

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

January 2018

TIPS

The Dressing – Sock it to Me – by Marcy Lytle

Every year, whether they want them or not, I place socks in the stockings of my daughter and daughter-in-law. I try to find comfy cozy ones for those cold winter mornings or freezing lazy evenings when they stay in and read, sit by the fire or just lounge around the house. Cozy socks can be expensive, but if they escort us into ooh-la-lah land, they're worth every penny. So now that the holidays are over, I'm betting socks are on sale everywhere! Try out some of these cozy ones and stock up on gifts for the girlfriends in your life for birthdays and Christmas... come December again!

Cable Knit – Aren't these Dearfoam socks calling your name? They come in a variety of colors at Kohls and I love the patterns and color choices! You'll definitely want to stay in, grab a cup of hot tea, and read a good book while wearing these!

<https://www.kohls.com/product/prd-3061941/womens-dearfoams-fairisle-cable-knit-gripper-slipper-socks.jsp?color=Light%20Gray&prdPV=11>

Cabin Crew – These socks found at Dick's Sporting Goods are infused with aloe! How cool is that? They're made by Field & Stream and great for cabin coziness all winter long, or for stepping out for a cold winter's walk.

<https://www.dickssportinggoods.com/p/field-stream-womens-cozy-cabin-crew-socks-17fnswfswczymrlstapa/17fnswfswczymrlstapa>

Chenille, Anyone? – Old Navy has these cute chenille socks in all sorts of animals, and the bear is my favorite! There are unicorn, cat and owl socks, as well! You can stock up on several of these for wearing all winter long...

<http://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pcid=5151&vid=1&pid=775247192>

Boot Sock – I LOVE these heart-on-the-heel socks from Urban Outfitters. They are to be worn with your boots, with your heart tucked away and hidden inside – to be revealed only when the boots come off! Slip into these with your boots and know that you're loved!

<https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/out-from-under-warm-hearts-boot-sock?category=SEARCHRESULTS&color=009>

Message for You – Aren't these cute? They send a message to that person, whoever he or she is that's walking by and near you, and begs for a response! These are from Nordstrom's and they're classic crews.

<https://shop.nordstrom.com/s/nordstrom-if-you-can-read-this-crew-socks/4684777?contextualcategoryid=2375500&origin=keywordsearch&keyword=women+socks>

With a Wrap – Now this is a deal, from Macy's! It's a cozy sleep wrap that comes with a pair of socks. And it's on sale! There are a variety of colors to choose from. Go on. Pamper yourself...or a friend!

<https://www.macys.com/shop/product/alfani-giftable-cozy-wrap-socks-set-created-for-macys?ID=4835171&CategoryID=225&swatchColor=Fox%20Glove#fn=sp%3D1%26spc%3D2%26ruleId%3D78%26kws%3Dcozy%20socks%26searchPass%3DallMultiMatchWithSpelling%26slotId%3D1>

Knee High – When is the last time you wore knee high socks? Elementary school? Why not wear them again? These plaid ones from Maurice’s are calling your name! Buy a pair for you, or even two!

https://www.maurices.com/product/plaid-knee-high-socks/19143?ref_page=search#color/C6531

Get to your sock drawer now, and toss the ones without a match, get rid of the ones that are threadbare, and stock up on a few that you’re sure to wear this winter. Treat yourself, now that the shopping is over, to something cozy for your tired feet!

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Seven 4 You – January Jingle! – by Marcy Lytle

There ARE ways to keep that Christmas feel, yet make it New Year real, in your home in the month of January, when it's time to put away the tinsel, tree and trim! January at home doesn't have to be stark and bare, like the trees in your yard. It can still be vibrant and full of life right on through the month...until February draws near!

Here are seven ways to do this:

1. **Snowmen!** – Snowmen aren't necessarily just related to the Christmas season. So if you've had some sitting around, leave them! Put one on your porch or your mantel. Go on out and purchase a pretty little Frosty in white and give him a prominent place where you will see him often, and smile at his joy.
2. **Lights** – Just remove the tree and all of the trim, but leave the lights somewhere in the house, all sparkly and bright. Perhaps hang them from the mantel or lay them out among a few items on a table, or let them adorn a house plant you have inside all year long.
3. **Scents** – Christmas may be over, but the aromas of baking gingerbread, peppermint, caramel or evergreen can still fill your house as you light the wicks and smell...oh, the smells! Don't put away your candles just yet. Let them burn!
4. **Towels** – I absolutely love fresh, pretty, decorative towels in the kitchen AND in the bathroom all year, and January is no exception. Again, opt for ones with snowflakes or evergreen branches, or whatever winter scenes you enjoy, and hang them, and use them! They will make your hands happy when you grab one, instead of that old dingy one you were about to pull out of the drawer...
5. **Branches** – There are plenty of bare branches to be found outside in January. Bring a nice one in and set it in a vase, then hang a few silver or gold sparkling balls or baubles, and you've got yourself a January centerpiece! Go for a pretty table runner underneath in silver or gold, and you're table is set! Or add pine cones to vase or light and turn it bright!
6. **Goodies** – Don't quit baking and/or making. Maybe you're tired and weary from the cooking and cleaning, but keep creating simple goodies that speak volumes of the freshness of a new year. Try something with peppermint, like the mini grasshopper pies we enjoyed with our family. They're so easy to put together! Just place softened mint chocolate chip ice cream in mini graham cracker pie crusts and then freeze. Top with whipped cream, chocolate sauce and crumbled Andes mints! Voila! It's still the season for smiles!
7. **Doormat** – Find one that invites the New Year to your house, and put it by your front door, so that you're greeted with hope and wonder when you arrive home each day from work or play. It will also make your January guests feel welcome, too!

Don't let the blues of Christmas past color your January skies a dark dreary gray. Find ways to keep that cheery feeling as you ring in the New Year and all that it brings to you and yours...His good plans for a hope and a future! That's His promise!

Selah's Style – The Short-Haired Gal – by Selah Irwin

As you can see I cut my hair short! I love how easy it is to take care of and fix but at first I was worried I would get bored of it. I was concerned that I would not be able to think of enough hairdos to keep it interesting. I was so wrong! It turns out the possibilities are endless! Here are a few of my favorite short hair do's!

For an everyday, go to the park look, try two twisty buns. This style is easy, cute, and comfy! Add glorious clips to match your outfit and add color!

Going to a wedding or fancy soiree? Try this up-do! It is ridiculously simple but looks elegant and complicated! Just swoop sections of hair to the center of your head and secure with bobby pins until all your hair is up. Then curl the ends to hide the pins. Magnificent!

Is retro your thing? Throw on a thick head band and curl the ends of your hair out and up. Presto! You have a very chic mid-century do!

With chin length hair, full braids are out of reach. But don't give up on the idea of braids completely! What about two smaller braids from the sides connected in the back? This look keeps your hair out of your face and looks so pretty from the back!

Do not underestimate hair accessories! Even the most simple hairdo can come to life with colorful barrettes, clips, bows, or bands! Very regularly, I throw my hair up in two pig tails and add flowers. It is my go-to do!

So as you can, see there is no need to fret! The possibilities for stylish do's for the short-haired gal are plentiful! Let your creativity soar!

Happy New Year!

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In the Kitchen – Soup’s On! – by Marcy Lytle

Over the holidays and during the winter months, soup is so delicious. When it’s cold outside, nothing warms up the tummy like a delicious bowl of goodness. And soup is one of those meals that’s so great to have on hand for a crowd, or to have stored away in bowls in the fridge, for a quick heat-up lunch. I love soup...if it’s tasty! Here are three of our favorites to share with you for January!

Slow Cooker Chicken Noodle Soup

- 1.5 lbs skinless chicken breasts
- 5 med carrots chopped thin (1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups)
- 1 med yellow onion chopped (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups)
- 4 stalks celery thinly chopped (1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups)
- 3-5 cloves garlic minced
- 3 T olive oil
- 6 cups chicken broth, 1 cup water
- $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp dried thyme
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp dried rosemary
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp celery seed, crushed
- 2 bay leaves
- S&P to taste
- 2 cups uncooked wide egg noodles
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 T fresh lemon juice
- Saltine crackers or Parm cheese

In slow cooker, place chicken, carrots, onion, celery and garlic. Add in olive oil, broth and water, and seasonings, then add S&P to taste. Cover and cook on low 6-7 hours.

Remove chicken and allow to rest 10 minutes, then dice. Meanwhile add noodles to slow cooker, and parsley. Increase temp to high and cover and cook another 10 minutes (til noodles are tender).

Stir in lemon juice and toss in cooked chicken. Serve warm with crackers and top with Parm cheese.

Yum!

My Sister’s Vegetable Soup

From Trader Joe’s she uses:

- 1 container of layered chopped onion, celery and carrots
- 1 bag of broccoli
- 1 bag green cabbage

- 1 bag cauliflower rice

She also gets (from any store):

- 2 cartons chicken broth
- 1 small can V8
- 1 can mild Rotel
- 1 tsp cumin
- 1 tsp onion powder
- S&P to taste

Stir fry the onion, celery, carrots in ½ stick of butter, then add broccoli and stir fry a bit longer. Pour in broth, V8 and Rotel tomatoes. Add desired amount of cabbage and cauliflower rice. Season with cumin, onion powder and S&P.

Serve with sourdough bread sliced and spread with butter and Parm, heated under the broiler. Also, sprinkle Parm on top of soup!

Chicken & White Bean Chili with Fritos

- 1 large bag Fritos scoops
- ¼ c olive oil
- 1 med chopped onion
- 6 chopped garlic cloves
- 1 jalapeno chopped
- 2 lb ground chicken
- 3 ½ T chili powder
- 2 T tomato paste
- 1 T cumin
- 1 T dried oregano
- 2 15oz cans white beans, drained (keep juice)
- 2 15oz cans diced tomatoes, do not drain
- S&P to taste
- ½ chopped cilantro

Heat half of oil in skillet, add chicken and cook til it starts to brown, about 6-8 minutes, and set aside.

Using same pan, add rest of oil, onions, garlic, jalapeno, and saute for five minutes.

Add chicken back to skillet and add chili powder, tomato paste, cumin, oregano, tomatoes, beans and 1 c reserved bean juice.

Simmer 20-25 minutes to marry flavors (add more juice or water or broth if too thick)

Season to taste with S&P and add cilantro as garnish.

Toss Fritos scoops into a bowl, with the chili, and serve!

Tried and True – Bowled Over – by Marcy Lytle

Friends arrived at our house for soup and bread, as we were the middle spot on the road of a Progressive Dinner. Have you ever participated in one? The appetizer is at one house, the main entrée at another, and dessert at the third. At least, that's how we did it! And I had the joy of making soup.

As I was preparing, I thought about bowls, as it was quite apparent that I didn't have enough of my own set of bowls to feed 18 adults, so I had to order some online. And while I was thinking about bowls, I looked around my kitchen and on my shelves and realized that I had some really cool bowls that I had collected over the years.

Let me tell you about each one, and something fun I learned and thought of as I looked at them, held them, remembered where they came from, and considered what the bowl is all about:

Pinch bowl – A friend gave me a set of these for my birthday last year, and they're for pinches – like spices – to add flavor to dishes when cooking. They're so pretty, a set of six in different colors! This small bowl reminds me that I don't have to have a lot; I just have to be spicy, to affect my world around me!

Chips n' Dip bowl – Last Christmas I asked for a chip/dip bowl I'd seen in a store and my husband sweetly ordered it for me, but I didn't know it. Before Christmas, we were shopping and saw this other amazing handcrafted bowl – one of a kind – for a great price in this gorgeous dark gray hue! We both loved it, but he had already ordered the other one. However, (don't you love that word?) that original order arrived broken! So my husband returned it, scurried back downtown and grabbed the handcrafted bowl and presented it to me! Cool story, right? It's a perfect size for chipping and dipping, for the two of us! This bowl reminded me to smile at the fun niceties of life that happen out of the blue...or gray...in this case!

Best Ever bowl – My kids gave me this bowl and it usually sits on a shelf as a display bowl, except for special dishes like these awesome syrupy almonds and cashews I made over the holidays – so easy and delicious! I am known for saying each fun outing is the “best ever” so my kids knew they had to give me this bowl. It reminds me that I'm loved, just for who I am.

Lighted bowl – This is another gift from my kiddos, and it just looks like two toned orange and blue bowl, until a light is shone inside! We have it sitting under a push light, and when we switch it on, the blue comes alive with sparkles and wonder, like the inside of a geode! I love this bowl, and it reminds me to stay in the Light so that my ordinary looks extraordinary in His glow!

Spirit bowl – We were on vacation in Santa Fe when we visited a store where Indian crafted bowls were sold, and this one caught my attention. See the gap in the color around the rim? Superstition has it that the bad spirits of the bowl can escape by that route. I almost didn't buy the bowl because that seemed a little strange, but then I thought “Why not?” I can redeem the purpose of that gap and say that it's reminding me to share His Spirit with others as I give and serve and feed them whatever I have in my bowl!

Look around your house this January and observe your bowls. From the plastic ones your kids enjoy cereal from to the big pasta bowl in which you serve your entire family a full meal, look at them. Pick them up. Think about them and see what stories and lessons you can learn as you are “bowled over” at the blessings of the New Year. And then purpose to share what you have in one of your bowls with someone you love...

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HOME

Practical Parenting – Don't Even Try It – by Marcy Lytle

I remember it well. We were dragging our kids from event to event over the holidays and their sleep schedules were a mess, and one would fall apart – you know what I mean – over the littlest of things and wail and flail. My husband I tried to discipline them with a stern, “Straighten up, now!” or “Stop crying or I’ll...” all to no avail. And then one day we finally got it...

Tired kids cannot be reasoned with, so don't even try it.

Think about it. We ourselves are no good when we're tired. Our husbands try to caress us when we're overly exhausted and we push his arms away. Our kids come up to ask their endless questions when we've had a long day, and we beg them to play in their rooms so we can sit down and put up our feet. We cannot be bothered when we're tired. Come back later, after we've rested.

It happened most often at restaurants when our kids were with us, and we decided this one time to stay past bedtime to visit with friends around the table a bit longer. So we stayed and we pushed toys and more food in front of our kids, hoping they'd sit still a bit longer, only to suddenly be hit with that screaming, crying fit that sends chills down the spines of every patron in the place. We wanted to hide under the table, because our kids were out of control and wouldn't respond to any of our directives to sit still another five minutes.

Kids aren't little adults. They cannot tame their emotions in front of people to save face. And they need more rest than we do. They're still growing, after all. But one of the biggest lessons we had to learn was that our kids were not being unruly when they didn't respond to discipline...if they were overly tired.

Here are a few times when our kids just can't keep up:

- When we skip nap times altogether, and they really need them.
- When we keep them up late and wake them up early.
- When they stay up late with homework, several nights in a row.
- When worries or sickness or night terrors make them lose their sound sleep.

So what do we do, when our schedules are crazy and sleep is nowhere to be found?

- If it's our doing, we can observe our children and realize that they need sleep, and hold back the discipline and the harsh words and the threats and the correction.
- If it's their doing, we can insist on an earlier bedtime, that they put away toys and electronics, in favor of routines and rest.
- If it's outside circumstances that can't be helped, we can hold them, letting them rest against our chest, so they can whimper themselves to sleep instead of whining themselves into fits alone.
- If it's too busy in our lives, we can reevaluate in this new year and cut out activities, purpose to get to bed, and insist on bedtime readiness.

When we try to discipline tired kids, we end up with an entire family that's over the edge. Words are said that can't be taken back, and kids and their little hearts are wounded right before they go to sleep. Tiredness supersedes any kind of reason, at any age, really. And it does a parent good to realize it, when their kids fall apart at the table or out in public.

Happy New Year, and may it be one of rest and realization for all!

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I Don't Do Teens – 5 Steps Away – by Marcy Lytle

I think I can count on one hand the number of “young” people that do this. I suppose they just don't think about it, haven't been taught to do it, or are unaware that there is anything to ask about. What am I referring to? It's conversing with their elders and asking questions, instead of sitting and answering all of the questions asked of them.

I have a daughter-in-law that's great at this. When we visit, or when we text, she often asks how I'm doing, she remembers to text and ask about an event we've hosted, or she'll often text me her latest clothing purchase because she knows I absolutely love fashion. But she's a gem and a rarity.

Too often than not, our teens and our young adults sit in the presence of their grandparents or other parents, and look bored, and only answer questions when they are asked...never pausing to think perhaps these adults in the room might have an interesting life to share, as well!

So how do we teach our teens to come out of their shell, step away from their self-absorption, and slide into a simple conversation with adults, a two-way dialogue of the most interesting kind?

Here are a few steps, with the first one being the most important in all of the things we teach our teens:

1. **We emulate it in front of them.** When we are spoken to by a person older than ourselves, and they ask, “How are you doing?” we can answer, and then ask back, “And what have you been up to?”
2. **We encourage them to go for the gold.** Have family conversations about other adults and the older generation, and share some cool stories about the grandparents. We can pique our kids' interests and tell them to ask their grandmother about that soda fountain where she worked, way back when, and what it was like.
3. **We practice this art of kindness.** We can totally have a family night, say once a month, where the family sits down and each one comes up with a question for another. Kids can ask parents how their day was at work, how are they feeling, etc. We don't have to dump our cares on our kids, but we can share, just like they share their days with us. Then we as adults can ask our kids the same interesting questions, provoking conversation and caring among the family.
4. **We pray together.** Teens, as long as they live in our houses, are never too old to join the family for prayer time. Pray aloud so that they can hear us include our parents, or the elderly woman across the street. Ask our teens to pray as well, and to include a friend, a parent, and an older adult in their requests.
5. **We follow up.** When our teens realize that Grandmother fell again and is in pain, they need to hear us call to check on her. We can share Grandmother's phone number, making sure it's in our kids' contacts. When a friend loses a job, our teens need to hear us call to check on the friend, to remind him that we're praying for him.

Teens never stop watching or listening or copying what we do, in front of them. If we only talk about ourselves and our worries and our accomplishments our kids will do the same. However, if we care, we share, we pray, and we follow up, our teens will notice and be drawn to kindness instead of self-awareness.

Giving to the poor is great, and seeking justice is awesome, but it all begins at home, training our teens to love others as they love themselves...including those of the older generation. And we all know that loving others (including the elderly) only makes for a better life in general for all of us...

Life As We Know It - Duct Tape Prayer – by Erica Simmons

June 1, 2017, this is the text message I sent to a friend, “I need to become a prayer warrior.”

Her response to me, “I think you already are! No one raises boys successfully like you without a divine connection!”

And here I sit, writing this story because in talking with Jerimiah this morning, I realized the better way to describe my prayer life is calling it *duct tape prayer*.

We all hear the jokes about how duct tape can fix anything. It is strong and durable, and I have used it many times to “fix” things. The truth of the matter is that it does not “fix” the problem. It provides relief from the immediate impact of the problem. And that is what my duct tape prayer life has done, provided immediate relief from the impact of the issues. When I fall on my spiritual knees and call out to my God, the enemy retreats and waits. He waits because He knows I will be satisfied with those results and I will fall away from praying, then he will strike again, and the cycle will start over.

A *warrior* according to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary is a person engaged in warfare. Notice the word *engaged*, it is used as present tense. It does not say someone who has engaged, or will engage. It says someone who is engaged. Now, daily, weekly, and at all times engaged in warfare. That is what God has been calling me to do, not just for my family (although there is lots to engage in warfare about) but on a larger scale in His kingdom work.

The results of my type of praying have indeed produced two amazing young men, because prayer, when used, is a powerful tool. However, it has also allowed the issues to hang around and become more a part of their character than if I had engaged in the warfare prayerfully and destroyed the enemy’s plan in certain areas of their lives.

As I thought about what it would take to begin this journey of becoming a prayer warrior, I went into a panic thinking about all the things I would have to give up to engage in this work, none of which are even remotely more important than the honor of stepping into this new level of my relationship with my Heavenly Father. It brought to mind the scripture about the spirit being willing but the flesh being weak, so I looked it up and it is Matthew 26:41. The full scripture is:

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Temptation is nothing but the enemy, so in essence this scripture is warning us to be watchful and prayerful so that we don’t fall to the enemy. I can say most of the panic came from questions like, “How do I do this? How can I become a prayer warrior?”

Here is the great thing about our Heavenly Father. He has told us that He will provide us with all we need in order to be who He wants us to be, II Peter 1:3. His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. The truly amazing thing is a few weeks ago I may not have truly understood what “His divine power” was had it not been for the subject of the Holy Spirit that we have been studying in our church life group.

Before this, my biggest worries were how do I pray and what do I pray. Because of His guidance, I now know the answer to those questions. Now it is a matter of taking the time to pray, now to engage in prayer.

I want to take an aside and share something powerful that I learned while studying the Holy Spirit. First, when Adam and Eve were in the garden, God visited with them daily. He would come into the garden and actually visit with them. He would talk with them and walk with them. He communed with them. This is the picture of what our walk with our Father is supposed to be like. For me, when I think about the fall of man, I (for whatever reason) only seem to focus on the fact that we lost our guaranteed place in eternity with our Creator. That is the reason our Savior came in the form of man, to die on the cross for our sins. His death provided a new way to our eternity. I have missed so much of who God is with this narrow focus. What I learned is that is not all we lost. We also lost our ability to freely communicate with our Father, and that is what the Holy Spirit does for us. He connects to our Heavenly Father, not only so we can have our garden time, but also so we can have His power, authority, truth, wisdom, promises and love, His truth.

It is Wednesday morning, three days since I started writing this story. Daily, I have spent time asking the Holy Spirit to surround us with all of the different aspects of who He is to us and this morning, as the kids like to say, "He dropped a little truth on me."

You see, I have had this notion that a prayer warrior "prays through to a breakthrough." This morning the Holy Spirit brought to my mind my own words in THIS story. The ones where I talk about the enemy retreating when I hit my knees in prayer. I thought I needed to do something POWERFUL in order to destroy the hold the enemy has in areas of my children's lives. The Holy Spirit simply said,

"Stay on your knees. That is where your power and authority comes from."

The words that I just typed are simple, but the message I received from them is *life as I know it* changing. Being there keeps the enemy retreating, it shores up our fortress in those areas and once the enemy knows he no longer has access through them he looks for other areas. The great news is that I just continue to stay on my knees, covering the new area he tries to attack. My biggest hurdles to praying were what to pray and how to pray. The answers to those two questions are that I pray God's word and I pray continuously.

I learned that the Holy Spirit also brings God's promises, and one of His promises He gives us in His word that no weapon formed against us shall prosper, Isaiah 54:17. Not most, or a few. No, none, nada, zip. No attack of the enemy will ever have any rule in my life, and my children are a huge part of my life, IF I stay on my knees in prayer.

So to turn my duct tape prayer life into the life of a prayer warrior, all I really have to do is **stop creating a prayer life in pieces that are bound together in crisis**. All I have to do is stay engaged in continuous prayer for my life and the lives of my children and the lives of other Christians around the world.

I am now a prayer warrior, a member of God's holy army.

Tiny Living – Our Pleasures – by Leyanne Enterline

We're in! It's been a month now back in our trailer, and we're still trying to get settled. There are a lot of bugs, bees and other strange critters roaming our land that would like to be inside with us! We are still trying to figure out the polite way to keep our inside space just for us and have the critters keep their space outside just for them!

There is still much to be done, but with the holidays these past few weeks, we have been house and pet sitting a lot! There are so many things that are not coming together as quickly as we would like. However, now that we have the trailer out on our land, there is really nothing but time to get things done...and fun for all.

When I was at home, I tried my best to get rid of things we did not use while not living there. I realized how little we really needed! (Now, telling my kids that is like pulling teeth!) Every item is super special to them, so their rooms still look like a tornado came and then left a wreck! Maybe back in a normal-sized house things wouldn't look so crazy and we'd have more space to hide things. However, I cannot recommend that anyone stepping foot in their bedroom for now...

What about me, on the other hand? I have been donating things left and right. Yes, I pretty much wear the same seven shirts and rotate each week. Don't judge! It's January now, so I'll be wearing a jacket and hopefully no one can really tell. It's also that time of year again when I start crocheting, so the area behind the bedroom door is a little tight with my bags of yarn that I just can't seem to part with. After all, I may need that one skein of yarn for a certain hat that I'm making!

Like I've mentioned before, we are five minutes away from my parents. And as I sit here and share my story, I am watching my kiddos and nephews on my parents' dock fish away and have the time of their lives being together!

Such a fun way to grow up.

I feel so blessed having all of this!

If we were living in town, these fun times would not happen nearly as often as they do where we live in our tiny home. Although tiny living is not for everyone, we have enjoyed the pleasures it has brought our family!

A Night to Remember – Winter Season – by Marcy Lytle

It's winter. Most of the colors of fall are gone now, and the browns of bare branches stand against the gray sky, looking bleak and well...dead. We know that this is just a season and that spring is coming in a few months, but do our kids know? Winter is a great time to notice the change in the outdoors and talk about it, learn what's going on, and wonder at the miracle of things that grow.

Preparation: *This lesson is best enjoyed in a park on a winter day that's not too cold, one where the family can walk around and observe the foliage. Hand each child (and parent too!) a sketch pad, some pencils (colored or charcoal) and set out walking. Do not show each other your drawings until the end of the lesson.*

Trees – Which trees in the park have lost their leaves? Some are still green! These are evergreen trees that don't lose their leaves in the winter. (Ask the kids to sketch the bare trees on their pads.)

Flowers – Are there any flowers in this park? Some flowers grow best in the summer, and others grow and survive the winter cold, like pansies. It's important to know which flowers to plant in which season, in order to have pretty blooms. (Ask kids to sketch flowers in their favorite colors, under the trees they just drew.)

Wildlife – Which animals do you see scurrying about? Do you notice their fur or their tails being extra thick? Where are the birds? What do animals eat in the winter? Squirrels are known for burying nuts and then digging them up to eat in the winter. Smart little fellas! (Ask kids to add an animal in their picture.)

Snow – Snow only falls in cold temperatures, not in the heat of the summer. Why is that? Is there snow today in the park, or does it even snow where you live? (Ask kids to place the sun, clouds, rain or snow in the sky of their artwork – whichever they like best.)

Color – How much color is in the park where you're walking? What is your favorite color in nature? Is the grass still green or is it brown and crunchy under your feet? (For a final touch, ask the kids to give a title to their completed sketch)

Now that we've walked around and observed the outdoors in winter, let's talk about the season of winter. Plants and animals slow down and don't appear to be moving or growing like they do in other seasons. But they are. They're either resting or digging deep, so that when the rains of spring come and the sunshine warms the earth, color will again appear, and new growth will be seen everywhere!

We can trust our Father up above because he knows just what he's doing in every season. He knows when to send rain and when to stop it, when to make the sun shine, and when to cool us down with breezes and clouds. He loves all of his creation, including us! And he makes all things beautiful.

Now, have show and tell, where each artist shares their masterpiece and describes why and how they made it...

As a family, give thanks for the winter season, all that it means, and for the Creator – our God – for taking such good care of us in every season.

Acts 14:17

He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

#

The Family Practice – Imperfectly Beautiful – by Marcy Lytle

We're awaiting our new writer to take over this column in the February issue, but for January...I thought I'd fill you in on the need for a column like "The Family Practice."

Just like physicians practice medicine, and it takes years of practice and research and work to "master" the profession, so it is with family. Physicians are still human and there are so many things they don't know and will never know, but they keep practicing...striving for that perfect formula to keep everyone well. Only, it's not going to happen...this side of heaven.

Since it's a New Year, why not encourage us all in our own practice called family? I remember starting out with my little family, when our daughter was born. I hadn't wanted children, I didn't want to be pregnant, and I didn't enjoy one minute of the nine month journey. However, like we hear of so many women, when my daughter was born – everything changed.

I became a mom who was fiercely in love, protective of my daughter at all costs.

I began the practice of family...without a manual, with a very green thumb, knowing very little about parenthood, and having no qualifications or skills that made me a family leader except that I had given birth.

Over the years, I've practiced family. By practice, I mean I've tried some particular notes like making my kids tiny clones of myself, and those turned out sour to the max! I've also added in a few crescendos of fun outings and planned parties to make our family fun, but those too must be tamed with down time and chill, or everyone ends up exhausted. The family practice in our home was full of this mix of beautiful melodies at time, but "hands over the ears" screeches at others. We were, and are, all imperfect.

Maybe you're just starting out with your little family, and you feel overwhelmed because that mother friend says to do this, or your own mom shakes her finger at what you're doing, or books and the web scold you for that. Perhaps you've been practicing family for a while and you've heard a few sour notes you didn't realize had made their appearance, where you thought there was only harmony before. Or you might be part of a family practice that has gone under, sank, with every note that was played just stopped. For good.

The Family Practice is something that we can pick up over and over again, correcting the mistakes, and reworking the lines, so that we keep the melody going and going, so that it's music to our ears.

I'm a grown mother now, to my daughter who is now a mother. My family practice is different. I no longer instruct my daughter and discipline her. I support her and pray for her. We practice family in new ways. I'm a grandmother now, to three littles. They're not mine to raise but they're mine to love and encourage and praise. My family practice is different, for sure. But the notes are still playing.

It's a New Year, a time to reflect and a time to consider the future.

If your family practice needs a little fine tuning, or some of the members have left the orchestra – or maybe new ones have joined – then be encouraged.

Practice makes perfect...until our imperfections emerge once again.

We are imperfect parents and children, loving on each other, playing and having fun, but carrying baggage and needs that can only be met by the Great Physician.

Don't ever stop practicing family.

Enjoy the process.

Pick up where the sour notes ended.

Make new melodies.

Love fiercely.

Run to Him.

Practice again.

#

YOU

Under the Influence – Those Wild Hogs – by Marcy Lytle

I've written multiple times about gratitude, especially during the month of November, because of Thanksgiving. But during the Christmas holidays, I thought about it again. It was a cold dreary day (my personal favorite!) and I was just feeling a bit blue and honestly – ungrateful – because of my mom's passing, my own fears, and just a myriad of other things that were just small disappointments in life. I call them small because I really had no reason to be frustrated, but I just chose to be.

And this made me think about gratitude again.

Christmas for some is all about the gifts, and I'm one of those people. There are those who are with me on that, and lavish their family with gifts aplenty under the tree, while others look on with disdain at that type of sentiment, stating, "Too many gifts makes for spoiled children." They then spout off some awakening moment they had where they decided on three gifts and no more, for their kids. Somehow, three won't spoil them, but four will?

Christmas for some is all about doing good for others, while telling our children they already have plenty and don't need more "stuff." So these kids get very little under the tree, while their family fills the calendar with feeding the poor, making goodies for others, and showing up at nursing facilities to sing. And these kids are supposed to get it – that there's more joy in giving than receiving – so they are told to be thankful for the pajamas their parents gave them. After all, pajamas are a necessity so that gift is okay.

I'm not shaming either group, because I have friends who fall into both.

However, I haven't seen that the way people celebrate Christmas makes for grateful kids or adults...for that matter. We've had Christmases that were a struggle to provide, and we've had other years where it wasn't. Our kids have gotten plenty of gifts, but there's always something on their list they didn't get. And I just really haven't observed that getting a lot makes one spoiled, or receiving nothing makes one grateful.

As I was thinking about this, I decided to look at myself and see what it is that makes me feel ungrateful...when I do. And it's really about this choice I have, the choice I mentioned up at the beginning of this story.

Receiving expensive presents can produce spoiled brats, for sure. But I know many people who possess many things who are totally grateful people. Not expecting and receiving many presents can produce kids who are less interested in material things...I guess...or it could backfire to where they want more. And there are lots of children and adults who are brats, who have very little.

Today, I heard a story on the radio about a veteran who had struggled with housing and finances, and how the Salvation Army had helped him get settled and be with his family...and I perked up...and I listened. I recoiled my wandering mind back to the present truth that I have no reason to be ungrateful, melancholy, or live another minute feeling sorry for myself. I then

chose to stop my downward spiral of thinking and began to turn it upward toward stating out loud how good God is. Period.

He's good in sorrow, because he Comforter.

He's good in joyful times, because he's Mr. Joy.

He's good in lean times, because I then get to see him as Provider.

He's good in seasons of plenty because he's Giver.

He's good at all times to me and mine, no matter the circumstances. And I can choose to wallow in my self-pity (which I do sometimes and it feels so muddy), or I can choose to switch on the light and see the pile of gifts under the tree...or the one gift...for me.

If our kids are spoiled and ungrateful, we can be patient with them, just like we hope that God is patient with us. We can teach them to make good choices at school by obeying the teacher, so why can't we teach them to make good choices in their minds by thinking good thoughts?

If our kids, or if we, are disappointed after the tree is put away and the presents are gone, and we still pine for more, then we need to stop. Turn around. Start over. Think again.

It's that simple. And yes, our thoughts will start to wander again one day when it's dreary and cold and we feel sullen and sad...but that's the time to lasso those wild hogs and bring them in for the slaughter.

That's what produces gratitude, the discipline of daily deliberation to pick up the rope and twirl...and bring that fat pig down.

#

Strengthening Your Core – Full Measure – by Marcy Lytle

There's this verse about each of us being given different gifts and it reads something like this...from Romans 8:

*Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,
each of us is to exercise them accordingly:*

I've never thought much about that verse until yesterday, when I thought about faith being one of those gifts and how some people have greater faith than others...and in different areas.

Here's what I mean. I don't worry about lead in dishes from which I eat, or about the water I drink from the tap and if it's contaminated with bacteria. I suppose I could say that I just have faith that if I eat with the best knowledge that I have, I'll be okay. I don't need extra faith to enjoy a meal or a drink. But there are others who do. They are concerned and worry over every purchase or every sip, because they fear what might be lurking behind that leaf, under that paint, or in the pipes of that sink.

All of us have this measure of faith, so to speak. I often feel faith rise up in me when I pray for the sick or for someone that's lost a job. However, there are other areas where I'm weak and my faith falters, and I need to lean on the faith of a friend.

There have been times when I've beat myself up for not having faith like her, or not being able to pull myself out of the worries, or stumbling yet again over this same fear. It never feels good to bang our heads when we're frustrated in faith.

And then it occurred to me...we all have different measures of faith. I thought of baking bread, which I did just yesterday. I measured carefully each ingredient, some were barely a teaspoon, and others were full cups. But each ingredient, after being measured out carefully, mixed together for this amazing presentation of cranberry walnut bread that was super tasty.

It's no different in our faith. Some of my friends have full cups of faith when it comes to praying against fear. They are fearless! So I lean on them and ask them for prayer, and they gladly add their cup (or two) to my bowl for the day. I have other friends who falter in the area of health. They worry over every little bump and ache and pain. So I pray with them with fervor, and offer my full cup of faith to their small teaspoon. Together our faith rises and sends out this amazing aroma up to the heavens!

What does your measuring cup look like? Where is it full and where is it lacking? Don't fret about it or become discouraged because your measure of faith is smaller than hers. And certainly don't spread your faith around like flour filling a room where it chokes everyone, when you're full and running over.

We've all been given this measure, and we are all meant to work together, not alone and separate.

So go on, knock on that neighbor's door and ask if you can borrow a cup of what you're lacking.
And be sure to do the same for her, when she comes knocking.

Then mix and stir, bake and wait, and enjoy the taste of a full measure of faith.

Healthy Habits - The Christmas Hangover – by Marcy Lytle

I've never been drunk on alcohol, that is. I just never found it appealing to do so. But I have been drunk on too much Christmas and holiday cheer. Do you know what I mean? I saturate myself with Christmas music, decorations fill my house, spicy aromas rise from my stove and oven, and I make it a point to enjoy and savor and "drink up" all that I can stand of the Christmas season, because I know it will be over way too soon.

And then comes January, when I'm hung over. I have all of the symptoms of a hangover. Oh, I'm not sick and throwing up, nor do I have a terrible headache. But I have the mood disturbance, for sure. And many of us experience this super low feeling after all of the super high euphoria from Christmas that came...and then it went!

We look at our bare shelves and walls and everything looks so bleak and sad.

We don't know what to do with ourselves in this cold month at the beginning of a new year, when we're no longer shopping and wrapping and baking and partying. And it's a huge let down when the whole lit up city goes back to the way it was back before the holidays...

Here are the four steps to recovering from a physical hangover, according to the Mayo Clinic. I've revamped them to apply to how to cure oneself from the holiday hangover, as well:

They start with saying that time is the only sure cure, and that's so true. Give ourselves a few weeks, and we'll be preparing for Valentine's Day and Spring Break! But in the meantime, we are told to...

Fill a water bottle. Isn't water just the best cure for everything? We can make sure we drink the best thing for us after the holidays are over – and that's water. And while we're drinking, we can find a good book and read. January is a great month to read that book we got for Christmas, or to purchase one at the bookstore and enjoy every page. Go on, sit down. Chill. Read.

Have a snack. Bland foods, we are told, settle our stomachs. Maybe we ate too much Christmas fudge, peppermint bark, and loaded up on just too much of every good thing! Spend all of January making a new menu, one full of healthy choices made fun. Have friends over for tasty trays – like a cheese/nut/olive board – or a bruschetta bar. Eat little snacks, and forego large meals, so our bodies can get back to healthy habits.

Take a pain reliever. Pain relievers are good for headaches. But the pain from a holiday hangover isn't necessarily going to subside with a pill. In fact, consider another pain reliever. It's called giving thanks. Yes, I know, that was back in November. But it serves us all well to give thanks after Christmas is over. We can thank Him for our gifts, for family, that we survived, for His coming to earth as our Savior, for a new year, and so on. We can start each day with thanksgiving, and the blues will certainly go away when we do.

Go back to bed. This is the last of the four steps! We are told, "If you sleep long enough, your hangover may be gone when you awaken." January is usually cold in most places. Even where

I live, in Central Texas, January is pretty chilly. I personally don't like staying in bed, but I totally get this directive. It implies rest. And rest can only be had when we are still. And many of us don't like to be still. But we need to be. We need to lie down and clear our minds from what we didn't get, who complained about what, how much debt we now owe, etc. We need to close our eyes and think on good things, things that are pure and lovely, hopeful and healing. We need to cozy up with a blanket, in front of a fire, and rest. For long periods of time, like bears that hibernate in the winter.

I always experience a big letdown in January, and my tendency is to start planning right away for the next big trip, event, birthday, or celebration. It's what I love to do. But my body and my mind often scream at me to slow down and sit by my husband, hold his hand, watch a mindless show, place a piece in a puzzle, or just sip some cider on the back porch and hope for snow...

And before I know it, I'll feel refreshed and realize it's 2018. A huge smile will appear, my spirit will soar, and all will begin again...because that's what happens when we treat the symptoms with a healthy response to the hangover of Christmas.

#

Get Fruity – Intentionally Kind – by Gabbi Crowhurst

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Galatians 5:22-23

#

Hello everyone! I hope you have enjoyed getting fruity with me these last four months. As I began to analyze my word this month, kindness, I wondered what the distinguishing factor was between kindness and goodness. I realized that kindness is a reflection of how you treat others. Truth be told, I know how to be kind—it is a concept that I have fully understood since kindergarten. But, since kindergarten, I have struggled with application rather than comprehension. I figured I did not need to gain new information on how to be kind as much as get new motivation to be intentionally kind. Maybe you can relate.

Kindness is sometimes hard for a number of reasons.

1. We are tired of being kind
2. We don't think people deserve kindness
3. We are not shown kindness

There are times when we can simply grow tired of making the effort to be kind to those around us. Especially to those closest to us, whether it be close family, a best friend, a spouse, or that coworker that always makes the same mistake, being kind can feel like a real burden. To go back to our definition of the fruits of the spirit, kindness comes as evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence. Maybe a lack of kindness comes from lack of being renewed by the Lord. I have a reminder that pops up on my phone every day that says, “Receive and overflow.” This is a simple yet effective way to daily remember to spend time with God so that I can receive His kindness and share it with others. I find that when I remember to be renewed from the Lord, kindness becomes much easier. Whether it's turning the radio off to pray on the way to school, or taking a long time to read the Bible and meditate on it, time to refocus and renew makes a world of a difference in our motivation to be kind.

You know the feeling—when that ‘one person’ does that ‘one thing’ and you just cannot find it in your heart to respond with kindness. There is no need to hide this, but instead, let your natural response be a call to reevaluation and action. If you are finding it difficult to be kind to someone who “doesn't deserve it,” that means you are seeing kindness as serving this person. However, when we are being kind, we are serving the Lord. Our job as Christians on this Earth is to serve God by serving His people.

1 John 4:12 says,

“No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another,
God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.”

When I am kind to those who don't deserve kindness, His love can be made complete in me. I'm going to let this change of perspective help me next time I have difficulty showing someone kindness.

If we are not shown kindness, we can look at this in light of the first idea. When we don't receive kindness that means the people around us do not exhibit the fruits of the Spirit. In other words, if our friends are not kind to us or others (including making fun of people, talking behind backs, or making hurtful comments), we are with the wrong group. Though we don't always get to pick our groups like our family or our coworkers, there are groups we can choose. Kindness

is a great criteria for this choice. If we surround ourselves with kind people, being a kind person will quickly become second nature.

God, I thank you for all the kindness you have shown me. Please reveal to me areas which I have grown tired of being kind, people I don't think don't deserve kindness, and help me to continually grow close to kind friends. Help me to be renewed by you, serve you even when it's hard, and show me the unkind people I need to distance myself from. Thank you for continually drawing my heart close to you. I love you. Amen.

Created for Life – Far into the Night – by Ginny Hurley

Far into the night
When the late winds blow
Can you sense change a-comin'?
Can you hear the falling snow?
Is your heart warm and cozy,
Is it beating loud and wild?

The atmosphere is shifting
No more waiting on the sides
The author of our story
Opens each one's storehouse wide
The time is now for our bold hearts
To scurry out and sing

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
It rises higher still
Its waves of joy will now abound
Delightful flakes reveal
The wings of life unfurl before Him
Creating quite a scene

The dancers leap on cherished ground
Above the tumult here
Acquainted with a child's sweet laugh
His love and motive clear
No sadness, loss, or woe can stand
Against the smiles of heaven

May every soul behold His face
His beauty pure delight
Colors swell all darkness here
Stars and moonbeams bright
For every boy and every girl
Our place is by His side

No evil word or anxious thought
Can counter what's been done
The veil's been torn
The night is gone
All of heaven's gates now wide
New Year's Bride!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – Teamwork – by Charissa Corbin

This past week I got to check off a bucket list item – dog sledding!

We traveled to [Paws for Adventure](#) in Fairbanks, Alaska where we met the sweetest lady, Leslie, and her 50+ Alaskan huskies. She has a true talent for dog mushing and cares for her dogs like they are her own children.

The 30-minute ride on the sled was magical. I felt like a little kid about to embark on the newest rollercoaster at Fiesta, Texas! In addition to the excitement, I was amazed by the talent of the dogs... the way they responded to commands, knew where to go, their eagerness to race, and how well they worked as a team. There are the “lead” dogs that set the pace and keep the team on the trail, while responding to the commands of the musher. Directly behind them are the “swing (or point)” dogs that help steer the team around corners. Then you have the “team” dogs that pull the majority of the weight and help maintain speed. Lastly, are the “wheel” dogs that are closest to the sled and usually the largest, as they are the first to take on the weight of the sled. It is not uncommon for mushers to switch their dogs’ positions during a race depending on their stamina and certain weather conditions.

The way these dogs and their musher worked so well together reminded me of how important teamwork is in my marriage. There are times where one of us is pulling more weight than the other, while the other is up front directing and keeping watch of things that could get in the way. Sometimes I’m the dog that wants to veer off in the other direction while my husband is trying to lead us down a different path. All of that is normal and it will happen!

Whatever your role is in marriage during this season, embrace it. More importantly, communicate it to your teammate. Let each other know when you need to switch positions or carry less weight.

Take comfort that the musher of your marriage, God, will never lead you astray. Listen to his commands for your marriage and he will guide you down one amazing adventure.

“To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and they sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” – John 10: 3-4

Date Night Fun - Let it Show, Let it Show, Let it Show... - by Marcy Lytle

We had snow in early December, here in Central Texas! Seriously, it was a true Christmas miracle! I've always loved that phrase in the Christmas carol, "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow..." because it's always my wish in the winter – since we see so little of that fully white stuff here!

As I was thinking about those lyrics, I decided to change one letter for date night fun in January. One letter is changed to make us sing "show" instead of "snow." What if our time out together is all about the show?

Theater Time: I love the movies, all the time. January is a great time of year to catch up on shows, at home or in the theater. I prefer the theater, because it's away from the house, the place where I feel I have to always be doing something productive! Consider seeing a movie at a movie house you wouldn't normally frequent, or a movie you might not usually watch. Go for one like *The Greatest Showman* or one in another language, and try a snack you don't normally eat. Start the new year with new experiences! It just might be fun!

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1485796/> movie

Here's a recipe for salted maple almonds and cashews to seal up and sneak in! Preheat oven to 350. Combine 2/3 cup pure maple syrup with 1 T unsalted butter, 1 ½ tsp pure vanilla extract in a medium skillet over medium heat and cook and stir, til bubbling (2 minutes.) Add in 1 ½ cups each of raw almonds and cashews, and cook and stir, til syrup reduces and coats nuts, about 4 min. Spread on parchment lined baking sheet and sprinkle with sea salt (1 tsp). Bake in oven til syrup around nuts sets, about 10-12 min. Stir once and let cool completely.

Show and Tell: Remember that fun event in elementary school, were you got to bring your favorite stuffed animal or toy to school and show it, then tell about it? You pick five things of his and he picks five things of yours (without the other knowing what they are) and place in a large tote bag. As you enjoy your dinner out (or in), take out one thing at a time and ask him what he likes/dislikes about that item, why he bought it, what it means to him, etc. And he does the same for you. Finally, stop in the Dollar Tree before you head out for coffee and each purchase three items for the other one, and show and tell those as you sip and chat. Fun!

Show Me: This night is to be all about sharing with your date four places around town or things you've discovered, and telling him/her why it means something special to you. For example, maybe you love coffee, chocolate, red shoes, cozy socks, and twinkly lights. Your part of the date will then be to share something of each of those things with him, as the evening progresses. He is to do the same! Won't that be fun? Pack up a picnic supper to enjoy in the heated car, a four course meal.

Here's an easy idea for the meal (all from Trader Joes!) – appetizer: brie stuffed with garlic and herbs and crackers, salad: turkey cranberry apple salad, entrée: tomato feta soup (hot in a thermos), dessert: dark chocolate covered peppermint joe joe's.

<https://www.traderjoes.com/FearlessFlyer/Article/3913> brie

<https://www.traderjoes.com/fearless-flyer/article/3873> salad

<https://www.traderjoes.com/fearless-flyer/article/3463> soup

<https://www.traderjoes.com/FearlessFlyer/Article/3964> dessert

The Big Show: January is sometimes the month where we feel the pinch of the spending from December. However, if possible, set aside a few funds to enjoy a big show somewhere near you, in a theater. Get dressed up, and make a night of it. If you're spending the bucks on the show, then opt for a cozy dinner before going out, or get dressed up (check out this lace choker!) – even for a discount meal at a fast food restaurant! Let people talk about why you're all dressed up, and then enjoy the show!

<http://www.rue21.com/store/jump/product/Black-Lace-Wraparound-Choker/0167-000336-0007476-0001> choker

Put on a Show: Maybe it's too cold to venture out this month, so put on a show at home. Include a bit of drama, some comedy, a game show, and a show with circus acts. For drama, play charades, for comedy read funny jokes from *Reader's Digest* or print out jokes on line, for a game try a new card game for two, and for a circus act consider contortionism! This will take a bit of thinking, but what fun it will be as you put on a show in front of the fire, maybe with music in the background, in the warmth and coziness of your own home for a night together!

<https://hobbylark.com/card-games/Card-Games-You-Can-Play-With-Two-People>

Let it show this January as you kick off 2018 with date night fun each week, with just the two of you, or with another couple. Be adventurous and show each other how much you enjoy spending time together at the "show!"

#

After 30 Years – The Snuffer – by Marcy Lytle

It's one of those small things, decorative pieces, cutesy thing to have, but it usually gets hidden in a box beneath the ornaments and rarely used. It's called a snuffer. Do you have one? I used to have a really pretty Christmas snuffer- that thing used to put out candles – that I kept on the mantel during the holidays. But I've gone back to the old way of putting out candles – blowing them out!

Not sure why, but I thought of that ornamental piece that I never used during the holidays at all, and I thought about how important it is; however, to put out candles when the evening or event is over. Many house fires have been caused from lit candles that were never snuffed out, that were left unattended, and disaster occurred.

And it doesn't matter so much that I've hidden away that snuffer, because I'm still able to use my breath to blow out the candles. But what does matter is that they are extinguished, put out, never to flame again until the match or lighter is struck against the wick. What we all know...is that flames cannot be left unwatched.

Why?

It's because an unwatched flame becomes a blazing fire, and a blazing fire becomes a raging roaring beast that requires too many snuffers, more than any one person has in their house. The firefighters have to be called in, those who are paid and those who are volunteers, and big hoses have to be hooked up against this war against time and heat and smoke and flames.

My husband and I were discussing this very thing recently, because we were recalling an argument we had once, where it all started over a silly misunderstanding over parking. It was like one of us lit this tiny flame of discord and the other one lit another one right by it, until we had quite a blaze going. It's been a long time since that argument, but both of us just shook our heads at what caused such a blazing fire of words and accusations that resulted all because...

Neither of us grabbed the snuffer or blew our breath and put out the original flame when it was still small and barely ablaze.

We had a choice, because the ability to blow that flame away is within all of us, but we chose to keep our snuffer hidden away in favor of stoking the fire that should have never been lit in the first place.

One of the biggest and most challenging tools to use in a marriage, in ours, and in others' lives as well, is that snuffer. It's really easy to use. You just walk over, place it over the flame, and immediately the flame is gone. Or you just lean over and blow hard, and the flame is extinguished. But in the heat of the moment (no pun intended) when the flame is lit just a little too close to our sleeve and leaves a tinge of a burn, we instead pick up the lit flame and turn it on its side and burn him back. It's all because we're quite sure that the other one intentionally burned us first.

As we were recalling that horrible day that was wasted in layers of arguing and accusation, we chuckled. We chuckled at our nonsense. Then we both said we need to work on putting out the flame when it's first lit. And we then felt serious.

Candles are pretty when there are many lighting up a room on the cold days of winter, and they provide ambience and warmth, as we cozy up together for a show or a good read. However, those pretty lit candles, if we sit too close, or fall asleep without attending, can turn into destruction like none other – and all can be lost.

What flames are you lighting? Ones of love and passion? Or ones of discord and frustration? We've been married 38 years and we're always still growing, still learning, and still making mistakes. But we've both become sternly aware that the snuffer has to be kept on the mantel of our hearts for immediate use when a fire is sparked that was never intended to be lit, or was lit in error. One of us has to pick it up and snuff that fire out, or both of us will be burned and scarred again...and again.

Where's your snuffer? When's the last time you used it? It's never too late to dig around and find it, and leave it out in full view...

ENCOURAGEMENT

Saddle Up - Love Where You Are – by Melissa Critz

It's another day, and chores abound. My position in life is one that doesn't require me to work a 9-5 paid job. My job position is a lifelong pursuit, day in and day out. Yes, I am a homemaker.

I do not regret this choice; in fact, I believe that I am blessed. I have been able to stay home and home-educate my children, and my last one graduates this coming May. It's rather surreal. I have been asked the typical question, "What will you do once your last one graduates?" It's a very valid question to most. I get it. However, when I really think on it, is there not value in what I have been doing besides home schooling?

I meal plan, grocery shop, clean the house, plan our family activities, make all sorts of appointments from doctor to hair salon, keep a calendar – on the computer, on a whiteboard in the kitchen, and by pencil and paper (the old fashioned way to many) – feed the animals, exercise horses, cuddle and feed cats, make vet appointments, take care of the garden, help with car maintenance, rescue family that is stuck on the side of the rode, answer phone calls and pray with a crying, stressed college kiddo, keep a budget and stick to it, research all sorts of issues from health to plant care, pray, play games, read, write, pray, answer emails, tutor high school math weekly, do loads of laundry and on and on. Okay. So my job isn't paid and it doesn't seem to lead to great career path with a 401K, but it's what I do.

As I was watering one day, I mulled that question over in my brain. *What will I do?* Should it be any different? Haven't I been doing something all along that I love and that I am made for? I have tasted the career path, once as an electrical engineer and another time as a secondary mathematics teacher. One was very rewarding in terms of money and the other rewarding by helping others (I'll let you determine which.) However, the Lord made me to care for my family – my husband and my kids. *How can I fight that?*

Yes, my kids are all basically adults and believe me, my husband and I have more than worked to guide and prepare them to be healthy, productive adults. No, I don't want them to live at home (unless dire straits happen of course) and my flesh would never have them move out, but that's not fair to them, nor is it healthy. They have to find out who they are in the Lord and where and what He has for them. My husband and I always let them know that they can home - our home and their old home – anytime that they need to. But they all do want – and two of them already do – to live on their own. They want to pursue what He has for them. I am proud of them for stepping out into this wide scary world.

After thinking, I sat and listened to my Saddle Partner and heard the word **process**. I think sometimes that we all get in the rut of just trying to get from one thing to the next – both short term as well as lifelong term – and don't enjoy the process. We are all in a process of sorts – trying to get that high school degree, planning a wedding, awaiting the arrival of a baby, waiting on a job, building a home, working on a college degree or postgrad degree, caring for an elderly parent, working on a project at work, waiting on crops to flourish. Whatever it may be, I felt the Lord encourage me to truly ENJOY the process.

My personality likes to get from point A to point B like a *Wrinkle in Time* – skipping the middle. The Lord so wants us to love the life process. He wants us to be content, even

amidst the drudgery and even the pain. Yes, even if it's a health issue with us or someone we love. This does NOT mean that we aren't able to go to Him in tears and anger and share it ALL with Him. I believe that to be very important and healthy as well. He is our perfect Father and He can handle whatever we throw at Him. However, He wants us to believe that no matter the situation, He is in control. He cares. He carries us. He loves us. He wants us to be able to take the burden off of our shoulders, the burden of fear, sadness, hopelessness, doubt, whatever it may be that holds us down, and put it on HIM. He wants and needs us to do this so that we can enjoy all that He has for us.

Isaiah 41:10

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Isaiah 30:15

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.”

Psalms 62:1-2

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.

John 14:27

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

These are just a few verses that spoke to me. No matter where you are in the process of life, know that He is there and wants to help you to enjoy the process, to be content in the process, to be upheld in the process. And you know how you do this? Simply by giving it all to Him. You cannot do anything in life in your own strength. If you could, then you wouldn't need our Father.

I cannot imagine life without the Father.

You can do NOTHING to sway His love for you – NOTHING. No matter where you are right now, what season, you are in a process of some sort – even if there is a life season that is ending and another life season beginning. It's still a process and He wants you to love where He has you. Seek Him. Know Him. He loves you unconditionally. Let Him show you.

Firmly Planted – Moment of Truth by Dina Cavazos

My finger rested on the “Delete” button as I thought about what this action would mean. *Am I ready for this? Am I willing to cast this into the sea, so to speak, forever?*

About a week before, I was listening to one of my favorite preachers, the late R.T. Kendall, on YouTube. The sermon was titled “How to Get More of God.” He was talking about the importance of Love, over and above the spiritual gifts, as the way to please God. Most of us are familiar with 1 Corinthians 13’s convicting, compelling definition of real, true, hard, where-the-rubber-meets-the-road kind of love. This is the character of the Father, *my Father*, who I claim to love and follow through the power of his son who lives in me. I’d heard it before, but this time the Spirit gave power to the words “**love keeps no record of wrongs.**” Together with Kendall’s wise counsel on how forgiveness gets us closer to God, those words resonated in my soul and I knew God was asking me to take a step of obedience. A Moment of Truth had arrived.

A few years ago (yes, *years!*) I went through something very difficult. It was one of those “refiner’s fires” that burns off a lot of junk. Part of the trial was bearing unfair treatment, hurtful accusations, and judgment from someone close who was supposed to love me and be on my side! Through this, God was showing me just how little of him I really had in me. In order to handle a situation like this in love, I needed more of *his Life in me*. My own inclination was to defend, point out *their* stuff, complain, get angry, etc. Gradually, as I learned to surrender and choose to walk in his way, not my way, I made some progress in responding instead of reacting, not talking or complaining about it, and speaking words of life and blessing. I began to see the person with more compassion and forgive “what they didn’t know they were doing”, albeit imperfectly.

Much of the hurtful interchange happened through email. It actually got to the point that my body would cringe when I saw an email from this person come through; consequently, a few I never even opened. But I was careful to save them in a folder for “future reference”, just in case it came up down the road. I just wanted proof that it really happened—I wasn’t making it up! After a time the issue that triggered all the nastiness went away and the seas were calm again as though no ripple was ever made. I made a choice to forgive, and I didn’t bring it up. I thought, “*Surely someday we’ll talk about it. Truth will be known, apologies will be made, forgiveness will flow, and it will be over.*”

It’s been *years* and that day has never come. Any talk of that time completely leaves out that part. Denial, amnesia, selective memory—I don’t know or understand, but it doesn’t matter anymore. That day was a Moment of Truth for me. I knew that, even though I’d forgiven and given up on expecting an apology or even acknowledgement, I was still holding on by keeping those emails. That “**record of wrong**” was standing between me and getting more of God.

So Moment of Truth: what’s more important to me— having more of God by listening and obeying him, or having “proof” of being wronged? As I pressed “Delete” the last chain fell off—I was completely free. I even deleted them from deleted. Would I be able to say to that person, as God says to me....*what nastiness? All I see is my love for you.* Truthfully, probably not...but what

he asked me to do was to make a choice in that moment of truth—a hard choice that would demonstrate my obedience and trust—a choice that would bring me closer. There's nothing like the peace that comes from that.

Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. **John 14:23**#"#

Moving Forward - Set Free! – by Pam Charro

Some types of bondage seem to take longer to be released from than others.

While I've known the Lord for nearly 30 years, lies about myself have been buried deep in my heart. No matter what I tried to teach my head about who I am, I wasn't able to overcome the conditioning I had received from an early age that I was responsible for others' pain and hang-ups. That belief prompted me to choose multiple unhealthy relationships in my own attempt to set things right and prove to others that I didn't deserve to be seen that way by those people. It has been a long and painful trial, particularly when I realized those people were going to view me however they chose, and there was nothing I could do to change their minds.

What was the secret that finally opened my eyes?

I can't tell you that. I can only say that walking with the Lord and believing in his love and faithfulness toward me throughout the process enabled me to receive an objectivity about my situation that I'd never had before. Suddenly, the truth was so obvious; but, until then, all I could do was suffer and wait.

However, once my freedom did arrive, I realized it no longer mattered how difficult and long it had taken, it no longer mattered what the other person said or thought of me, and it no longer mattered how devastating and unfair it had all been.

All that mattered now was that I was free!

I could clearly see that the people in my interactions were not my enemies, just people like me who needed their own deliverance from their own lies. So instead of being bitter from those entanglements, I was able to even more desperately want them to be blessed and experience their own liberation.

Those long and painful trials can make it seem impossible to hold onto the Lord and believe in his goodness. They seem like they will never end! But arriving on the other side has been so worth it. I can truly view even this as a light and momentary trial compared to the goodness in store for me. I don't know if I have ever had such exhilaration and hope for my life.

How great is our God!

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Real Stories - Where is God? By Brandi Oman

I have been struggling lately with the question, "Where is God when so many people are hurting and going through so much Sorrow?"

This is a question every Christian asks at minimum one time in their walk with Christ. In the month of November alone a friend of mine lost the love of her life after he lost the fight with his demons and took his own life...she blames God. Another friend of mine came close to losing his newborn baby girl after she contracted RSV...he cried for God to save her. I had another friend who almost had a miscarriage and she is thankful because her growing baby is now okay. I myself had a scare with my son when the doctor at the hospital thought something was wrong with Caiden's heart. The cardiologist said his heart is perfect I thank God for this miracle.

Everyone faces trials, and the question of "Where is God?" is always brought up in everyone's situations. People blame him for what has happened or they cry for his salvation and mercy.

I do not believe God punishes us with times of sorrow but I do believe he is reaching out for us to grab on to him during these times. As Christians, we are looked up to by non-Christians as an example of God/Jesus. What I mean by this is that everyone goes through pain, but the outside world expects Christians to accept the pain and handle it gracefully and without mistakes, kind of like Jesus did. I think this is very unlikely, as we are human beings. And as much as we may strive to be exactly like Him, we are not.

I feel like every Christian faces the fork in the road at some point in their life when something awful happens and we can choose to hold on to the grief, wrap ourselves in a blanket of hurt and anger, OR *we have the opportunity* to give it to God. Giving our pain, struggles and sorrows to God sounds simple, but it isn't. The reason it's not simple is simply that being real and raw when we are hurting is never easy. It makes us vulnerable. Being vulnerable is scary, and our natural defenses fight it.

There is not a 5-step plan with God. His love and mercy are relentless. I know from personal experience that he is very real.

I challenge you during tough times to stop going with your human instinct of fight-and-protect and get vulnerable with God. It will save you years of turmoil, you will feel better, and God is always on your side. Bad things will happen here on Earth, but we have so much more to look forward to when our body dies and our eternal lives begin.

So, where is God in the middle of sorrow? Revealing his plans, as He says in His word, Jeremiah 29:11, and they are very good plans indeed.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord,

"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

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FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - And We Ate – by Marcy Lytle

Over the Christmas holidays, family arrived, just like I'm sure yours did, too. There were about 22 of us on our biggest days, and 12 on our least, and our gatherings mostly centered around food. My mom (who passed away just last summer) always made sure that the family gathered to eat, either in her house around the table, or at the table in nice restaurants around the city. This was her tradition, and she had the money to pay for it all, so that's what we did.

But this Christmas was different. Mom wasn't here, and we kids didn't have the funds to spend hundreds of dollars eating out for 10 days, which was the allotted time for our holiday celebration together. Dad now had the funds, but would he be interested in paying? None of us knew, for it was mom who lavished her money on her family, money "she hadn't spent," she would say. And she often told us that she couldn't take money with her, so why not spend it on our family, now? And she did.

My brother decided that the tradition would continue, my sister and I weren't about to cook and serve and clean every day during the holidays, and so we gathered around many tables across our city. My sister's favorite hamburger spot was our choice meeting place on the day she and her husband arrived. BBQ always made the list, so the bigger group gathered around a large table where the intoxicating rubs and smokiness of the meat being cooked over an open fire filled the room. We enjoyed BBQ twice. For our big Christmas exchange we reserved a private room at a fine restaurant where the food just kept coming...and coming...and it was all most delicious and satisfying. And, of course, we had Mexican food, a staple among each one in our family. Once doesn't live well unless one eats Tex-Mex every few days. And chips and queso? Those are the vitamins of eternal life, aren't they?

Every year, this is the scene. And every year, someone comments, "Are we really eating again?" It's only been a few hours since our last consumption of a full feast, and somehow everyone shows up hungry for more. Every year, we wonder how we'll find a place that will accommodate our large group, and every year we find it. Each member of the family finds a seat, some will be seated near the kids who are clamoring for someone's cell phone so they can play a game while they wait, and some will be seated near Papa, the eldest one in our group now. They will hear him tell stories they've heard before. And still others will sit near their siblings or their cousins and ask questions like, "How's your job going?" or, "What are the kids up to?"

Those meals, those gatherings, those scenes, and those plates of food are what we all remember and talk about for weeks to come, and reminisce about the following year when we gather again.

Somehow, we all gained sustenance in more ways than just filling our bellies, when we ate together:

We gave thanks for a family that loves each other.

We relished in the bounty of our grandmother/mother/great grandmother who started this feasting event.

We savored each bite of something served to us, something we didn't have to make or bake or pay for.

We sat and listened, and talked, and wondered, and pondered, about each story and each person and each child at the table.

We marveled at the array of food presented to us, the way it looked and smelled, and the way it tasted on our lips, and even enjoyed desserts we'd never bake for ourselves.

We lingered just a few moments longer on the last day, as the last family was leaving to board a plane, and as all of us knew it was the last meal together...for a while.

And all of that eating around one big table together somehow strengthened us for the year to come, when we would be apart for thousands of miles and unable to gather together.

We arrived, we opened gifts, we visited Christmas events, we showed up for tours...and we ate. And the eating was the event that reminded us of the love that started back when she made her first pecan pie and set it on the table one Christmas day.

May we never stop eating together...

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FRESH THYME – Hands Ready – by Marcy Lytle

Are you one who claps loudly? Or do you sit in a concert or at the end of a show with your arms folded, while the rest of the audience sends up the applause? I'm a moody clapper. What I mean by that is I won't just clap because everyone is clapping. I withhold it if I don't feel it's deserved. After all, applause means we liked what we heard or saw, doesn't it?

We attended a concert over the holidays, one where the groups Casting Crowns and For King and Country played. These groups were really great, especially For King and Country. The lyrics, the presentation, the tunes, were all so celebratory – as it was their Christmas tour! And I was super emotional, missing my mom, as this is the first holiday season without her. I found myself with tears streaming down my face multiple times throughout the evening.

While I was sitting there, I noticed how the people around me tended to do whatever everyone else was doing. If a group stood up during a particularly awesome song, then people around the bleachers joined them. In one song, a few people turned on their flashlights on their phones, and soon the whole arena was lit up in the dark! It was beautiful. And when applause began after each song, it soon rang out among everyone.

Except me.

I wasn't in the mood to clap. Understandably.

I thought the phone thing was silly. Until everyone did it. Then it was cool.

I didn't want to stand up, and I was annoyed at those in front of me who did. Judgy me.

I'm not much of a follower, usually. In fact, if EVERYONE is doing it, I'm pretty sure I'll not do it. That's just how I'm made up. I don't like to join a bandwagon just so I can take a ride wherever those on it are going.

But withholding applause...that got me thinking. Applause is such an affirmation, isn't it? When we applaud people, smiles emerge on their faces – like when our kids score a basket and they hear our hands come together in unison with those around us. When we clap to the rhythm of a song, the songwriter or singer feels so excited that the audience is receiving and listening and participating in their creation! And when we applaud a group of actors at the end of a play, or give a movie a thunderous applause, we are saying without words, "This is awesome!" And those people can go home and sleep, knowing their best was well received.

I've decided as a New Year's resolution of sorts to be more intentional with my applause to those around me, with my pats on the back, with my high-fives, and with my claps of appreciation. It's important. And so what if everyone else around me is clapping and I don't want to join in? I need to do so, if I enjoyed the show. And so what if everyone else around is not applauding, but I feel affirmation is needed, I need to stand up and cheer on the person who needs that encouragement.

Clapping is good for the body, it gets the circulation moving, and it's energizing. And that movement and energy is transferred to those who can hear it, when it's done loudly for the ears of the ones performing and giving their all.

Won't you join me in thunderous applause this year for the One who marches the stars out each night in perfect rows, for those tireless parents who care for children with needs, for the elderly who are dealing with wounds from the long race they've taken, and for friends who are brave against all odds like fires and floods and famine?

I've got my hands ready...warmed up...awaiting the show.

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