to be very structured and organized and deliberate in finding answers to problems. Because of this, I approach my faith with the same type of mentality. I often ask God to just reveal to me the steps to this walk with Him and I will take them.

I wanted to know the solution to effective prayer, to healing, to walking this life as He wanted me to and I wanted it all in 5 simple steps so I could easily implement them. I would have to say that destroying that way of thinking was the first turning point, although it was not the first word of knowledge I received. I will explain that a little later. Finally, realizing and accepting that there was no quick reveal master road map to this place of Joy and Peace was the beginning and the end **to** Joy and Peace.

Because I was so desperate to know what I needed to do, I leaned into God in a way I had never done previously and that was continuously. I have had amazing seasons with God, I have had amazing moments with God and I have time after time drifted away from the very thing that produced those moments: *time in His presence*. The last few months of 2019 I consistently spent time with Him and this new season has been prolonged and more fruitful because of it.

Stepping up and volunteering to lead a Life Group was another significant turning point. I knew God had been preparing me for a couple of years to do this and when the opportunity arose, I stepped out in faith. This new responsibility naturally came with the task of preparing lessons for the group time together. These times turned out to be the starting points of consistently spending time with God as I prepared.

My church's goal to create an outreach list was another turning point for me this year. One of the people I had on my list was a co-worker who I was in the process developing a friendship with. She and I had always connected and over the last few years our relationship began to deepen. She shared her story with me of how she used to go to church and things just happened, and she pulled away. Because she had seen Christians do, say and live their life contrary to the word of God, I had be more conscientious of how I lived in front of her. Don't get me wrong. I take my daily life commitment to Christ very seriously, but we all have areas we let slip and can definitely do a much better job. To woo her back to God, I have found that I now stop and make the conscious choice to choose to leave areas of my life more aligned with the Word. It has been great for me and I love what God is doing in her life as well.

Lastly, (because this list could go on and on) is truly understanding how to pray. This came for me from two different books recommended by a friend. The first *Prayer* by Richard Foster,

tackled an issue with my conception about prayer, which goes back to my original confession of doing it the right way. Here is the paragraph that just broke the chains of bondage I had been living with in regards to prayer.

The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives – altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us will all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith or anything. That is what grace means and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.

I felt the tumblers in the lock align and the chains of bondage over my prayer life fall off. I can't explain it any better than that. It just made sense to me and freed me from my struggles of having to pray the perfect prayer and thinking it had to be just so, in order for God to answer it. The second book *Praying Circles around your Children*, by Mark Batterson, was so inspirational that it is now the center of a small and hopefully growing group of women getting together and praying for our children. It is one of those books that I wish I had when the boys were younger.

Now back to my earlier statement about my first word of knowledge. About two years ago I had a "rebuke the enemy show down" in my car on the way to work about a generational curse that was taking hold in my children. I will never forget the night when the Holy Spirit roused me from my sleep and it felt in my spirit like the chains of that curse were broken. That day in the car was one of the early, if not the first, turning points in learning to live a life of Joy and Peace. You see, putting the enemy in his place was critical. It required me to know the Word because that is the only thing that will cause him to flee. It will not keep him from trying to come back, and that is why we have to stay diligent. We have to continue to press into God and His Word as they are what we need to attack in battle.

So that road map I desperately wanted?

I had it the whole time.

I leaned into Him, I truly desired Him and I learned to trust Him. As Richard Foster said in the excerpt, it does not have to be perfect, but it does need to be sincere and He knows the place that we seek Him from. So as I say good-bye to a wonderfully blessed 2019, I look forward to a more fruitful 2020 because I am going to make sure it is overflowing with time in His presence.

Firmly Planted – Expectations – by Dina Cavazos

Right now, this moment, is a moment of peace—a moment of blessed silence. For the moment, the weed-eaters, the dog next door, and the teenagers revving their cars are taking a break. As I sit in my peaceful garden to write this, I'm relishing this moment because there are too few of them. The sounds of the moment are water gurgling, birds chirping, wings whooshing as they fly from one feeder to another, some stopping to get a drink. I hear the seed heads of Inland Sea Oats rustling, and, strangely, a cedar wax wing pecking at the fence like a woodpecker! Perfect weather, sunny but cool—God's gift to Texas this moment in December, and I'm so grateful.

As I said, these moments are few...as I finished the last sentence the neighbor let her dog out and the blessed silence is broken. It will be cooling down soon anyway, so I'm moving inside to my new prayer room—my new favorite spot besides the garden.

In between the to-do list of life, I've been looking back on the past year and considering moments that, strung together, reveal a slice of truth for my life—like a page in a personalized book—a truth revealed by God, if I'm willing to receive it. My life, like yours, is a complex book with many pages, but in all honesty and transparency, the past year is a page filled with many moments of disappointment, anger, and resentment. Feeling betrayed and baffled, judgment crept in. In retrospect, I see how God navigated me through the maze of moments, patiently waiting for me to realize the futility of expectations and the wisdom of accepting reality. If this sounds vague, I'll say it plain and simple: I had expectations of people that weren't met—expectations that people would be "different", more like Jesus, like we're *supposed* to be. I do believe this is a problem common to Man, and that's why this seemingly negative story is in the Encouragement section!

When will I accept with grace and hope that *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?"* Jeremiah 17:9

In retrospect, I see that in one situation I invited disappointment by creating my own expectations of how God was going to work things out. Instead of leaving things entirely in his hands, knowing he works in hidden ways, I presumptuously expected "godly" people to play a part I had assigned them. In my mind I created a scenario of how God was going to answer my prayer and when it didn't happen, I blamed people for not doing what I expected. I've had many moments dwelling on something from the past—decisions made by God-loving people had devastating consequences on the lives of their long-time friends and their church. In between the major disappointments were repetitive moments of people failing to understand, not making time, constantly forgetting the important things, rejecting someone close to me, not being kind or thoughtful...missing the mark.

As I consider all these moments strung together, a slice of truth emerges. In the wrestling with negative emotions and a sense of betrayal, choosing to forgive but not feeling it, questioning and judging...my own frail humanity screams its imperfection. The reality that we all miss the mark is clear. The truth that Jesus came for this very reason is clear. He is the perfect balance of grace and truth and no human can ever achieve that, but it's easy to forget as we live our lives day by day with others. In moments of personal revelation Jesus reveals himself as real,

imparting transformational grace and truth. My expectation can only be in him, anything else will disappoint. Let's pray for each other to know him, to hear him, to abide in him.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Moving Forward – New Beginnings – by Pam Charro

Another year is almost over and another is about to begin. Most, for me, have gone by in a blur, but this past year has been one new beginning after another.

I made a major decision in my personal life almost exactly a year ago which required a complete renovation, and I spent 2019 walking it out. I also started a new job last spring at a hotel which didn't actually open until a few months ago. The work involved in both areas of my life had some amazing similarities.

One of the things they had in common was both seemed to take forever! Before the hotel opened, we were all cleaners, regardless of the job we had been hired to do. I would show up every day in workout clothes and a ponytail, look around at all of the construction dust, and feel like we were never actually going to open. It seemed I would spend the rest of my life scraping paint and cleaning up dust. My personal life also appeared to be nothing but a shapeless, chaotic mess with no relief in sight. Everything seemed uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and unrewarding. It was hard, most of this past year, to dream very big.

Eventually, the hotel started having furniture brought in, and I could see things beginning to take shape. It still seemed like a distant dream to think I would not always be cleaning, but the lobby of the hotel no longer resembled a blizzard. In the same way, I started feeling some order and accomplishment in my personal life. It still seemed lonely and unfamiliar, but I felt a little bit of pride in how far I had come.

Life was no longer completely formless.

Another similarity between work and home was, even when we finally did open, there was still so much hard work ahead! At my job, we have gone through one transition after another in the past few months. I remember thinking several times that I just wanted to get through the year so I could feel like I knew what I was doing and things would finally start to settle down. But, here we are at the beginning of a new year, and so much still feels unstable and unfamiliar.

I have had to learn so much in the past year. Life has changed and so have I. I have felt completely lost, miserable, exhausted beyond words, without resources and without hope. I broke down sobbing while trying to write this. But the beautiful thing about a new job, a new life, and God himself, is that the rebuilding continues regardless of how I think or feel. While nothing in any area of my life has gone or turned out the way I thought it would, I am not only excited about the future; I am also more confident than ever that, with God, I can handle whatever lies ahead. Both the hotel where I work and my personal life have become beautiful works of art. I couldn't be more proud of both.

Best of the Mess – Weighty Comments – by Ashley Zanella

Now that everyone's New Year's resolutions are set, and usually they are surrounding fitness or weight loss, I want to take a step back and talk about a big frustration I've experienced as part of my baby making and weight loss journey.

As I started to put on the pounds with my first pregnancy, I could tell a shift in how people would interact with me. Some would say things like, "Don't worry, the pounds fly off when you start breastfeeding," or "You still look great..." What do you mean by "still?" I knew exactly what they were talking about and why they would make these comments. But let me tell you, it was freaking CONSTANT.

Then about seven months after my second son, once the pounds started coming off, another shift in those same interactions happened. I would hear, "Oh WOW, you look great!" And "You look so skinny!!" Or "You've lost a lot of weight, I can tell! Like wow, a lot!"

Cue red face. Cue eye roll. Cue gag emoji. I still get these comments literally every single time I see certain people. It makes me grind my teeth. It truly, truly irks me. This is one of my, what Marcy calls, "whiny windows." It bugs me for so many reasons, but maybe not for the reasons you might think.

Now let me take a step back and say I do not think these people have *meant* harm by these comments. I do think they just have a little bit of an unhealthy perspective of the human body and what a healthy boundary should look like in regards to commenting on another woman's body. Because yes. Most of these comments came from other women.

Some of you may be reading this and wondering why any of those comments would cause frustration. "They were being nice, encouraging." That's okay. Some of you may be triggered right now and all frustrated right alongside me because you see where I'm coming from already. So let me share that perspective...

First, it is a natural, God-given fact that a women's body has to grow and expand to hold another life. To expand on that, if you see a pregnant woman, her body is going through unspeakable changes and every woman is affected by that differently. Some, like myself, are so sick during pregnancy that it literally takes all their energy just to go to the bathroom. Forget the hair. Forget the makeup. Forget making any of the healthy meals her body has become used to. Forget the workouts she had on lockdown. The pounds compile from there.

Second, not all women lose weight during breastfeeding. In fact many women, such as myself, have the complete opposite effect. Our body holds onto the fat because it is now fuel to producing that precious milk. That weight doesn't budge until the milk is gone.

But most importantly, why is it so acceptable for one of the first things we notice about another woman, one of the first things we feel comfortable commenting on, is her weight?

Why do we feel okay blurting out that, "Oh you'll lose that baby weight when you breastfeed?" When we don't actually know that to be true?

Why is it that we can look at a woman who has ALWAYS been beautiful, and tell her in admiration, now that she's lost a bit of weight, that she looks "so skinny" or be astonished with how "great" she looks because she's lost some weight?

We feel comfortable with this because it is a cultural norm. And it's a cultural norm that I want to reject. These comments may seem flattering, and I always accept them graciously. But in reality, they grind my darn gears because my fitness journey is for MY health, not for your visual pleasure. When you comment on how much weight I've lost, it just makes me feel doomed because no, I'm not done having kids. And now the next time I start packing on the pounds, I'm going to know what you really think about how I look.

Then I see my friends who are still on their weight loss journeys or maybe those that aren't in a place to prioritize that right now in their life. Or those that have health conditions that make weight loss near impossible. Or those that really just do not care. They are gorgeous to me, but I can't help but see their faces drop when you comment on my "success." Then I see my friends who battle with eating disorders, who hear these comments and are triggered again into a black hole that they just fought out of.

I didn't want to make anyone feel bad by writing this. I needed to write this because I want us all to think a little bit more the next time we go to make these kinds of comments. The way we look is not everything. The weight our friend, co-worker, or family member is losing or gaining is not about us, nor is it for us. There are many other ways to have a conversation, and it does not need to be and really should never be about their most recent body changes. Don't feel bad if you've made these comments to a loved one, just recognize how it may not be the best approach going forward.

God bless, love y'all!

Real Stories – This is Life – by Debra Gomez

I first met this couple several decades ago at church and fell in love with their entire family as we both grew our families together. In fact, their youngest daughter and our son are only one day apart. And who knew that years later, that same daughter would marry a guy, and then that guy's sister would marry our son! God did. And that's the beauty of this story Debra is sharing with you. In God's wisdom and kindness he brought our families together, and he's still bringing families together through Peter and Debra Gomez, in a whole new experience of life...

A long-time friend of our family, Cynthia Borsellino, told me about a place called Hope Rising, when I participated in the very first 1012 Dance Upon Injustice Movement. Hope Rising is located in Brenham, Texas and we just recently became foster parents at this child placing agency, now that our own kids are all grown and gone. We live in one of the foster homes out in the country on 15 acres, with four teenage girls, four dogs, 10 horse, two goats, and 15 chickens! This is our new life...

Before moving here, we met with the director, the horse-trainer, and a board member at Hope Rising. We fell in love with the place and with the fact that they offered equine therapy with the girls. Not only that, but they help and support their house parents and the girls with trauma-informed counseling with licensed mental health professionals, an online computer school that the girls attend, a boutique with clothing and personal care items, respite caregivers! What a great Christian organization, we realized that Hope Rising is! We found out that pre-placement screenings take place so that a traumatized girl can function in a normal foster home.

Of course, we didn't consider this new move lightly. Plenty of fear and trepidation was involved in making such a big change after being "empty nesters" and being stuck in our ways for so long. We wondered how in the world we would be able to stay in touch with our own children and grandchildren if we moved away from them. The commitment to these girls at Hope Rising is huge, and it would be hard to go back to raising teenagers – teenagers that don't know you at all! However, Peter and I have been married for 37 years and want to spend the next 5-10 years making an eternal difference for the kingdom of God – where young people can come to know Christ and their true worth by giving them a chance to start again...on the right path.

What does our day look like at Hope Rising? It's very busy and complex. We work with caseworkers, staff members, an online virtual school and have out-of-town visits for the girls. Sometimes there are court appointments, meetings with CASA mentors, doctors' appointments, cooking, cleaning, feeding animals and giving the girls life skills. We are on the go providing fun for the girls as well, taking them to movies and to bowl, to the park, and providing all that they need (and want.)

One of our biggest challenges as a couple is communicating by staying connected to the Holy Spirit and each other. We have so many different players in these girls' lives. It is quite intimidating to talk to caseworkers, law enforcement people and attorneys. However, we've realized that they are just people like us, and that they like what they see in our home and what we are trying to do. Scheduling all of these meetings is daunting, as well as all of the other activities.

One of the most enjoyable things about our new place is the setting. It's so pretty. We started attending Cowboy Church in Brenham, where great people attend, and we have connected with a small group called a "Round Pen!" The concept of a round pen is that it is a corral with no corners, because it limits the ways and options for a horse to avoid being trained. It also focuses on the development of trust between horse and trainer. We feel like this is also how God is making us grow – forcing us to learn and serve where otherwise we may not – if we were on our own without outside pressure.

Some of the cool things we've had the privilege of experiencing are helping the girls learn to drive, visiting colleges to enlarge their horizons, helping them in court appearances, getting them to life skills' classes, teaching them cooking lessons and sharing our own lives on a personal and daily basis. This is life to us.

For all of us, God's timing is now, his wisdom is present, and his provision is always there when we step up for his kingdom. Despite how difficult it is, getting out of our comfort zones can be accomplished, and there are hidden treasures we cannot see when we do. For us, this particular ministry time is the culmination of everything we've done in our lives. We are utilizing untapped abilities. It does take humility, maturity and God's wisdom to see everyone and everything by the Spirit.

Remember us when you pray! We want these girls to truly come to know and trust their One and Only true source – Jesus!

Financial donations to us personally are always welcome. We are running a home where we buy groceries, fix things, pay bills, and buy things for our new family. Visit our website to see our need list. We run a boutique of nice teenage (up to date!) fashionable clothing from workout wear, to coats, dresses, jeans, shoes and more...



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – All the Lights – by Marcy Lytle

I absolutely love the holiday season, except for the fact that it goes by so quickly. I hear so many people express that same observation, every single year. And this past holiday season was no exception. I often even anticipate with dread the weeks after Christmas is over, because of the fact that it flies by and I want to savor every moment just a bit longer...

But this past December I realized that one of the biggest things I love and that I then miss when the holidays are over are the lights! I love the lights! From the time the first house on our street hangs them on the roofs or around their windows, it makes me smile. I love it when Christmas trees are lit on little town squares, with all the people gathered around to count down and watch the moment they shine! I light candles, I have battery operated lights strung or stuffed into many little Christmas objects, and we string lights around our own tree, and I sit back and...*sigh*...it's so beautiful. The lights are breathtaking and they draw me in to sit a while and just gaze at the sparkle...

And then, January 1 hits and it seems there's this mad rush to get back to the norm, put away the mess, and get the house back in order. I feel that way, as well. But I also enjoy having some of the winter décor linger a bit longer (like snowmen and even trees!) and this year, I've decided to let the lights remain for a bit longer, as well. Probably not on the outside of the house, but above the fireplace especially, I want to enjoy those flickers. I've even thought of ways to incorporate lights throughout the year so that the warmth and smiles that they bring is never extinguished!

In February, I think I'll add a few twinkles of red around a heart, and for sure keep candles aflame.

In March, it might be fun to check our lights out in the garden, so that they twinkle at sunset and usher in spring.

In April, why not enhance the light show around the theme of Easter, with flowers in vases, also adorned with a few twinkles?

In May, I'd like to purchase a few summer scented candles and place them around, to replace the pumpkins and apples and vanillas of fall/winter. Perhaps sage and rosemary and lavender scents will be present, as they burn and the fragrance fills our home.

In June, summer lights enjoyed in outdoor concerts on the green, especially the lights of our downtown city as they come on at night will be enjoyed!

In July, of course, the lights of the night that come with fireworks are a must!

In August, it's hot and sultry, so morning lights on the porch before it's hot might be enjoyable with him.

In September, the start of the fall season begins and all of the lights and flickers that we love so much will begin appearing everywhere as we start preparing for that fast and furious countdown til the end of the year once again.

Jesus called himself the Light of the World, perhaps because people are drawn to the light. No one wants to sit in darkness where things aren't visible, we end up with bruises from the unseen, and scary things come at us to whisper doom and gloom. We are born to enjoy the light, be the light, and spread the light. It's why we exist.

So if you're also a little gloomy that the holiday lights are being packed up and put away until December, why don't you too let a few of those strands linger...and purpose to let a little light shine throughout the year? I plan to, and I'm excited about it.

FRESH THYME – Fruitless – by Marcy Lytle

“Look at that fruitless pear tree,” he said to me. He has pointed those little trees out to me before, and each time I’ve wondered why in the world a tree would be called a fruit tree, but produce no fruit? What’s that all about?

I decided to investigate.

Fruitless pear trees have showy blooms and color but no fruit production. They are low maintenance, so they pop up all over in urban and home landscapes. They are shallow-rooted and can grow most anywhere, in any soil. Again, this makes them a popular choice for landscapes. A few can produce fruit, but they are inconsequential – and eaten by birds! These trees do not have a strong branch structure so are susceptible to wind and strong rain. In fact, those types of storms may knock them down!

But you can read all of that for yourself...if you google “fruitless pear trees.” And if you read further on these fruitless trees, you’ll find that they cause all sorts of problems. In fact, one tree can spawn hundreds of evil progeny!

But their white flowers are so pretty!

Reading further, it’s found that they don’t pollinate with themselves, which is why no fruit is produced, but they do pollinate everything else and cause thorny thickets that choke out the life of stately trees that we DO want! And they stink!

I had no idea!

It’s hard to get rid of a fruitless pear tree. It’s a battle and can take up to two years to win the battle with their root systems.

I don’t need to really write much and tell you how this story of the fruitless pear relates when we compare it to a fruitless life. But I’ll write my thoughts anyway, just in case...

Some say, as Christians, that we are content to just love God and be. We don’t want to be bothered with all of that fruit-producing talk about being an influencer out there to the ones that don’t know Jesus. We don’t really want to work on our grudges and bitter hearts and stinky ways. We’d rather wallow in grace like a pig in mud, and then sit in the sun and bask...in the dirt. We are perfectly fine with presenting to others around us a pretty picture of kindness and love, when it’s convenient. And we love the accolades from those looking at us when they observe our “showy flowers.”

But I’m thinking that because we were created as His offspring and made to bear fruit, that unless we actually are bearing fruit, we’re a stinky addition to the landscape around us! We’re shallow, easily toppled by storms and a prey to pecking birds.

Eewww!

I'm thinking about the fruitless pear this year and looking at my own showy flowers to see if I've succumbed to settling for the show, or if I'm cultivating for the produce.

It's a sobering thought, that fruitless pear tree...and I'm pretty sure I don't want to resemble one. So I'm thinking a little digging might be in order for the year of 2020...

FRESH THYME - Redefining Friendship – by Marcy Lytle

Friends come and go in our lives, because of proximity or hurts or different seasons, or for so many other reasons. But when friends go just because we've had a set of rules that friends must follow in order to be friends, we need to rethink and reevaluate our rules. I know I'm learning this still...

Here are a few of the rules I've had over the years that are not fair when placing them on others, because everyone has different ideas and situations and life experiences that shape them into friends and how they behave:

Friends should call often – Who defines “often?” I've been disappointed before because friends don't call or check in, at an interval I deem friendly. Having this expectation leads to disappointment from most people, and it doesn't mean they're not a good friend. No way. It means they aren't like you.

Friends should know how to spell your name – I had a friend I'd known for decades and she STILL spelled my name with an “i” instead of a “y” and it made me so mad! How could she be a true friend and not know that? Many people don't think when they write and there's no evil intent or slam intended when they don't recall spelling. We can let this one go...out the door.

Friends should reciprocate and invite you over or out – We love to go do things, and we love to invite others. However, many, many people prefer to wait and be asked...simply because they don't know what to do or where to go. And just because they don't reciprocate doesn't mean they're not friendly. Now, if they don't reciprocate because they don't like us...well that's another story altogether.

Friends should communicate well – Again, definitions. We have these parameters and rules of what good communication looks like. We look at ourselves and think we're awesome communicators, and we place that mantel on our friends to be the same. If communication is our specialty, then we can find a kind way to ask them why they don't communicate better and be satisfied with their answer.

Friends should not drop by without calling first – I was raised with this rule of etiquette so it stands to reason that everyone else should know that, right? Nope. And just because I think that's proper doesn't make it so. Friends that drop by aren't rude. They're friendly. And we can nicely say we're busy, if that's the case...or we can invite them in and enjoy their visit!

Friends should want to do fun things – This is a huge one for me! However, not all friends created equal are they? Just because I enjoy festivals and walks and movies and talks, other friends may consider a perfect evening just dining over a slow meal and nice conversation. And that's it. And those are good friends, friends we need, when we're always running.

Friends should be friends forever – I think that “forever” word is a can of worms. Friends move away or their family and even church dynamics morph; and they have to attend to new things that crowd out old habits or time spent. That's not awful, or mean, or unfriendly. It's life.

And we can be happy when we see them and hug them, and remember the times when we were together. Still friends.

Friends should have kids that are my kids' friends as well – This just doesn't happen with each friend! Just because you love her and she loves you, does not mean that your daughters will be best friends! Don't place that expectation on them! I learned this the hard way...

Friends should rejoice when you rejoice – This is great to have friends like this, and to be a friend who does this. But sometimes, life is hard and circumstances and losses make it hard to rejoice for others. That's just reality, and it doesn't mean they're not a good friend when we win the lottery, and they aren't so thrilled. Okay, that's never happened...

Friends should be your rock in hard times - If friends are kind and considerate and giving in hard times, give thanks. But don't look for them to be your rock. There's only one rocking neighbor that doesn't roll...and his name is not Jones.

What rules have you silently placed on your group of friends that to be looked at, and definitions that need to be redefined? Doing so might release some of the stress you've carried on your shoulders and in your hearts for years...



FEATURE STORY

FEATURE STORY – Sour Milk and Broken Globes – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever thrown away an empty gallon of milk into the garbage without first rinsing it out? If you have, you'll only do it once. After a while, the stench of sour milk will hit your nostrils and send you running to retrieve that sack of trash and take it out of your house! Sour milk is an awful smell, as moms of small babies know, and anyone that's smelled it knows! I did this once, and then realized that there are some containers that totally have to be rinsed before placing them in the trash can, unless that trash is immediately taken outside.

What about when you do take the time to rinse out that carton really well, smash it and discard it? It's then gone, and you make room for the brand new carton of milk as it takes its place on the refrigerator shelf! I love it when we finish that last bit of milk and are able to get rid of it, and replace it with a new one...with a brand new expiration date. Fresh milk for cereal, for baking, for drinking, for making all things good...

That simple act of discarding the old and making room for the new milk made me think about a lot of things that need to be rinsed and discarded, because they're about to sour. And what better time to look at that list than the start of a brand new year?

Judgments: Maybe over the past year those little verdicts we've given our friends or foes about how they acted and why they acted, and they wound up on our "naughty" list. It's time to rinse and discard.

Attitudes: Perhaps we've picked up cynicism or sarcasm a little too often this past year and it's starting to smell sour when we speak. It's time to rinse, *smash* and discard!

Burdens: Is your back a little achy from the holiday season, picking up the burdens that others carry, or carrying your own until you're about to drop? Remember that little verse that invites you to "come" if you're weary and He will give you rest? Carrying burdens we weren't meant to carry is sour milk, and it makes us sick to our stomachs. Time to rinse and discard, and rest.

Lies: Picked up a few thoughts about yourself last year that just aren't true? Maybe you've decided that no one loves you, you messed up too many times, or that your children will never amount to anything. Maybe you've included God in that sentiment and believe that he can't possibly love you either, because of...circumstances. It's time to make room for a new carton of "milk" and toss out the old. There's no place for the both of them.

Bad habits: Maybe last January you resolved to relax, scream less, quit biting your nails or quit telling tales and you didn't succeed at anything you tried. In fact, you fell in to all sorts of bad habits that you now regret. Who says that stinky milk has to stay on your shelf? Just toss it out and start all over with a new expiration date! Again and again...

I just finished a Hallmark movie where a young girl broke the town snow globe – a cardinal sin – stinky milk! She felt absolutely horrible, until the end of the movie when all that happened after

the break led her into all sorts of good things. She met the young man that owned a shop where broken things are fixed...better than new.

I don't know about you, but January is a great time for me to not only get rid of the stinky milk on my shelves, but to look forward to fresh and new cartons of milk over and over again this year. There's always life to be had when we know Jesus. He's the great fixer-upper, fresh milk, and creator of good things. We just have to be willing to toss out the old and make room for the new.

Be sure to rinse well, smash and discard...and then pop off the top of that brand new life...and drink.