

A BUNDLE OF

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2014

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January 2014

TIPS

THE DRESSING: Filling the Void

The holidays are over. All the decorations are put away, except for that one lone decoration you overlooked while cleaning. And the house is back to “normal,” only it looks empty and not so inviting as it did before all of the decorating took place. It’s empty from the cheeriness of Christmas, and it begs for some sort of update – but there’s no money left! What can you do to make your living area cheerful and bright through the rest of the winter?

Bring in the outdoors. Pinecones, some branches from your trees, and sprigs of evergreen all look so pretty in a clear glass vase, and allow you continue the scent and feel of the holidays, without all the red and green. Just replace your table centerpiece with this neutral palette of the colors of the outdoors in winter.

Fruit in a bowl is simple, clean, and inviting. Choose a bowl that you like, and make a mound of fruit, such as clementines – those juicy orange, round balls that taste so good (and are so good for you!). Underneath the bowl, place a piece of burlap, to go with the natural feel you’ve started with your outdoors vase.

Woody scents are great for filling the room with an aroma of the outdoors. Try [Cabin Fever](#), one of the great flavors from Milkhouse Candle Creamery, or [Jack Frost](#).

A trio of herbs on a windowsill or a small table near the outside light is useful, beautiful, and smells good! [This cute set](#) includes seeds for basil, oregano, and chives – the makings for a wonderful homemade pizza!

A natural-colored plush throw will keep you warm, and make guests feel cozy in these next six weeks of winter, as they see a warm hue like chocolate brown or hunter green, to go with your outdoor décor for your living area, where your family and friends gather.

Joy, Peace, and Hope are good sentiments to linger after Christmas is over, so if you’ve still got these wooden or metal letters for one of these, leave them out on your mantel! Spray paint them a neutral color, if you like, and even embellish the letters with clear jewels and/or berries from outside.

All white candles of various sizes and heights look very pretty on a wooden tray lined with small rocks. Or check out these [snowflake votive holders](#)! Light them in the evenings, as you sit by the fire enjoying the ambience you’re creating with your new winter décor.

Outdoor garden lanterns that you use in the spring/summer can be cleaned up, brought in, and placed on the hearth, with tea lights candles flickering inside. [These lanterns](#) are very affordable, and add such flair!

Your living area doesn’t have to seem like a dank, dark, tomb after the livelihood of the holidays is over. It can be transformed into another pretty picture that invites you to come and rest, dine, and be...with those you love the most.

SEVEN 4 YOU: Friendly Feet

Feet are like our friends. We have to treat them well, or they will hurt us, and that doesn't feel so good.

After all the shopping, standing and cooking, moving and cleaning, and running around, our feet may be crying by now saying, "Help! I need some attention!" And when our feet feel good, they're happy and well-cared for, they serve us well. They're the best friends we've got. Sure, a monthly pedicure feels great, but what about ways we can help our feet out daily, at home?

Here are seven ways to rejuvenate your friendship with your feet, this month:

1. **Rub with lotion.** The particular scent of [peppermint foot lotion](#) tingles when you spread it over your heels and feet, and immediately makes your feet wake up and feel energized to go another mile. Use it daily, at night, after a long day.
2. **Remove your shoes.** Train yourself to kick off your shoes when you're at home and go barefoot, or move around in [non-slip socks](#). How many times have you worn your shoes from sun up, to sun down, and wanted to kick yourself for doing so? Your feet want to kick you, too!
3. **Feet Up.** Lie down, put a pillow under your feet, and elevate them. You're already responding to this suggestion with a, "I don't have time to lie down!" Take 15 minutes in the evening to lie down on the sofa, watch a bit of television with the family, and don't move. It's okay to rest.
4. **Mix it up.** Don't wear heels or uncomfortable shoes every day. This seems like a no-brainer, but we punish ourselves by wearing shoes that hurt, several days in a row. If we're limping, our back hurts, and we're wearing a frown, let's try slipping on some cute, comfy flats or [kitten heels](#) for a few days. Our feet will smile up at us.
5. **Massage Exchange.** Find someone – a friend, a family member, your spouse – who is willing to rub your feet during an entire 30-minute show on television. Then ask them what they'd like in return. My sister used to love it when I played with her hair, combing it, pinning, it, etc. You might want to have your turn last, because this one could make you sleepy...
6. **Leave Off the Polish.** You're most likely not wearing sandals this month (except maybe to your New Year's parties), so clean your nails and go bare for a month, letting your toenails breathe and see fresh air again. You might even like the natural look, at least until spring arrives...
7. **Homemade footsoak.** If you've got time for this one, do it. Using salt, tea, lemon juice, or even honey, to pamper your tired friends might be just the thing to rebuild that relationship you so long to have again with your two best friends. [Check out these recipes!](#)

January should be a slow, healing, by the fire, kind of month. So take time to treat your feet well, and give them thanks for the past year of keeping you upright and on the go. They will feel refreshed and be ready to stay with you for the long haul, if you treat them right once in a while!

SELAH'S STYLE: Winterizing! By Selah Irwin

Hi there. By now you know I love fashion and style. Today I will tell you how to winterize your summer outfits for cold weather.

Even in California it gets cold, but rarely snows. I don't particularly like to have to put away my summer outfits for the winter. I decide that I don't have to because I came up with a solution. I will show you how.

Here you have a regular every day summer outfit. As you can see, I like skinny jeans.

To make it ready to be in the winter with me I added a long sleeve blue shirt. It is plain when it is by itself but when you add the darker blue on top it brings creative style. I added some very, very warm legwarmers. They are always awesome for the winter!

If you have a cool beanie like this one, why not swap it in for having plain hair? It keeps your head toasty and warm like chestnuts roasting on an open fire. Add a *scarf-tactical* neck warmer and you're ready for the cold mountain weather!

I like to wear fancy outfits but sometimes it rains or it is too cold to wear them. It is sad that I have to wear a coat and cover it up. I decided I don't have to cover it up! I just add warm layers underneath and a short sequin jacket on top.

I put on sparkly leggings and fancy boots instead of cold shoes. I have fuzzy, fuzzy ear muffs. They are black and white with a bow, and that makes them good for fancy dresses and the cold.

The best thing for cozying up in the winter is getting into your favorite pair of comfy pajamas. Here is mine!

And finally, my favorite movie is the new Disney film Frozen. I like the snow queen because she can turn things icy, she has a pretty dress, and she lives in an awesome ice palace!

FEARLESS KITCHEN: Healthy Helpings, Happy Wallet by Christina Vetter

Happy New Year!

Starting a new year is so exciting. It's a time to shake off our cobwebs and breathe in the fresh, new, untainted year. Resolutions, goals, and self improvement sayings similar to, "My best year yet," take the place of Christmas cards and pumpkin pie.

With all the self-improvement going on, getting back into shape becomes top priority for many women around this time. Bathing suit season is still a manageable five or six months away, and in the meantime, our not-so-fit body can still be covered by cozy jeans and baggy sweaters.

January usually brings a passion for health, but many times we make this commitment only to find the dedication wavering more and more as the months pass. Who can blame us? With all the boring, tasteless, ball-and-chain diet food around, it's no surprise that our vow to health starts to deteriorate. After all who wants to eat carrots and egg whites for the next 365 days? I sure don't. As much as I love fresh fruits and vegetables, I have to have something that will satisfy my taste buds along with my waistline, all the while avoiding a dismal balance in my bank account. It seems like a constant research project to keep the menu changing, but believe it or not, it is possible to eat inexpensive, healthy, and tasty meals.

Simple tricks can make little changes to help your health without sabotaging your palate or your wallet. For example, when cooking with ground beef, buy the highest meat/fat ratio you can afford, and drain off the fat as you're browning the meat. Ground beef is inexpensive and can be dressed up very easily. Try my Pantry Chili recipe this month for a great dinner idea. Also, to save some cash, buy whole chickens to cut up instead of buying frozen pieces. Trust me; it's easier than you think, (thank you, [YouTube](#)) and the dark meat isn't going to jeopardize your health. The dark meat actually has more iron than the white and as long as you cut the fat off, dark meat can be a great ingredient in many dishes. Speaking of meat, always ask to see the discounted meat at grocery stores. These meats are still a safe distance from their expiration date but are usually marked 50% off. Another trick is to add healthy items to or use healthy versions of your existing favorite meals. For example, add sautéed vegetables to a baked potato in place of bacon bits, substitute your favorite spaghetti with whole wheat pasta, or make some homemade Sloppy Jane's with sweet potato fries (see recipe below).

Especially in the winter months, soups can also be an inexpensive way to eat healthy. Bowls full of corn chowder (see October's column for recipe) or a Spicy Chicken Tortilla soup (see recipe below) are healthy, warm, and super yummy! Another tip: as hard as it seems, give up soda. Many nutritionists agree that we are drinking the majority of our calories now and soda is the main culprit. On top of the damage it's doing to our health, the havoc on our wallets is brutal! Swap soda for some fruit infused carbonated water. Or try drinking tea or 100% juice.

To eat inexpensively and healthy, all you're required to do is a little research and sneaky creativity. Don't chain yourself to an ineffective fad diet this New Year. Instead, try changing your eating habits as a whole, little by little, for the best results. You can do it!

As always please comment and share *your* favorite healthy and inexpensive munchies below! Happy eating!

Sweet Potato Fries

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

These have become a staple in our house. They're healthy and addictive! I like them dipped in mustard, but feel free to pair them with any of your favorite French fry condiments.

Ingredients:

2 large sweet potatoes
3 TBSP olive oil
½ tsp chili powder
½ lime
Coarse salt and black pepper to taste

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 425 F. Line two cookie sheets with parchment paper.
- Wash potatoes and cut (with skins on) into ½" x 2" fries. *can also cut into wedges but they won't be as crispy
- Toss fries in a large bowl with oil, chili powder, lime juice and a pinch of salt and pepper.
- Transfer to cookie sheets and bake for 30-35 minutes turning every 10 minutes for even coloring.
- Remove from oven, and add salt to taste.

Sloppy Jane

Serves 6-8

Difficulty: 

This is my version of the "Sloppy Joe." This is healthier than the original without giving up that finger-licking mess that we all love.

Ingredients:

1 ½ lb ground turkey
½ medium onion (small diced)
2 medium carrots (small diced)
1 green bell pepper (small diced)
3 cloves garlic (minced)
1 TBSP Worcestershire sauce

3/4 C ketchup
1/2 C BBQ sauce (my favorite is Head Country)
1 TBSP olive oil
6-8 whole wheat hamburger buns

Directions:

- Cook veggies in olive oil over medium heat until soft.
- Add meat and cook thoroughly, draining off any fat
- Add Worcestershire, ketchup, and BBQ sauce
- Simmer for 5-10 minutes
- Serve on whole wheat hamburger buns

Pantry Chili

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

The great thing about this chili is its versatility. I call it pantry chili because it can be made out of whatever I have in the pantry at the time. This is more a guideline for chili than an exact recipe and the kinds of beans can change to whatever is in your pantry. All ways go great with warm cornbread and shredded cheese on top.

Ingredients:

1 LB ground beef
1 small onion small diced
2 cloves garlic minced
1 can Pinto beans
1 can Red beans
1 can ranch style beans with juices
1 can diced tomatoes with juices
Salt and pepper
1 tsp chili powder
1 tsp Tabasco sauce

Directions:

- Cook meat in stock pot, add onion and garlic and cook until translucent.
- Add beans, seasonings, tomatoes, and hot sauce and simmer for 20 minutes
- Add salt and pepper as needed. Serve with shredded cheese on top.

Chicken Tortilla Soup

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

This soup is great for a cold night. It's fast, easy, and waistline friendly. The tortilla chips are optional, but I think it takes the soup to a great level!

Ingredients:

1 medium onion- small diced
2 garlic cloves- minced
2 TBSP oil
1 can Rotel tomatoes and chilies (I use hot)
4 C chicken broth
2 TBSP Worcestershire sauce
1 tsp chili powder
1 tsp ground cumin
1 tsp hot sauce (such as Louisiana or Tabasco)
4 TBSP flour
1 LB chicken breast cut into small pieces
Tortilla chips
Shredded Monterrey Jack cheese

Directions:

- In a large stock pot, sweat onion and garlic in oil until translucent.
- Add Rotel, chicken broth, Worcestershire sauce, spices, and hot sauce and simmer for 20 minutes.
- In a small bowl, mix flour with a ½ C of the soup's broth and whisk quickly to blend. Add to soup and bring to a rolling boil.
- Add chicken and simmer for 5 minutes or until chicken is cooked.
- Add salt and pepper as needed.
- Serve with chips in bottom of bowl, topping with cheese.

TRIED AND TRUE: Must-Haves for Your Purse

As the New Year begins, it's often a time when we clean up the house from the Christmas craziness, organize our closets and drawers, make room for the new, and discard the old. What about our purses? They are usually a catchall for the entire family's stash, including papers, small toys, loose change, and a heap of other "junk." So we thought we would share with you our must-haves for our purses – those things we actually need – the items we don't want to leave home without.

- I actually don't have much in my purse, but you will find moisturizing Chapstick, a small notepad and pen, and a [thumb drive](#) at all times. I try to be prepared for any and everything, whether it's a great idea or recipe, or something I hate -chapped lips! – *Christina Vetter*
- I have a fingernail file (I hate rough edges on my nails), Orbit Wintermint gum in ample supply (for me & two teenagers), Bath & Body Works, [True Blue Spa](#) Super Softening Hand Lotion (this is really great stuff!) – *Lynn Cherry*
- Burt's Bees Tinted [Lip Balm](#), which adds color & conditions lips without being heavy like lipstick, Hand Sanitizer (I didn't used to be a germaphobe, but having a kid who picks up every bug in a 5 mile radius turned me), "First Aid" baggie with band aids, Benadryl (for allergic reactions), and Advil. As a mom, I use it often for my own kids, and sometimes other people's kids need it, too! – *April Karli*
- Lipstick. With my pale lips, I look pretty bad with no color; AAA card - not only does it come in handy if I get a flat tire or lock myself out of my car, but I also can save money at many stores and restaurants: Janice Seney's [booklet](#) *Reality Exercises to Develop the Inner Man*, for whenever I need to be reminded of God's positive perspective of me. – *Pam Charro*
- In my purse is my planner (I have one for each month), my pretty [zipper bag](#) that catches all that loose stuff, and a fun key ring on my keys for easy finding when the keys fall to the bottom of the bag. – *Marcy Lytle*
- Chapstick, [nail file](#), pen. I don't often wear lipstick, but I don't like for my lips to feel dry. So, I keep Chapstick with me all the time. Who hasn't broken a nail before? It drives me nuts to have a ragged nail and not be able to file it down. Finding a pen in my purse is like striking oil. Hardly ever happens, and it makes me feel rich. – *Georganne Schuch*
- Baby wipes, since I have babies. But honestly, they clean up everything! I also carry a [coupon/planner book](#) I got at Target which is a great organizer. It's where I keep my lists. This brings me to my third item – lip gloss! Without finding a pen in my bag one time, I had to resort to checking off my grocery list with my lip gloss, which worked out perfectly! – *Kamrin Wolfe*

REVIEWS: One-Liners

We can forget the content of movies, books, and music if there's nothing there to remember. However, the really good ones stick with us, and it's usually one line, an awesome quote, or a lyric that speaks to our heart that we find ourselves thinking about for years to come. In fact, we even pass these sayings down to our children...and their children. This month we are sharing our favorite lines from movies, books, and music so that you too may watch and listen or read for your favorites, as well.

MOVIES

Home Alone 2

My family seems to use movie one-liners more often than anything else in our conversations. One line we use more than any of them is from [Home Alone 2](#) when Buz tells Kevin, "Beat that, you little trout sniffer." It's become something we jokingly say to each other (or mutter to ourselves) when we're particularly proud of something we've done. It's the best confidence booster. – Christina Vetter

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

My kids just watched a *Harry Potter* marathon, so this one stands out. One of my favorite lines ever from there is from Professor Albus Dumbledore in [Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows](#). "Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it." – April Karli

Emperor's New Groove

"Pan-clocks," from *50 First Dates* with Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore; "Back, elbow, shoulder, oof, cat screech," from Crunk falling down the stairs in [Emperor's New Groove](#); "So if you've a date in Constantinople, she'll be waiting in Istanbul," from Istanbul by They Might Be Giants. All just because they're silly and stick in my head. – Pam Charro

The Book Thief

"I am haunted by humans," gave me chills as I watched the movie [The Book Thief](#), because it's a quote from the narrator, Death himself. And it made me feel empowered to know that I haunt death because life lives in me forever. What a great quote. – Marcy Lytle

BOOKS

Gifted Hands

I just read [Gifted Hands](#). What a testament Dr. Ben Carson is to the love and determination of a mother. He also gives a great testimony to the faithfulness of God. He overcame unbelievable odds to become a renowned surgeon who has saved many lives while never losing sight of where he came from and what is important to him. "Successful people don't have fewer

problems. They have determined that nothing will stop them from going forward.” – Georganne Schuch

A Light in the Attic

I love the series of books by Shel Silverstein, and my daughter has every one! [A Light in the Attic](#) has a lot of good quotes, but this is one of my faves: “How much good inside a day? Depends how good you live 'em. How much love inside a friend? Depends how much you give 'em.” Start your collection this year, and read these fun books to your kids. – Marcy Lytle

MUSIC

Take it Easy by Chuck Girard

“Our lives are in your hands, oh Lord we want them to be there...our lives and dreams and hopes and plans we trust entirely to your care.” This is a song I heard live in concert decades ago, and the lyrics and the message have more than several times a year come to mind, when I’m praying for direction or provision. What a great reminder of God’s care over us. [Chuck Girard](#) was one of the first contemporary Christian artists to hit the scene, and his songs are still amazing.– Marcy Lytle

Redeemer by Nicole C. Mullen

Another oldie, but goodie. This song off the album [Redeemer](#) is super encouraging, and Nicole’s voice is perfect for the message. If you’re discouraged, speak to God about it, then listen to this song, and wait all the way through until the end, to hear her exclaim, “I spoke with him this morning!” [Click here](#) to listen to the song. – Marcy Lytle

HOME

PRACTICAL PARENTING: Four Simple Steps by Georganne Schuch

January is always a good time to consider, or reconsider, goals and expectations. Looking forward to a new year, you might feel like it's the chance for a new direction or at least a break with a bad past. When considering my children's future, I like to pick a few goals for them to achieve or work toward for the year. Then, I identify several steps we can take over the next 12 months to move toward that point. After all, while our children certainly change every day, their childhood passes so quickly that it's easy to get halfway through without any thought to where you want to end. Raising a child is more than keeping him alive for 18 years, though it often seems like the best you might be able to do.

Adults often create life plans to chart the course they want their life to take. A similar exercise can be helpful with children, but it needs to be tweaked more often, since a child is a constant work in process...in more ways than one. Therefore, I consider age and maturity appropriate goals. I'm not expecting a preschooler to be able to separate clothes for washing; however, I can expect them to learn to put their dirty clothes in a hamper and put up their clean clothes in a drawer. These are reasonable steps to learn so that in a few years, they can be ready to separate clothes and eventually even operate the washing machine and dryer. After all, I'm not doing their laundry forever.

For young children, I identify several life skills they can perform proficiently by the end of the year, such as picking up toys, throwing away trash, and putting up clothes. These are each parts of a bigger chore that they will gradually learn to do. My eight year old, for instance, has the ability to clean her room well from learning each of the steps over the course of several years. Pick up the toys. Make up the beds. Throw away the trash. Put up the clothes and shoes. Notice, I said she has the *ability*. The will to keep her room clean takes a lot of encouragement, if you know what I mean.

As my children get older, I want them to begin to know their passions and investigate their talents. Most children like to color, for instance, but I have one who is passionate about drawing. From the time she was very young, she could sit for hours drawing and coloring and planning details of a picture. She got books that showed techniques, and she copied them, even before she could read well. I plan time and buy the supplies she can use to pursue this passion. I seek out special art activities and classes for her to take when we can. I am setting a long term goal for her interest in art by implementing many small steps along the way.

While she might love to spend her day drawing, life is more than paper and paint. A well-rounded person should know something about many things. I think cooking and music fit the bill nicely. All children should know the basics of cooking, since I have the same attitude as laundry. They need to make their own meals and not eat all my groceries forever. I start them pretty young pouring in ingredients and stirring. My end goal is for them to be self-sufficient in the kitchen, which involves cooking for me for a change.

I have a special love of music and want them to share that, as well. Whether they ever play Carnegie Hall is irrelevant, but I have a goal that they know how to read music and can play an instrument with some skill. This can be a relaxing hobby that brings pleasure to not only

themselves, but others. I, personally, have not whipped out my trumpet to serenade anyone in a long time, but I hope their piano lessons will be more fruitful.

I consider what I want my children to remember of their childhood and what I think they should be able to do as adults. It can't be all fun and games, nor should it be all tedious chores and studying. Passions and talents can coexist very well with responsibility and character. In fact, I don't think you can fully appreciate one without the other.

Developing a year plan for your child really involves four steps:

1. Choose a few chores you want your child to learn and practice, and give them *every* opportunity to practice.
2. Help them recognize their talents and passions and find ways for them to develop the skills necessary to determine how it fits in their life.
3. Introduce other activities which may awaken unknown talents and interests.
4. Involve them in real life so they can learn how to survive on their own. You will welcome that independence about the time you hit retirement age.

I love that I get to see the special glimmers of talent God has given each of them and shine them up for others to enjoy. That's one of the many cool things about being a parent. My children are very like me in many ways, but they are unique individuals. I want to encourage that uniqueness, first and foremost.

TRAIN THEM: How Our Kids Grow by April Karli

I wrote some time ago about the most significant influences in the spiritual formation of our children. [In that article](#) I said, **"Parents acting as primary disciplers is the key to raising children with a vibrant faith."**

Honest moment: sometimes this feels like a massive task to me. My perfectionist tendencies float to the surface. Teaching my children about God is the most important thing I do as a parent. Showing them who God is, and helping them learn how to follow Jesus, is the most meaningful and significant job I'll ever have. What if I mess up something? What if I teach them something wrong? Or maybe I'm a bad example? My husband and I are bound to make mistakes -- lots of them -- and it seems maybe others, who are wiser or more spiritual, would be better suited for the position. Of course, lots of people do help and support us. But, we are, as I said, the **"primary disciplers"** of our kids.

Deep breath...

I know other parents feel inadequate to teach their children about God sometimes, too. They tell me so. Many don't believe they have what it takes to lead their children into a deep and meaningful relationship with Christ. As an answer to the anxiety, books and programs abound offering parents tools to help moms and dads feel capable and competent.

Sometimes I think all the books, advice, and programs, while well-intended, actually serve to undermine our self-confidence as parents, and they make it harder to hear the voice of our Heavenly Father as he directs us in the faith formation our children.

Scripture says that it's God who makes the seeds of faith grow. We are God's co-workers in gardens of our children's hearts. We plant. We water. But only God makes the seeds grow.

"So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, **but only God, who makes things grow.** The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service." ([1 Corinthians 3:7-9](#))

My job is to plant seeds and to water the seeds others have planted in the hearts of my children. To carry the metaphor further, perhaps sometimes I even might need to help my kids cull a few weeds from time to time until they're old enough to take on that job themselves. But the growing part? That's not my job. I can leave that to God.

Seed planting is hard work. There's the digging and getting the soil ready. It's sweaty, and makes for tired, sore muscles the next day. Watering can be hard, too, particularly during a long, hot drought. But when it comes to making something grow, I don't even know what goes into making that happen (I didn't major in botany or even biology.) And when I start to think that I am capable of causing something to grow, I'm taking on a role that's not mine. It's not ultimately

up to me whether or not my children grow spiritually. I have to trust God to do his job. **And God will do his job.**

Rather than taking all the burden upon myself, along with my husband, to be my children's "primary discipler," for now I'm gladly sharing that job with God. I'll plant and I'll water. **But I'll leave the growing part to God because that's his area of expertise.** The best part is that I believe that through trusting the process of growth to God, I'll grow too. And that is something that will be very good for my children. For the more I grow, and the more spiritually mature I become, the better "primary discipler" I'll be.

Do you ever feel inadequate to disciple your children? Who do you rely on for help? How can you trust God more in the process of the spiritual growth of your children? Yourself?

Kamrin:

There are two broken links in the original article I reference above. I hunted down the updated links. Here they are:

correct link to white paper: <http://jeremymavis.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/cmwhitepaper.pdf>

updated link to Eikon: <http://www.eikonthechurch.com/>

Comment [1]: April Karli:
Kamrin -- note for you!!

I DON'T DO TEENS: Bloating...or Growling? By Marcy Lytle

You know the feeling. You've eaten too much for dinner and your stomach is bloated and full like a blimp about to take flight. You also can identify with the feeling of an empty stomach, due to a distasteful meal being set before you, where you eat hardly a thing. The next thing you know, your stomach is making noises in the most inappropriate places, at the most inappropriate times. Neither of those feelings is comfortable.

After Christmas is over, our kids have either been overloaded with goodies, toys, and everything their heart desires...or they're sullen, pouting, and disappointed because they didn't receive what they wanted.

Teens are fickle. It's hard for them to identify what they want, and when they get it, they are often dissatisfied with how it looks or fits. Teens often want it all for Christmas, and when they get their entire list wrapped in pretty packages under the tree, the grateful heart is there for a moment, but then the gluttonous strut shows up soon after the holidays are over.

So how do we deal with our bloated teens that have "eaten" too much from all the family members who showered them with "more than enough?" And how do we contend with our teens who sit sulking on their bed, growling and complaining that their friends all got a new phone and all they got was pajamas?

First of all, here's what doesn't work:

1. Shaking our finger in shame at them.
2. Demanding that they sit and write thank-you notes.
3. Telling them about all of the starving children in Africa.

Why not try this:

1. Be an example by sharing with others, and giving thanks out loud, so your teens hear you.
2. Rejoice with your friend who got a new car for Christmas, as you wear your new watch.
3. Pray for your kids and their attitudes, as they grow and mature in developing thankful hearts.

Teens will be teens. They're moody, they are trying to figure out who they are, and they sometimes get their identity from the wrong things. Living by example, in our own word, deeds, and countenance, is really the best way to influence our kids in positive ways.

Disappointed with your own gifts, and feel like growling? Overwhelmed with the goodness under the tree this year and feeling a bit guilty for the fullness you feel?

Ask the Lord to show you what to do with your bounty. Express your disappointment; let it all out, and then gladly wear that new watch and ask for a ride in your friend's new car. Your teens will see, and they'll imitate you, instead of their peers.

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS: 10 Ounces by Georganne Schuch

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Those words take on new meaning when trying to keep a house from looking like a demolition site and children from resembling feral pigs. Preventing some messes go a long way to keeping both in a presentable state. Likewise, cleaning a mess that took a nanosecond to make often takes an hour and no small amount of effort. I've learned a few ounces of prevention over the years, and here are some of my "duh" moments.

1. **A cookie sheet or piece of foil placed at the bottom of an oven** catches inevitable spills from pies and casseroles. That one second ounce prevents two hours of soaking and 30 minutes of scrubbing, not to mention the smoke alarm from the burning leftovers. The fire department does not take kindly to false alarms.
2. **Lay wet towels and wash cloths over the side of a tub** or sink to dry before putting in the laundry basket. All those wet towels turn in to a stinky, mildewed mess if you pile them in a basket. Then, the basket will need cleaning before it makes the entire house smell like smelly socks.
3. **Pour out leftover coffee** instead of letting it sit to grow its own antibiotic factory. Rinse the pot and return to the coffeemaker ready to make the next pot of coffee. Otherwise, you might feel the need to completely sanitize the pot before making coffee again.
4. **Move the contents** of the refrigerator around every few days to disclose any hidden leftovers or forgotten vegetables. Plastic bags do little to contain the mush factor of a decaying cucumber, and broccoli stink is hard to get out.
5. **Resist the urge to pour that last two tablespoons of filling in a pie.** If you can't put it in the oven without spilling it, it's too full. If you insist on trying, remember tip #1.
6. **Treat clothing stains** with pre-wash immediately. Setting a garment aside to treat later rarely works and results in a permanent jelly stain down the front of the new white shirt. It's always white, never black, that gets the red stain.
7. **Eat at the table** or in the kitchen. Sweeping crumbs and picking up half-eaten sandwiches is so much easier when you know where to look. If the entire house becomes a child's eating domain, you should not be surprised to find petrified apples in the closet and moldy bread in their bed.
8. **Likewise, drinks** should not leave the companionship of the food at the table or in the kitchen. You have no idea how bad milk can smell until it soaks the sheets and mixes with a child's body oils.
9. **No one leaves the car without bringing something in the house.** If it went in the car with you, it needs to come out of the car with you. This includes shoes, coats, papers, books, toys, hair bows, and clothing. Why children think the car doubles as a closet is a great mystery.
10. **Group food items in the pantry.** Canned items go together. Pasta share shelf space. You get the idea. This makes it easier to find your ingredients when preparing a meal and faster to see what you need at the store when making your grocery list.

There are a thousand ounces of prevention that make your life easier in the long run. A simple effort now pays big dividends tomorrow or next week. Of course, hindsight is 20/20. You

always realize too late how you could have prevented some huge cleanup or fix. Learn from your mistake and add it to your file for next time.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER: Use It! by Marcy Lytle

After all of the holiday uproar has settled down and we've got new toys and accessories to fill our closets and drawers, it's a great time to look at what we've got and determine its usefulness. After all, the gifts we receive must be used in order to bless others. Otherwise, our gifts become things that define us and own us, instead of blessings we share.

Set out the following items on a table, with each one hidden under a napkin: an item from the house covered with dust, a rotten banana or other food, a tarnished piece of silver, something from a drawer or closet that has been forgotten about, a broken item, something left outside that is now dirty, and a rusty tool.

As you pull out each item, discuss the uses for it and read the paragraphs below. Point out how some of these items can become useful again, but some are no good and must be discarded. Be sure to encourage each other at the end. You may want to think ahead of the gifts and talents of each one participating, and have these ready to discuss.

[Read Matthew 25: 14 – 30](#)

Does the master in this story seem harsh to you? At the beginning of the story, it says the master "entrusted" his property to those who worked for him. This means he gave them things and trusted these things to their care. Jesus has given us life and given to each person talents and gifts, entrusting them to our care, to bring him glory and honor. Are we using them for him?

Uncover the item covered with dust. When something is covered with dust, it has been sitting unattended for a long time. Sometimes books get dusty because they are never read. Don't let your Bible be one of those books. Open it, read it, meditate on what it says, and receive it in your heart. **Use your Bible.**

Uncover the rusty item. When a tool is rusty, it has usually been sitting in a tool box somewhere for a long time not being used. If it sits there long enough, it gets stiff and eventually becomes too old for use. We are all given talents to be used for God. Some people can sing, some can be a friend, some can pray, etc. Don't let your talents become "rusty" from not being used. **Use your talents and gifts to bless God** and others.

Uncover the rotten food. No one wants to eat a rotten piece of fruit. Our talents are best when they're fresh, too. This means that we need to stay connected to our source of life, Jesus, at all times. Fruit is best eaten when it's ripe and eaten right away. Too long off the vine results in a rotten tomato. Stay connected to Jesus so when you are used for him you will **be fresh and tasty to those around you.**

Uncover the tarnished silver piece. Silver utensils or silver jewelry have to be polished to remain silver in color. Silver tarnishes when it reacts with the air, but a polishing cloth can buff the silver and make it shiny again. When you are out in the world, you get dirty and need to be "polished" or cleaned daily, so that you don't lose your "shine." This means you need to cleanse your mind and heart daily from things you've seen or heard during the day, and **let God renew you** with his love, peace and joy.

Uncover the item that was lost or forgotten. Have you ever lost your keys? Lost your homework? Lost a sock? Sometimes things get lost and we eventually just forget about them, until one day we discover that lost sock under our bed way back in the corner! Items often get lost because they are not placed where they belong. Sometimes we know we have talents and gifts, but we ignore them and hide them, because of embarrassment, unworthiness, or just plain laziness. Every person is different and unique in their gifts. Ask God to show you your talents, to **find them and use them.**

Uncover the broken item. When things break, they need to be fixed if they are to be useful. A broken TV cannot be watched, a broken toy cannot be played with, a broken bike cannot be ridden, and a broken heart cannot be left that way. God is the healer of broken hearts. Maybe you tried to use a talent or gift you have and you got hurt and you feel ashamed to try again. Let God heal your broken heart and give your disappointments and hurts to him, so you can **be whole and useful in His kingdom.**

Uncover the dirty item. Shoes or toys left outside in the weather get dirty or chewed up by the dog, or even worse, could cause someone to stumble and fall. Our talents and gifts from God are very precious and need to be treated with the utmost care. If you have a voice to sing, use it to sing praise songs to encourage others. If you have a gift of giving, be a good steward of your money. If you are good at school work, use your time wisely and keep your mind occupied on good things. If you are good at artwork, draw beautiful pictures and share them with others. **Don't leave your talents and gifts just lying around. Pick them up, and use them to glorify your Lord!**

Take time to discuss each other's talents and gifts, encouraging each other to use them to bless God and others.

HANDMADE & HOMEGROWN : Handy Tote Bag by Cheryl Carrell

My girls were each in need of a small tote bag recently, so I decided to have them work alongside me for a bit of home-economics and to make some together. I didn't use a pattern. My kids picked from my fabric stash and this is what we came up with. I thought we'd share, in case you or someone you know is in need of a cute little bag, too.

The fabrics my girls chose were light weight cotton, so we used two in complementing colors to make a lining for extra support when carrying books and things. You could alternately use a more sturdy fabric like denim or canvas, without needing a lining.

Here is a step-by-step in pictures of how we made them.

Supplies you will need: Fabric, scissors, or rotary cutting tool, large ruler for easier measuring & cutting if you have one, sewing machine, pins, a tool like [this](#), or [this](#), or a big safety pin, iron.

First, cut your fabric to desired size. We cut ours to about a 30"x12" rectangle. (The finished bags are about 14"x11"). Be sure to leave a double seam allowance, because you will first sew your outer fabric and lining together, then you will fold that in half and stitch the bag together. I just made sure our final product would fit a standard sized text or music book, but you could make it any size.

Happy crafting!

January Garden Tips

If you live in a warmer climate, spring planting may already be creeping to the front of your mind. Some of you have inches of snow covering your yard right now, while others of us are excited to finally work outside when we don't have so many weeds and fire ants to contend with!

Bellow I've linked to some helpful January gardening tips.

[Southern Living](#)

[Gardening In January](#)

[Natural Gardener Austin](#)

[Portland Nursery Tips](#)

[Tips for Jan. Gardening in the Deep South](#)

YOU

STRENGTHENING YOUR CORE: Change by Marcy Lytle

You know...pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters. They're heavy when they pile up in the bottom of your purse. But what about change of another kind? What about the kinds of changes life brings on, as you age, as you get married, as you experience divorce, or perhaps as your job description changes?

We all experience change, from the kind that rattles around in our pockets, to the kind that redefines the landscape out our heart's window.

What made me start thinking about this? It happened a few days ago when I threw away a penny. Yes, I did. I'm so tired of pennies, and I wish they didn't exist anymore. I try desperately to find one lone penny to pay for something that is \$4.81 so that I don't receive four more pennies back, to toss aside in the ever growing heap of change in the middle console of my car. So I saw this lone penny, and I tossed it in the trash. I didn't want to be bothered with that insignificant change, the kind of change that can't buy a darn thing, and the kind that looks different than all the rest of the coins and adds weight to my bag.

However, when change occurs in our lives, we all react differently. When small changes occur, like a spill on the carpet, that change can sometimes be erased...unless of course it's grape juice. When big changes occur, like the addition of a new baby, or the loss of a loved one, these experiences make indelible marks in our lives and our whole world changes...for good.

Back to the penny. My grandparents, if they were alive and well, would slap my hand for throwing away that small coin. "A penny saved is a penny earned," they might say to me. And I would argue that a penny saved only amounts to slight earnings, even over years of savings, and I'm just not that patient!

Let's look at a few changes in life, comparing them to the coins in our pocket.

The lone penny.

We wake up, and there's a change in our routine. It's small, insignificant, and perhaps no one else will notice it, but we do. It's like that penny we spot in the parking lot. It's a change in our mood, a change in plans, or perhaps a change in what we were going to wear for the day – because the shirt we planned on wearing now feels tight and uncomfortable this morning.

What do you do when you see change on the ground? It makes you feel sort of special, right? For some, a lone penny screams, "Pick me up! You will have good luck!" *Embrace and accept small changes as part of the spice of life...and enjoy the new flavors the change brings.*

The value of change.

Change occurs all the time, in our lives. We are forced to change jobs, for example, when we're fired, when funds are depleted and can no longer support our expertise, or when the economy dictates change. Change always appears in our pockets, too. We pay for something, and when we don't have the exact amount, we get back change. Do we see the value in change? I once read a story of a woman who paid for everything in dollar bills, and saved all the change she

received, over a couple of years. She ended up with enough money to take her family on a vacation!

Never devalue the worth of change in your life, no matter how difficult the change may seem. God is at work making all things [work together for our good](#); even changes that seem to have no value, or in fact seem downright worthless.

Change of a different color.

A penny is the only copper colored coin, the rest are silver. It stands out in a pile of change because of its color. It's easy to spot. Sometimes the change that occurs in our life is so bold and obvious, so easy to spot by others, that we are ashamed and embarrassed. Perhaps we've put on a few pounds, or we've aged and we're not pleased with our mirror image anymore. Or, what about changes that occur in our marital status? These changes make us feel like an oddball, we stand out in a crowd, and we are left feeling so alone.

A different color is a good thing, in fashion. In fact, we are told to add a pop of color to a drab outfit. *If your change makes you stand out, either face it and change it back if the change is damaging to your health, or...be proud of the change, stand tall, and realize your individual worth among many.*

Change is heavy.

Too much change; and we know it. We can barely lift our purse, our pockets end up with holes from the weight, and we're ready to clean out the change and give it to the little kids we know (who LOVE change, by the way) or add it up to see its worth, and purchase something. We can't keep carrying around piles of change. Eventually, it has to be expended or used or given away.

Changes in life are going to occur, and for some there are too many changes at once, that weigh them down. *Recognize when you're feeling heavy with all the changes you've experienced, and sit down with a friend to talk about them one by one, sorting and counting, until you start to see the numbers add up to something good.* Then spend that change for wisdom, or for the [gold that change brings](#) when we mature and change with every season of life.

Am I going to keep the next penny I spot on the ground? I don't know. But I am going to think about change and the value it can bring, when I stop and consider the worth in the making of the change...

YOU: At Risk by Marcy Lytle

Everyone wants to know their risk factor for disease, and there are so many studies and methods now to find out our tendencies for ill health that we can work at staving off many of the horrible things we fear we might get – things that might kill us. For some reason, we feel that knowledge is power – power to take control of our lives, that is. But what about our spiritual at-risk factors? Do we give those factors the same consideration?

Heart disease runs in my family on my dad's side, so it makes sense that I try to exercise and eat healthy foods to avoid high blood pressure and bad cholesterol. Some inherit the propensity towards breast cancer, so it seems wise to have mammograms and periodic checkups to make sure any lumps are found early and treated aggressively. However, sometimes all of this knowledge creates fear, fear of getting what it is that our predecessors have passed down to us.

Did you know that there are factors we need to consider that are being passed down to us spiritually? The cool thing about our “at risk” factors spiritually is that even if our parents/grandparents didn't do such a good job of passing anything down to us except depression, anger, or even fear, once we belong to Jesus – our inheritance changes – and we are at risk of being healthy! We become heirs of all of the promises that come from being a child of God. His character, his qualities, and his blessings are things we can expect and prepare for as we live our life.

At Risk for Blessings.

If you've inherited an estate or you were named in a will and received a lot of money, you're lucky, right? If your family invested well, and you are well-liked by your relatives, your name might be mentioned in a will and riches might be yours.

Once you believe in Jesus and receive forgiveness of sin through repentance and faith, you're at risk for the riches of heaven – all of them. Every good gift comes from heaven, and they're all there because of the blood line to which you're now connected. All you have to do is stand and receive.

At Risk for Suffering

Because we live in this world, we will suffer. That's a given. When we're at risk and then acquire a disease that runs in our family, the suffering can be horrendous, unbearable, and even sometimes fatal. We can read, prepare, and treat the best we know how – and yet it can still not be enough.

Jesus' suffering was enough. Because he suffered, he shares in our sorrow and grief, and he turns our sorrow and mourning into joy. Yes, we're at risk for suffering, but just like Jesus conquered death – we too have life eternal – and abundant life on earth. ([Romans 8:17](#)) So instead of suffering being a dark tunnel with a blocked exit, it's only an open door to peace that passes all understanding.

At Risk for Glory

Jesus brought glory to the Father through his obedience to everything his Father told him to do. It pleased God to exalt Jesus because he was God's son. He was so connected to his Father that when people saw Jesus, they saw the goodness of God. He bore his father's image. And it was not an image of a sickly, weak man – it was an image of an indestructible spirit of God.

Did you know that you are at risk for bringing glory to your heavenly Father? You don't have to worry and fear that you might be destroyed or lose your life, because you are his daughter. And as his daughter, you bear his image – that of a strong, dignified woman – one who reflects his glory.

At Risk for Eternal Life

Finally, no matter how much we become in tune with our bodies, how many checkups we attend with the doctor, or how many pills we pop or greens we eat for good health, we are going to die one day. And even if we avoid the risks that our parents pass down to us, we can't avoid death of our earthly bodies.

We are at risk for longevity of life; in fact, eternal life - because the Spirit of God lives in us. All of the risk factors are present when we know Him. We're forgiven of all sin, so there is nothing unclean in us – because of Jesus. We belong to the Father and he has promised that where he is – there we will live also – because of Jesus. And the power that flows from His throne actually flows through our veins so that we can do all things – through Christ. ([Titus 3:7](#))

Next time your “at risk” factors fill your mind with fear, start going over the risk factors you have for all things good, an end to all suffering, a life that reflects his glory, and everlasting joy as you enter His presence once and for all.

Your prognosis, considering your Father and his length of life, is amazingly good. Think on these things.

HEALTHY HABITS: Feeling a Bit *Blimpy*? By Georganne Schuch

Holidays are just about synonymous with crazy eating: big meals, lots of desserts, snacks on every corner. If you didn't resist that eating frenzy, don't feel bad. Now, it's time to do something about it. And I'm not talking about the typical New Year's resolution to lose 100 pounds and never eat sugar again. Like that will happen. Let's be real.

If you're feeling a little *blimpy* after all that holiday eating, the most likely cause is sodium overload. Sodium, aka salt, is in just about everything, and on its own isn't so bad. However, so much of our everyday food has lots and lots and LOTS of added sodium. On an average day full of cereals, sandwiches, chips, and pizza, you might consume more than 3,500 mg of sodium (about 3 ½ teaspoons of salt) without ever touching a salt shaker. That's about twice the amount of sodium you should eat. TWICE!

Do you know what all that sodium does to you? It raises your blood pressure, makes you retain water, overloads your kidneys, and strains your heart. I know people who like a little food with their salt and think nothing of taking medication to control all the side effects this addiction to salt causes. I'd rather control my diet than take any medication, and I say that from experience.

Five years ago, I was on high doses of cardiac medication when I experienced congestive heart failure. CHF is not usually caused by lifestyle factors; however, recovery is certainly aided by a healthy diet. So, I got a crash course in low-sodium foods.

First, fresh is always better than processed. Fresh fruit and fresh vegetables have little natural sodium and far more nutrients than canned.

Second, "scratch" cooking, or assembling your own ingredients, will produce a healthier and lower sodium meal. Packaged and processed foods, even the "healthy labels," always have added sodium that acts as a preservative, at the very least. It also adds taste to ingredients that have had the flavor sucked out of them by processing.

Third, look for sodium in unusual places. Sandwich meats, pasta, bread, and sauces are all high in sodium. Eat open-faced sandwiches (one piece of bread has 200 mg of sodium). Choose real meat instead of sandwich meat. Skip the sauces, especially the processed ones.

Fourth, watch your snacks and drinks. A serving of chips or French fries supplies an entire daily sodium allowance. I prefer something else to eat during the day. Sodas have sodium and won't satiate the salt-induced thirst that follows a high sodium meal. Sports drinks are absurdly high in sodium and not recommended for even serious athletes.

Drink water and lots of it after you've eaten a meal, or meals, high in sodium. Water helps flush your system.

Flavored vinegars and homemade seasonings avoid the added sodium that is in most packaged marinades and seasoning packets. Herbs and spices add no-guilt flavor, too.

Our bodies do need some sodium to balance our electrolytes, but it's far less than you think. Less than 2 teaspoons, or 2,000 mg, of salt is the most anybody should really consume daily.

I found changing my diet to avoid sodium was really pretty east once I wrapped my head around the unusual places in which it hides. Within a few months, my blood pressure stabilized, and I was able to reduce my medicine significantly. Not everybody recovers from CHF so quickly, if ever. I don't take that blessing lightly and still try to be careful of my diet, particularly sodium.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES: God's Joy by Pam Charro

Have you ever wondered what God looks like? I mean, recently.

As I was drifting off to sleep earlier this year, I asked God in desperation to show me what He looks like. He responded with one of His picture flashes that He so often does: a big, huge, twinkly-eyed grinning face. Almost like a big, happy Irishman. It reminded me of one of the guys in our fellowship at church.

I must admit, I wasn't sure at first that the message was really from God. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I pictured His face. I know logically that God is very positive, but to actually imagine it in real life was odd for me, maybe partly because it's so different from the God and Jesus that I had seen in movies and heard preached about in church most of my life. That God was just so heavy and serious all of the time! I sure wouldn't want to hang around someone like that; it would be exhausting, and I would feel so self-conscious!

So, if God is happy, that means a couple of things for me:

1. He is relaxed and easygoing in general, not impossible to please like the impression I have had most of my adult life. Yes, there is a time to be serious about certain things, but we aren't on this earth to be uptight.
2. He approves of me. This second one is huge for me because it means I have had a wrong picture of Him all of this time, and it's been tougher to change than I thought it would be.

I am not the only person He has been speaking to about this, lately. It seems to be a message He really wants to get across to people right now. I recently heard a speaker praying on stage, and he was telling God what he loved about Him, and said, "I love your sparkling eyes and easy smile." There's that Irish head again! Another well-known speaker said, "I was telling God what I love about Him, and He told me He appreciated it but was tired of never getting to respond and tell what He loves about me."

I think God is not only crazy about us as a whole, but that He loves all kinds of things about us individually, and would love to let us know about it! And, I think as we grow in this knowledge, we will become more and more secure with who we are and more productive in showing others how wonderful it is to know Him. Therefore, **I have decided to focus more on this happy God who, for whatever reason, has chosen to be favorably impressed with me.**

And when I forget, I just call to mind that big, grinning face with the twinkling eyes.

MARRIAGE

TWO FOR THE ROAD: 21 Days of Desperation by Lynn Cherry

Sizzling fajita meat cooled under an aluminum foil tent. My husband had grilled it to perfection. My mouth watered as the savory scent filled our kitchen. We fixed plates for the boys and then sat down to our sautéed vegetables. That is just plain wrong! What were we thinking? We were following a [Daniel fast](#). So for 21 days we ate no meat, bread, or sweets and drank only water.

The spiritual discipline of fasting is not dieting or skipping meals. A spiritual fast always involves prayer and seeking God. January is the perfect time for a season of fasting. I want to challenge you to consider fasting, partnering in prayer, and seeking God together with your spouse at the beginning of this New Year.

Togetherness

Fasting is not easy. There were days when we both wanted to quit. It was hard and we struggled, but we struggled together. There is something powerful about that kind of togetherness. We needed each other's support. When one was weak the other was strong. You'll find both individual and corporate fasting in the Bible. When people fasted together, they were desperate for God's help and desperate for change. They were united in their suffering and their seeking. Fasting together brings both physical and spiritual unity.

Hearing God's Voice

You will undoubtedly find times in your marriage when you are faced with a decision and need God's direction. Fasting is like tuning a radio dial. It eliminates the static and helps you focus on hearing from heaven. As Job wrestled with understanding the circumstances of his life he said *I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food.* (Job 23:12) When we fast we are telling God we care more about hearing his voice than satisfying our appetite. Fasting wakes us up out of the complacency of a full stomach and gives us ears to hear. When we fast together we have an extra pair of ears. During one time of fasting, we were desperately seeking direction. Honestly, it didn't come within those 21 days, but in the weeks that followed we saw the fruit of our fast as God opened doors and provided opportunities we hadn't even hoped for.

For Our Families

As Ezra was leading Israel out of captivity and back into the Promised Land, he was concerned about their safety. So he called a fast. *"Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions."* (Ezra 8:21) I love the tenderness of this passage. We fast for the right way for us. We also fast for our little ones. Do you have little ones? Consider fasting and seeking God together for the right way for your children.

We are stocking up on vegetables and kicking off 2014 with another fast. Join us. Share your prayer focus in the comments and know we'll be praying with you.

Try This

If you decide to do a Daniel fast, there is great resource online [here](#). It includes information about what to eat, what not to eat, and even some recipes to try.

Pastor Jentezen Franklin also has a lot of free information online including a [21 day video journal](#).

As you fast together, remember [Matthew 18:19](#). Be strategic and focus on areas needing change in your marriage and family.

DATE NIGHT FUN: Winter Warm-Ups by Marcy Lytle

January is the coldest month in our area of the country, and it's a great month for lots of date nights. The cold air makes for warm hugs and hands, warm hearts and thoughts, and even warm clothes and shoes. Our ideas this month all have to do with warmth, so snuggle up and try them all!

1. **Workout in Warm-ups.** The holiday season is over and maybe you ate a bit too much...or not. Either way, it's a good time to put on your hoodies and sweatpants and get the heart pumping. Make it a date to work out together, at the gym, in a park, or even at home where you have some space. Afterwards, play a game that involves movement, like Charades or Twister. End the evening sipping hot chocolate by the fire, and dipping cubes of cheese and bread in a delicious [fondue](#).
2. **Take a Trip** at home. January can be tricky for road trips, so plan a trip at home. Get out your state map and each pick three cities you've never visited before. Sit with your laptops and spend 30 minutes each, searching for info on those cities, where to eat, what to see, unique attractions, etc. Share them with each other, over a bowl of soup and cornbread. Finally, set a date on the calendar for a road trip to your favorite of the six cities, for next month! Print out a puzzle or two from this [travel game site](#) and work them together, as you end the evening.
3. **Mexican Pile-Up.** Our friends make this fun dinner by chopping up all the "fixins" for tacos (cheese, black beans, lettuce, tomato, onions, etc.), cooking ground meat with taco seasoning, and placing all of it in individuals bowls, where each person piles up their own creation for eating! So why not make this a winter date, preparing together; then playing [Mexican dominoes](#) over dessert?
4. **Tailgate Fun.** Invite two other couples for this date night out, and ask everyone to bring a chili they can serve tailgate-style. Pack up your chairs and blankets, and head to a park where you can pull up and open the back of the car or let down the tailgate, enjoy your food and get to know each other better. Include some hot apple cider and [Snickerdoodle](#) cookies.
5. **Coffee Chat.** I don't care for coffee, but I love the smell of it, and I love the pastries behind the glass window! Make this a Saturday morning date, where you start out at your favorite coffee shop for breakfast, then head out for a hike with beanies, scarves, and gloves to keep you warm. [Take photos](#) while hiking, and make sure you laugh out loud at least once!

The January cold doesn't have to freeze your dating opportunities. Instead, you can still heat up the romance with a little bit of planning and with a heavy coat near the front door, reading for grabbing. And even if you opt to stay in for the evening, don't succumb to flipping channels, when you can be inspired to do so many other fun things together!

AFTER 30 YEARS: Pursed Lips by Marcy Lytle

[Pursed lips](#) are lips that usually express disapproval or irritation. And they are the lips I presented my husband one morning as he was heading out the door, bothering me for a good-bye kiss, when he could clearly see I was busy working. He leaned forward to kiss me, and felt my irritation and replied, "I hate pursed lips." Quickly, I stood up and turned toward him to kiss him again, this time with passion.

Let's talk about lips. According to [Wikipedia](#), the lips have many nerve endings, and play a crucial role in intimacy. In fact, the border of the upper lip is called the Cupid's bow. Lips also contribute to facial expressions, like when we smile it's apparent that we're happy, and when we frown we're sad. And lips move up and down when words come out of our mouths.

It seems that when we're young and in our "prime" our lips are fuller, sexier, and attractive, and that when we age our lips get thinner, less attractive, and well – pursed. However, even if the aging process shows up on our faces, our lips can stay soft and supple towards our husbands, if we realize they're pursed and we exercise them to attract Cupid's bow once again.

Over decades of marriage, the lips can become pursed for several reasons:

- We're disappointed with our spouse and his lack of attention and pursuit of us, like he did when we were young.
- We're pissed off at life and all that we've been through, so our lips have tightened together in solid lines of indignation.
- We're just apathetic now that we've raised our kids and we're alone once again with him, because we're just not that interested in physical intimacy – or so we think.
- We're too preoccupied with our busyness to respond to his lips that are seeking ours.

Sometimes (of course, not always) it's not our husband who has quit pursuing us, but rather we have stopped responding to his pursuit or even recognizing it. Rub a little Chapstick on those dry lips and go after him with a full blown kiss on the lips that says, "I love you and you're awesome!"

Sometimes we need to let go of our hurts and unforgiveness that we carry around in our hearts, because it's showing up our face. Ask God to help you forgive, give thanks, and move on, and see if your lips don't feel a little blood flowing to them again...

Sometimes menopause and plain tiredness settle in and take over our minds and bodies. It happens. But mind over matter works here. Make up your mind to kiss him often, and your body will learn to respond again.

Sometimes, we're just settled into our own routine where we do our own thing, and we don't want to be bothered or interrupted. This takes effort and purpose, but we must realize that he is in the room, and if we look up and catch his eyes, puckered lips will emerge instead of pursed ones.

Are your lips pursed or puckered? Look in the mirror and see. Read a few verses in Song of Solomon (4:3, 4:11, 5:13, 7:9) for good visuals about lips. Then speak to yourself. As your lips move up and down, pinch them, pucker them, and part them - and find your husband so you can stir up that intimacy you both long for, once again, as you taste his lips – and it's better than wine.

ENCOURAGEMENT

HIDDEN GEMS: Fixing My Eyes by Kayley Ryan

At a youth retreat on the second weekend of November, I made a New Year's resolution—except it wasn't just for 2014. It was for every day, month, and year.

Seated at a circular table after breakfast, we girls talked about our futures. Handing us small, colored notepads and pens, our youth leaders had us write down what our goals were daily, in six months, and in five years.

As we told stories, related our dreams, and explained how we expected to achieve our goals, we were so filled with purpose and hope. We knew that if we established our goals in small steps, stuck to them, and took them one day at a time, we would accomplish everything we set out to do. It would take dedication, perseverance, and a daily struggle to keep going even when the constant hard work would seem overwhelming at first sight.

Some of our goals were small; not exactly what you would expect New Year's resolutions to be. Some girls wanted to start by just cleaning one thing in their room, by just trying to do the laundry or make the bed. Other girls discussed even bigger dreams: one girl described her five-year goal of training to be a lawyer.

It was such a simple act, writing down what I wanted to do with my life, but I realized later that I couldn't just write down several goals on a pad of paper and expect that act to change something. I had to make several small steps to achieve my goals.

In the past, I've tried to bite off more than I can chew, deciding things like: I'm going to have a perfectly clean room; I'm going to exercise every day; or I'm going to radically change my eating-habits to be healthier. But radical changes don't work. I have to constantly remind myself that I'm not always going to be perfect. I'm not always going to achieve my goals right on time.

I have to daily put in the tedious, nonstop effort to achieve those goals, no matter how slow that process seems.

It's not just a cliché phrase to say, 'you change the world one step at time.' It's true. When I first got behind the wheel, I was so nervous. I was afraid that I would make a tragic mistake—that I would run the car into a tree or something—but I didn't have to worry. My dad was in the front seat, telling me in plenty of time every little thing that I was supposed to do and exactly how I was supposed to do it. I didn't have to fear, and I certainly didn't have to try to be perfect the first time behind the wheel. Believe me, I wasn't; and I'm still not by the faintest chance. I've accepted that I won't be a perfect driver in the snap of a finger. Just like with anything else, driving takes practice and dedication.

It takes staying in the game and not throwing up your hands and giving up, even though the finish line seems so far away.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is [Hebrew 12:1-3](#). In it, the author writes of running the race with perseverance,

“...And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us...”

But the verse doesn't end there. The key is in the next few words,

"...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

Those words strike me as containing the greatest purpose a person could possibly have. To fix one's eyes on the greatest being who ever lived, who is still living, and who will live forever gives healing and purpose to the one who feels as if she is living for nothing.

And Jesus lived with more perseverance than any of us could ever dream of,

"For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

I can't read this verse and not be encouraged. How much do we girls spend time just trying to be liked? We focus so much on what other people think of us, and we forget that the greatest person in the world—God—already approves of us completely.

I'm just as guilty as anyone. I try so hard to make myself look pretty and stylish or to act "normally" around guys I think are cute instead of just being myself. I have to remember that my goals shouldn't be based on what other people think about me; they should be based on what God thinks about me, because He cares more about me and you than anyone else could.

He must've thought we were pretty special if He was willing to die for us.

So next time I make a New Year's resolution, I'm going to remember that I can't always be perfect, that I can't always expect it to be easy, and that I can't always seek approval from *people*.

I have to fix my "eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

TOUGH QUESTIONS: Sabbath Rest by April Karli

If you're like me, resting doesn't come easily. It's hard to slow down. Even when I'm not actively doing something, my mind is busy thinking about the things I need to get done.

There's more to my busyness than family, work, friends, and my kids' activities, though. There's an inner restlessness. It's some sort of attempt to achieve something. To earn something. To earn God's love and approval. It's as if I'm trying to prove I belong in God's family by being good enough.

A friend asked me recently, "How are you being challenged?" At the time my answer was, "I'm trying to survive, to keep my head above water." As I thought about it, I changed my answer. **I realized that my real challenge is entering into Sabbath rest.** Even when I'm doing a fun or restful activity like taking my dog for a walk, or preparing dinner with my girls, or stealing a few moments with a book, my mind is on something I haven't gotten done or something I need to do – the unreturned phone call, the impending (or missed) deadline, tomorrow's appointments and tasks, the unfolded basket of laundry, or the dusty bookshelves.

For years I've been learning about Sabbath and the importance of rest. Without rest, we put ourselves in God's place. We act as though our work is indispensable. **When we don't rest we behave as if we are machines created for the purpose of doing, not women created for the purpose of being – of being loved.**

Rest and Sabbath allows God to do his work both in us and in the world around us. If we're too busy trying to be God, the fruit is exhaustion and burnout. These are not fruits of the Spirit!

God says to his daughters, **"Be still and know that I am God."** [Psalm 46:10](#)

I am learning that God wants me to step away from so much busy doing and enter into the rest of being. That's hard for those of us who like to know how we measure up.

Jesus didn't come to teach us how to "measure up." He didn't teach, "Three Ways to Know You're Really Saved." No. Jesus did the opposite. Jesus came to give life to those weary and worn out from trying to do everything, to be everything, to save themselves.

Read Jesus' comforting words for the tired, broken, and burned out:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." [Matthew 11:28-30](#).

[Dallas Willard](#) says this about rest and Sabbath, "Sabbath is a way of life ([Hebrews 4:3; 9-11](#)). It is simply "casting all your anxiety on Him," to find that in actual fact, "He cares for you," ([1 Peter 5:7](#)). It is USING the keys to the Kingdom to receive the resources for abundant living and ministering."

I love this idea of Sabbath as a way of life. It's not taking a day or a weekend away to rest. Though, that is a good spiritual discipline, and one I recommend. Sabbath as way of life means believing what is already true – God cares for you! He cares for you because you belong to him. You cannot earn God's love or care by doing more things or by being better. He simply loves you.

So stop. And rest. Find a Sabbath moment here and there until they become so frequent that you realize you're living the Sabbath way of life. This is what I long for, for myself. And this is what I believe God wants for all of his daughters.

MOVING FORWARD: I Don't Want To by Lynn Cherry

I've never been a morning person. My roommate in college called me the Snooze Queen. But when life took a downward turn, I didn't just hit the snooze button. I turned the alarm off altogether. I didn't want to get up. Getting out of bed felt like moving the Titanic. Sliding out from under the covers to carry the weight of my heavy heart was the biggest hurdle of my day.

I know someone who is experiencing a downward turn of their own. We were talking recently and like a helpful friend, I offered a string of suggestions. Our conversation went something like this:

"Why don't you get outside and go for a walk?"

"I don't want to."

"You could watch a funny movie."

"I don't want to."

What about taking a bubble bath?

"I don't want to."

I gave up and left our conversation feeling frustrated.

And then I remembered how much I appreciate perky people with helpful suggestions when I have the "don't-want-to's."

I always groan whenever someone tells me to turn to [Proverbs 31](#). Seriously, that woman is so annoying. And here's the reality - King Solomon waded through 700 wives and 300 concubines looking for that girl. I'm not sure she exists. [Verse 15](#) is particularly irritating when you have serious sleeping-in skills like mine.

"She rises while it is still night....."

Ugh!

I'll admit, I've made some assumptions about this overachiever. I assume she wants to get up. She's a morning person. But what if my assumption is wrong? What if she rises not because she wants to but because she knows it's the right thing to do? What if she gets up even though she doesn't want to get up at all?

I've learned a few things about desire through the don't-want-to episodes of my life:

- Desire is nice, but not necessary.
- If I wait until I want to, I may never take action.
- Doing what I know is good and right to do regardless of how I feel is actually quite satisfying.
- **Sometimes the "want to" comes AFTER I take the first step.**

I'm still not a morning person. Sometimes I leave the blinds open so sunlight will seep in. Nature's alarm clock is the best. Sometimes I lie in bed and think about rhubarb strawberry yogurt, hoping thoughts of a yummy breakfast will rouse me. Sometimes I let myself linger and read a devotional before getting out of bed.

I won't let the "don't-want-to's" keep me under the covers for long.

She rises. She gets up. She moves forward with or without the "want-to," and so do I.

What helps you overcome the don't-want-to's?

REAL STORY: Shanta's Shining Light by Loretta Mach

I was baptized as an infant in the Methodist church and grew up in a family that attended church every Sunday and had family devotions during the week. In my teen years, I was confirmed in the Lutheran Church, but my quest for God began in college. Discontentment in my soul led to the pursuit of a different church.

I reasoned that if I found the correct church then I would find God.

I was drawn to the reverence and ceremony of the Catholic Church, so I became a Catholic. That same summer, I worked as a camp counselor in Colorado and met my former husband, whom I married in 1981. However, in 1985 my spouse announced that he wanted a divorce. That same year, God arranged the hiring of a special someone at my place of employment, where I was sad, scared, and lost.

That's when I met Shanta.

Every day Shanta Jeffers handed each employee of Motorola Credit Union a white slip of paper with a Bible verse printed neatly on it. At the top of the paper was the title, "The Word for Today." Then she'd excitedly say, "Here's The Word for Today!" We weren't quite sure what the "Word" was. Later I learned it was God's Word from the Bible.

After each individual took their verse, Shanta's face bloomed into a radiant smile and she brightly said, "Jesus loves you!" I treasured each verse and smile. This sweet Nigerian co-worker presented Christ to me through her loving words and actions.

Shanta became my friend and confidant. She was willing to listen and encourage me. After sharing my marital woes with Shanta, I somehow felt that my problems weren't so enormous. Day after day I observed her. She was thankful for every kindness given to her, she responded graciously when others spoke ugly to her, and she was a woman of prayer.

Shanta prayed about every situation. When she was cooking, she asked God what spices to add. When she needed a parking space, she talked to the Lord. The most memorable aspect of Shanta was her faith and the close relationship she had with her grandmother. While working at the credit union, Shanta's elderly relative became ill and died. I presumed Shanta's confidence in God would turn to doubt; however, I was amazed at Shanta's certainty in God's promises. A few days after her grandmother's passing, Shanta uttered confidently, "I know my grandmother is in heaven."

I'd never seen or heard of such hope and trust. I wanted that hope in my life, too.

Shanta blew away all my misconceptions of what it meant to find God. She had a real relationship with God and she lived out this love daily at the credit union by delivering his messages on little pieces of paper. Once again, I started pursuing God, but this time by reading the Bible.

Before long, Shanta got married and moved out of state with her new husband. I continued my journey for god by attending a small church in South Austin that taught the Bible. One Sunday I

heard the pastor say to become a Christian and receive eternal life, we must confess our wrongs, turn away from them, and believe that Jesus Christ's death paid for those offenses. That was very familiar to me. Then he said something different, "You must receive Jesus into your heart to become a Christian." He referenced [John 1:12](#).

That Sunday I asked Christ to be the Lord of my life, and it was the best decision I've ever made.

I thank God for placing Shanta Jeffers in my path. I thank Shanta for choosing to shine God's light in my direction.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Loretta Mach and her husband Rick have been married for 20 years. They live in Austin with their children Joseph (18), Hannah-Joy (16), and Phillip (12). Loretta uses her marketing and promoting talents with [The Attic Film Festival](#) - an independent Christian film fest.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME: The Taste of Salt by Debra Brown

I find myself sitting at the airport, again, in the middle of coming & going – going and coming.

Lord, bless my comings & goings. Jesus, help me find rest in their midst.

I must leave the old in order to enter the new. I must go out in order to come in. I must board the airplane.

Help me, Lord. Help me let go, wholeheartedly.

I cannot stay "between." It is time to surrender and move forward.

LIFTOFF!

If I look back I will turn to salt! [\(Genesis 19: 17, 26\)](#)

A new season beacons. **Greens** deepen. **Reds, oranges, yellows** erupt. Autumn invades every sense; it bids the weary traveler to come, to taste, to touch; to experience true beauty. She draws to completion spring's sweet beginnings. Oh, the bliss! Can I not stay in autumn? Can I not stay in its pinnacle of achievement?

My tears taste of salt.

Just as the leaves eventually surrender to the wind, so I must let go and move forward toward a new season. Winter approaches. Winter ends the old season, and prepares us for new beginnings. Death precedes life. Life precedes death.

LIFTOFF!

Flying high in the sky, I'm carried to new moments, new beginnings. My clinging to the in-betweens has become lifeless, like the dead leaves that crunch beneath my feet. Once beautiful, they now lie brown and broken, preparing the soil for new beginnings.

Lord, bless my comings and goings. Help me surrender to the continued movement of the seasons of life.

Let me not look back, or I will turn to salt!

FRESH THYME: Joy, According to Gabe by Marcy Lytle

He has problems with movement and balance, and is unable to formulate spoken words, but he smiles all the time – all part of his syndrome – Angelman. Gabe Cloud is almost two years old, and his mom is my friend. I sat and listened last night to her explain how Gabe can understand outside stimuli and communication from his parents, but because of his chromosome disorder he has the inability to respond in ways that most of us do.

I wondered, then, how frustrating that must be for Gabe, hearing and understanding what he's told, yet being unable to communicate back in like manner.

I actually thought about this during the night as it woke me up several times. I thought about how many of us hear God and what he says to us through his word – things like he is good, he is love, he is omnipotent – and yet we don't understand these things when we look our lives that seem to be nothing but heartache, frustration, and pain. We want to respond to God in faith, with arms lifted high in praise, and songs of thanksgiving from our mouths. Instead, we sit paralyzed in fear, anger, and hurt because we don't understand his ways.

This friend of mine is a fiercely loving mom and is constantly bettering her knowledge of Gabe's unique world, and she works with him to teach him other ways to communicate, she works with the insurance companies to cover medical equipment Gabe needs in order to walk, and she desires desperately to stay at home with Gabe to be with him as he learns, grows, and matures. She's relentless in her pursuit of making life the best it can be for Gabe.

God's love is like that fierce love of a mother, that protective love of a father, and the undying love of a divine being who loves his creation. He realizes our human limitations, our inability to comprehend his ways, and our frustrations with him. However, his entire existence is spent restoring us to fellowship with him, bringing about circumstances in our lives to conform us to his image, and being ever present in our daily lives so that we experience his goodness and love until it overwhelms us and overtakes us. That's who God is.

Gabe is making great strides. He's learning fast. And he's a delight to his parents. It's incredibly hard work to keep up with his 200 doctor appointments per year and all of the physical challenges that Gabe encounters. But his parents won't give up Gabe for a minute, nor stop pursuing every best avenue for Gabe to be all that he can be as he grows. They love every detail of who Gabe is, because he's part of them. He was birthed out of love.

And there's one more thing about Gabe, and other children who have Angelman Syndrome. He smiles. He always has a happy demeanor, which is contagious. This leads me to believe, and hope, that Gabe is not really frustrated at all. Although he understands his parents and outside stimuli, and is unable to communicate with them in "normal" ways, he's happy. He has an innate ability to smile incessantly and be joyous. In fact, one of the symptoms of Angelman and part of the diagnosis is a "happy disposition with frequent laughter." Wow.

I cannot imagine the struggles and challenges my friends go through on a daily basis with their little boy. But I also cannot imagine being happy all the time, and smiling. Yet this little boy, who from all appearances has no reason to smile, does.

God doesn't expect perfection out of us because *he's the one* perfecting us into his image, and that process takes a lifetime. He doesn't even mind when we struggle in our faith a bit, when we perceive that our prayers go unanswered or are delayed. I don't believe he's one bit disappointed in our inability to lift our hands on days when we're absolutely spent and tired, and unable to communicate with him in words that he can hear.

However, I believe, just like Gabe, that inside in the deepest part of our hearts there is a place where joy can reside, unspeakable, pure joy. It can flourish and thrive in the middle of the most caging of experiences in life, and at times burst open the prison doors and emerge, manifesting itself in a wide smile on our faces.

I pray for Gabe that God heals him and gives him a "normal" life where he can run, play, and chat with his peers. And I hope God hears and answers that prayer. But I know that God's ways don't look like my ways. And so until that prayer is answered, I pray for his parents. I pray that they have strength and wisdom and joy in the raising of their son.

I know that God has all wisdom, all strength, and all joy in caring for his children. And that makes me smile, too. Even when the rest of my body is limp and silent.

FRESH THYME: Heartbroken by Marcy Lytle

Sometimes I can't sleep at night, and it's because my mind is full of concern (some would call it worry) about friends and family who are suffering. My heart hurts when I hear of another marriage ending in divorce, or a friend turning away from God. I'm stunned and saddened when a friend suddenly loses a spouse to death. And even when my own kids are praying for their daily desires and needs, I want those prayers answered quickly, because I feel their aching heart. When all of these empathetic tendencies combine into one evening, settling into the corners of my mind as I drift off to sleep, I'm soon awake – feeling heartbroken – and that's why I'm up writing this story now.

I've always been an empathizer, so much that when I see someone in physical pain, I feel pain in my own body. My husband experienced electrical shock not long after we were married, and when I arrived at the hospital and saw him on the stretcher, I fainted. Immediately, I related with his condition and my body reacted by passing out. Imagine how silly I felt when I awakened and found myself in the emergency room, lying on a gurney beside those who were really hurting...

Seeing and listening to news stories often leaves me heartbroken at the atrocities in this world, as well as the devastation when "acts of nature" go wild and destroy whole communities. When I realize what people in other countries do without, when I have so much, it overwhelms me so much that I have to block it out because I cannot even comprehend such a hard life. Just out shopping for pleasure, when I spot a fellow shopper in a wheelchair with severed limbs, I feel an immediate sense of sympathy and sorrow at her loss and inability to walk and enjoy all there is to enjoy about using two legs to walk around, skip, and dance.

By now, I've painted a pretty sad picture of how I feel at times when I think, see, listen, ponder, and experience the pain around me. Life is rough and bleak at times, and even on the best of days in my own little world, I can quickly sink to the place of despair as my heart breaks for those I know, those I see, and those I only hear about from the media that is so prevalent around me.

So what do we do, when our hearts are broken – not for ourselves or our own pain – but for the pain of others? The best thing I know to do is to look at a few examples from the Bible.

Moses was heartbroken when he came down from the mountain and saw this people worshiping idols, when he himself had just been with God. His reaction was one of anger, as he broke the stone tablets where he had just inscribed God's commands for the people. Moses lashed out at the people and said he would try to make atonement for what they had done. But God's response was so awesome in Exodus 32:34:

The LORD replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin."

- When our hearts break at the sin of others, we must walk blameless ourselves, and believe that God will turn them around. It's his job, not ours.

Job had these “friends” that heard about Job’s sorrows and hardships, and Job 2 says “...they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.” When we read further in the book, we find out these friends added to Job’s problems by trying to fix Job, apply their own ideas of why Job was in the state he was, and point the finger.

- When our hearts break in sorrow with those who are suffering, they don’t need a pointing finger and a list of how-to’s and what-for’s, but rather a listening ear and lots of prayer.

Jesus himself was heartbroken, moved to tears, when he arrived at Mary and Martha’s house, where they were grieving over their brother’s death. They complained to Jesus that if he’d only been there, their brother would not have died. I don’t think Jesus was crying tears of grief over the death of Lazarus (because Jesus knew the power that he had to raise him up), so perhaps he was brokenhearted over their lack of faith. John 11:38 says this: “Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.”

- When our hearts break at that which kills the faith in the heart of our friends, we can show up where death resides, and speak life.

Finally, in 2 Corinthians, **Paul** writes this:

See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.

Being truly heartbroken over sin (in our own lives and the lives of others), over those who are suffering, and over the disasters that happen around us, must produce something good in us...once the earnestness, indignation, alarm and concern subsides. And that fruit is readiness – to see justice done.

- When our hearts break over the abuse and tragedy that befalls our neighbors, we can first repent of our own neglect and wrongdoings, so that our hearts and minds are clear to hear what it is we can do to seek justice for those who are unable to seek it for themselves.

Being heartbroken, empathizing with others, and experiencing true concern is a good thing. But feeling brokenhearted and carrying that concern as a weight that drags us down is not healthy, nor wise.

Are you heartbroken for others?

Carry your burdens to him, and let him exchange them for his burdens – which are light. Listen to a friend and pray for them, knowing God hears you. When darkness and death surround those you love, speak words of life and hope. And when you’re devastated beyond words, ask and be ready to send help, to see justice restored.

I’m going back to sleep now – heartbroken for others – but hopeful in Him.

FRESH THYME: The Ideal Woman by Christina Vetter

Everywhere we go, there are pictures, magazines, books, and movies telling us how the “ideal woman” looks, acts, talks, dresses, etc. We view modeling images of 20-year olds selling wrinkle cream and size-2 actresses playing fit mothers of four in movies, then wonder why we are so unhappy with ourselves. We know these situations are unreal, yet we can’t seem to step back into reality once we look in the mirror. Why are we so obsessed with how we *should* be dressing, acting, or looking? When it comes down to it, I think we just simply want to be the best we can be. We don’t truly want to be someone else; we just want to be *our* best. We want to be confident and proud of who we are, how we’re presenting ourselves, and what we do with our lives.

It’s difficult to know how to be our best when we’re bombarded with instructions from every type of media. We need to turn off the television, take a break from *In Style Magazine*, and open a different kind of book. [Proverbs 31](#) is God’s true, obtainable, peaceful, and beautiful instruction manual on being our best. I know so many women who’ve grown a hate-hate relationship with this chapter. They say things like, “It’s too much pressure, I do enough already,” or “This is just some snobby mother-in-law bossing around her son.”

God didn’t mean for this chapter to act as just another weight to stack on our shoulders. These are guidelines (similar to the ones found throughout the entire bible) designed specifically to help women be their best. God knows we have a million things to do. He knows we have to spin five plates, hop on one foot, and be ready to breathe fire, all the while never breaking a sweat. This chapter helps us keep our lives in balance: something women are desperately trying to do.

Throughout the chapter are wonderful truths that will satisfy that media-tarnished image of the ideal woman:

“Her husband can trust her, and she will greatly enrich his life.” (Verses 11-12)

The ideal woman guards her heart. She makes sure her heart belongs only to her husband. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying a good chick-flick, but once we idolize a script-written relationship or man, our real life, imperfect marriages, will lose their sparkle.

“She goes to inspect a field and buys it; with her earnings she plants a vineyard. She is energetic and strong, a hard worker, she makes sure her dealings are profitable; her lamp burns into the night.” (Verses 16-18)

The ideal woman is a hard worker. No matter what we do, we are in charge of our success. It doesn’t matter if we’re a stay at home mom or a power suit-wearing CEO. Whatever we decide to do, we can refuse to be lazy. We can plan ahead, make goals, and work hard to accomplish our dreams.

“She dresses in fine linen and purple gowns.” (Verse 22)

The ideal woman takes pride in herself. First of all, God isn't saying we need to center our entire lives around our appearance. However, we do need to take care how we look, not only for our husbands or kids, but for ourselves and our own confidence. When we're dressed nicely, hair and face fresh & clean, we very often hold our head higher and take ourselves more seriously.

**“When she speaks, her words are wise, and she gives instructions with kindness.”
(Verse 26)**

The ideal woman watches her tongue. It's easy to let our words give into our emotions, but God wants us to watch what we say and speak with uplifting words in order to build up those around us.

“Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last; but a woman who fears the Lord will be greatly praised.” (Verse 30)

The ideal woman puts her worth in the Lord. Above beauty, above youth, above money, above everything, a woman's worth can rest in God's love and his guidance.

Throughout this entire chapter, God gives his blueprint on how to be the ideal woman; and yet he summarizes his instructions telling women to simply love him and trust our lives to him. When we allow God to direct our paths, he gives us the grace and wisdom for each new day and each new challenge.

In our fallen world, there will never be a perfect woman. No one woman always does everything right. But, with God living in us and working through us, our lives can begin to follow his layout for being a truly ideal woman.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

February 2014

TIPS

THE DRESSING: Accessorize! By Marcy Lytle

It's February and we are tempted to spend money on a new dress, we're tired of winter and want a new spring wardrobe, and we just have the blues and want a bit of shopping therapy! However, we might be still crawling out from under the Christmas crunch from a couple months back.

So why not accessorize our wardrobe, using a bit of creativity with what's already hanging in our closet, and just add an inexpensive piece or two to bring the outfit to another level? It's not too hard when we follow a few simple rules, which of course can be broken, but maybe not like the couple pictured here!

Necklace and Earrings: If you choose a bold necklace to highlight your outfit, then don't wear big bold earrings that match. Wear either one, or the other. If you've got a cute white, nicely pressed, t-shirt and a dark pair of jeans, adding a statement necklace makes the outfit dressy and wearable – anywhere at all!

Necklace picture from Anthropologie sale rack - \$19.99!

Purse and shoes: Black and brown are always good staples, but having one bright colored pair of shoes and/or a handbag (again, not to match!) bring magic to an outfit, and you just feel so good carrying them or wearing them! It's not too early to start shopping for a cool pair of spring shoes.

Shoes pictured here are from Target.

Headbands and glasses: If you're going to wear reading glasses anyway, or you already wear glasses in order to see, they might as well be in a pretty color! Or if your hair looks cute pulled back in a headband, choose one in a cool pattern to draw attention to your fun, youthful personality!

Glasses pictured from the Dollar Store.

Rings and bracelets and watches: A fun ring and bracelet on one hand, or a trendy watch on the other, can add just the right touch to your lackluster wardrobe. World Market and Target have trendy, cute watches and bracelets. Be bold, put away your gold and silver once in a while, and opt for color!

Watch pictured from World Market.

Belts and scarves: If you tuck in your tees, add a belt of a pattern or color. If you only have woolly knitted scarves hanging by the front door, go out and grab a few of the whimsical lightweight ones available in the trendy stores. You can wear whimsy with the classics – they're a perfect pair!

Scarf from Rue 21.

A few final tips:

- Pick out your favorite outfits that you wear, perhaps three: the white tee and jean as listed above, a black skirt and blouse, or a pair of gray capris and a jacket that you love.
- Look in the mirror and imagine a pop of color at the neck, around your wrist, or on your feet – and go shopping.
- If you see something on a mannequin or on a real person that you like, note it on your phone, and look for a piece similar to it. Or flip through magazines for ideas, as well.
- Think accessories, and give yourself a budget, then go for it. You'll be surprised how many different ways you can wear just a few pieces with the wardrobe you have right now.
- You don't have to spend a fortune. Find a few stores that you love, and only shop the sales racks, or visit often to see the new items they display.
- Discover your own style, wear it proud, and wear it loud...

SEVEN 4 YOU: A Pretty Pantry by Marcy Lytle

Recently, I revamped my pantry, and so did my daughter, so here are some helpful tips to help you do the same. It's amazing how fun it is to prepare for a meal, now that I don't have to rummage through stacks and piles of boxes and bags, and I can clearly see just what I have for dinner. I just keep opening the door to peer inside...just to enjoy the view.

You may have a large pantry, or a tiny one, but either way – these tips can be put to good use!

1. **Save and Spend.** Make a trip to your discount store like Target, or the Container Store, to stock up on organizers. You'll need [clear containers](#) with lids of all sizes. Pick ones that will fit your shelves. Also, consider a few baskets, either rectangular or circular, whatever fits your fancy. You might even include a small set of [drawers](#) for the bottom of your pantry, if you have the room. Also, invest in an over-the-door rack for extra storage. And finally, perhaps purchase a [stairstep rack](#) for your canned goods.
2. **Clear it out.** Take out everything and discard all products that are expired. Now look at what you've got left: canned goods, cereals, baking products, pastas, snacks, oils, rice, cookies, chips, and so much more! Arrange by category or container, on your kitchen counter: Baking products together, canned goods, boxes, bottles, jars, etc. And if you have small appliances or dishes in your counter, put them together to the side.
3. **Wipe it clean.** Clean every shelf, the floor, the walls, etc. with some good old-fashioned lemon water mixture. Then dry every surface well.
4. **Start filling.** Empty crackers and chips into your large, clear containers, as well as pastas. Empty out baking chips, nuts, and other small bags into your smaller clear containers with lids. Organize lunch-making items into bins, like baggies, snack bars, pudding cups, etc. so they're easily accessible.
5. **Sort by use.** If you've got a small cookie sheet, place your baking goods on it: flour, sugar, brown sugar, etc. so that when you bake, all you have to do is remove the entire sheet of items. Put together in groups your pastas and your rice. Line up pouches or small items in a rectangular basket, for easy sight and use.
6. **Start shelving.** On the top shelf place the items that you use the least. Eye level items should be those used most often. Arrange your pretty clear containers from tallest to shortest, and place your baking sheet in a large space. Place any large bags or items that don't fit well on shelves into your drawers.
7. **Finish up.** Install any hooks you might need for grocery bags (if you have the wall space), or to hang a small broom or vacuum. Step back and look at the shelves and make every one pleasing to the eye, and useful.

The goal when I re-did my pantry was to get rid of bags and boxes as much as I could, so that I could see the actual food product and keep it fresh without using a ton of chip clips! Sometimes if I'm in a hurry, it looks messy again, but with these organization strategies it only takes a few minutes to make my pantry pretty once again.

SELAH'S STYLE: Fabulous February Fashion Fun by Selah Irwin

I have some fabulous February fashion fun ideas for you. Valentine's Day is getting near and I have some tips for you to get started on your special outfit.

As you can see, I did not use the usual white pink and red for this outfit. Instead I decided to go with blue and pink stripes and polka dots. I was so brave and courageous to mix patterns. Why don't you try it, too?

I found a tank top in my closet that was puuuuurfect for valentines but sadly it was too cold to wear. So, I came up with a solution! I just whipped on a jean jacket and a purple hat. Ba bam! It is complete and puuuuuuurfect for the weather and this special day!

Here is the classic red-and-white Valentine look. I found this little dress my great, grandmother made for my mom when she was two. Of course it was too small but I used it as a shirt! You should never get rid of your outgrown dresses if they can be worn as a shirt and still look adorable!

My Aunt Marcy (who owns this magazine) took me shopping when I visited Texas. This is what we found. Because it has a heart it also goes very well for Valentine's Day. I like how it looks with the zebra jacket. Again, I mixed patterns so bravely!

I hope you enjoyed the Fabulous February Fashion Fun!

FEARLESS KITCHEN: A Night to Savor by Marcy Lytle

It's February. All of the Christmas presents have been opened and the last starry glasses of champagne have finished ringing in the New Year. Familiar shades of red and pink, cute heart shaped candies, and what seems to be a never ending sea of red roses have blanketed the stores hoping to spark the romantic side of even the most prosaic shoppers. For some, Valentine's Day is a wonderful day full of romantic words, flowers, candies, and chick flicks. For others it's the most awful holiday serving as nothing more than a reminder of being alone. For others still, February 14th is simply February 14th, same as any other day...

Wherever you find yourself on the "day of love," why not make the night a little something special? It doesn't matter if you're alone, in a crowd, or an intimate party for two, every day is a good day for romancing your taste buds.

Before we get into any of the food (trust me it's coming), create your atmosphere. Look at your table as your canvas. Don't just clear a corner of the table while piles of bills, purses, dishes and keys roam free. Take the time to clear off the table completely. Add candles, cloth napkins, a charger plate, etc. Dress your table to mirror that fancy restaurant you love. Next, add some mood music. My favorite is the First Lady of Jazz, [Ella Fitzgerald](#), or Norah Jones, but choose whatever makes you happy.

Now that you have the backdrop for the evening, here comes the best part – the food. There are so many wonderful recipes that I thought about using for this menu, but these are some of the most user-friendly and delicious ones I could think of. To start, a traditional French fondue, followed by steak medallions with chimichurri sauce and truffle mashed potatoes. Add a side of Caesar salad (with homemade dressing) and all that is needed to finish a perfect meal is your local chocolate shop's dark chocolate truffles. Trust me. Your taste buds will love you!

Whether you have someone you want to celebrate extra special, a group of girl friends ready to party the night away, or find yourself twiddling your thumbs that Friday night, make the night something to savor.

Caesar Salad

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

True, making Caesar dressing from scratch can be intimidating at first, but as with everything else, practice makes perfect. I love this dressing. The taste is completely worth the extra effort. It's light years past the bottled versions.

Ingredients:

½ head Romaine lettuce chopped
3 anchovy filets minced

1 lemon
¾ tsp red wine vinegar
2 Tbsp shredded parmesan
1 garlic clove minced
1 egg yolk
4oz olive oil
1 tsp Dijon mustard
1 tsp Worcestershire sauce
Croutons

Directions:

- In medium bowl, whisk together egg yolk, anchovy filets, garlic, Worcestershire, lemon juice, and mustard.
- Drop oil into mixture a couple drops at a time, whisking vigorously. Continue whisking and very slowly add a little more oil. Repeating until all oil is used. Dressing should be fully emulsified and similar to a thin mayonnaise consistency.
- Add vinegar and parmesan to dressing. Add salt if needed.
- Pour dressing over lettuce, add croutons and serve.

Traditional French Fondue

Serves 6

Difficulty: 

Fondue is one of my favorite appetizers to share. It's so much fun to gather around a pot of this velvety cheese dip with your closest friends and some cubed baguette bread.

Ingredients:

1 C dry white wine
½ lb shredded Swiss cheese
½ lb shredded Gruyere cheese
2 Tbsp flour
¼ tsp salt
¼ tsp nutmeg
¼ tsp black pepper
¼ tsp garlic powder
¼ tsp onion powder

Directions:

- Bring wine up to a simmer in a small pot.
- Add cheeses ¼ lb at a time, stirring constantly until each portion is fully melted before adding more.
- Whisking constantly, add flour slowly to fully mix in.
- Add remaining spices and mix well.

-Serve in a fondue pot or double boiler, making sure the fondue stays very hot. If it cools it will start to look less like a dip and more like stringy cheese.

Steak Medallions

Serves 2

Difficulty: 

This recipe is more of a starting block to get the juices flowing. Substitute whichever cut of meat you prefer. I like to use deer back strap, sirloin, or filet mignon, but really any of your favorite steak cuts will do.

Ingredients:

1 lb steak
2 Tbsp butter
Coarse ground salt and black pepper

Directions:

-Season all sides of steak with salt and pepper.
-Over high heat, melt the butter in a shallow pan until it begins to brown. Be careful not to burn.
-Sear steak in butter until desired doneness is reached, flipping once. (For a medium rare steak, 3-5 minutes on each side depending on thickness of steak.)
-Allow steak to rest for 5 minutes and immediately before plating, slice the steak in $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ inch slices.

Chimichurri Sauce

Difficulty: 

This sauce is a wonderful condiment to steak, poultry, pork, or fish. It's tangy, earthy, and very easy to whip together.

Ingredients:

1 $\frac{1}{4}$ C fresh parsley (packed)
 $\frac{1}{4}$ c olive oil
1 Tbsp fresh oregano
1 Tbsp fresh basil
1 shallot (or $\frac{1}{8}$ onion) peeled
4 cloves garlic
2 Tbsp red wine vinegar
1 Tbsp lemon juice
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp red pepper flakes
Salt to taste

Directions:

- Combine all ingredients in a food processor and blend until chopped and thick in consistency.
- Spoon into bowl, cover, and refrigerate for at least one hour.

Truffle Mashed Potatoes

Serves 8

[Recipe courtesy of HEB](#)

Ingredients:

- 4 lbs. unpeeled potatoes, white, red or yellow
- 1/2 stick butter
- 1 pkg. (8 oz.) cream cheese
- 1 c. Central Market Organics Free Range Chicken Broth
- 1 tsp. Borgo de Medici Truffle Salt
- pepper, to taste

Directions:

- Rinse potatoes well and cut into large cubes. Boil in salted water until fork tender.
- While potatoes are cooking, heat butter, cream cheese, and chicken broth together in a separate saucepan.
- Drain potatoes, mash coarsely and mix in warmed butter broth sauce. Add truffle salt and pepper. Serve warm.

TRIED AND TRUE: Online Finds

Shopping and learning, on line. It's a way of life for most of us, now – especially for gift giving. We can peruse all sorts of gift options and have them delivered right to the recipient's door. We can also purchase diapers for our babies and have them arrive on our doorstep, or join the fruit-of-the-month club and have fresh produce for our enjoyment every few weeks! And we can find a how-to for almost anything we want to do!

We thought this month we would share with you some of our favorite online websites, other than your standard big-name websites like Amazon or Overstock.

[Uncommon Goods](#) – This online store has just what the name suggests – uncommon items. I ordered a cute mug there and had it sent to my nephew's wife. It was different and yet practical. The birth month necklaces are super affordable and unique. Some items can be pricey, but they're worth the splurge for that special gift you might be looking for! – Marcy Lytle

[Spartina449](#) – I ordered small wallets from this place for Christmas for each lady on my list, and the purses arrived and were more beautiful and well-made than I imagined! To search for them be sure to type coinpurse as one word. I was very pleased with this company's service and product. – Marcy Lytle

[Milkhouse Candle Creamery](#) – If you're looking for awesome, scented candles, this is the place! My sister sent me a pack of several scents in the votive size, and I loved each one of them. Check out the citrus lavender scent to enjoy while you bathe! These make great gifts. – Marcy Lytle

[Lillian Vernon](#) – I'm always surprised when I mention this site and my friends haven't heard of it. It's a great site for kids, personalized items, or just cool things for your home. We bought the travel map that we hang and use push pins to designate every place we've gone! Check out all of their items and sign up for their catalog to be sent to you in the mail! - Marcy Lytle

[Polder's Old World Market](#) – This was my favorite online store this Christmas. They make fabulous and unique handcrafted wooden kitchen utensils. I bought a spoon and a spreader for my husband. The spoon is our new favorite utensil. This business is a family-owned and operated business, so you're supporting a whole family when you buy their products! – Georganne Schuch

Online Cooking Classes - I love online classes, especially cooking classes. It's always fun to learn new recipes, even if I never use them again. I enjoyed a short series by English chef, [Rachel Khoo](#), or bread baking classes at [Breadclass.com](#), or healthy cooking at [GNOWFGLINS](#). – Georganne Schuch

If you watch SharkTank you may have seen [Grace and Lace](#) and their super cute frilly lace boot socks. They attend our church and have seen God's favor on their business. Great online shopping for boot socks, leg-warmers and other knits. – Lynn Cherry

I love wearing scarves, and this adorable [you tube video](#) demonstrates 25 fun ways to wrap up, tie up, or twist up, a fashion statement. – Lynn Cherry

I used the information on [this site](#) over the Christmas holidays. It totally works! Watch the video and see how to deseed a pomegranate in 10 seconds! – April Karli

My husband purchased for me my awesome bike shoes on [Ebay](#), he found some Tifosi sports sunglasses that he loved. He didn't want to pay full price so we found them on Ebay for much cheaper. I love Ebay because they literally have almost everything, and usually the stuff is new or almost new, in great condition, and much cheaper than other sites. – Pam Charro

REVIEWS: A Little Help

Movies, books, and music are for entertainment, that's for sure. But they can also be helpful in lifting our spirits, making us healthier, instructing us on how to better our lives, and so much more! This month we've picked few that do just that!

Books

Modern Manners by Dorothea Johnson & Liv Tyler

I heard about this book, [Modern Manners](#), on television and I always enjoy a good book on etiquette, even though the first thing I read made me realize I've got a ways to go, in order to enter some social circles! Not only is the book entertaining, it's full of tips and tidbits that are helpful when interacting with others, or just for storing up knowledge to be used in a pinch!

Jesus Calling by Sarah Young

This was the gift under the tree this year at Christmas for several family members! It's a devotional, yet more of a journal, of the writer's movement closer to God. They are written as if Jesus was calling himself, to you. A great little book to keep with you wherever you go, [Jesus Calling](#).

Movies

The September Issue

If you enjoy fashion, like I do, you'll enjoy this documentary, [The September Issue](#), which chronicles Anna Wintour's preparations for making one of the *Vogue* magazine issues. Anna Wintour is the editor-in-chief for the magazine. This is one of those movies that inspires creativity, allows you to lose yourself for a couple of hours into another world, and you learn so much about the makings of a most magnificent magazine!

The King's Speech

What a great historical drama about King George V's son, played by Colin Firth, who had a severe speech impediment. After being crowned King George VI, and his country needing a leader, he tries to improve his speech with a therapist, played by Geoffrey Rush. Not only does [The King's Speech](#) inspire you and lift your spirits, it enlightens you on history as well!

Music

I Need You More

Music by Jesus Culture is certainly uplifting and stirring, from the lyrics to the melody, to the passion shown by Kim Walker, the one who sings on this song [I Need You More](#). Take a listen, and see if you don't feel like you've just downed a tall glass of refreshing, pure water of life!

WOW 2014

Do you buy these CD's ? They come out each year, and they are a compilation of the best of Christian music from the year. [WOW 2014](#) is not full of one artist's songs, but it includes a bunch of them, so each song is different in lyrics, melody, and sound. They're a great collection to have!

HOME

PRACTICAL PARENTING: You Can Do It! by Georganne Schuch

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Who hasn't heard these words from a parent or coach (and rolled your eyes)? Few great things in life are achieved without a lot of perseverance and practice. Sure, Mozart was a piano virtuoso at age five, but most of us aren't Mozart. Most of us, including our children, need more than a few opportunities to succeed at almost anything. So, as parents, are we teaching our children to keep trying or to give up?

One of my daughters has never shown much of an interest in sweating. She usually chooses the path of least resistance when it comes to anything involving work. Once, when we went for a walk along a hike and bike trail, she rode her bike. The terrain was smooth and level, but she still grew tired of pedaling. First, she wanted to switch with her younger sister in the stroller. I explained that her bike was too big for her younger sister. So, she pedaled a few 100 yards and then asked me to push her bike while she walked. "No," was my definitive answer. I realized this was a good teaching opportunity for her.

Now, I could have lectured her about the importance of endurance, blah, blah, blah. But I didn't. (Well, I might have lectured a little bit by referencing the scene from *Finding Nemo*.) Instead of "Keep swimming," I said, "Keep pedaling." I also walked next to her and helped push her along. While the trail really was pretty flat, my hand on her back kept her momentum going. After about two miles, she seemed to get a second wind and pedaled ahead of me to keep up with her older sister. Maybe she was tired of hearing me talk; but regardless, she finished the hike under her own power. I promised her a double scoop of ice cream as a reward for overcoming great obstacles (to her). Even without the ice cream reward, she was satisfied with herself for succeeding.

Maybe it's the age, because when she was a toddler, no piece of furniture was too high to be climbed. Now, she sees many things as unconquerable. If the going gets rough, she's ready to bail out. I can tell she's thinking, "That word is eight letters long, I can't possibly sound it out." I help her break it down a few letters at a time and show her it's always possible if she keeps trying.

I use a multi-prong approach to encourage her to endure. There is the **pump-it-up line**:

"You can do it. Keep trying!" Frankly, that starts getting on my nerves, and probably on hers too, because it usually only makes her whine more.

Sometimes, I use the **reverse psychology approach**:

"Fine, if it's too hard. Just give up, and you can live with your sisters when you grow up." Apparently, that doesn't sound too appealing because she usually picks up her pencil and starts working again.

A **carrot-on-a-string enticement** is always worth a shot:

"If you finish your homework in 30 minutes, you can have extra video time." For the less mature, that only works about a quarter of the time. They fail to understand the reward concept at the successful completion of a project. I'll be glad when she grows out of it.

When all else fails, I use the **no pain-no gain method**.

“You see this room? Visualize not eating lunch until it is cleaned. Oh, and we’re having pizza.” (Or whatever her current favorite meal is). That room can be spotless in five minutes when the pain is big enough.

Every child is different, of course. I don’t like to use the same method each time one of my children encounters an obstacle. It’s good to keep the kids guessing about what mom will do next. Mysteriousness is my motto. I also find that mixing and matching methods is useful. So, one time it might be the carrot-on-a-string/no pain-no gain combo: a reward and a threat all rolled into one. Another time, I might employ the pump-it-up/reverse psychology methodology: a little rah-rah-sys-boom-bah pairs nicely with unattractive consequences.

Ultimately, as a parent, I want to teach each of my daughters to have the confidence to keep trying. To know she can succeed even when there are challenges. I cheer her on, and I push her from behind at the same time. When she fails, I pick her up, brush her off, and point her in the right direction again. When she succeeds, as she is bound to do if she keeps trying, we all celebrate.

TRAIN THEM: Serving with Kids by April Karli

“At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by ‘I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in.’” - Mother Teresa

As a follower of Jesus, there are many aspects of my faith that I want to pass onto my kids. I hope as they grow up they'll love the Lord, develop lives of prayer, study Scripture, and be deeply involved in faith communities. Of all the spiritual habits I hope to cultivate in their hearts, service is among the most important. **It is through serving others, in particular “the least of these,” that we most closely walk in the footsteps of Jesus and bring God’s kingdom into the world.**

Serving others should naturally flow out of our love for God. We see needs around us and are compelled by our love for God and others to roll up our sleeves and pitch in. We don't teach our kids serve so they can feel better about themselves, nor should they do it because it's a “hard thing” and we want them to be challenged. Both of those reasons lead to an attitude of self-righteousness. **We teach our kids to serve, and we model service for our kids, because serving others is serving Jesus ([Matthew 25](#)).**

I can think of no better reason to offer a homeless person a blanket, visit a homebound, elderly woman, or to raise money to build a well for clean water in Africa than that by doing so I'm serving Jesus himself.

Serving doesn't always come naturally, though. It's a habit that has to be practiced. I am grateful that I grew up in a home and church where service was highly valued. As a pastor's family, my parents served their congregation tirelessly and with love. I learned the value of service raising money for the needy and going on mission trips. Summers spent with my youth group rebuilding homes in inner-city Jackson, Mississippi and time fixing up a church in Mexico City taught me important lessons about consumption and wealth. Serving others was ingrained in me from an early age and continues to be an important part of my faith.

Practically, learning to serve begins in the home. Kids watch their parents model service both within and outside the family. Young kids can serve their siblings or help clean up before leaving a playdate at a friend's house. As kids get older there are more opportunities for service at church and within volunteer organizations. Here are a few examples of ways my family or friends of mine have been serving recently:

- One mom I know said that after seeing a group of homeless people under a bridge on a cold day she and her three young kids (ages 5-8) bought hot cocoa and blankets for them. The homeless people were warmed up not only by the cocoa but by the love from the kids and their mom. It would have been easy to ignore the homeless folks and

continue on with their busy day, but this mom chose to teach her kids the value of serving others.

- Our house church partnered with another church to serve an immigrant trailer park community for the holidays. We bought Christmas presents and helped sack groceries as families came to get their holiday meals and gifts for their kids. The day was miserably cold and rainy, things didn't go as planned, and my kids were miserable and complaining because of the wet and cold. But I'm so glad we did it, and once they warmed up, they were too. The highlight was a 4-year-old girl in our group watching a family choose the doll she'd shopped for to give to their 4-year-old girl. I hope that memory sticks with her for a long time.
- A friend's 9-year-old daughter spent one week of her holiday break volunteering with her grandmother. They delivered Meals-on-Wheels and spent time helping at a daycare-type place for Alzheimer's patients, chatting with the clients, and bringing smiles to faces.
- The junior high classes at my daughter's school volunteered at an organization that serves the homeless and refugees. They prepared and served a lunch of hot dogs for over 300 people and then cleaned up. Unfortunately, some of the students under 12-years-old were too young to volunteer. So their teacher arranged for those students to have a parent drive them around to deliver more hot dogs to homeless people. Everyone worked hard and I believe they experienced serving Jesus as they served those hot dogs to the homeless and refugees who came for lunch that day.

Learning to serve others begins with our love for God. Because of God's great love for us we love others. What an honor and privilege to "do unto Jesus" as we offer meals to the hungry, safety to the exploited, presence to the lonely, or medicine to the sick.

I DON'T DO TEENS: The Need for Affection by Lynn Cherry

My first born son will randomly walk up and hug me throughout the day. He'll lie down on the sofa with his head in my lap so I can run my fingers through his hair. My youngest, on the other hand, will opt for a chair if the sofa is occupied and has told me more than once, "Mom, please stop petting me."

I've found it helpful to reflect on their toddler years as I parent my teens. My oldest has always been a snuggler. He used to sit in my lap and let me rock him, hold him, and read stories to him for hours. My second son had a hard time being still long enough to snuggle. He was always on the go. I was happy to get one story in at a time. The disparity in their need for affection now makes perfect sense when I look back over the years.

What they say is true. Teenagers are like toddlers in so many ways:

- They are intolerable when hungry
- They test boundaries
- They need a daily nap (which stacks up on Saturday mornings)
- Communication reverts to the non-verbal
- They are vying for independence
- They understand all too well that bad behavior is the quickest way to get attention

Just like toddlers, teens are prone to act out in negative ways to get their needs met.

We all have needs, and most of them are best met in the context of relationships. There are several models out there and lists of relational needs that differ slightly. At family devotions a few weeks ago we all took a relational-needs-assessment from the [Living As Conquerors](#) model.

The boys' response to statement #27 tells it all:

27. Without physical touch I sometimes feel that a person does not care about me.

Firstborn son agreed.

Second son strongly disagreed.

Contrast that with responses to #47:

47. It sometimes seems that people are angry with me if they don't say, "I love you."

First born son disagreed.

Second son strongly agreed.

One boy feels affection through touch and the other feels it better through words.

Being aware of relational needs brings great insight to parenting. It helps us respond in ways that have the most impact on our children. Stay tuned this year as we will dig deeper into 10 relational needs and how they are felt and met in the lives of teens.

Hyper link: <http://thelaccenter.com/>

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS: 5 Ways to Open up a Room by Georganne Schuch

I've learned a lot from sharing small spaces with six people, five of them children. I won't go into all of the lessons at this time, but let's just say that floor space is important. And by floor space, I mean empty, walkable floor space. If you have a large room, you need big furniture (think four-poster bed) so that it doesn't look doll-size. But when you have a small room, you need to adjust the size variance accordingly.

In a living space with children, you're also going to lose floor space to everything they are not playing with at the moment. By default, unused toys fall to the floor with the floor around the toy box seeming to have the greatest gravitational pull. WHY can't they stretch two more inches to make it to the toy box? *Sigh*. I don't know.

Here are a few ideas I do know, for opening up a room:

1. **Less furniture.** I know that sounds backwards, but we have discovered that we really hate dressers. Yes, we need something in which to store clothes, but dressers take up a lot of space that could be better used for breathing. [Closet systems](#) use combination drawers/shelves/hanging racks to make better use of mostly unlivable space. Then, the bedrooms have more floor space to be used for living...and toys. Never forget the toys.

2. **Smaller furniture.** Like I said, furniture needs to be proportionately sized to the room. When bedrooms are shared, furniture needs to go up rather than out to maximize living space.

3. **Hangings.** Why use something that sits on the floor when you can mount something to the wall that serves the same purpose? You don't have to walk around it or pick it up or even dust it much. I bought a [wrought-iron coat rack](#) for just this purpose. It's pretty, convenient, and space-saving.

4. **Replaced furniture.** Strategically-placed furniture enhances a room and encourages a smooth flow of foot traffic. There is a fine balance between open floor space in a living area, while accommodating seating for seven+. This can get tricky. But in the world of children, floor space doubles as sitting space.

5. **Furniture for more than one purpose.** If you have a piece of furniture that you cannot get rid of and is pretty enough to be shown, then consider using it for more than one purpose. For instance, I have an antique dresser. Selling it is out of the question. I don't want to move it to the

closet because it is really pretty. So, I use half the drawers for clothes and half to store something else like craft supplies.

So, basically I've come to the conclusion that floor space isn't for filling. It's for living. And the less of it that I have covered up, the more free I feel.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER: Conversation Hearts by Marcy Lytle

This month, why not get the family together for some heart-to-heart conversation from each other, and from God himself? Just like the little candy hearts remind us of sweet sayings, like “Be Mine,” or “Kiss Me,” we can offer up some sweet sayings to one another, and hear some sweet sayings from above, as well!

As you participate in this family devotional, be sure to include a box of candy hearts for all to enjoy, as you share your own conversation hearts with each other!

Print out several pages of hearts (see below), and distribute two to each family member. Ask them to write 2-3 words only on each heart, ones that share their love with the family. If some members are too young to write, just ask them and write what they say. You might give examples like “You are pretty,” or “Your nose rocks,” or “Let’s play.” Let them be imaginative and creative, but above all – nice and sweet.

Next, take 10 of the hearts and write these sayings from the Bible, straight from God, to be placed among the other hearts as they are collected:

“He Gave” (John 3:16)

“Christ died” (Romans 5:8)

“Rich in mercy,” (Ephesians 2: 4-5)

“Love one Another,” (I John 4:9-11)

“God is Love” (I John 4: 7-8)

“Love endures forever” (Psalm 136:26)

“Consuming Fire” (reus 12:28-29)

“Brought us Peace” (Isaiah 53:5)

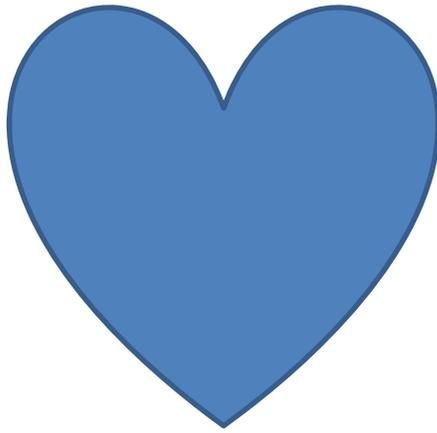
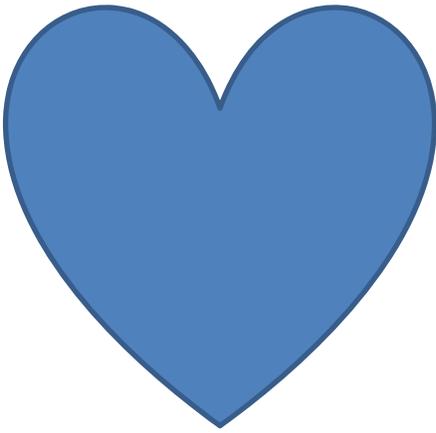
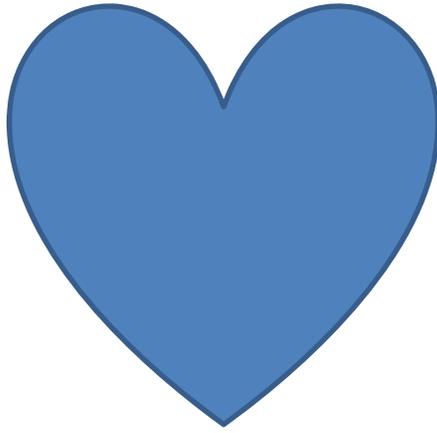
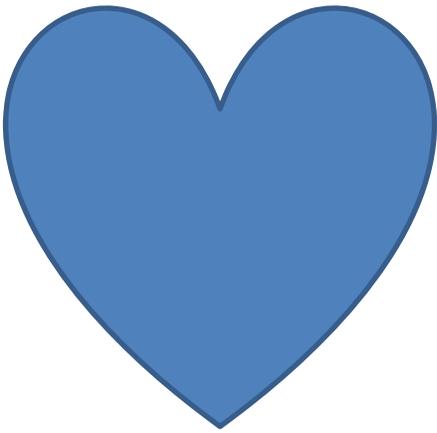
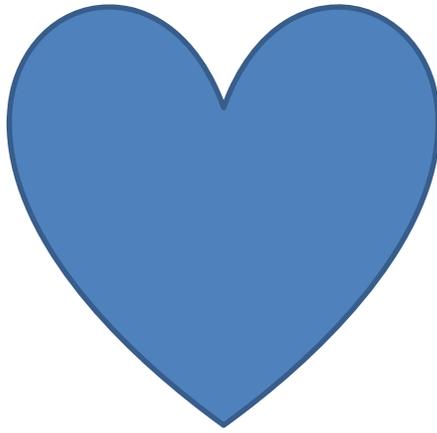
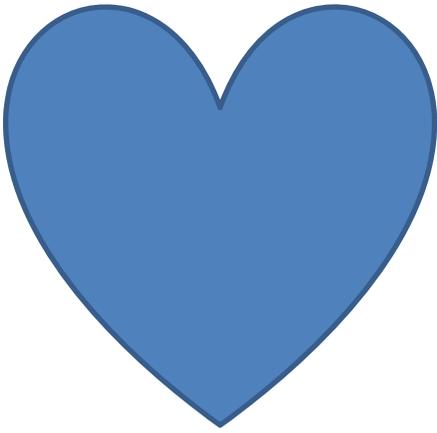
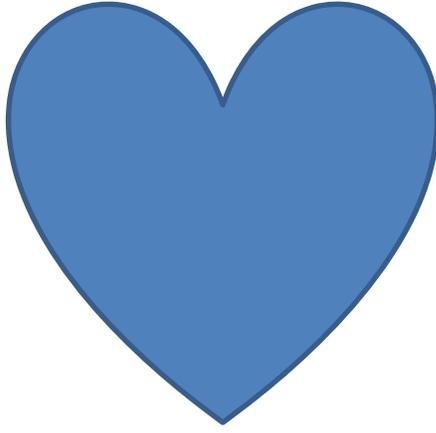
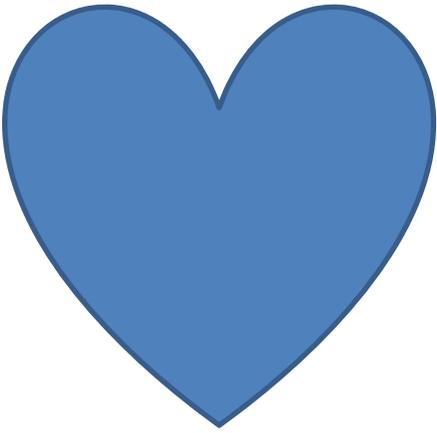
“Children of God” (John 1:12)

“Refuge for us” (Psalm 62:8)

Now mix up all the hearts in a bowl, and draw them one by one, reading aloud. Let each one guess if the saying is from a family member, or from God. As you read the ones from God, read the scripture verse along with it.

After all hearts have been read, share with the family how that God’s conversation hearts to us are always available and always real, because we are his family – sons and daughters – when we believe in him. Family members may feel the love from each other some days, and other days not so much, but God’s love never changes.

Finally, let each one respond to God in conversation through prayer, out loud or silently, as you close, with only 2-3 words each.



HANDMADE AND HOMEGROWN: Love Never Fails by Cheryl Carrell

I have a super simple craft this month for you to try. It leaves lots of room for creative inspiration. I'm slightly disappointed that it didn't turn out exactly as I had envisioned, but I'm sharing it anyway, because the beauty is that there are so many possible ways to take it.

Here are two examples of my finished product, but you can choose any color, font, paper pattern, or frame combo to spice it up according to your liking and to match your home!

I decided to use love as my theme, for obvious reasons this month, not to mention it's the way we strive to live in our home – loving each other.

Here are a few places you might find scripture inspiration if you want to use a verse that incorporates love.

["Bible Verses About Love: 25 Awesome Scripture Quotes"](#)

["10 Most Important Bible Verses on Love"](#)

- I simply copied the verses I knew I wanted to use into a word document, and printed them on some scrapbook paper that I had.
- After the scripture was printed, I trimmed the paper down to fit in a standard 8x10 frame.
- I then applied some basic letter stickers found at any craft store. (Again, I had these on hand, so I may have chosen a different font if I was specifically going out to buy some for this project.) I thought it might also be cute if the frame and printing on the paper were black with a white or simple background, and the word "LOVE" was in red.

I am interested to see what fun ideas you come up with!

Love in the Garden

If it's still cold where you are, and even if it's starting to warm up, why not add some "love" to your garden and whip up [this adorable heart-shaped treat](#) for your feathered friends? I'm planning to do this with my kiddos in the next week or two.

Something [like this](#) might be fun to try as well.

Hope you're starting to think about what seeds you may need to order, or purchase from the store, and whether or not you need to start any of them indoors soon. Spring is just around the corner!

YOU

STRENGTHENING YOUR CORE: Peace like a River by Marcy Lytle

My son had me sing this song every night as he drifted off to sleep, “I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river in my soul...” I suppose the repetition of the same phrase over and over again finally seeped from his ears into his little soul and this enabled him to fall asleep, fears of the darkness aside, knowing all was well.

But what about a river that’s flooding out of its banks, destroying everything in its path? That’s not a picture of peace! In fact, if you’ve lived near a river that floods, that song would sing more like, “I’ve got fear like a river...”

Peace is so temporal sometimes, for me. It’s fleeting. It’s circumstantial. It’s elusive.

Thoughts stir the waters.

Nighttime is the worst, isn’t it? And it’s not just for our kids, but we experience night terrors as adults, as well. We lie down to sleep, and the thoughts of the day, the regrets of yesterday, and the worries of tomorrow start flooding our minds. Pretty soon, they’re over the banks of our peaceful river, and we’ve got insomnia and cannot sleep.

Life rains hard.

We can wake up, go to work, and all is well. One phone call, a bit of news from a friend, or even an unkind word from a boss – and our peaceful river is tumultuous. It’s stirring beyond our control and we cannot calm it down. Why is life full of these flash floods?

The flood came and went, and we’re devastated.

Thoughts captivated our minds and hearts, or circumstances in our lives changed permanently and for the worst, and we were overcome, wiped out, destroyed. There is not even a place for us to set up camp, because everything is gone. We’re trying to move away from the river as far as possible...

Do any of those situations above describe you, at times?

[Psalm 34](#) says to “seek peace and pursue it.” In fact, there are two more verses that tell us to seek peace, and that directive is preceded by “turn from evil.”

I’m convinced that looking out our window and spotting a peaceful river behind our house is partly up to us. Jesus promises us peace, but there’s an action on our part. [Philippians](#) says to be anxious for nothing...to cast our cares on him...and then the peace comes.

Thoughts are going to swirl like a swarm of pesky flies, but we have to swat them with the truth.

Life is not all sunshine, and there will be clouds and stormy days, but if our foundation in Christ (the truth) is secure, we cannot be moved. The river will recede, the sun will shine, and we won’t be destroyed.

If there's nothing left, we have no strength to move, and we don't even really know where we've landed after a devastating flood, it's time to rebuild. And we must ask for help and allow those who love us to give, and we must receive.

[John 16:33](#) is a familiar scripture, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

What were "these things" that Jesus told them, things that would bring them peace? Back up in [John 16:22](#) he said, "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

The only thing that sustains us, enables us to live in peace, and pushes away the dark clouds and storms that make the water rise, is the truth that there's a better place awaiting us all. There will be times that we grieve and days when the peaceful river is anything but calm, but...

We WILL rejoice, and no one (and no storm) will rob us of our joy ever again.

Are you grieving today because your peaceful river is no longer in sight? Open up the windows of your mind and let the lying flies out. If it's raining cats and dogs and the river's rising, close your windows and remember the truth that you're a wise woman who has built her house on the rock, the immovable rock. And if the river has already flooded, and your windows and houses are broken into pieces, look up and realize the storm is over, the sun is shining, and there is hope.

"I've got peace like a river in my soul."

Visit our bookstore and purchase [Life is Fluid](#) for a study book with more analogies of life being like a river, always moving, carrying us along. The book also has drink recipes to go with each lesson! A great study alone, or with a group of friends...

UNDER THE INFLUENCE: Pet Peeves by Marcy Lytle

I have lots of pet peeves. From people not answering emails, to women who bash their husbands, to wearing shorts in the winter, I get annoyed by things that really don't matter all that much. They are minor annoyances that, if I "pet" too long, can grow into major disturbances. In fact, nursing pet peeves can raise my blood pressure, and that's never a good thing!

We actually owned a dog whose behavior was a pet peeve. She was a lovable little dog, but she dug in my flowers and buried things - annoying. She made a trail in our grass from the house to her pen - annoying. And she barked at a leaf falling - super annoying! She was a sweet, obedient, cute dog, but I couldn't get past her annoyances in order to love her.

As I sat thinking about pet peeves one day, I realized that when we are peeved about something, then we choose to "pet it" and stroke it like when we pet and stroke a dog, that particular issue keeps coming around again and again. If we pat our dogs on the head on a regular basis, they are going to come up to our side for a pet on the head over and over again, until we're annoyed by their presence!

One of my goals this year in 2014 is to be annoyed less by people and their idiosyncrasies. Why? Because being annoyed constantly at little things is a waste of time and energy, and I've got better things to do with my time and thoughts. How am I going to get past this? I'm not all that sure, but I'm starting by addressing the annoyances:

Behavior

This is one of the pet peeves of most people - how someone around them is behaving. Maybe we have a co-worker that bites her nails constantly, or a boss that clicks his pencil as he's talking. Perhaps our husband whistles a tune that annoys us; or our friend talks too much, and we never can get in a word. We can choose to be annoyed, or choose to observe the behavior, turn away from it and walk away - praying for them and their behavior (if it's really a problem) or praying for ourselves and our attitude (which is most often the problem).

Manners

Dining with others can bring up lots of pet peeves! If we have been trained in manners at the table, we often look down on and get peeved at others who don't follow suit. Maybe the person across from us talks with her mouth full, or waves her fork around when telling a story. Perhaps our own sons tilt their bowls to slurp the last bit of cereal, smacking their lips as they finish the last drop. We can address the behavior if it's really important, or we can try to listen to the person and look into their eyes and see who they really are, apart from their manners. Manners at the table, or the lack thereof, should not destroy good conversation and friendship.

Driving

I suppose this is where we often get peeved the most, when we're stuck in traffic and the other drivers do the most annoying things, like not using their blinker, driving too slow, driving too fast, or talking on their phone as they barely miss our front bumper when they change lanes. I've

seen grown adults arrive at their destination all in a fluster, just because of the “crazy drivers” who shared the road with them as they drove. Is the nut beside us really worth our own loss of sanity to where we too are nutty? When driving, we can use our horn to alert a fellow driver of danger, but we can also smile and carry on, if that driver is a little elderly person, or realize that perhaps others are not as in a hurry as we are, to get to their destination. We can breathe. We probably won't get there but two minutes faster by hurrying and scurrying, anyway.

Conversation

There's always a person who talks too much, someone who “knows it all,” or yet another who is condescending in tone or looks, when we're visiting with a group, or even one on one. It's a pet peeve of mine to converse with a new friend, only to hear them talk all about themselves, never asking a thing about anyone else. I can get so annoyed! However, we can realize that people act and converse out of wounds, past relationships, or just personal issues, and we can choose to listen, then walk away and bless them. We can pray for their self-esteem, their lonely hearts, and their incessant need to dominate. Then we can let it go.

With our Spouse

When my husband puts his arm around me as we're sitting on a chair or bench, he often starts tapping the back of the chair or the top of the bench. I get so annoyed, and I often snap, “Stop tapping!” When he answers the phone, I sometimes think he's talking too loudly, and I wave at him to quiet down, and flash him my evil eyes. You know the burrowed eyebrows I'm talking about! And what happens often is that I start with one pet peeve and before it's snowballed into a long string of annoyances, until I brush him off completely! Not wise. I can choose to speak politely, walk out of the room, or even train myself to laugh at such silly nonsense.

In fact, laughing off our pet peeves might just be the best way to approach all of them. We can determine if the annoyance is really worth screaming over, feeling pressure rise in our chest, or ruining a perfectly good friendship. If the action is really damaging, we can speak up, pray for that person, and let God deal with their behavior. But if the action is really our problem, and not theirs, we can learn to walk away smiling at the silliness and absurdity of life, and the ways that we're all wired so differently.

And we can choose to forgive and forget, as we skip along our merry way.

One of my biggest pet peeves? The little “ding ding ding” on my refrigerator that surfaces loudly when I leave the door open too long. I get so annoyed! But if I didn't respond correctly by shutting the door, I'd lose a pile of good stuff for eating.

Lesson learned.

HEALTHY HABITS: **Snack Attacks** by Georganne Schuch

Snacks are a necessary evil with children. They could graze all day. I could too, truth be told. I find that a bit hard on the budget, as well as the nerves. What mother hasn't wanted to run screaming from the house after the 500th "I'm hungry" of the hour?

So, I instituted a snack policy.

First: No sweets before lunch.

Second: No snacks after 4:30 (our dinner is around 6:30).

Third: No snack if the previous meal wasn't eaten (unless the child is finishing the leftover food.)

Here are some of my favorite snacks:

- crackers and cheese
- fruit and yogurt
- [homemade popsicles](#)
- apples and peanut butter
- [homemade granola bars](#)
- [mini-muffins](#)
- homemade popcorn
- veggies and dip
- cheese quesadillas
- leftovers
- tortilla chips and melted cheese
- applesauce

Now, I don't know about your kids, but mine can make the kitchen look like a bomb went off. Crumbs and peanut butter smears everywhere. So, being the Type A mom that I am, I created a snack protocol for acquiring, eating, and cleaning snacks:

1. Ask permission.
 - Timing is everything. No, you may not have a snack 15 minutes before the next meal or 15 minutes after the last meal that you wouldn't eat.

- Some foods are meant as ingredients for meals or to be consumed for a certain event, such as a park day.
- 2. Fix snack-size portions.
 - I buy food to be eaten but not all at one sitting.
 - A meal is looming in the near future, and I expect you to eat it.
- 3. Eat at the dining table.
 - Finding petrified food under the couches or in the closets makes me crazy. The ants that find all those partially eaten foods make me crazier, a very combustible combination.
 - I know what you ate and didn't eat, which will directly affect the outcome of your next request for a snack.
- 4. Clean up when you're done.
 - Your mess. Your responsibility.
 - I have a meal to make soon, and I won't be happy to clean the kitchen when I need to be cooking. That means you won't be happy to be called in from playing to mind your mess.

A snack is tidbit of food to tide you over until the next meal. A box of crackers or a family size bag of chips does not qualify as a tidbit. By teaching restraint and common sense, snacks won't force you into bankruptcy or derail normal meals.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES: The Season of Cold by Pam Charro

Winter has never been my favorite season.

It gets harder to shake off the cold the older I get, and it feels darker and lonelier. I have a harder time feeling positive and motivated, and I just want to sleep the day away. It is often difficult for me to see anything pretty happening in winter (especially here in Texas, where we seldom get snow). Where is the sunshine and the growth? All I can see is brown and blah.

I have been in a season of spiritual winter, as well, for the past several weeks, and I am not enjoying it. Sometimes I wonder how long I can feel so cold inside and why I feel so distant from God. He doesn't seem to hear or answer my prayers and I just feel so alone. I "know" He is good and that He loves me ... but I am not feeling anything. I can really get down on myself and my life during these times.

It does help me to keep in mind that:

- His faithfulness to me does not depend on my strength or how positively I feel on any given day.
- His commitment to me means that growth is occurring, even when I can't see it. He is always working. That promise came from Jesus' own mouth.
- And if He only loved me when I was being and feeling lovable, He would not be the great God that He is.

Sometimes the simplest truths are the most important, especially when I am feeling spiritually cold. My life may not always appear to have any bells and whistles happening in it, but my God always has the same strong and exciting love for me; and great plans for my life, even when I can't see them.

So, during spiritual winter, sometimes I have to accept that I can't always feel like a warrior. I will keep praying, reading and listening as I wait for the cold to pass and the sun to shine again.

Sometimes it has to be enough for me to simply be a well-loved child.

A MOMENT IN THYME: Let Winter Come! By Debra Brown

The transition between seasons is not always simple. I arrived home from my trip to Boston with good intentions of fully embracing the new season of our lives. My expectations of what "retirement" would look like were not being realized, and I found myself growing discontented, allowing self-pity and fear a voice. I had expected to do all the things I used to do better, but suddenly found myself moved out of the old and into new areas of ministry that I did not "feel" qualified to tackle. The Lord was definitely moving me out of my comfort zone, but unfortunately, I found myself relying on my own strength to carry me forward.

Autumn had come and gone, once again. Driven inside by winter's chill, I sit staring outside, dreaming of the brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows; remembering the autumns of my life. Another season beckoned, but I so loved the old one.

Lord, who am I now?

I do not recognize the woman that I see reflected in the window. I've fallen down a tunnel, and find myself in a world that's topsy-turvy. My children are the adults, and they're quite bossy! I'm the one complaining that the music at church is too loud, and I don't seem to know the songs.

How did this happen?

Glancing over at the fireplace, I see the plaque on the mantel displaying Isaiah 32:17:

"The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever."

The door to the tunnel appears.

Peace. I take a moment to breathe deeply, and remember the gift that I did not earn. Jesus rights my world. Just like the other seasons, He has a special place for me now. Quiet confidence replaces the fretting.

Let winter come!

MARRIAGE

TWO FOR THE ROAD: Stuck Like Glue by Lynn Cherry

"Dot, dot, dot - don't use a lot." Our son's preschool teacher repeated her gluing mantra over and over, but to no avail. Pink and red construction paper hearts and white doilies swam in a sea of sloppy gloppy stickiness. With that age group, less is never more.

Do you remember discovering the amazing properties of school glue? It goes on white but dries clear. It practically disappears! My husband remembers letting glue dry on his fingers and then peeling it off tip by tip. Glue can take two separate items and make them one. It's a fascinating substance.

Jesus mentioned glue in the context of marriage. [He said](#), "For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife." The original Greek word for cleave is "kollao" which literally means "to glue." Husbands and wives are to bond, adhere, and be glued to one another.

As our boys have grown into adolescence, my husband has taken each of them away for a special weekend they call their "Journey to Manhood." He used material from [FamilyLife Publishing](#) by Dennis & Barbara Rainey called Passport2Purity. Together they listened to messages, answered discussion questions and worked on object lessons. One of the lessons involved glue. Although the focus with our preteens was to discourage exclusive relationships, I see a slightly different lesson for marriages.

No mess for me

If we take two paper hearts and stack them up or rub them together, neither is changed. They are still two pieces of paper. In the same way, it's relatively easy for two people to cohabitate without connection. Do you know couples like this? They go through the motions without sharing much. They exist in the same space but occupy separate lives. Life is neat and tidy when all you have to think about is yourself.

A little dab won't do ya

Dot some glue on those paper hearts and they'll stick for a good long while, but over the years glue gets dry and brittle. When we found my mom's old high school scrapbook in the storage room, pictures and papers slipped right off the pages. You've heard that silly story about a husband saying, "I told my wife I loved her on our wedding day and that hasn't changed, why would I keep saying it?" That attitude won't work! The principle of "leave and cleave" is not a one time occurrence. It is an ongoing process.

Less is never more

Invite a preschooler to glue your paper hearts and it's a completely different story. They'll smear glue all over the paper, take the lid off the bottle and pour it on until the tacky white stuff oozes out from under the paper. Then they'll want to do it all over again the next day.....and the next day. What a great model for bonding as husband and wife. We can't be stingy when we think about connecting our hearts, even if things get a little messy. We have to keep gluing, keep cleaving, and keep joining together. We have to pursue intimacy.

In counseling, we learned that intimacy causes short term instability. It's tempting to avoid the temporary shakiness by holding back or pretending and not sharing your true feelings. David and I both have moments when we know that being open and honest is a risk and it can make life uncomfortable for a while. We are learning to press through that fear, knowing the instability

won't last long. When we chose vulnerability, we strengthen the bond between us. We are stuck like glue.

Try This:

- Gather some paper, scissors, and pens and make a hand-made valentine for your sweetheart this year. Don't forget the glue! Write your own unique version of "*Roses Are Red...*"
- If you need to have "the talk" with your pre-teen, we recommend Passport2Purity. Find out more at FamilyLife.com
- Deuteronomy 13:4 says, "You shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and you shall serve him, and *cleave* unto him." What would it look like to glue yourself to God?

DATE NIGHT FUN: Black & White...and Red All Over by Marcy Lytle

I suppose there is more of the color red in stores during the month of February than any other month, except for December. Red clothes, red hearts full of chocolates, red everywhere! This month we will include some red, but with black and white added to it, because it just looks good to pair up those three colors – even on a date with your special someone!

Black & White Cookies & Red Socks: My first visit to New York I was introduced to the famous black and white cookie there, and I promptly retrieved a great recipe to make them. They take a bit of work, so why not stay in, and [make up a batch](#) together? Prior to the date, both of you visit a discount store separately and surprise the other one with comfy red socks to wear while you bake. Pack up the cookies, add your favorite drink, and sit down to watch a black and white movie. My suggestion is [The Artist](#).

Newspaper & Red Velvet: Reading the newspaper is a luxury I don't often have time for, but I do enjoy several sections, and my husband enjoys his own pages. He likes to share with me what he's reading, and I usually don't have time to listen. So pick up a newspaper for your next date night, head to a coffee shop where you can purchase a red velvet dessert ([Starbucks](#) carries them this time of year!), and read and share, listening to each other intently as you talk about the news.

Zebras and Apples: Zoos are not just for kids! In fact, you might see and enjoy a zoo visit more than ever, with just the two of you, as you linger to look at the awesome stripes on the Zebras! Pack some red delicious apples, cubes of cheddar cheese, and mixed nuts, for a snack as you rest at a picnic site, between animal sightings. February is a great month to visit a zoo, at least in the south where I live. If it's still cold where you live, consider an aquarium. (But you won't find zebras there!)

Dice and Dips: Yahtzee is a game with dice that's fun to play, while you enjoy conversation with the other players. This might be a good idea for a date night with another couple. Prepare this fun [Red Hot Buffalo Chicken Dip](#) served with crackers, and play several games of Yahtzee, seeing who can win the best four out of five! Remember to gaze into your date's eyes with a twinkle, as you play the game.

Peppers & Penguins: Have you seen the movie [March of the Penguins](#)? It's a great documentary and worth a night in, to watch it. Make salsa together, and set out a huge basket of tortilla chips to go alongside. My easy salsa recipe is to just place in the food processor – five roma tomatoes, half a red onion, half a bunch of cilantro, one jalapeno (seeds discarded), juice from one lime (or two), and salt to taste. When you're finished with the movie and salsa, write on pieces of paper five things you love about each other, and exchange. Then walk like a penguin and laugh.

February doesn't have to be just about making dinner reservations and getting dressed up on the big day of the 14th, and coming home broke, and irritated at the crowds. With a bit of planning ahead, a different kind of a date can be enjoyed and become one of your favorite romantic memories – one you'll share with your kids!

After all, what's a better example to show your children than their parents having a good time on a dime?

AFTER 30 YEARS: The Domino Effect by Marcy Lytle

You've seen it on television...or somewhere. A long row of dominoes is set up, one by one, and one little flick of the last domino standing causes the whole string of little rectangles to tumble to the ground. In other words, this is called a "cascading failure." And it happens in our marriage too; the longer the row of dominoes, the more devastating the effect.

Let's peek into the set up. On Monday, we asked him to remember to make a call and he forgets – one domino of frustration sets up. Tuesday, we wear a new outfit and he doesn't even notice – second domino of disappointment stands behind the frustration domino. Wednesday, we need help with the house because company's coming for dinner but he conveniently has to work late – third domino of anger is standing tall. You get the picture. By Sunday morning, there are at least seven dominoes lined up. And if we choose to continue the process over weeks, months, and even years, we've got quite an impressive lineup – all dominoes of some ill will towards our husbands.

The fact is that if we topple the first two quickly, choosing to forgive or to voice our disappointment and move on, the sound, the effect, and the fall of the dominoes is minimal. However, if the dominoes are carefully stacked over time because we are building a "case" against our husbands, it takes less and less for another domino to be added to the row. And one morning, out of the blue, our husbands look at us incorrectly or say the slightest remark that's less than affirming, and what happens? The Domino Effect takes place and it's a long but rapid cascade of falling dominoes from beginning to end, and it's a sight to behold. All of the little irritations we lined up begin to land, number side up, and we start counting all the things that have brought us to this table of dominoes on the floor, dominoes across the room, and dominoes that hit our toes. We're not happy with *him* and it's *his* fault that this mess took place, and it's *his* responsibility to clean up the mess, put away the dominoes in their box where they belong, and quit playing the game.

Have you experienced The Domino Effect?

I once heard a lesson from a wise teacher that when offenses occur, we have two choices. We can address them, forgive the offender, and walk free...or we can step down the next stair to hurt, then to anger, then to accusation and judgment, and so on. In his example, there weren't dominoes, but rather stairs. The teacher pointed out that in all his years of counseling, he observed that once a person got down to a specific stair, without turning around and dealing with each lowering step, they never turned around.

I'm convinced this is one of the reasons so many marriages end in divorce. All because the row grew too long, or the stairs grew too steep, and the fall was unstoppable.

If we're going to be happily married for decades and not end up in two Lazy-Boy chairs bickering across the room, we've got to deal with the dominoes...one by one.

1. **Cut him some slack.** Sometimes he's tired, just like we are, and he doesn't notice or remember.

2. **He's not Superman.** Sometimes we want him to swoop in and save the day, but only God can do that.
3. **Forgive and Be Free.** If he's truly offended you ask God for his grace and mercy to forgive. You'll be free. And God is well able to deal with him.
4. **Press through, and hug.** Stop and topple the first few dominoes quickly, sweep them back into the box, and turn around and hug him tight.
5. **Communicate.** Tell him you are wearing a new outfit. Or just love yourself enough to feel pretty without him saying so, and tell yourself you look nice.

These are five simple ways to keep the stack of dominoes small and manageable. Obviously, there are huge offenses in a marriage that end up with huge boulders on the table instead of dominoes. Those kinds of offenses need prayer, counseling, and intervention. But for the sake of this article, we're talking about the day-to-day nicks and bruises that occur from living with another person in a house full of furniture. We're bound to stub our toes or bruise our thighs when turning a corner, but such are the hazards of a home.

Don't let small rectangles with numbers on them start stacking up against him. Instead, ask him to sit down and play the real game of dominoes, and enjoy all the things you love about playing the game with your husband. And make sure the only score you keep is the one that's erased and forgotten, once the dominoes are back in the box.

ENCOURAGEMENT

HIDDEN GEMS: Waiting for God's Best by Kayley Ryan

People who know me know that I struggle with patience. When my mom or dad asks me to wait before I tell them something or before they'll help me with something, it's like my life has just been put on hold.

And my impatience is one of the main reasons I struggle so much with having to wait for God's best.

Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one in the world still waiting for that perfect guy to swoop her off her feet, though I know I'm not. When it gets right down to it, most every girl struggles with waiting for the right guy or any guy for that matter.

If only I could get that look of confirmation, that sweet text message or phone call; if only he could ask me to prom or the homecoming dance—if only, if only...

But the beautiful truth is that we're not alone. God knows our anxious thoughts, and he desires for us to turn to him and find comfort and peace in his love, whether we have a boyfriend or not.

In my freshman year of high school, I had a huge crush on a guy, but I had no idea what I was doing. I flirted with him, hoping he would get the hint. I nearly had a heart attack when he sent me a text or talked to me. To anyone else, including my brother and parents, I probably seemed like a maniac, freaking out at the slightest bit of attention paid to me by him.

The problem was, I was paying too much attention to my “crush” and not enough attention to the one who loved me the most.

Now, I'm not saying that crushes or boyfriends are a bad thing, but when we become so engrossed and tangled up that we're putting them before God then we know that we need to change something. But how do we do that? How do we focus on God instead of constantly focusing on some guy we like? In fact, what does it really mean to wait for God's best?

I asked a few of my friends what they thought about waiting for God's best and focusing on him instead of constantly focusing on guys:

Hannah said that we shouldn't just give our hearts or our purity away to the first guy we meet; instead, we should patiently seek God's will. “Saying I love you is one way you can give your heart away to someone, and that's a big thing; you shouldn't do that unless you're sure and unless you think God thinks that's the right thing for you.” Hannah puts her focus more on God than on guys by focusing on what she believes God's will is for her life, by working towards those future goals that God has called her to follow.

When I asked my friend Emily about what advice she had for others, she suggested teen girls make a list of important things they might be looking for, not just in a boyfriend, but in a husband. She also stressed that they should pray a lot about it. “It's very hard for me to keep myself focused on God,” she admitted. “Anytime that I start thinking about a guy too much, I remind myself, ‘Emily, he's not the whole world. Stop, turn yourself around, and think about who's important.’ That brings me back to God.”

Just like my friends Hannah and Emily, I find that I when I am thinking on the things of God—whatever is pure, noble, and true as [Philippians 4:8](#) says—I worry less about whether I will ever get a boyfriend and instead am able to draw closer to God.

I'm reminded of a song by Rebecca St. James, a Christian worship artist who's originally from Australia, about waiting for the right guy. In a DVD showcasing her live performance of the song in Florida (from the album [Alive in Florida](#)), she tells her own story of how she made a promise to God at a conference at age 16 to save sex for marriage and to wait for God's best. In her song, "Wait for Me," she writes to her future husband, telling him that she is waiting and praying for him.

"Darling did you know that I
I dream about you
Waiting for the look in your eyes
When we meet for the first time
Darling did you know that I
I pray about you
Praying that you will hold on
And keep your loving eyes only for me

Cause, I am waiting for
Praying for you darling
Wait for me too
Wait for me as I wait for you
Darling wait

Darling did you know I dream about life together
Knowing it will be forever
I'll be yours and you'll be mine
And darling when I say
Till death do us part
I'll mean it with all of my heart
Now and always faithful to you"

When I first heard this song, it really made me think. *What should I be doing right now? What am I doing right now and what do I need to change?*

The words in the song, "praying for" the one God has in store for you, are so crucial, and it's something I've been neglectful about. My mom has continually reminded me that the best thing I can do whenever I begin to feel lonely is to simply pray for God's will to be done in my life and in the life of the one God has planned for me.

I recently read a book called [Before You Meet Prince Charming](#) by Sarah Mally that talks about waiting for God's best. The author explains that waiting "doesn't mean we should do nothing." It means we should focus on him and his works—serving God with all of our hearts, resting in him, and trusting that he will take care of everything else.

"Waiting is patiently anticipating that which hasn't yet come and joyfully and diligently working on the Lord's business in the meantime."

I know it's hard to wait. In fact, sometimes I just want to give up, take matters into my own hands, and make sure that some guy *knows* I like him. But God tells us to wait and trust in him, and he promises that we will have rest and peace if we do so. Psalm 130:5 says,

**"I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope."**

TOUGH QUESTIONS: Which One? By April Karli

It was New Year's Day and I sat around a kitchen table with friends. We sipped mimosas, dreaming out loud with each other about the new year. Each of us faced changes and decisions ranging from employment transitions and the possibility of moving, to how to juggle work and parenting responsibilities, to discerning new paths God might have for us in the coming year.

As we chatted about possibilities one woman whose family was considering a move across the country asked, "**Do you think God cares which choice we make?**" We poured more champagne...because of that question. It's a tough one to ponder. We needed more mimosas.

Rather than immediately jump into an abstract theological discussion about God's will versus human free will, we asked questions to find out more about what my friend's family was facing with their decision. We also expressed the ways we've all wrestled with discerning God's will while making huge decisions ourselves, at times.

Does God want me to take this path or that path? Does God have a specific plan for my life? What if I mess something up by making the wrong choice? When tragic things happen are they part of God's plan, too?

At times we've all wondered these things. Those of us who desire to obey and follow God hope to align ourselves with "God's plan" as much as possible. This is good, but it can paralyze us at times. Searching for God's seemingly elusive will, and agonizing over decisions, can keep us from taking risks.

What if God, in his deep love for us, simply gives us choices and wants us to choose? And what if (aside from obvious immoral and unethical things) there aren't any **wrong choices**? What if God gives us our minds and will to decide where to live and work or worship; whom to marry or not, or whether it's time to make a change in our lives. And what if God blesses whatever decision we make because we're his beloved children?

I do believe there are times when God's will for me is very specific. Sometimes I need God's direction in clear-cut ways and I believe he guides and steers me when I ask. Other times, however, I believe God simply wants to bless me. **I believe God wants to bless me no matter what I choose.** And he does. What a freeing thought that God would give me the ability to make my own decisions and bless me in whichever choice I make!

That New Year's morning around the table I expressed all of this to my friends and they shared their perspectives and questions, too. Maybe it was our deep respect and love for one another, or maybe it was the mimosas, but that morning we didn't argue or try to change anyone's mind. Rather we listened and heard each other's beliefs and hearts.

As the year progresses and the paths before us unfold, I rest in the knowledge of God's love for me and in his desire to bless me no matter what path I take. **Any path that is part of bringing God's kingdom to earth is within God's will.**

[For more on the biblical basis of free will read this from Greg Boyd at ReKnew.org.](#)

Moving Forward - I Deserve to Suffer by Lynn Cherry

I have no self control when it comes to potato chips. I crave them. Ruffles. Lays. Target brand Archer Farms Maui Onion Kettle Chips. Oh my! That being said, I did it **AGAIN**. I ate too many chips and now my tummy hurts. Ugh. I knew when I was eating them that I should stop, but I didn't. I just kept munching on those deliciously salty and perfectly crunchy chips.

I laid in bed, trying to sleep while my stomach gurgled and cramped in complaint of my weak character.

All I could think is:

I DESERVE TO SUFFER!

That's what we tell ourselves, isn't it?

We made another mistake and we are just getting what we deserve. Now we have to face the consequences. So let me ask you:

- Are you feeling the bite of your holiday spending?
- Did you get sucked in to family drama?
- Are you having a hard time pulling on your favorite jeans?
- Have you already blown your new year's resolutions?

Sometimes, it feels like there is no way out of the mistakes and the messes. We can't go under, over or around them. We have to go through them. Wondrously, our redemption stands in stark contrast to the "way things usually go." Through Christ we don't get what we know we deserve. We get MERCY.

Aren't you glad?

But it doesn't stop there, because we also get what we could never deserve.

We get **GRACE**: unmerited favor and blessing.

Don't continue to punish yourself for your failings. Ask God to forgive you. Ask your family to forgive you. Forgive yourself and move forward.

Today is a new day! God has fresh, new merciful love and all-sufficient grace for you today. It's free. It's abundant. And you don't have to do anything to deserve it.

Psalm 103:8-12 says this:

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

REAL STORY: Consider Joy By Rachel Keagy

I've experienced many hard times in my life, some big, some small, but never before now have I ever been able to say that **I consider it joy when trials come.**

I remember from a young age reading the first chapter of the book of [James](#) and seeing where it says to take joy in my trials. I was so amazed at these words that I even wrote about them in one of the very first songs I'd ever written. So I know I've always been intrigued by this 'taking joy business' and have always wanted to learn more about it.

Last year in 2013 I didn't just close a chapter in *The Story of My Life* book; I literally closed the book, and started to read a new book called *The Story of My NEW Life*. The year of 2013 was the year of everything NEW for me and my family. The big events were: new house, new job for my husband, a new baby girl adding to the mix of two spirited boys, and a new business for me and my husband to enjoy together. I was so excited!

Throughout the entire 2013 year, I got to practice the fruits of the Spirit like I never have before. The fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And even though I am not an expert in any of these areas, I know someone who is and He lives inside of me. His presence within me accomplishes all of these things, in my time of need. This was good news to me, since recently becoming a mother, and now about to be a mother of three children all under the age of four. (Because the hardest thing I have ever been through in this life on earth is becoming a mom.)

My year was filled with so much growth it's really been hard to pick what to write about, but yet again, even in this story I'm practicing to write it from a place of joy and rest, not a place of worry or strife. And as I rest in Jesus at this moment, the stories and moments I want to share are coming to mind. *Don't worry. Be anxious for nothing...* words of truth God shares with us that we can really believe. He cannot lie.

First of all, I've always wanted to be a songwriter, and I've attended many workshops and events that have helped teach me tremendously with this. Being a musician, this is where God often meets with me to teach me about his character, and my life.

About four years ago, I picked up the guitar and in five days I was singing and playing at the same time. I was shocked and amazed because I had tried to play and sing the guitar back in my college days without success. I asked God, "What was different this time when I picked up the guitar?" Many things were different, but the one most key difference was that this time I enjoyed it from the start. **My starting place was a place of joy, with no doubts behind that joy.** My drive, my desire, my goal, for wanting to sing and play at the same time was rooted in joy. I didn't start out with a mindset on a hard striving work, I set my mind on the joy that playing the guitar would bring me, and I began a good work out of that. And the end result came very quickly, in just five days. I'm still no expert, but I act like I know what I'm doing and the Spirit leads me and teaches me. So now when I write songs, I don't *try* to write a song, I simply sit down and enjoy time with the Lord and my guitar and receive a song.

Secondly, when I became a mother, I always thought that I would be able to continue doing music ministry while having children. But becoming a mom was a lot harder than I ever expected. And I began to find myself becoming more frustrated with life, and the joy was harder to find. Since I felt like my life had purpose before becoming a mom, adding children to my

family sadly became a burden, because it was hard. My mental starting place was not rooted completely in joy. I operated out of a place that was run by my emotions and feelings. I wavered like a boat on choppy water. Everything was so hard instead of an exciting adventure. I tried desperately to enjoy all the joys I was *supposed* to be feeling. And my heart did grow in love to give when I became a mother, but I also found myself realizing I was full of frustration.

It turns out that I didn't realize how selfish I really was. And my children rescued me from complete selfishness. Looking back now, I remember asking, "Lord how is it that children are a blessing from you? I want to know more of what that looks like. Because all I can see right now is the hard life changes that children bring." He said, "When you feel like you're on that boat again on choppy waters, look at the horizon which is constant and non-wavering just like me." My Daddy God has been teaching me about the peace that passes all my understanding, and I know that this peace is absolutely a real peace to receive from Him. I've started to practice receiving this peace, and I want it to manifest in my life every single minute of every day. If you were to come over to my house in a moment when everything looks like a huge chaotic mess, with children running and screaming, with toys underneath my feet and chores piled high, you would probably hear me speak a promise of God out loud and receive His peace in that very moment to fill me with Himself and give me wisdom. **Even when I don't feel it, I speak the truth out loud.** I probably look completely silly, but it's been my way of practicing His goodness in order to turn my situation around.

Thirdly, at the end of the summer when I was about 10 days from giving birth to our baby girl, our family went through our first accident that found us spending the night in Dell's Children hospital with our two-year-old. He fell about six feet and landed on our kitchen floor, resulting in a fractured jaw and losing his top two baby teeth. A real life scary moment was happening and I had the opportunity to turn to choose and trust my real Daddy God with everything: a true test moment to fully rely on God Himself who's been telling me all these years that I can trust Him no matter what happens. I felt helpless in that moment; but the truth is that I was not helpless, because **my family and I were absolutely in the hands of God.** He was holding us and protecting us through it all, which he does every day of our lives. Jacob's adult teeth are unharmed, his jaw was a clean break needing no surgery, and he suffered no concussion.

Finally, my year completed stronger in the Lord than it began. And crazy enough, God led us to start a brand new business - a business that came to me as a message of hope for my future and your future. It's a business that I'm taking to the top because everything in my life so far as trained and prepared me for this moment. I'm choosing to not remain the same but keep growing in God's grace. I've gone from trying to be joyful mama, trying to have peace and patience, to seeing that these are fruits that come from practicing His presence and receiving His fullness. God came through, like he always has, and always will.

He's always with me and always with you, and just that alone make us successful, as we consider it all joy.

Rachel Keagy websites: www.joyfulfreedom.acndirect.com
www.indieheaven.com/artists/rachelkeagy

http://www.indieheaven.com/artist_main.php?id=24060

listen to Rachel sing

Rachel Keagy is a singer, songwriter, mother of three, a wife, and an independent business owner. She has a distinct voice, produces music, and performs for the love of the Lord. Rachel says, “.. I deeply would love to share this message of hope with anyone who wants more out of life.”

<http://www.joyfulfreedom.acnibo.com>

<http://joyfulfreedom.acndirect.com>

<http://www.indieheaven.com/artists/rachelkeagy>

FRESH THYME

FRESHY THYME: “What’s that, Daddy?” By Marcy Lytle

Discovery is something that sets babies apart from adults. For babies, everything is about discovering new tastes, new touches, new wonders, and new places. They really are fearless. They reach out to discover whatever it is that’s nearby...until one day they fall. It’s then that the process of learning caution (and fear) before reaching out for something new begins...

I like to hold babies, for a while, at least, until they discover my hair or my earrings and pull really hard. So I put them down on the floor. Then they start moving across the room to discover the texture of the toy sitting in the corner, which promptly moves from their hands to their mouths, where they can taste this bright shiny object, as well.

As they grow into toddler status and can speak and be understood, the line every parent loves to hear (and then hates to hear over and over again) emerges, “What’s that, Daddy?” It’s so cute when they can put that string of words together, and then so annoying when they make that string long enough to reach around the world!

The wonder of discovery is something many of us lose as we “mature.” We end up discovering the hardships that life has to bring, and we sort of shut down and don’t care to discover anything new anymore:

The wonder of a new day is lost when we wake up one morning with a lump in our breast, and fears become the shades that we wear over our glasses that once allowed us to see so clearly.

The wonder of a new relationship and all that it brings is destroyed when a relationship we thought was “forever” ends up just being letters engraved on the inside of a ring.

The wonder of exploration into the unknown is no longer even a thought, because we ventured out one time on what we “thought” God was telling us to do, only to find ourselves at the bottom of a well with no way up.

The wonder of a new taste is replaced by the same old flavors day in and day out, because those tastes are safe, easy to digest and familiar to the palate.

In [Matthew 18](#), it says this:

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Notice this:

Jesus he says we need to “change” and become like little children. This implies, to me, that Jesus knows that when we become adults we lose childlike wonder, and we must get it back.

If we don’t, we won’t enter the kingdom of heaven. Why? It’s because discovery and wonder are two necessary ingredients in order to experience a place where God is supreme. It’s when

we lose that faith in his sovereignty that we sink back into fear and never move again. The trust is gone, so we become immobile.

The lowly position of a child literally might mean sitting on the floor, looking at all that lies before us, and being full of energy to go after it and experience it.

Have you lost your childlike spirit that points to a new day and asks, "What's happening today, Father?" Do you always expect the worst, because you've "grown up" and become bitter? Do you find yourself stuck in a rut, or at the bottom of a well?

Make a change. Ask God to restore to you that childlike trust, that innate sense of discovery, and the curiosity that makes you move towards all that lies before you – today.

Babies don't know to worry about what they will eat today, drink tomorrow, or where they will live next week. They just enjoy the world around them, as long as they sense security nearby.

If I might paraphrase the above verse into today's language, it might read like this:

Jesus stood a child in the middle for an object lesson. He said, "You've grown up and lost your sense of wonder. So change and get it back! Otherwise, you can't experience my presence, because where I am there's freedom! Get back on the floor like a child, crawl around, climb to new heights, and eat from my hand. Then, from that position, I will lift you up."

Ask your Father today, "What's that, Daddy?" and listen to his answer and repeat after Him.

FRESH THYME: The Sword by Marcy Lytle

A sword in the hand of an untrained fighter is dangerous. In fact, it can be downright deadly. I know nothing about sword fighting, but I've seen enough of it in the movies to know that one wrong move and you're gone, or one right move and you're champion.

Ephesians 6 says: *In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

Psalm 144:1 says: *Praise be to the LORD my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.*

Using the word of God as a sword takes training, and that training must be from the Lord himself, not from a friend who's skilled in using her sword to slice up others.

What does a sword do? It cuts...to the bone. The word of God cuts to the heart issues in each of us, and divides that which is flesh from that which is spirit. If we don't know what we're doing with it when we use it against in battle with a friend or family member, we're likely to end up killing both flesh and spirit.

So just how does God train us for war, and instruct us on using the sword of His Spirit? This takes time, and it takes considering the sword:

A sword left in its sheath is a sword that's just for show. Imagine sword fighters that walk around with their swords stuck to their sides but never use them to win any battles. Once an enemy realizes this, it only takes one jab to send this sword carrier down.

It's the same with us as we spiritually engage in battle. Just knowing verses we've memorized does us no good. We actually have to take them out in faith, when storms arise, and move our arms in for the kill, so that we come out unscathed.

A sword swung aimlessly might fly out of our hand and land where unintended. If our arms are weak and our fingers are untrained on how to hold the sword, when we start swinging – others better watch out.

The best way we can exercise our spiritual arms in sword fighting against depression, hopelessness, or any other evil, is by lifting them in praise and admiration of the very character of who God is: wonderful, amazing, loving, caring, and all-powerful. Then when we're in a battle with others, our arms go up, instead of out towards them, and He fights on our behalf.

A sword swatted at an enemy will leave us open to be jabbed. There's a huge difference between swatting and jabbing. Have you ever tried to swat a fly and missed? It's because they're quick! Swatting at what threatens us will end in a hit-and-miss game, until we learn the skill of jabbing to the bone.

Being skilled in spiritual sword fighting involves time spent in prayer, in listening to Him as he whispers in our ear, "Move to the left, lift up your sword, and go in for the kill!" Jesus has

already defeated all of our enemies, but he enables us to deal with daily battles with him by our side.

A sword that stabs must destroy. Haven't you seen it? The sword fighter stabs his opponent, only it's not for the kill, and the opponent rises, as he becomes enraged to fight back! Trained hands know when and where to stab – and it's never a friend or another person – it's always the lies that get between us.

If we are pulling out our swords in faith, lifting up our arms in worship for strengthening, and listening to where and when to strike – we will be alive and well – not struck down and destroyed. What will be destroyed are the lies of the enemy that brought us into battle in the first place!

II Corinthians 4:8-10 says:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

We must read the word and become a student of it, so that we are trained in it for battle. Pulling a verse out of context and throwing it at a friend in need is like swinging a sword in the air – it's dangerous and not wise. Carrying around the word, like a pill we pop into our mouths when we have headache, only pacifies and never heals. The word must be in us, alive in us, and truth in us. And finally, the truth of who God really is must be woven into the fabric of every piece of armor we wear.

It's then, and only then, that our sword comes away from hanging by our side, we lift it up at the target of lies, we aim and we hit the mark – as we walk away in victory – head held high.

We are women at war, but we've been equipped with a sword that kills everything and every lie that dares to raise its head against our children, our husbands, our families, or our own minds.

FRESH THYME: Riding a Bicycle with Jesus by Paula Alvelo

By Paula Alvelo

My prayer life has been a little bit like riding a tandem bicycle with Jesus. Advantages and disadvantages of the back seat of a tandem are: I can't steer, and I can't see too far ahead. I might be able to see a distant landmark, but not a dead armadillo in the road 20 feet ahead of me. On the other hand, I don't have to do much pedaling. I can pretend to do some of the work, but my pedals are going to rotate whether my feet are on them or not. I have to trust the person in the front seat, not only when the bike trail is level and the weather is beautiful. I have to trust even when the ride feels like a roller coaster, or He steers me right into a storm.

My son, Phil, was my first answered prayer, and it was a pretty feeble prayer. Phil's dad and I had been married for five years and had decided we were never going to have a baby because it was too much responsibility. I really didn't want to tell him that I was changing my mind, and as a new follower of Jesus, it occurred to me that this might be something I could pray about. So I did: one time. I remember saying something like, "God, I am afraid to tell Rick that I want a baby, but I really do, so if you want us to have a baby, that would be great." I promptly forgot about it. I got pregnant in late December. *There might be something to this prayer thing.*

Phil's dad wasn't a believer yet, and we weren't in church, so I didn't grow spiritually very much. The next prayer I remember was when I wanted another baby. Greg was born about three years after Phil. When Greg was a baby, I started going to church and women's Bible studies, and a neighbor mentored me for a year. I wanted to learn more about this prayer thing. I was still confused about how to talk to God, but I was on the back of the bike asking questions, listening to His answers.

I started to learn about praying scripture for my kids, so I bought a notebook and put in dividers for each of them. We would sit on the sofa at the beginning of the day, and pray. Then I would pray for them throughout the day, about their needs, their futures. Whenever a prayer was answered, I would highlight it in the notebook and show it to them.

I had started with a shallow one-sided view of God, seeing Him as only the incomprehensible, sovereign Creator of the universe, but that made him seem unapproachable and uninvolved. However, seeing God only as my Father made it seem like I was being too familiar with him. *God, can I have a dollar? And a baby?* And yet, He describes himself as both of these, as well as my friend.

Over the years, God has answered my prayers in ways that didn't look like answers. I felt like I had been on the back of bike that was sucked up into the middle of a tornado. In those storms, I couldn't pray full sentences. I could only pull out fragments of the scripture that I had learned during the times Jesus and I had been biking over level ground. *Help. I'm scared. I put my trust in you. You promised never to leave me.*

Creator - Isaiah 44:24 - *I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself.*

Father - 2 Corinthians 6:18 - *I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters.*

Friend - John 15:13-15 - *Greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.*

How can I have a conversation with a God who is all three of these at the same time? The answer, as in riding a bike, is in the balance of authority. I won't be so casual as to consider him my peer. I am not his equal. However, because of our personal relationship, I have freedom and access that are still unbelievable to me at times.

Consider printing out the below tips, as you relax into your own bike ride with Jesus:

What does my bike ride look like today?

- Calm, perfect weather: I could ride, talk and listen like this for days.
- Stormy and uphill: I would rather not be here. Can't breathe, can't talk much, in pain.
- Flying down the other side of a hill: Feeling pretty good about surviving the climb.

ONE new prayer relationship tip to try before I go to bed tonight:

If life is calm, I will put Scripture into my mind that I can recall later:

- If I am in a Bible study, I will do my homework.
- I will study last Sunday's sermon notes.
- I will read the chapter of [Proverbs](#) that corresponds with today's date, and ask God to show me one verse that He wants me to meditate on.
- I will read a passage of scripture that I am familiar with, rephrasing it into a prayer.
- I will make a special prayer corner or nook, even if it has to be in the bathroom or the closet. Suggestions: candles, music, Bible, pictures, journal, note cards and pens.
- I will write scripture prayers (with dry erase markers) on my mirrors or windows.
- I will download the [Prayer Journal iPhone app](#) and enter my immediate family's names (including mine) and one prayer request for each.

If life is a stormy or uphill I will make use of time fragments:

- I will leave my Bible open and read a verse as I go throughout my day. I will let my children see me doing that, and will comment to them about what I'm reading.
- I will put something on my pillow to remind me to pray before bed: a rock, a cross, a devotional book, a prayer card.
- As I drive, I will ask God to help me see people as He sees them, and act accordingly.
- I will move a chair out from the table as a visual reminder that Jesus is waiting for me to sit down with Him.
- I will actually sit down with Him.
- I will listen to Him without feeling the need to carry the conversation.
- I will stop for 30 seconds to read and pray one of the verses on my mirrors or windows.
- I will turn off the TV or talk radio and replace it with music or even silence.
- I will open the Prayer Journal app and pray for one request.

If I've weathered a storm or am flying down the other side of a trial:

- I will sing!
- I will read praise verses out loud. [Psalm 145-150](#) is a good place to start.
- I will laugh and enjoy being on the other side.
- I will encourage at least one other woman who is riding uphill in a storm.
- I will not get complacent. Every season has its own kind of storm.

FRESH THYME: I Need the Bumpers by Christina Vetter

Whenever Dan and I go bowling, it is very much a one sided game. He has a fancy stance and knows how to curve the ball just right to score a strike almost every time. He was even in the junior “bowlympics,” (yes that really does exist) as a kid. I, however, am lucky if I manage to knock a couple pins down. I fling that heavy ball down the slippery lane, cross my fingers, and hope for the best. Needless to say I’m not skilled in the art of bowling, so I find no shame in requesting bumpers. Yes I’m a grown woman and yes I can sometimes make a strike if the earth tilts just right, but I like to do it the easy way. I really don’t like gutter balls.

The way I live my life is no better than my bowling. I honestly try to get the best results from my decisions, but I simply don’t have the skills to do so. I need the bumpers. I need God’s direction and wisdom to make sure my life doesn’t take a trip through the gutters. In searching for wisdom through his playbook, the Bible, I always seem to come across Proverbs 3:6. In order for God to direct my decisions, I need to acknowledge him in everything I do. I’ve read this many times before, but recently the word “acknowledge” caught my attention.

“In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your path.” Proverbs 3:6

What does it mean to really acknowledge God?

“Acknowledge” is defined as:

1. admitting the existence and truth of, and
2. recognizing the importance of.

Acknowledging God is admitting the truth of his word, his promises, his character, his provision. God cannot and does not lie. Every promise in his word is truth. They are not only promises to ancient biblical people, but to us as well, right now, today. God is still the same God who called forth water from a rock, parted the Red Sea, healed the sick, blind, dying, etc. He is able and willing to do the impossible in our lives if we get out of our own way and believe that he will. Not only do we need to admit God’s truth, but we need to recognize the importance of him as our Savior. My bowling game is in serious need of bumpers to get a score combatable with Dan’s. Similarly, to get the best outcomes in my life, I am in serious need of Jesus’ guidance. It is impossible to guide through all the mess of my everyday life without his help.

So what else does it mean to acknowledge God?

We simply need to admit the truth and need of Jesus in our lives, accept his grace and forgiveness, allow Jesus to come into our lives and speak to us through the Holy Spirit, and finally, recognize that he knows what’s best for us. He knows our future. He knows where our decisions will take us. That’s why he gets the driver’s seat. I know I don’t want to haphazardly toss my life in an unplanned direction, hoping it falls somewhere close to target. I want my life to make a bee-line straight for a strike, the best possible outcome.

And to do that, I need Jesus as my bumper, guiding my every move, helping me avoid all the gutters.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

March 2014

TIPS

THE DRESSING: Colors of Spring

Spring 2014 fashion trends are here, and colorful hues are everywhere, to be worn and enjoyed by all. It's time to put aside the blacks and browns from the winter months, in favor of pretty patterns and colors in all of your new clothing as you put together your spring wardrobe. You don't have to spend a lot, because just a few pieces can be worn in multiple ways for a variety of looks!

Orange/Persimmon: A pair of orange shoes, like [these Vans](#) from Zappos, compliment khaki, denim, or navy for this spring. Pair them with a cute skirt and tee, and perhaps an orange headband, too.

White Chiffon: White is always a fresh, clean look for the spring season, and this [pretty blouse](#) is a great buy from H&M, and will sit atop any colored capris, pants, or skirt you choose to wear.

Blue: (any shade will do) – Pick out a skirt in a blue hue to wear all season long, right on into summer. Why not add this [maxi skirt](#) from Urban Outfitters to your wardrobe for spring? It's great for travel, and can be dressed up...or down.

Yellow: This color goes with more things than you might think! A yellow purse can brighten up the most boring of outfits! This [crossbody bag](#) from Target is great for a hands-free walk as you shop for the rest of your spring wardrobe.

Orchid: This color just speaks, "Spring is here!" So look for a pretty dress in this color, as you shop at your favorite stores. A side sweep dress looks nice on any body type, and [this dress](#) from Nordstroms looks like a million bucks!

Gray: What a versatile hue gray can be, as it's worn with almost any other color to make a complete outfit. A [comfy skirt](#) like this one from Target allows movement and style. Wear gray just like you do denim – with anything!

Graphic print: A cute top in a graphic print can add a pop to any outfit! Check out this [awesome crop top dress](#) from Target, wear it with your spring capris, and add a cardigan for those cool mornings. You'll be ready for whatever the day may bring!

Finally, pick up a pretty umbrella in a spring hue as well, and have on hand for a walk in the rain. Mix and match all of the above by pairing your gray skirt with the orange shoes or the yellow bag – or the white graphic print atop the blue skirt – cinched at the waist with a belt! Mix and match to your heart's delight!

SEVEN 4 YOU: Being Ella by Marcy Lytle

Either you have a grandmother, who might chuckle at this article, or you will be a grandmother in the near future, or maybe you're a new grandmother like I am. Wherever you are on the timeline of life, I hope these tips on how to handle *grandmotherhood* will help you avoid some hazards and send you into this stage of life, armed, prepared, and ready for anything! I couldn't whittle it down to seven tips, so here are seven...plus two.

1. **Do your squat thrusts.** Remember those? You squat, push out your feet, bring your feet in, and stand up again. This will strengthen your arms and legs for playing with toddlers on the floor, up and down, and all over again. And it will enable you to shimmy up the slide in a fast-food playground, to grab your grandson who's frozen up high and won't come down.
2. **Fall in love with chunky, sturdy, industrial jewelry.** Once those little hands learn to grab, you will not want to have them yank your dainty chain and toss it across the room. Instead, go for big stuff – the kind they can pull – and it stays in place – on your neck!
3. **Reacquaint yourself with quick diapering.** I'd forgotten how many tricks there were to a quick wipe, holding the legs still, placing the fresh diaper in place before removing the old one, and all of those things that make for a clean kid, instead of a dirty Ella.
4. **Ask questions, and learn.** Get trained on the clicks, buckles, and straps of the car seats, strollers and carriers. A fussy kid will not be patient with you while you push and then pull, trying to figure out whether or not you were supposed to pull and then push.
5. **Shop for your own stuff.** Stock up your vacated closets (from the vacated rooms your children left when they got married) with toys, and a high chair. This way, you have your own "new" toys when the kids arrive, and your sweet son or daughter doesn't have to pack yet another bag. And the high chair is so necessary, to keep crawlers from mashing food into your new rug (the one you bought when you redecorated after the kids left.)
6. **Know when to be quiet.** Practice the art of listening, observing, and praying. Ditch the urge to instruct, step in and do, and help out God. The new parents don't want advice unless they ask for it, they don't want you making them feel inept, and prayer really does work – much better than anything we can say or do! Oh – and how "you did it" isn't how "they do it" today – accept that fact and get over it.
7. **Get a backpack purse.** This has been a lifesaver, for me. Carrying a backpack frees up both hands, which believe me, you will need. And you might need to stuff your own bag with a thing or two, when you're out and about, again leaving your hands free to hold the hand of little he, or little she (or what if there's one of each?)
8. **Shop for shoes.** Heels are pretty and sexy, and you can still wear them, but ALWAYS keep a pair of comfy shoes in your car or in that backpack purse. When carrying kids, you don't want to fall or turn your ankle. No, no. And somehow your legs are just not as confident as they were when you were just a new mom.
9. **Enjoy the ride.** When you had your own kids, you tried to get it right, keep up with your friends and their kids, and make your kids turn out well. This time, that's not your job.

It's your job to laugh at every new sound, clap at every first step, and play until dark – then send them home to sleep in their own beds.

Being Ella is the most exhilarating experience I've ever had, but also exhausting. Watching your own kids become parents is surreal, for sure, and realizing you're old enough to have kids that are parents is shocking. But once you're over the shock and awe, you settle into this routine of amazement and wonder at God's gift to you in the eyes, skin, and touch of these sweet kiddos that call you by whatever name it is you've decided to be called.

I'm Ella, and my husband is Mister, and we like it that way.

SELAH'S STYLE: From Boring...to Awesome! By Selah Irwin

Hi I'm Selah.

This month, I am going to show you how to make plain, boring outfits transform into something awesome! When I wake up and it is just a play day, I put on some boring old clothes like a white t-shirt and black stretch pants. But, if I am going out to dinner, shopping, or to a party, I like to spice it up, accessorize and make my outfit more fashionable!

It is not hard to jazz up an outfit. Look at these three looks I made by adding to my boring old stretch pants and tshirt!

My beginning outfit had no color and was so plain and sad.

Here I added turquoise shorts, pink polka dot boots, a cute little hat, a sparkly scarf, and a striped backpack. I then added a jacket (in case it is cold.) Instantly, *Babam!* My outfit is so awesome!

The next outfit was created to have a rock star theme. I found a shining star hat to add a little bit of flare. A pink sweater provided some fabulous color. I added a zebra purse which is so amazing! I completed the outfit with pink shoes that has matching stars. A rock star is born!

I always like to wear my dresses, but sometimes it is too cold. Here is a solution. I slipped the dress over something warm! My boring stretch pants and t-shirt are now a smashing outfit!

There you have it. Three ideas to accessorize a boring outfit for spring!

FEARLESS KITCHEN: For the Love of Gumbo by Christina Vetter

March is one of my favorite months of the year. Not only is spring starting to roll in with a warm and welcome return, the celebration of Mardi Gras is in full swing. I'll be the first to admit I'm not a devout participant (even though a culinary trek to New Orleans is very high on my bucket list) and I'm not exactly well educated in the history or traditions of the holiday, itself. However, I do know that this year on March 4th I will be devouring as much Cajun food as possible with some great blues and jazz tunes in the background. I personally don't need a specific day to do this (one look at my Pandora stations will prove that), but Mardi Gras is a day that the rest of the nation comes together in parties, parades, and celebratory feasts dripping with the French language and Cajun cuisine. Now that is something to celebrate.

I'm a sucker for good Cajun food and after spending many summers as a kid with my Grandpa in Louisiana, it has become something very dear to my heart. After all, he was the one who sparked my interest in food at a young age, and the first thing he taught me to cook was shrimp gumbo. This month I'm going to share some of my favorite Mardi Gras-worthy recipes. I'll be sharing my own version of my grandpa's yummy Gumbo, a mouthwatering Crawfish Boil, Chicken and Andouille Etouffee, and King's Cake with Apple Cinnamon filling. Whether Mardi Gras finds you spending the day with your family and friends, watching a parade stroll by, or cruising the French Quarter of New Orleans, I hope you have a très joyeux Mardi Gras and are able to enjoy some très délicieux Cajun cuisine!

Chicken and Andouille Etouffee

Difficulty: 

I love a good etouffee, and this one hits the mark. Be sure the chicken stock is hot when adding it to the roux, otherwise it may separate and become oily. Recipe courtesy of www.saveur.com

Ingredients:

- ¾ cup canola oil
- ¾ cup flour
- 2 ribs celery, finely chopped
- 1 small yellow onion, finely chopped
- ½ green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and finely chopped
- 2 tsp. kosher salt
- 1 tsp. cayenne pepper
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp. freshly ground white pepper
- 1 tsp. dried basil
- ½ tsp. dried thyme
- 3 cups chicken stock, hot
- 4 tbsp. unsalted butter, cubed
- 2 lbs. boneless, skinless chicken thighs, cut into 1" pieces
- 1 lb. Andouille sausage, halved lengthwise and cut crosswise into ½"-thick pieces

6 large scallions, white and green parts, thinly sliced
Cooked white rice, for serving

Directions:

- Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium high heat until it just begins to smoke.
- Add flour, whisking constantly, and cook for 1 minute. Reduce heat to medium and cook, whisking constantly, until roux is the color of milk chocolate, about 12–15 minutes.
- Add celery, onions, and peppers, and cook, stirring constantly, until soft, about 5 minutes.
- Stir in salt, cayenne, black and white peppers, basil, and thyme, and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute more.
- Add 2 cups hot chicken stock, and bring to a boil; cook until thickened, about 5 minutes
- Meanwhile, heat butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat.
- Add chicken, and cook until lightly browned, 4–6 minutes.
- Transfer chicken and butter to Dutch oven. Pour remaining chicken stock into skillet, stir to scrape up any browned bits, and then pour into Dutch oven along with Andouille.
- Cook, stirring occasionally, until thick and chicken is cooked through, about 10 minutes more.
- Remove pan from heat, stir in scallions, and serve etouffée with rice.

Crawfish Boil

Serves 10-15 people

Difficulty: 

There's nothing better than gathering with your loved ones around a steaming crawfish boil. I love that it's meant to be served sprawled out on top of the table and eaten with your hands. Don't be afraid of the mess, but make sure to line your table enough heat and moisture resistant layers to protect it i.e. trash bags then newspapers to be safe for an indoor kitchen table, newspapers-only for an outdoor table.

*Special Equipment needed: large ice chest, and LARGE pot with a lid (a turkey deep fryer or tamales pot works best)

Ingredients:

30 lbs live crawfish
3 lbs red potatoes
2 lbs smoked or Andouille sausage
15 baby ears of corn
2 lemons, sliced
2 large onions, quartered
10 cloves garlic
Crawfish boil seasonings (I like "Slap Ya Mama" brand, it's nice and spicy.)
Water

Directions:

- Make sure crawfish are cleaned. If not, fill ice chest with crawfish and cool water, swirl around to rinse, then drain, repeating 3 times or until water drains clean.
 - In a large pot, mix water with spices and boil for 10 minutes. The amount of water to seasonings will depend on not only the brand of spice you use, but also how spicy you like it. The instructions on the package of spice can be a good starting place.
 - Add red potatoes, corn, lemons, onion, and garlic to pot. Cover and boil for about 10 minutes.
 - Add cleaned crawfish. Cover and cook for 5 minutes.
 - Remove pot from heat and let sit for 15 minutes.
 - Drain and serve immediately.
- *Tip: You can serve directly from the pot or from the ice chest if need be.

Gumbo

Serves 6-8

Difficulty: 

This gumbo is one of my favorite dishes to make. It makes the whole house smell wonderful and it tastes fantastic! It can very well be served over cooked rice but I like it better as a standalone meal. Just a tip: be careful not to burn the roux. Get it as dark as possible, but if it burns it will make your gumbo taste bitter.

Ingredients:

- ¼ C vegetable oil
- 1 lb smoked sausage sliced
- 1 lb chicken breast diced
- 4 Tbsp butter
- 3 Tbsp flour
- 1 large onion diced
- 5 cloves garlic minced
- 1 ½ C sliced okra
- 4 C beef broth
- 1 (14.5 oz) can diced tomatoes in juices
- 1 green bell pepper diced
- 2 Tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- ¼ C minced parsley
- 1 lb white fish (or shrimp) diced

Directions

- Cook chicken in oil over medium heat, remove from pan.
- Brown sausage, remove from pan.
- Melt butter in pan, whisk in flour until roux is formed. Cook about 10 minutes stirring constantly until roux is dark.
- Add onion, garlic, and bell pepper and cook until tender.
- Add Worcestershire, broth, parsley, sausage, and chicken. Simmer for about 45 minutes.
- Add tomatoes and okra and simmer for another hour.
- Add fish (or shrimp) and cook about 10 minutes or until it's cooked thoroughly.

-Add salt and black pepper as needed.

King's Cake with Apple Cinnamon Filling

Makes 1 cake, about 6 servings

Difficulty: 

King cake can be served with any favorite pie filling, and while the traditional filling is pecan praline, I really enjoy the apple cinnamon in this recipe. This can be served with purple, yellow, and green sprinkles on top for Mardi Gras, or simply glazed for a great breakfast bread with a consistency similar to cinnamon rolls.

Ingredients:

For the dough:

½ C warm milk

2 T butter, melted

1 (.25oz) packet dry active yeast

1/3 C warm water

¼ C sugar

1 egg

¾ tsp salt

¼ tsp nutmeg

3 C flour

For the Filling:

4 tart apples (such as granny smith)

6 Tbsp butter

¼ tsp nutmeg

½ tsp cinnamon

¼ C brown sugar

1 tsp cornstarch

½ tsp lemon zest (or a splash of lemon juice)

For the Glaze:

1 C powdered sugar

2 Tbsp milk

Purple, yellow, and green sugar (optional)

Directions:

-For the dough: in large bowl, dissolve yeast in warm water and a pinch of sugar, letting rest until fluffy (about 10 minutes)

-Add warm milk, melted butter, egg, sugar, salt, and nutmeg. Mix well.

-Add flour one cup at a time, until dough forms.

-Knead dough on floured surface until elastic and smooth, 8-10 minutes.

-Place dough in a large greased bowl, covered with plastic wrap, in a warm area until it doubles in size - about 1 ½ hours.

-Meanwhile, for the filling: peel, core, and very finely chop apples.

-Melt butter in a small sauce pan over medium heat. Add apples and remaining ingredients and cook until apples are soft and sauce is thickened. Allow to cool to room temperature.

-Preheat oven to 400 degrees F.

-After dough has doubled in size, punch down, and on a floured surface, roll dough into a very large rectangle, about 18" x 12".

-Spread filling evenly over dough, making sure to cover all sides and corners.

-Roll dough (similar to a jelly roll) starting at a long edge, making sure to grab the filling in each roll.

-Twist dough into an oval shape and place on a parchment paper lined cookie sheet, seam down.

-Cut slits 1/4 of the way through the top of the dough all the way around.

-Allow to double in size again, about one hour.

-Bake in oven for 25 minutes or until golden brown and baked thoroughly.

-Meanwhile, for the glaze: Mix together powdered sugar and milk.

-Once cake is finished baking, pour glaze over the top while still hot. Sprinkle alternately colored sugars on top if desired.

TRIED AND TRUE: Bento Box Meals

I just got these boxes for Christmas, and honestly they are my favorite gift! We eat on the go a lot in the car, for fun, on trips, or just to save money when we're gone for the day. These boxes have five compartments, all neatly organized for the filling. The base is a large container, and the four others sit on top, to be filled with goodies. So...what should you put in them? Here are a few ideas:

Bottom: Sliced summer sausage and crackers.

Four top: sliced cucumbers, carrots, homemade hummus, and cheese cubes.

Bottom: Chicken strips with sweet potato chips.

Four top: onion dip, sliced dill pickles, mixed nuts, and an Oreo cookie.

Bottom: rolled turkey, kale chips

Four top: honey pecan cream cheese spread, wheat thins, sliced apple, an Oreo cookie.

Bottom: avocado, grated cheese, and white bean wraps (spread on tortilla and sliced into pinwheels)

Four top: pita chips, hummus, orange slices, and vanilla wafers

Bottom: Leftover grilled chicken, bacon slices

Four top: grape tomatoes, 2 mini cornbread muffins, sliced strawberries, brownie

Bottom: Hard -eggs

Four top: cheese cubes, salami or prosciutto, pistachios, and dark chocolate square

Bottom: Seasoned canned tuna (drained, with lemon juice, lemon pepper, and seasoned or citrus salt) – half avocado (squeezed lemon juice on top)

Four top: diced apples (sprinkled with lemon juice), chopped tomatoes, diced carrots, saltines

(Mix the top sections into the tuna, scoop avocado with each bite)

REVIEWS: Nice and New

This month we're sharing anything new that we're reading, watching, or listening to. Perhaps we got a new book for Christmas that we've now finished reading, or we've watched a new movie that is now one of our faves. Music that's fresh and new can make a tired woman dance, so we are sharing that too! Enjoy something nice and new...as spring arrives.

BOOKS:

1984

I'm starting to read [1984](#) by George Orwell again. I found it among dusty boxes in the back of my closet and have decided to reread it. I enjoyed the story (except for the ending) very much in high school, but it's been so long since I've read it that it feels like a brand new book! I already can't put it down. It's proving to be a favorite all over again. – Christina Vetter

Relish by Daphne Oz

This book was on my Christmas list, and I'm really enjoying the read. Daphne Oz is the famed Dr. Oz's daughter, and she shares healthy recipes, along with healthy lifestyle tips. This is not a spiritual book, but rather a practical one that has beautiful photos, and it's interesting, challenging, and informative. My favorite recipe so far is the Breakfast Potatoes! Check out [Relish](#).

MOVIES/TV:

Blue Jasmine

[Blue Jasmine](#) is not a feel good movie, but it's a great film recently out in DVD, and Cate Blanchett is superb in her role as a ["former New York socialite teetering on a tightrope"](#). The story is captivating, and it's a great movie for an evening with the girls, or your guy...if he'll watch it with you! The actress who play her sister is worth a watch, as well... - Marcy Lytle

Call the Midwife

We're watching [Call the Midwife](#), BBC series. It makes me happy when I watch it. Poignant, spiritual, full of hope. We started watching it while I had the flu over New Year's. We're hooked! Series 3 will air in the U.S. on PBS mid-March. – Georganne Schuch

MUSIC:

Where I Find You by Kari Jobe

This isn't a "new" release but it's new to me. I just recently bought it for my young neighbor who lost her mother. The song "[Steady My Heart](#)" off of Kari Jobe's album [Where I Find You](#) is a great reminder of who heals our hearts when life hits us hard. The album is full of songs from a passionate voice that loves God. – Marcy Lytle

Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)

This is one of the top songs of the year from the album [Oceans](#) by Hillsong United, and this singer's voice is crystal clear on the song "Where Feet May Fail" – an inspirational, heart-lifting song of praise. You can listen to the song [here](#). – Marcy Lytle

HOME

PRACTICAL PARENTING: What it All Boils Down To by Georganne Schuch

When I am considering how to judge whether a behavior (mine or my children's) is one I want to continue, I think of [1 Thessalonians 5:11](#). Good behavior boils down to encouragement. If our behavior, which includes our actions and our words, is not encouraging to the people around us, then something needs to change. And that something is the behavior, not the standard. Let's look at just a couple of common behavior problems.

Bad language. I'm not sure at what point potty mouth turned into an acceptable form of self-expression, but using bad language shows an inability to clearly communicate. Sure, everyone understands the depth of emotion expressed, but the overall message is lost among all the four-letter adjectives and verbs. And after someone finishes spouting off, does anyone feel encouraged? Not usually.

From an early age, I work with my children to understand their primary emotions and how to process them. Anger is a universal toddler emotion, for example. If you don't think so, you haven't spent much time in the company of a three-year-old. Anger is also pretty commonly tied to bad language. Whether a toddler knows the actual bad word, his emotional overload sums it up pretty well. So, when (not if) one of my girls explodes over a small slight from one of her sisters, which happens about every 5.4 seconds, we identify the emotion (I'm mad), what caused it (she won't give me the doll/book/game/etc.), and how to deal with it (ask nicely, play with something else, or have a time out).

To enforce this attitude, we as parents must set the standard with our own language. In this case, children hear exactly what we say. Word for word.

Bad attitude. One of my girls learned pretty quickly that she didn't much care for the consequences of expressing her attitude with bad words. Her phrase of choice was, "I hate you." This ranked very low on our scale of encouraging words. After a few interventions, she mostly stopped the bad words, but her attitude did not improve. When she became offended, she folded her arms and pouted. Boy, her pooched out lip could just about reach the floor.

The Bible says God sees the heart, which means he knows what we are thinking, feeling, and expressing, whether we say it aloud or not. So, I use the same method I used with the inappropriate language but with a slight twist. Unfold your arms. Suck in your lip. Stand up straight and tell me what is wrong. Now, figure out a way to fix it or get over it. We are still working toward that whole "being an encouragement" goal. It's a speck on the horizon, but it's there.

I can't say that she's in this battle alone. I often catch myself acting out my own irritations by slamming (I mean forcefully closing) a door. Again, my own action is an example. Or not.

We highly discourage, by all means necessary, resorting to any language or action that does not resolve a conflict peacefully or, at the very least, does not escalate it.

Teaching our children to express themselves without bad language or a pouty attitude has many positive consequences:

Enables them to build better relationships. Everyone wants a friend who encourages them to be a better person.

Raises their standard of conduct. A right attitude does not beget poor choices.

Transforms their spiritual life. They are able to receive peace and joy when they aren't filled with anger and frustration.

Shares their faith without hypocrisy. No one wonders if the *Hulk* is going to break out at the first sign of trouble.

It's never too early to begin teaching a good behavior to our children and modeling it in our own lives. It is a lesson both taught and caught.

TRAIN THEM Parenting like the Father by April Karli

If we're honest, most of us would say that to some degree, our view of God is directly related to what our parents were like when we were growing up. Memories of warm, loving parents lead some to relate to God as caring and benevolent, while memories of harsh or abusive parents lead others to believe God is dangerous or angry, and uninvolved or neglectful parents cause some to consider God is disinterested.

There are many things I can teach my children about God. I can read Bible stories, sing songs, and pray prayers. But the kind of mom I am, and how I interact with my kids, will teach them more about God's character than any Bible story, doctrinal truth, or hymn.

Recently, I attended a funeral of a man who left behind three grown daughters, all in their 20s. At the service, his daughters shared something that was deeply moving. It's the kind of thing every devoted parent hopes their children will tell others about them some day. They said simply, "He was a good dad," and elaborated on how they had only good memories of their dad. Rather than sifting through bad memories to find a few good ones to hold on to, their remembrances were positive.

As I reflected on this, I realized what a wonderful gift this was for his girls. Not only do they have good memories of their father, they were shown a beautiful picture of what their Heavenly Father is like.

How can we, through our words and actions, show our kids God's qualities? Here are just a few ways:

- Love our kids the way God loves us - [1 John 4](#)
- Free our kids from fear of perfectionism, punishment, or rejection by assuring them of their place in our family - [Romans 8:15](#)
- Show them mercy and grace - [Psalm 103:8](#)
- Keep our word and follow through - [Numbers 23:19](#)
- Give them good gifts (real presents and other kinds of gifts too!) - [James 1:17](#)
- Overflow with grace and peace - [Philippians 1:2](#)
- Listen attentively - [Psalm 145:18-19](#)
- Delight in them - [Zephaniah 3:17](#)

While we as humans will fail at times, our ability to show our kids an accurate picture of what God's character depends on our own relationship with God. The closer we draw to God ourselves, the more like Jesus we will become and the more [good fruit we will bear](#); the more like Jesus we become the more we will be able to show our kids what the Father is like. As Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." ([John 14:7-10](#))

I can think of no greater privilege than showing my children what the Father is like through being like Jesus to them. ([Matthew 19:14](#))

A. W. Tozer said, “**What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.**” I believe this is true. There is no relationship more important to a person than his/her relationship with God. I want my kids to grow up knowing they are precious to God, that they are his beloved children, and that his love for them is so wide, long, high, and deep that it [surpasses knowledge](#).

I believe that as a parent I have an opportunity to influence what comes to my children’s minds when they think about God. I am thankful for God’s grace that will make up for the shortcomings of myself and my husband. But I am determined to remain close to God myself, allow him to transform my own character to that of Jesus’, and reveal to my children as much as I can of what their Heavenly Father is like.

What characteristics of God do you think are important for your children to see in you?

I DON'T DO TEENS: The Need for Value by Lynn Cherry

According to the relational needs assessment, both of our teenagers share the exact same top need. They desperately need to feel valued. The [Living as Conquerors](#) model defines value as knowing someone takes an interest in what I am doing and appreciates the person I am.

Our youngest son “strongly agreed” with all five value statements, giving this need the maximum score of 25. Our oldest son scored lower overall but value came in higher than the other nine needs at 20 out of the 25 possible points.

What I said last month about teenagers being like toddlers rings true again. The language they use is a little different but the request is the same, “Hey Mom, look what I can do!”

In talking to my boys about this need, what seems to make it so important is the transitional season they are in as young adults. Value is best communicated to a child through interaction, attention, and quality time. Teenagers feel value as we show confidence in their ability to become independent. It is still a matter of being interested in their world but leans more to appreciating what they are able to do on their own.

So how can we meet our teens' need for value?

- Invite them to weigh in on decisions that affect their lives.
- Take an interest in what they enjoy. This includes the music they listen to, the movies they want to watch, the Vine videos that make them laugh.
- Ask your teens for their opinions.
- Offer your opinion in a collaborative, non-judgmental way.
- Really listen and tune in when they want to talk, even if it keeps you up late at night!
- Look for ways to express confidence in their abilities.
- Notice when they step up and take responsibility.
- Talk about their skills and how they are developing.
- Pick up a game controller and join in the fun.
- Show them they are worthy of your love and attention.

As with all relational needs, when they are not met in healthy ways, we find unhealthy ways to get our needs met or we learn to take what we need.

We want our home to be a filling station for our boys and their friends. Being aware of these 10 relational needs is the first step.

Join us next month as we discuss the need for belonging...

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS: 3 Beginning Basics by Georganne Schuch

Money is one of those areas where we could always use a little more. Just because we can pay our bills and eat doesn't mean we wouldn't like to fit in a night out, or a vacation, or a new outfit, or whatever floats our boat. Am I right, or am I right? Then, we get a raise and have that little extra, but what happens? We just expand our budget to encompass that amount and still need a little more. Surely I'm not the only one with this syndrome.

So what does the average American do when there are more wants than bank balance? Why charge it, of course! Before long, we need not only a little extra for the extras but a house-sized extra for the debt. Like the credit card commercial says, "Priceless." *Right.*

It's a hard hole to dig out of; I can tell you from personal experience. But it is possible. Unlike the government, you can't spend your way out of debt. You must actually spend less than you earn. Shocking truth.

There are more than a few options for tackling credit card debt, but I highly recommend [Dave Ramsey](#). My husband and I took Financial Peace University many years ago and used Ramsey's principles for paying off a lot of our debt. His principles are pretty basic, when you think about it.

1. Save about \$1,000 as an emergency fund. Only use this money for real emergencies, like car repairs (not fake emergencies, like a new purse.)
2. Pay off your debt. Start with the smallest first to create momentum. Once you pay it off, apply the amount you were using for it to the next biggest debt.
3. Expand your savings to include at least three months of living expenses. No one plans to get sick or injured or laid off. But when it happens, a little cushion gives you time to recover.

These are just the first three "baby steps" Dave teaches. These principles have helped us and thousands like us get out from under an avalanche of debt resulting from life happenstance and our own poor choices.

Then, there is the whole **spending-less-than-you-make** thing. This involves taking a long hard look at the money you bring home and how it very quickly makes a U-turn just inside the door to leave. We keep a tab of all the money we spend; and I have to say, it is an eye-opening experience.

Of course, the bills should be prioritized to pay the ones that directly affect your most basic needs, like shelter and utilities. Running water and electricity are basic needs. A country club membership is not. Next on the list is food. Steer clear of the steaks (Get it? Steer?) Okay, well you know what I mean. Eat in. Eat simple. No frills, until the debt is paid off.

After paying the overhead, like rent/mortgage, utilities, and food, decide what else brings you real happiness. It's okay to spend your extra money on things that you want. But think carefully about what really makes you happy. Is it things, or people? Relaxation, or activities? Choose wisely.

I have been guilty of assuming someone is financially well-off just because of what they own or drive or how they dress; only to find out they make less money than we do. I have had people complain to me that they cannot afford to do some of the things our family does; only to find out they make more money than we do. Lesson learned. Don't judge.

The simple solution with finances involves some common sense, some discipline, and some soul searching.

Get it right, and you control your money.

Get it wrong, and your money controls you.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER: Eagerly Waiting by Marcy Lytle

Jesus is coming again. We are supposed to comfort each other with these words and remind each other of his coming. He will wipe away all tears. He will be the light of the day and the night. He will make the blind see, the lame walk, and the dead will live. It's hard to imagine, isn't it? While we are here eagerly waiting, we can remind ourselves of the glory to come.

Preparation: You will need to fold a piece of blank paper in half twice and write "Book of Life" on the front. You will also need a blanket, a few fluffy pillows, a horn or whistle, a strand of pearls and something gold, worship music, and a snack or meal for the end of the study. The study will take place outside on a partly cloudy day in an area where a blanket can be spread. Have all materials available in a basket or bag.

- ❖ What will heaven be like? The Bible says there will be no need for sun or moon, because Jesus will illuminate the holy city. It says the streets will be gold and the gates will be of pearl. (*Pass around the gold and pearls.*)
- ❖ (*Have everyone lie down on the blanket.*). When Jesus returns he is going to come in the sky, and people who were dead and gone will come up from the graves, and all peoples from the north, south, east and west who know Jesus as their Savior will rise up to meet him. (*Look in all directions and imagine.*)
- ❖ (*Look at the clouds*). Jesus will come on a cloud, riding like the wind, maybe on a white horse, to take us to our heavenly home (*Look at the shapes of the clouds and fluff your pillows and place under your heads.*)
- ❖ How will we know when he returns? A loud trumpet will sound (*blow the horn.*) Everyone who knows Jesus will hear the sound and look up. It will be distinctively clear, definitely recognizable, and echo throughout the earth.
- ❖ Once we get there, what will we do? We can only imagine. The old earth will pass away and all things will be new. We will have plenty to eat and drink, we will be joyful and full of praise and adoration for our King. (*Pass around the food.*)
- ❖ Music will fill the air, music like we've never heard before. The [song of Moses](#) will be sung, the psalms of David will be heard, songs to the Lord will ring out, spontaneous music and melody fill the air, and exuberant dancing for joy will take place before the throne. (*Play the music and rejoice together.*)
- ❖ We cannot imagine heaven. We can be ready for his coming and we can encourage one another with the hope that lies in each one of us, hope for a better world to come, hope for a shining future, hope for the weary, the tired, the sick, the blind and the lame. That day is coming, and we are eagerly waiting, watching, preparing and yearning for that day to come.
- ❖ Who's going to heaven? Those who have a passport to enter in. The passport is the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all our sin. Do you have your passport? (*Invite those who don't know Jesus to ask Him in...and pass around the "passport," after all names are added.*)

Pray together as a family, as you eagerly await the coming of the Lord.

HANDMADE AND HOMEGROWN: Yarn by Cheryl Carrell

(It's not just for blankets and scarves!)

This month I'm going to show you how I covered a cardboard letter in yarn. I'm not reinventing the wheel here, but if you've never seen a tutorial on this type of craft, you might find a few of these tips helpful.

To start out, you will need these four basic supplies: Cardboard letter (or other material) found at most craft stores, scissors, craft glue, yarn.

My letter is 12 inches tall. I thought I could get away with just one skein of yarn, but I ended up needing two. This was one project that didn't work out as well using "just what I had on hand," because I bought this yarn several months back on clearance without a plan at the time. And then, I couldn't find it at any local stores after I ran out, in the middle of wrapping and gluing! Thankfully, I was able to [order more](#) fairly inexpensively, online. Anyway, be sure to get TWO skeins of whatever yarn you're using, just in case.

Now, for the process: It's fairly simple, but does take a bit of time, especially if you have a more detailed letter shape. Hopefully the pictures will help explain what I describe below.

- Start out by winding a bunch of yarn around your fingers, as seen in the picture, then cut to make several short pieces that will be glued on all of your letter's ends.
- Once you have enough cut, go ahead and glue these on each end, making sure to not leave any space between the yarns.
- Next, you will want to trim up what's hanging down long, and glue down the short ends. This will allow your wound yarn to lie evenly.
- After that, you will begin wrapping the letter itself.
- Start by spreading about an inch of glue on at a time, wrapping the yarn tightly over it as you go. At the very beginning, I put some glue directly on top of the yarn that was hanging over my ends, as well as on the cardboard next to it.
- Continue wrapping the entire letter as tightly as you'd like, being sure to cover the surface of the cardboard completely.
- The only other tricky part is curves and corners. Each letter is obviously different, but if yours has smooth curves like "C," I found a triangle-type wrap worked well. It does make for a bulkier look in these areas, so depending on what you're going for, you could experiment with other techniques. I didn't mind the thicker wrap in the curves; I think it just adds a bit more character. As you can see in the picture, I just skipped some space at the curve and then went back and forth filling in the triangle shape that had been created.
- If you do run out of yarn like I did, you can just tie a small knot to attach the new skein, and wrap it at the back, or wrap a bit extra over it to cover the knot and blend it in.
- After the entire letter was covered, I finished it off by tucking and gluing the loose end down under the last few wraps around.

Happy wrapping! I chose to leave my letter as is for now, but I may add some flowers or other embellishments later.

Yarn (or Twine) in the Garden

As you may guess, yarn doesn't hold up for years and years in the garden, but it does last for at least a season or two, even here, in the hot Texas sun. Twine and hemp work pretty well too. In case you haven't gathered by now, I like to use what I have on hand, when I'm in a pinch.

A couple of my favorite uses yarn or twine include:

- A simple trellis for poll beans and peas.
- Tying tomatoes, berries, and other tall plants to stakes.

Do you ever use yarn or twine in the garden?

YOU

STRENGTHENING YOUR CORE: Church – Why Should I Go? By Marcy Lytle

I've heard it all...I think. Growing up in church all of my life, I've seen people come and go, hop churches, quit going to church, or come so infrequently that I forget their names. But most of all, I've heard dozens of reasons why those who quit going, or rarely go, do so. I've wanted to quit going to church myself, at times. But I can't. And it's because there are good reasons to go.

Here are a few of the comments I've heard over the years:

- There are too many hypocrites in the church.
- There's nothing there for me – they cater to missions, or to “van” kids, or to young adults – and I don't fit into those categories.
- Mr. _____ hurt my feelings. Or Mrs. _____ never even speaks to me.
- When I miss, no one even notices.
- People aren't friendly, there.
- The preacher's kids are unruly.
- I'm not being fed or getting anything out of the sermons.
- I had a real need, and no one seemed to care.

I think I'll stop with those. There are numerous reasons out there why people quit frequenting church on Sunday mornings, especially. I even worked for a non-profit that focused on getting “out there” where the people are, instead of expecting them to show up where we're having church. I totally believe in getting out there, but I totally believe in church, too.

Being a preacher's kid myself, you can bet there were many times I didn't want to go to church. And sometimes I still don't want to go. But I go. I'm not legalistic about it, but I know that it's important to belong to a body of believers – a vital part.

Here's my response to the comments from above:

- Yes, hypocrites are in the church. But isn't church for everyone, including hypocrites? Instead of criticizing or pointing them out, we can pray for them and befriend them, and hope God changes their heart, just like he's changing our own to be less judgmental.
- There are certainly times when we need to find a church that suits our own needs, but no church should ever “cater” to us. The church caters to God, and we glean from the buffet that's offered in the catering. If we feel we belong in a certain body, we can either start a ministry that's missing, get involved and help out in something new, or move on, so that the church can prosper without naysayers.
- Feelings will get hurt. Even in the church. It's a given. And to expect that just because people go to church that they are saints all the time, is absurd. We need to speak to others, be kind to those who sit by us, and love everyone who attends. And those who are rude? Let God deal with them.
- I knew a couple that was upset if they missed and no one noticed. And yet another couple was offended if they were told they were missed, with a curt reply like, “Well, we

don't have to be here every service, do we?" If you're going to church to be seen, or staying home to be missed, you're missing the point of church.

- When someone says a church isn't friendly, oftentimes it's just a few people who aren't friendly. And I've found that if I'm friendly...others follow suit. Yes, there are churches that have cliques of youth, couples, etc. And they "should" notice newcomers and talk to them. But they don't always do that. However, we can befriend another lonely person at the church and start a group of new friends, can't we?
- Preachers' kids. They're either so cool, or so awful, aren't they? There seems to be no middle ground. Preachers' kids sometimes have it hard – cut them some slack – and pray for them. Pray for the preacher, too. It's no piece of cake preaching to a bunch of people who are wondering why they came to church in the first place.
- If we're not being fed at a church where we're attending, we can certainly make a request for a specific class or suggest a topic to those who teach. But maybe we're just too full of other "food" we've eaten in church for decades, and we're not expending any energy to burn off that food fat – through our own acts of service. Don't see a class you like? Start one yourself! But make sure your attitude is in check, before you do...
- Finally, our needs do matter. Of course, we want a church body to help us out when we have a need. But ultimately, God is our provider. We can present our need to a church, but we must remember there are a multitude of needs in a church of even 100 people. And if our need is not met through the local church where we attend, then we can rest assured that God cares and will meet our need elsewhere. But that doesn't mean the church is no good, or non-caring.

Are some churches bad? Yes, they are, and we should stay away from them. But those are the places that teach things that are contrary to God's word, places where Jesus is not the focus of body life, and where pride is up there above God.

However, a good majority of the time the church is not bad. It's our own attitude that stinks. And it's our own hurts and wounds that cause us to see others through darkened glasses of doom.

Tired of church and all of its hazards?

Try going each service with a heart to serve, a voice to worship, hands to give, and a mind to focus on Him as you listen and observe those around you. If you do these things, church won't be mundane, or boring, or dissatisfying, because **Jesus always meets with those who seek Him.**

UNDER THE INFLUENCE: The Mealtime Prayer by Marcy Lytle

I'm overwhelmed. I'll admit it.

All of the recipes and food I ate growing up as a kid are now no longer considered healthy, and those food groups we learned about in elementary school are now ancient history. Menus in restaurants now have items that I never even knew existed before, and grocery stores now have healthy "sections" (*Wait, I thought the whole store was full of good stuff!*) Gardening is a trend, a "cleanse" is not just something we do to our face, and there are more cooking shows and magazines than I can watch or read in a year's time. I feel like I'm this hamster on a wheel, trying to keep running and keep up with what's new, what's good, what's bad, what's in, what's out, and what to keep in and out of my mouth.

A lot of conversation with peers now includes some sort of talk about healthy food. I have friends who've tried low-carb diets, others who have built garden boxes (including myself), some who only drink liquid that is green, and still others who pop some sort of pills to stave off hunger. Ordering at a restaurant now includes thinking! Who knew America's pastime could become so laborious? *How many calories are in this salad? Is the dressing low fat? How many bites of queso can I have, who will half a meal with me, I think I'll order water, I'll eat less tomorrow...*

Are you with me?

Eating and preparing food is something we spend a huge portion of our life doing, and it's now become totally about being healthy. And not only that, but eating is all about being healthier than the person next to me. I'm into it. I'm reading. I'm changing my eating habits. And I'm cooking lots of good stuff. However, **I'm still praying over my food.**

Remember, when we were young and our prayer sounded like this?

God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for our food. Amen.

Or our parents said something like this (as we peeked at the French fries that we wanted to eat so badly),

Lord, thank you for our food. Bless it to the nourishment of our bodies. And bless the hands that prepared it. Amen.

My cousins and I sometimes prayed,

Rub a dub dub, three men in a tub. Yay, Jesus.

Don't ask me why, but we did.

As I get older, I realize health is very important, and of course I want to eat well. However, I also realize that no matter how hard I try to keep up, tomorrow I'm going to see on the television that something I thought was good for me to eat is now bad. And something I've never heard of before is now necessary in order to live. Honestly, one can create quite a panic trying to live this life of a healthy breakfast when we rise, a workout after that, a lite low-cal lunch that we've

grown in our garden or made in our blender, and a dinner out that keeps us under the calorie mark we're trying to avoid every day. Healthy living is great, necessary, and we must be diligent...but we can't know it all...or do it all!

So, now I'm back to the title of this article..."The Mealtime Prayer."

I'm trying to slow down and enjoy life, since I've whizzed right by most of it (I'm sort of like an energizer battery that never slows down.) And part of enjoying life is enjoying good food with friends and even a dessert once in a while.

And whether or not my orange is grown organically or not, if my bread is brown, or where the chickens I eat are bred and fed, cannot send me to my grave while I worry over it. I won't let it.

Thus, the mealtime prayer is necessary.

I've grown accustomed to short little, hurry-up prayers over our meals, so I can get to the act of eating. But in reality, those prayers might be my saving grace.

**God can bless my food and the hands that prepared it, and make it nutritious to my body, as long as I'm eating wisely and with the best of my knowledge.
He really can, and he will.**

I'm tired of listening to, reading about, and seeing everywhere the next new diet plan, pill, or smoothie that's going to "change my life." I want to enjoy and savor the food I buy, as I make it with love, eat it with discipline (where are the ads for that?), and swallow it with satisfaction, knowing it's going to do my body good – right after I pray over it and receive His blessing.

Now, that's some good food for thought...

HEALTHY HABITS: No Silver Bullet by Georganne Schuch

Whenever I Google, I'm sure to find something diet or exercise related. Everything claims to be the silver bullet to fix all my woes and help me look 20 years younger. I have come to realize there is no silver bullet. No wave of the wand is going to magically fix any of my problems. Thanks anyway, Fairy Godmother. I can't drop 10 pounds by eating grapefruit for a day or two. I'm not going to buff up by taking the stairs once a week. Change takes dedication and work. Improving my health involves a lot of small changes to effect a big change.

It goes without saying that **eating healthy food changes a person's overall health**. Have you ever seen a skinny pigeon at a fast food restaurant? They're fat because the food they eat causes them to gain weight. Likewise, eating the same quantity of vegetables, fruit, and lean meat does not cause an equivalent weight gain. Therefore, swapping the unhealthy drive-thru lunch for a [balanced meal](#) from home adds more value to your health and to your wallet.

Movement expends energy. It's a scientific fact proven by years of research and common sense. Strangely enough, the more you move, the more you feel like moving. Well, to a point, anyway. I don't think everyone is cut out to be a tri-athlete, but even the elderly can fight the effects of aging by doing [chair aerobics](#). Simple exercises help retain flexibility, oxygenate the blood, and stretch stiff muscles. Exercises burn calories and build more muscle. More muscle burns more calories. That's a beneficial cause and effect. So, do more than wear a path between the couch and the refrigerator. Get up and move.

Like good food, **the body needs good hydration**. Sodas, alcohol, and caffeinated drinks miss the mark by a mile. Water should be the drink of choice because even the touted health drinks often have sodium and artificial colors and flavors. I love tea, hot and cold. But for my own health issues I limit my intake to one cup a day. I also add lemon juice to my water, which helps digestion and flushes toxins from the body, among other [benefits](#).

Avoiding unnecessary stress and getting adequate rest soothes frazzled nerves and strengthens the body's defense systems. If you keep getting sick, a little extra rest may be the ticket to kicking that bug out the door. Sometimes, it's hard to relax enough to rest, and there are dozens of little tricks to help unwind: Hot bath, warm milk, [white noise machine](#). Find your Zen button, and push it.

Like most people, I wish staying healthy was as easy as a nip here and a tuck there, but sadly it's not. Getting healthy and staying healthy involves lots of little rudder adjustments, a few big lane changes, and possibly jumping ship when old habits are on a crash course with reality.

Start those changes now while they still can make a difference.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES: How Can I Know? By Pam Charro

It's time for our family to do one of my least favorite things ... move. I am feeling a myriad of emotions about it: exhausted, apprehensive, cautiously optimistic, a bit overwhelmed, a little excited. There's so much work to do, and so much of the unknown ahead.

My spiritual journey is kind of the same right now. I feel I am at a place I have never known before, and my own feelings about it are even unfamiliar to me. I would love to be full of faith and jumping for joy, but, truthfully, I am not as excited as I would like to be. Maybe you can relate to having mixed feelings as this new year continues to unfold, especially if last year left you a little disappointed (as it did me). I tried so hard last year to continually hold onto my positive expectations, but just as I started to grow in my faith, something knocked me down.

How can I know that the future will be worth all of the hard work?

I am grateful that the Bible's guidance is so steadfast when I feel less than stable in my feelings. God knows that life is hard and we get tired. That must be why the Word says to continually be transformed by renewing our minds with God's truth. I am amazed at how much repetition I seem to require when these are things I already "know," but I like to think it doesn't surprise God.

So, back to the basics! Here is what God has for me in 2014:

- Plans to prosper me and not to harm me, to give me a hope and a future ([Jeremiah 29:11](#))
- Plans to transform me into the likeness of Christ ([II Corinthians 3:18](#))
- A better perspective, that all of my trials are light and momentary in comparison with the glory that will be revealed in me ([II Corinthians 4:17](#))
- He desires that I cast my cares upon Him because He cares for me ([I Peter 5:7](#))
- Never will He leave me or forsake me ([Hebrews 13:5](#))
- A better understanding of myself and Him as I continue walking with Him ([Psalm 103:7](#))

These barely even scratch the surface of all of God's promises.

And, voila!

I have just typed myself into a good mood!

Situations will change, but God does not. I have to move, but He doesn't move. He only moves me forward. In all of life's uncertainties, my reasons for hope remain strong and trustworthy.

This New Year is going to be amazing.

A MOMENT IN THYME: Taken Captive by Debra Brown

I've always loved clocks. This is a conundrum, because I'm often running late. The second hand will not stop ticking. My "moments" seem impossible to capture. They dissolve in my anxious hands like falling snowflakes. Until my anxious hands let go...

Newness rushed at me. 2013 brought much change to our lives. Much! In almost every area, we faced upheaval, leading to a Y in our road.

My head warned, "Caution!"

My husband Jim beckoned me to trust God and take a giant leap of faith in our finances.

"Turn back, run to safety!" my insides shouted.

My spirit whispered, "Let go, and trust your husband."

But now thus says the Lord, He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have saved you, I have bought you back, I have called you by name, you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior - Isaiah 43: 1-3a (NASV)

I love that passage. I've read it hundreds of times, but I still give ear to the voice of fear. My heart's cry was to master my moments. It seemed an impossible task because I was constantly "leaning on my own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5) Totally miserable, I finally faced the facts. I had two choices:

- I could continue to walk in frustration and fear, or...
- I could let go of my understanding and trust the Lord in Jim.

I made my choice. I grabbed Jim's hand and leapt forward. Surprise, surprise! I was not overwhelmed, burned, or consumed. Like the effects of an essential oil, a sweet peace soothed my inflamed soul.

Then suddenly, one of our dearest friends went to be with the Lord. Upheaval threatened our lives once again. Death moved us to check how we use our moments, convicting us to make the main thing, the main thing. Moments matter.

Ruth Burrows wrote, "There is never a moment when divine Love is not at work...."¹

Amazing! In every moment, in every tick of the clock, God's loving hand is at work. My major intersection full of roadwork suddenly shrunk into a tiny crossroad. Does this mean that I won't fear again or face obstacles along the road? No, it means **I can face my moments knowing God's love is at work**, knowing that they are encased in the loving hand of God. This knowledge insulates our moments in peace. I'm so thankful for Ruth Burrows. She helped me put my struggles into perspective before we lost our long-time friend and co-worker in Christ.

¹ Essence of Prayer. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006, page 176

His life was precious to us, and his walk into the depth of God's presence was the work of divine love. That knowledge brought peace and strength to my soul. That knowledge helped me walk forward through the pain, without fear or despair. It allowed love to capture my moments.

Love does not always make life easy.

I cannot always master or control the ticking clock.

I can, however, choose to rest in the One who has my times in His hand.

MARRIAGE

TWO FOR THE ROAD: Love Maps by Lynn Cherry

When David and I were first married, we would jump in the car on Saturday morning and just drive. We enjoyed our weekend road trips. Since David loves to be behind the wheel, I took on the duty of navigator.

Currently, we are reading [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#), by John Gottman and Nan Silver, and the first principle is “Enhance Your Love Maps.” When I hear the word “map,” I think road map. So I think, *Okay, Dr Gottman, tell us how to get our marriage from Point A to Point B. Which road do we take? Where do we turn? How fast can we get there?*

But I think a better visual for the love map principle is a topographical map. Dr Gottman provides tools in this book to help us learn each other’s highs and lows, our special features, the everyday stuff of life, as well as our biggest hopes, dreams and fears: the lay of the land of each other’s lives, if you will.

Jesus told us that the very hairs on our head are numbered. ([Matthew 10:30](#)) Can you imagine the level of “knowing” it takes for God to keep up with those numbers? It’s inspiring. It makes me want to count my husband’s hairs (well, not really.) But it does challenge me to keep drawing in the details of his life on my love map for him.

David and I worked through the first two exercises for enhancing our love maps and after nearly 23 years of marriage, we found there is still more to discover. We enjoyed sharing memories from our childhood and talking about our plans for the future. It gave us an opportunity to talk about things that don’t normally come up in everyday conversation.

In some ways, these exercises affirmed that our love maps already have quite a bit of detail. We know each other pretty well. In fact, there was one question David for which didn’t have a strong answer. I shared what I thought his answer might be and he agreed. For that moment, I knew him better than he knew himself.

But, this didn’t last long.

In a question that followed, I wrote down what I thought David’s biggest stresses were, and I missed the boat. He confessed that sometimes he is apprehensive about sharing things with me because I tend to hold on to them. He moves forward and I stay stuck. He forgives, and I hold a grudge.

Our two big takeaways:

- Married people still need friends to talk to, because our spouse may not always be the best person with whom to debrief a tough situation.
- The way we respond matters. Can our spouse count on us to stay steady and not spin out when we hear about his/her struggle? Do we rush into fix-it mode when she just needs someone to listen or someone to help him process?

Dr Gottman says, "Without such a love map, you can't really know your spouse. And if you don't really know someone, how can you truly love them? No wonder the biblical term for sexual love is to *know*."

These seven principles are based on years of research following hundreds of couples. Dr Gottman has gathered hard data to prove these are the things that create emotionally intelligent marriages and love that lasts a lifetime.

Join me next month for principle #2, "Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration."

Try This:

- Join us! Order your copy of [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) and plan one date each month for the next seven months to practice these principles in your marriage.
- Share a high and low from your childhood with your spouse tonight.
- Plan a date this month to check in on each other's goals for 2014 and plan ways to support one another's pursuits.

DATE NIGHT: Up in the Air by Marcy Lytle

Spring is in the air, winds are blowing, it's still cool outside, and the sky's the limit when it comes to date night fun. All of our ideas this month have to do with the sky – the wind – the rain – the stars – all things “up there!” Read through them, add your own creativity, and enjoy a date together as you look up together and enjoy your time away from responsibility, as you skip along joyfully in love.

Kite Flying doesn't just have to be for kids, and kites can be found for a really cheap price at most stores. Pick out two kites and head to the park, along with a couple of Frisbees, on a windy day this month. Head out a couple of hours before dark, then go back home and watch the movie [The Kite Runner](#), and express how much your friendship with each other means to both of you.

Stargazing is a blast. In my town, the local university has free [stargazing nights](#) for anyone who wants to show up, where people with telescopes share their views of the constellations. Invite another couple to go with, and pack a thermos and a snack to enjoy, while looking at the sky. Visit your local bookstore and find books on the planets and constellations, and quiz each other on how much you can remember from your school years of learning, while you sip on **Starbucks**, or your drink of choice. Nothing like this in your town? Rent or purchase a small telescope and set up your own viewing atop your own roof!

Singing in the rain reminds you of an old movie classic, right? Wait for a rainy forecast (no lightning, of course), and make sure you have a large umbrella for two, as you take a walk in the rain, splashing in the puddles, singing a tune. When you return home, clean up and cozy up in a blanket, while you watch the old classic [Singing in the Rain](#) and enjoy [this snack](#) that's really for toddlers, but so cute for an adult twosome, as well!

Airplane rides are great, but super expensive. So pack a bag with these common flight items: a map, [peanuts](#), pretzels and sodas, a blanket, and some magazines you both enjoy, as well as a puzzle book and paper/pen. Find a spot in your town close to your local airport where you can see the planes fly away and land. First, dream about a getaway and write down a few ideas. Enjoy your snack atop the hood of your car, or on a park bench if one is available. Finally, sit back and enjoy the view, as you flip through your magazines and work a puzzle or too, until it's time to disembark, put your feet on the ground, and head back home.

Trailing messages are cool to see behind a blimp, during a game where the stadium is full of people. However, why not make your own trailing messages and hang them from the trees in your backyard where the leaves are now making their appearance once again. Each of you write down a sentence to the other, expressing your love, on skinny pieces of paper (3 each), and roll up, attaching to a string to hang in the trees. Prepare a [picnic dinner for two](#) together, spread a blanket, and one by one, uncoil the messages and read them. Enjoy one of these [tasty beverages](#) as you lay back and enjoy your trailing messages blowing in the breeze.

Who knew date night could be so fun, when the breezes blow and the sky is the limit?

AFTER 30 YEARS: My Butter Half by Marcy Lytle

That's not a typo in the title. This article is indeed about my butter half. I saw that phrase in the newspaper recently, and thought it would make a good story for our March issue, regarding my butter half – my husband. I didn't always think he was my butter half...but now I do. Let me explain....

Butter comes about and is made by churning.

My husband has been in the churn a lot more than I have, thus he's my butter half. He lived in another country on the "mission field" and did without, saw God provide, and had his faith tested in ways I've never experienced. He survived many near-death accidents and has an artificial hip as a result of one of them, and he walks straighter and faster than I can. I'd say the churning produced some pretty nice butter.

Softened butter, mixed with spices and herbs, make it spreadable and more delicious.

One characteristic seen in my husband is his servant heart, where he runs to hold the door open for a person ahead of him, he makes sure he carries his trash out from the theater, and he always opens my car door too (unless it's freezing, at which time I tell him to get the car heater going quickly!). He has a soft heart towards God, towards others, and towards me. My heart is fickle – sometimes it's hard a butter from the freezer, and sometimes it's melted and running off the plate – never consistent. Thus, he's my butter half.

Butter is used in baking to complement sweet baked goods.

I just can't imagine baked goods of any taste, flakiness, or beauty without butter. Butter makes the cake, doesn't it? My husband just makes everything better when he's nearby. He's stability in the time of crises, he's strength in moments of weakness, he's wisdom when wackiness is about to take over, and just his presence is warm and comfy, like a blanket under my legs when I plop down on my orange leather sofa in the winter. He complements every situation, so that's why he's my butter half.

Butter is sometimes used in pranks, like rubbing it on a door handle on April Fools' Day.

No one likes a good prank or joke like my butter half. He laughs a lot and finds a lot to laugh at, whereas I'm a very hard case to crack when it comes to humor. My daughter says she may write a book of her dad's jokes and title it *My Dad's Lame Jokes*. Laughter is good, it's healthy, and it brings healing. I'm pretty sure that's one reason Jon is so full of life.

After 30+ years of marriage, I'm learning to enjoy the butter and include it in my daily digestions, instead of avoiding it like the plague. A little bit of butter is good atop a hot roll, any time and any place. I'm realizing that churning turns out a good product, one that's soft and mixable with tasty things, and one that complements the taste of every place it lands. And sometimes, butter is just plain funny.

My butter half isn't like me, he's different. That used to bug me, and now I embrace it. I used to try and keep that butter wrapped up tightly in cold places, so that I could control its usage. But

I'm trying to leave it sitting out a bit more now, with a spreader in hand, offering my butter half to those who care to dine with us at our table, so they too can taste and see what delight a little butter brings to every dish that is served in our home.

ENCOURAGEMENT

HIDDEN GEMS: I Had to Smile by Kayley Ryan

On a cool morning in February, as I was going about the morning tasks of making my bed, folding my laundry, and cleaning my room, I got a clear picture from God that he wanted me to smile. I thought it was odd, smiling while I did my morning chores, but it struck a chord within me. It wasn't so much the act of smiling, but it was what that meant.

God wanted me to give glory to him even in the most menial tasks I would do that day.

Giving glory to God in everything you do can seem a little daunting. In fact, how are you even supposed to glorify God in little, supposedly meaningless things, like making your bed or washing dishes? What's there to glorify God about?

Many teenagers (including myself) feel that what they're doing right now has little to no value, importance, or relevance to their future. I tend to think of those everyday, menial tasks as just some bullet points on a long checklist that I need to complete before my *real life* can begin.

But what if *real life* is happening right now? What if *everything* I do is sacred and important, even those seemingly meaningless, daily tasks?

We tend to get this idea in our heads that only the work of a minister, missionary, or pastor can be considered *sacred* work. How did this idea get started and how has it impacted our culture since?

The concept of deeming some things as sacred and worthy but others as secular and unworthy was something many Christians accepted in the 16th century A.D., right around the time that Reformer and Augustinian monk Martin Luther was nailing his [95 Theses](#) to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was influential in demonstrating that every occupation, be it shoemaker or minister, housekeeper or missionary, was dignified, meaningful, and full of worth.

One of my favorite quotes of his exemplifies this truth:

“What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God. We should accustom ourselves to think of our position and work as sacred and well-pleasing to God, not on account of the position and work, but on account of the word and faith from which the obedience and work flow.”

Obviously, Martin Luther didn't think that the work of a farmer or some other laborer, dubbed “secular” work by many Christians of his time, was any less meaningful than the work of a priest or nun.

Nancy Pearcey, author of [Total Truth](#) and other books on theology, describes Martin Luther's influence on the idea of Christian “callings.”

“Whereas in the Middle Ages the word *vocation* was used strictly of religious callings (priest, monk, or nun), Martin Luther deliberately chose the same term for the vocation of being a merchant, farmer, weaver, or homemaker. Running a business or a household was not the least

bit inferior to being a priest or a nun, he argued, because all were ways...of participating in God's work in maintaining and caring for His creation."

But this idea of physical work as "of this world" and not fit for those who wanted to be *true Christians* actually began almost 2,000 years ago with a well-known, classical philosopher: Plato.

You may be familiar with a painting by Raphael titled "[School of Athens.](#)" In it, Plato points up to what he calls the "real," metaphysical ideals, while Aristotle points to the floor, where the temporal, earthly matter exists. Around 387 B.C., Plato was already teaching his philosophy of Dualism, which basically meant that the things of this world like washing the dishes or plowing the fields are inherently bad, valueless, and even unreal, while the things that exist in some sort of heaven, those spiritual ideals like love and goodness, are inherently good, full of value, and more real than the world we live in.

Yet, both Plato and Aristotle were missing a very important fact.

From the beginning of creation, God created all life on earth—all plants and trees, all animals, acts of labor, and even the act of gardening—and he "saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)

Why shouldn't I smile when I do my chores, or even while I mull over a schoolbook, write an essay, or solve for "x?" God would call each craft and each seemingly menial task good. He places value on every little thing we do.

In fact, he is right there with us in all that we do. We can glorify him by just talking to him about the little things we're doing, by asking for his advice, and by being willing to turn around and apply his wisdom to our daily activities—even while making the bed.

I don't think there is a perfect, laid out way to glorify God. It's not like you can do it in three simple steps. It's more of a lifestyle, committing yourself to God and determining to put his will above your own, to study his word, to dwell in his presence, and to pray with him and ask him to be with you in everything you do.

John Piper, a pastor and author who wrote [Don't Waste Your Life](#), explains the best way you can glorify God, which he calls "making others glad in God."

"To make others glad in God with an everlasting gladness, our lives must show that he is more precious than life."

If we put God above everything else, making it a priority to hear his will and do it to the best of our ability, we are showing others that he is "more precious than life." The greatest flattery is, after all, imitation. And if we try, in everything we do, to apply God's wisdom, to live a life that he would want us to live, and to praise him while doing it, we are glorifying him the best way we know how.

So, next time you feel like moaning and groaning because of all the work you have to do, rushing through those daily, mundane tasks in anticipation of when your life will *finally* begin,

remember that God calls each and every thing you do—as long as you do it unto His glory—meaningful, dignified, and so worth every minute you put into it.

1 Corinthians 10:31:

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

TOUGH QUESTIONS: Death & Resurrection: Part 1 by April Karli
Did God Not Mean For Death to Exist?

Some say social media keeps us from truly connecting with each other. However, it wasn't very long ago that a few brief private Facebook messages exchanged with a friend one evening met me exactly where I needed it.

She and I were part of a home fellowship for several years. Though we currently worship separately, we spent time sharing our lives and stories together over countless meals and bottles of wine with the others in our group. I don't see her often anymore, but I consider her a dear friend with whom I can be vulnerable and real.

A few weeks ago, a local pastor and mutual friend of ours died suddenly. As news spread, my friend and I communicated via Facebook about the plans for the funeral, among other things, and whether we'd see each other there. Our conversation was brief but poignant. These words, which had been welling up in my heart all day after I heard the news, leaked out through my fingers and onto my keyboard:

“Sometimes I just feel like the sadness in the world is too much.”

Her reply was simple, but packed with empathy and truth: “I know what you mean. Especially when you realize God never meant for death to exist.”

God never meant for death to exist.

God *never* meant for death to exist.

Her words ring true. But how do we know God never meant for death to exist?

In a few weeks I'll observe Ash Wednesday with Christians around the rest of the world. Someone will dip their finger in the soft, black ashes and bring them to my forehead making the sign of a cross. As they do so they'll say, “*Remember from dust you came and to dust you shall return.*” It's a somber occasion reflecting on our sinfulness, brokenness, need for a savior, and the reality that some day our bodies will return to dust.

Is that the whole story, though? If God never meant for death to exist it can't be the whole story.

We live in tension between death and resurrection. The truth is that I will die. You will die. Those most dear to us will die. It could be soon or it could be a decades from now. This is a somber thought. My family and friends will grieve my passing, and I theirs. This is normal and healthy. Jesus mourned the death of his friend Lazarus even though he knew he would raise him from the dead just a few moments later ([John 11:17-37](#)). God promises to [comfort](#) those who mourn. Grief and mourning are part of this life because death exists.

Yet, like my friend said, God never meant for us to experience death. I believe part of our grief is that deep in our souls we are aware of this truth. We know that God didn't intend for it to be this way; and when faced with death we grieve for the loss of our loved one, but also for the loss of how God originally designed the world to operate.

The good news is that God is in the business of making everything right again and wiping every tear from our eyes. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we are promised the eternal life God intended all along. And, as scripture reminds us, "The last enemy to be defeated is death." ([1 Corinthians 15:26](#))

Until then, there will be times we weep and times we feel the sorrow of the world is too much to take. We'll have the ashes placed on our foreheads, and we'll repent of our sins that brought death into the world. Yet, as John Donne expresses beautifully in his famous poem, *Death Be Not Proud*, "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee. Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so...One short sleep past, we wake eternally. And death shall be no more; **Death, thou shalt die.**"

The reality is that resurrection life starts happening now. This is the tension we live in -- death and resurrection happen together. How we live in the face of that is of tremendous importance.

Look for part 2 of this article next month for Easter where I'll talk about how we can live resurrection lives in the face of death. In the meantime, I'd love to hear your thoughts:

How does death and grief affect you? Do you agree with the statement that God never intended death to exist?

MOVING FORWARD: Keep Reading by Lynn Cherry

I'm not ashamed to admit I'm on the two-year Bible reading plan. I started out in 2012 on the one year plan; but rather than abandon the plan when I realized I was going to miss the mark, I simply adjusted the plan.

It's now March, and chances are you too may be crushed by the weight of lofty resolutions. Don't give up. It's a great time to adjust the plan and keep moving forward. In the business world they might call it a "mid-course correction." I call it plan X, Y or Z.

So many times in the history of my life I've abandoned unmet goals. If I missed them – I just missed them, right? It's "The End," too bad, so sad, try again next January.

Phooey!

You can have a second, third, or six-hundred and eighty-third chance, today.

Reading the Bible is not just a noble goal – it is life. It's the bread of life - a way for us to connect with God himself through his very words. But this isn't Junior Bible League. It's not about who reads the most chapters per week.

In a previous month of [A Bundle of Thyme](#), [April Karli wrote a wonderful article about teaching kids the Bible](#), but she shared great truth for grownups as well. When we think about reading the Bible as a way to interact with God, to find our place in His Story and to see our redemption revealed, it becomes less about crossing something off our good-thing-to-do list or reaching our chapter quota for the day, and more about a way of life.

Join me on the 2-year, 5-year or 10-year plan:

- Throw out the rules about quotas and timeframes.
- The Bible is just as alive at 4pm as it is as 6am.
- Sometimes one verse has more impact than one chapter. Stay there.
- Digital Bibles are still Bibles, so use your smart phone. With the free [YouVersion](#) Bible app, the Bible is always in your pocket and the pages won't get wrinkled.
- Pray before you read and ask God to speak to you through his word.
- Take time to ponder.
- If you don't understand something, join the club! Seriously, the Greek and Hebrew scholars disagree on meaning. Try an [online study tool](#). Discuss the passage with a friend. Search it out, but don't quit because you have questions.

Honestly (and I hate that this sounds cliché), I don't know where I would be without the scriptures that lifted and carried me when I didn't have the strength to move on my own. And I wouldn't have found them if I hadn't been reading.

If you are behind in your 2014 Bible reading plan, it's really okay. Maybe you can catch up over Spring Break. But even if you don't, just KEEP READING...

REAL STORIES: Finding *My Voice* by Erica Simmons

As Christians, we are always searching for our purpose. We hear countless sermons on it and purchase numerous books about it, all in a quest to find that one thing we feel God created us to do. While some find their purpose and thrive in it, I continued on a constant quest for it. Who knew the key to finding my God-given purpose would be in the middle of an obsession?

It all started this past summer when I made a simple decision, a decision that thousands of people make all the time. There was a show I caught on syndication called *Castle*. The show came on TNT in the afternoons and often showed four or five episodes in a row. Before some of the episodes, a “previously on *Castle*” clip showed events that happened in prior shows. I found myself continually missing some of these episodes, so I made the decision that eventually had a huge impact on my life. That decision was that I simply decided to watch *Castle* from the very beginning. *Innocent enough, right?*

The “problem” started when the lead female actor caught my eye. Her name is Stana Katic, and I had never seen her in any show before, so I Googled her. From the first interview, I was enthralled, and thus began my obsession. The more I read about Katic, the more I wanted to read. I created a Twitter account to follow her and daily searched the internet for information about this actress. Every time I finished watching all the seasons of *Castle*, I started at the beginning and watched them all over again. I talked about Katic like she was a personal friend; in fact, I gushed about her. I talked with my Christian mentor, hoping she would share with me some sage wisdom to help me get over this obsession. It did not work.

This obsession was so not like me. For those who knew even a little about me, they knew that in the dictionary next to the word “practical” should have been a picture of me – so I was definitely in crisis. I turned to God, begging Him to help me understand this, as it was interfering with my life. As I talked with God, I asked Him why. Why was this person so captivating to me? “Why,” I asked. “Why?”

Then, He answered me.

The answer was so simple and liberating. The answer was *clarity*. Clarity was present in each interview I read about this actress. She knew what she wanted, she knew who she was, she was happy with her life. I had been searching for more than a decade for my purpose and couldn’t find it. However, I saw someone who so clearly knew what her life was about, and to me this was amazing. The crazy thing is that I know plenty of Christians who know their purpose and are living in it each day. So why did this person, whose faith I don’t even know, have such an impact on my life with *her* clarity?

The answer came to me from watching one of her interviews. A few years ago, Katic (along with her co-star Seamus Dever), started the Alternative Travel Project (ATP). She said something about *waiting to have a bigger voice* before she launched her project. As a Christian struggling to find my purpose, the word *voice* struck a note with me.

I began to think about my life, what I had been through; those who planted into me, and what I know now, that I can offer as a result of all of these experiences. I realized I too have a voice. I

just had to take the time to listen to it and follow the bread crumbs of my life. I became a home owner in July of 2012 and since then I have had to fix a plumbing problem, dig up a couple of dead trees in my backyard, replace the water pump on my washer, repair my dryer, as well as take care of other cosmetic upgrades that I wanted to make around my new home. I have always had a capacity to “fix” things. If I did not know the how-to, I hit the internet to find out. As a single parent, I was grateful to be able to do these things myself.

God began to show me how I He wanted to use my life to help others, to share with them what I have been so very blessed to learn, either through help from friends, or through my own explorations. This was the beginning of what I am now calling **The Helping Hands Network**. This is *my* voice; what I am good at, this is what I am created to do. This is my whole life; and what I have been through, the decisions I have made, now make sense. This is what life has prepared me to do.

The Helping Hands Network is being set up to address the needs of single parents, for now. However, God’s vision for it is so much greater. As a single parent, I have been faced with many challenges. Although I am single, I have never had to go it alone. I have a great community of friends at New Hope Community, my local church, that have deposited mighty things into me.

When I moved here, I was broken. Since joining my church, I have met amazing Christians, established a very rewarding and satisfying career, and will soon be celebrating 18 months of home ownership. These are things I would not have been able to do if it were not for loving Christians answering the call God had on their own lives.

Now it is time to give back, and I look forward to every moment of service I will have the honor to do in Jesus’ name and in loving memory of my awesome pastor, John Pound. He was all about passion for Jesus and compassion for people.

I now have clarity...and I have found *my* voice.

Erica Simmons is a mother of 14 year old twins, who are an inspiration to her, and she is an educator who passionately cares about educating future generations. Erica is an avid reader of mystery novels (Tess Gerritson is her favorite author), she obviously loves the show Castle, and admires strong women.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME: The Silent Answer by Marcy Lytle

You know it's going to happen to you, it's just a matter of when. So you watch, you observe, and though you know it's totally self-absorbing, you begin to fear that what you're observing...the death of a lifelong friend...might happen to you and yours, too.

We got the news that our neighbor had a few days to live, when we thought she was actually recovering. Within 24 hours after the news, she was gone. Just like that. Overwhelming grief settled in as we observed a dad deal with raising two children on his own, now that his wife was no longer with them. Two weeks later, we got a call that our lifelong friend and pastor was taken suddenly to the place we who know Christ hear about, sing about, and are supposed to dream about – heaven. But in reality, we feel cheated, forsaken, and again grieved beyond words, as we watch his wife and daughters deal with the loss of a husband and dad.

Death and taxes. My mom always told me these are the two certainties in this life that we live. Neither of these two things is pleasant, and both seem to be downright thieves. So when we sit as a friend, an observer, an empathizer, full of grief at our own loss, part of our sadness is that we are reminded once again of the fact that none of us likes to think about – we're all going to die – unless of course the “rapture” takes place. And the thought of the rapture stirs up a whole other emotion and set of questions, which we won't write about here.

Back to the observation...and the fear....

None of us likes to think about the time when our family members and friends will die. It's morbid. It's sickening. It's sad. But when we are faced with the death of someone we love (and we all are at some point in our life), we feel the pain. It bites. It hurts. It taunts.

As friends and family converse about the death of our friends, I hear the same question each time from someone who is bold enough to ask, “Why did God take them *now*?” Then follows all of the other questions about why didn't God heal them, why would he be so cruel as to leave those kids without a mother, or that wife without a husband? Or why would he wipe out a whole community of people with a tsunami and leave a land destitute and forsaken?

As I thought about these things today, I remembered [Psalm 119](#), which is the longest chapter in the bible. There are lots of verses in this chapter that bring comfort and clarity when death is in our face...and our thoughts. This chapter is all about God's decrees, his statutes...his word. You know, that true stuff that sustains us, keeps us, and gives us life.

Verse 25: I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word. (What a promise for the one who dies, that they really just pass from life to life!)

Verse 28: My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word. (What an incredible miracle of something that even supersedes sorrow – God's word!)

Verse 41: May your unfailing love come to me, Lord, your salvation, according to your promise. (His promises are in his word, and in the worst of times, it never fails.)

Verse 50: My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life. (The promise is that in death, I will live again. And in life here, as I observe death, I will not die.)

Verse 68: You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. (God doesn't rob us in death, sin did that. God preserves and escorts into life eternal, because He is good.)

Verse 82: My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?" (We will question, we will cry until we can cry no more.)

Verse 91: Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you. (This truth alone brings peace. Oh Lord, you are NEVER caught off guard.)

Verse 96: To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless. (What we see is dim, dark and incomplete. What he sees and does is without end.)

Verse 105: Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. (This verse implies there will be dark nights, but never lack of light.)

Verse 116: Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live; do not let my hopes be dashed. (His word sustains, his promise is sure, we shall live - and hope will not be destroyed.)

Verse 134: Redeem me from human oppression, that I may obey your precepts. (There is oppression in the flesh in which we live, but we have been rescued through salvation!)

Verse 152: Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever. (There is one thing that will stand in the face of death – the word of God.)

I could list verse after verse of comforting words from His word, words of life, words of hope, and words of truth.

But what I get from this peek into this one chapter today is that **his word is important**. It's more than important – it's life. We are told to desire it more than fine gold. It's supposed to taste sweeter to us than honey. And we are to meditate on it day and night.

I don't like to think about death and when it will come to me and mine. And I cannot borrow grace to store it up now, so that I will have it then. Grace comes when it's needed. However, I can read the word and store it up like treasure in my mind so that when thoughts and fears arise, they are immediately cut down with the sword called "The Truth."

Therein lies the hope that will not be dashed – the sustainability of the Creator of the earth, the Everlasting God, the Prince of Peace, the Holy One – and He breathes life in the face of death as he quizzes,

"Death? Where is your sting?"

"Grave? Where is your victory?"

And the answer to both of those questions is a silence that stills the storm in me.

FRESH THYME: Truth Trumps by Marcy Lytle

We used to play this card game when I was a kid where you had to have a card in your hand that “trumped” the cards in the other players’ hands in order to win the game. I thought about that game today, as I sat with the news of my neighbor dying of cancer. I want to play a trump card against cancer, because it seems to show up in the hands of many people I know way too often, but do I have a trump card to play? I mean, really, what trumps cancer?

Throughout my life, I’ve been a contemplative thinker, and I think way too much about everything. But one thing that dominates my thoughts a lot is suffering. I can’t stand to see children lose their parent due to a tragic illness or accident. The thought of losing my own husband can send me to tears in an instant. Divorce is another playing card that seems to show up in the hands of those playing this life game with a spouse, and I don’t like it. I want something that trumps it, so I can play it and beat out divorce.

I heard something in a movie recently, where one of the characters said something like, “If we could see into the future, we’d never get out of bed in the morning.” And that statement bothered me. The fact is that none of us can see what hand we will be dealt tomorrow, or even today, for that matter. We don’t know what card will show up in our hand, one of illness, a loss of some kind, or a betrayal of the worst kind. But somewhere, somehow, there must be something or someone who holds a trump card to win this game of real life we’re all playing.

As I sat in devastation thinking of my neighbor, I fell into that pit of a downward spiral of bad thoughts. I began to be reminded again of how short life is, how nothing we have is forever, how people disappoint and irritate, and how the aging process increases in speed like a roller coaster until we come to a screeching halt – called death. I could feel myself falling, even though at this moment everything in my own life is going very well. None of that *truth* of present circumstances trumped my despair, because I knew it was all temporal...fleeting. Does that sound like the echo of a familiar book in the bible called Ecclesiastes?

It then hit me that the only thing that sustains, heals, brings hope, and opens the door to light, is the truth.

But what is that truth? It’s not the “truth” that if I live well, eat healthy, and do good, I’ll live a long and prosperous life. There are variables not included in that equation like the other people who live around us who aren’t living good lives, and they’re driving drunk, right head-on into our lane of traffic. It’s not the “truth” that if I marry the right man I’ll be happy and satisfied and in love until “death do us part” because people are human, people err, and people are well – people. So what is truth?

“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

That’s a quote we all know well.

But again, what is that truth that sets us free from the fear of death, the dread of being lonely, or the terror of loss?

The context of that quote is the setting of Jesus' accusers railing him because of who he stated he was – the son of God. They questioned the validity of Jesus and his identity.

When we encounter hard times of any kind, and we start to question the love of Jesus, the reality of Jesus, and the truth of Jesus and the work he did on the cross, we are not holding a trump card. We have drawn from the pile of death and are holding a card that's sure to give us a losing hand.

However, when we know that we know who Jesus is – that he is the son of the living God – sent here to die for our sins and to give us eternal life – this truth trumps all evil that life has to bring our way.

Is the card of death in your hand? Jesus made it possible for us to live forever, and not die. Sorrow comes for a season, but life is forever.

Is the card of betrayal in your hand? Jesus' love that sent him to the cross is real, and that love is enough to sustain you, to hold you and make you know you are LOVED by the lover of all lovers.

Is the card of loss in your hand? Jesus suffered in every way imaginable and is well acquainted with our grief, but he's our provider of all things we need.

The truth that sets us free is not written in religious books, on magnets on our refrigerators, or even in verses we've memorized. The truth is written in our hearts when we accept Jesus – for all of who he is – Savior – Lord – King – and that indelible mark of his love is the truth we must hold in our hand.

This truth trumps all playing cards of hurdles, broken hearts, and devastation.

I've suffered loss, just like everyone does at some point in their lives. And when it came down to theology – it did nothing to free me. When it came to sermons on Sunday – they comforted for a moment but comfort was lost by Wednesday. And when it came to my own goodness – I failed miserably more times than I can count.

The only thing that will disarm us and send us a losing hand is choosing to believe lies about who Jesus is.

Jesus told those guys if they obeyed his word they would never see death. He pointed out that they had no room for the word of truth in their hearts. They didn't believe who Jesus was, and questioned his very character and being. They had shut out the truth and exchanged it for lies.

Jesus loves you.

Jesus died for you.

Jesus rose again and because of that you can have eternal life.

If Jesus is in your hand, you're a winner.

Lies can pop up, cards can be played, but the truth of who Jesus is trumps them all.

FRESH THYME: Patience in the Flood by Christina Vetter

Imagine taking a cruise with only your family on board. Sounds pretty nice, right? Now take away all the luxurious cuisine, living quarters, music, and activities. You're just a family on a big boat. Not as great, but still not bad. Now add a pair of every single type of animal that exists (snakes, tarantulas, and roaches included) with no outlet for their "bathroom needs." Starting to not sound as fun? Now, imagine being trapped on that boat for a year. No, thank you.

Sometimes we think of Noah's Ark as a cartoon image with lion and giraffe heads smiling beneath a beautiful rainbow, instead of what it really was: cramped, uncomfortable, and extremely trying for Noah and his family.

They were in a very overwhelming and difficult situation, yet they were exactly where God wanted them to be.

Even as the animals' waste piled around him, and his family getting on his very last nerve, Noah stayed on the Ark. Even when they landed on dry ground, he waited an additional five months for God's perfect timing, no matter how difficult his surroundings were. Talk about patience!

Throughout the course of our lives there are going to be plenty of storms that cross our paths. Some are serious downpours that threaten to flood destruction into our lives, but God tells us to trust him and be patient no matter how uncomfortable we are. God wants us to trust him even when our immediate situation is scary, painful, and seemingly hopeless. He uses these times of difficulty to get us to our next destination. He hasn't forgotten us. He knows our future, he knows what's best for us, and he promises (remember, God cannot lie) that "everything will work together for good for those who love him" ([Romans 8:28](#)). True, not every day will be sunshine and butterflies, but he promises that he is with us even during the roughest patches and the darkest days, reassuring us that relief is on the way.

The Ark sounds like a miserable place to be, especially for that long. But if Noah had gotten off before it was time, our world may very well not be here today. God knows our situations are difficult and uncomfortable. He just wants us to be patient and work on his clock, according to his timing. God has a plan and purpose for every single one of us ([Jeremiah 29:11](#)), and if we can trust him no matter how difficult our surroundings seem, we will be able to see the great things he has in store come to pass in our lives.

Write this on your refrigerator, mirror, or anywhere you look throughout the day as a constant reminder of your hope in Jesus:

Psalm 37:25

"Once I was young, and now I'm old. Yet I have never seen the Godly abandoned or their children begging for bread."

FRESH THYME: Meet You at the Fence by Marcy Lytle

I sometimes listen to young moms bare their souls, and I can often see something in their faces that hurts my heart. Their child is suffering yet another illness and though they've prayed, the kids are sick again. These young ladies manage their homes well and try to get ahead, only to have something else break at the most inopportune time and there's no money to pay for repairs. Again, they've prayed for provision, but from their side of the fence it seems God is on vacation.

I've been on that side of the fence. It's the side where the grass is newly planted, kids are young and playing in the yard; and the sun is shining, because all things are new. It's sort of that utopia that one lives in, when newly married, newly a mom, or newly graduated from college. When I was first married, my husband and I both worked full-time jobs, made pretty good money, and I figured if people had financial woes it must be because they don't know how to do simple math. Life was all about simplicity, spending money, and having fun.

However, now I'm on the other side of the fence, past the halfway mark in life, where the grass has died and come back many times because the sun got too hot, and all things are not new anymore...unfortunately! And just like two friends that meet at the fence to chat and visit, I want to meet at the fence with all of you young ladies and let you in on a little secret. It's not a secret piece of gossip about a neighbor and how rude she is, or how incapable she's been, but rather a piece of news that might lift your countenance back up to the skies...even though the skies have become cloudy gray.

When we are young, we all "know" about God's character, but it's like hearing about how the President of the United States loves his dog. We hear about it, we see him romping in the grass with the cute little canine on television, but we've never been to his house, or enjoyed his puppy with him. It's just something we've been told.

It isn't until we actually hang out with him on a daily basis and see him show up in the sweetest of ways that we really know the character of God as an experience, and not just a verse in a book.

Here's what I'd say if I could meet you ladies at the fence and chat a while:

God never leaves you. There will be days you feel so lonely you could die, because your husband's gone to work, your kids only want you for food and diaper changes, and you feel like screaming, "Is anybody out there?" Or maybe you're single and searching for a job and the right "someone" and the months and years are slipping by, and you feel completely lost. Your life resembles Psalm 101:7: *I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof.*

I'm at the fence telling you that God is not a father who abandons. I went through a period of years where I prayed and heard nothing, from what I considered a silent God. However, I know now that he was speaking things into the deep places of my heart that would solidify my relationship with him as daughter to father. He heard every cry and plea I made, and he held them next to his heart to where he could shape them into answers that healed cries I didn't even

know to make. Psalm 101:17 says, *He will respond to the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their plea.* And that's so true!

God really is faithful. We sing this phrase in more choruses than I can remember. And yet, we sit at times and perceive with our eyes that he hasn't come through, he's disappointed us by not fulfilling our desires, or he's just made life so hard. We sing "God is faithful," we know it, and we read it – but it sure seems like he's not that interested in what concerns us. Ecclesiastes 19:20 becomes our mantra: *So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun.*

I'm at the fence sharing with you about the times when my grass died and showed no signs of growth, my skies rained until I was drenched, soaked and shivering, and everything new was stolen and swiped from me, leaving me feeling raped, naked, and abused. However, I'm alive and well now and know that God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, brought me through those fiery times, unscathed and without a hint of smoke. He's faithful and with us in the fire. Remember those three guys in Daniel 3? *Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, Your Majesty.' He said, 'Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'*

God's always at work. Sometimes it seems like we're working, being a student, performing wifely duties, wiping up spills as a mom, or just existing as a worker bee at a job that leads to nowhere. How could God be at work in us, when the work we do is so mundane and monotonous? What a waste, we feel our lives are becoming!

I quit my career and stayed home to raise my kids, working for years at a job behind a computer, at home, alone, in order to be with my kids. No one gave me bonuses, I got no accolades from a boss, and my co-workers were the thoughts in my head. But I'd do it all over again, because God was at work, preparing me and honing me to be a good mom, and for a future when the kids were gone.

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work, II Corinthians 9 says. Even when we can't see what's happening, there's crafting and sewing going on - just listen for the humming of the machine while he stiches and snips. A beautiful piece of work is taking place.

God is real, and he loves you. This is the lie that trips us all up, and the little whisper that can tank a perfectly good day, "What if God doesn't even exist? And even if he does, how could he love ME?" This tacky lie shows up when we've believed all of the others lies above, and we're at the bottom of the well of self-pity, in a dark, damp, cold place.

I came to this place and I parked myself there for a while. So many bad things had happened (when I thought I was being a "good" girl – so why did I deserve this?) that I was sure I must have missed something somewhere, and perhaps nothing I believed about God was true. It was there at the bottom that I laid aside all theories and made a choice to believe – Jesus loves me. And that one ounce of faith alone brought me up to the light and enabled me to stand again.

I John 4 says, *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*

While we're still at the fence chatting, let me tell you that your yard is lovely, you look beautiful in the son-light, and all is indeed well. How do I know that? Because I've been to His house, played in His yard, and eaten at His table, and I know there's plenty for you and yours...always and forever.

Until next time, when we meet at the fence...

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

April 2014

TIPS

TIPS - THE DRESSING: Wonderful Wallets

Wallets are no longer just the size of a checkbook, slim enough for a pocket, or just available in black or brown. Wallets are an accessory, a statement piece, something that houses all of our valuables in our purse. So it stands to reason that shopping for a wallet for our purses is something that can be fun, because who knew there were so many choices these days?

[This wallet](#) from Target comes in many colors, and it's a great size – not too thin or too large. It's so cute that it can be carried out of your purse as a tiny clutch, if you're just going into the store for a quick buy. And the prints are great for spring! Check it out, handle it, and open it. It's so cute!

This [horse zip pouch](#) found online at Urban Outfitters is a great choice for your slouch purse for the spring. It opens up for holding your cards, dollar bills, a pen, and some lip gloss, so that it's easy to grab when rummaging in the bottom of your bag.

How about a [coin purse](#) as part of your wallet collection, like this one from Fossil, found on the Zappo's website? Sometimes all you need is a small pouch for your cash, a couple of cards, and you're good to go!

I have a [patchwork bag](#) like this one that I use as a wallet and for a bit of makeup. The fabric colors are fun, and they are so roomy! These hold a checkbook, cards, papers, pens, makeup and more. They fit nicely into your large purse, and are so fun to have! Buy it from Noonday and help support women in need.

Isn't this distressed [faux leather wallet](#) so nice? It's by Billabong and it opens up with zippered compartments to keep you organized. It's so fun to organize and fill a new wallet with your favorite things, and slip it into your purse for safekeeping.

This [Visconti wallet](#) is multi-colored inside – so beautiful. It's leather, and zips closed for a tight fit, a sleek look, and makes a great statement piece for your accessory wardrobe this season. Every time you zip it open, you will smile at the pretty colors inside!

What a cute [whimsical wallet](#) by Modcloth called "Keys to Success." This might be just the one you want for your purse this season. There are several cute wallets on this site if you like something a little different than the ordinary.

Whatever wallet you carry in your purse, it should be wonderful and new! It should be cute, feel familiar, fit in your hand, and carry all of your essentials right where you want them.

TIPS - SEVEN FOR YOU: Gotta Have Both by Marcy Lytle

Faith is what brings us to Christ, right? And no amount of work on our part can get us there, because it's all the work of Jesus. However, these verses say that faith without "deeds" is dead. Deeds are the fruit of faith. Without them, one must wonder if we really have faith...or just a nod of understanding. In these verses are seven things to note about faith...combined with works...in a very practical, real way.

1. **Faith provides.** If you know of a friend in need of a meal or groceries, or even clothing, and you have the ability to help, then give. Nothing is much sweeter than giving joyfully out of your own abundance.
2. **Faith is accompanied by action.** If you know of a friend who's cold and hungry for friendship and the truth, because life has come at them hard, send them a handwritten note in the mail, or call them on the phone and encourage them. Nothing is much finer than gold found in the kind words of a friend.
3. **Faith is more than believing.** Even demons believe in God. But demons want to destroy. If you know of a friend being destroyed by gossip and lies, turn away and don't join in the conversation. Instead, speak the truth about who Jesus says that person is, and then pray for them. Nothing is much warmer than faith spoken in prayer.
4. **Faith completes us.** Offering God our most precious of possessions is an act of complete surrender to him. If you worry and fret about your children, place them at Jesus' feet and say, "Here. They are yours." Nothing is much more liberating than releasing the burden of raising children into the arms of our Father.
5. **Faith produces friendship with God.** You are no longer at odds with God because of your sin, as you are now righteous before Him. If you feel distant from God because of disobedience, simply repent and lay down your agenda "on the altar" and God will call you his friend. Nothing brings more happiness than locking arms with Him.
6. **Faith covers and protects.** We worship and congregate with fellow believers who deserve honor, respect and love. If you know of those with whom you worship who are being chased by lies because they are "different" than the norm, stand up and be a friend who loves at all times. Nothing is much safer than a friend who accepts us for who we are.
7. **Faith with deeds is alive.** No one wants to be around a dead Christian. It's not attractive, or desirable. If you feel like your faith is dead, respond to Christ's love again, and this time lay aside all preconceived ideas and theology, and just receive his forgiveness, his mercy, and his light. Then walk beside him, free to live. Nothing is more desirable than life...when one is dead.

James 2:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless^[d]? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

TIPS – SELAH’S STYLE - For Sons & Brothers by Selah Irwin

For April’s column I decided to talk to you about boys’ fashion. It is important for your sons and brothers to hear about styles too, so I came up with some amazing suggestions with pizzazz!

We live in California, and my brother and I like surfing. This is a look for cruz-ing on the beach! Board shorts, a bright red t-shirt, and flip flops are a go-to look for Santa Cruz or whatever beach you live by. I added a hat because it looks cool and keeps you cool!

For this look, I dressed him in everyday skateboarder attire. It is comfy and looks awesome while he busts out his moves. I started with a long sleeved shirt and camo cargo pants. I layered a jacket and added Converse and a beanie, to spice up the look. Now he can skate away in style!

I call this next look the Super Salsa Style! I don’t know why, but that’s just what crossed my mind. At first I was going to call it Mexican mojito, but that did not make any sense! He just looks ready to tango! I love his hat! It makes you want to say, "Oh, yeah." The striped shirt is amazing with the black chino pants.

If your son or brother does not like to dress up, but you have to go to a fancy dinner, this is a good selection for your options. Isaac has on his favorite jeans with a comfy, comfy t-shirt, but I whipped on this black sport coat to make it acceptable for a dressy outing or dinner.

That’s all for today on Selah’s Sense of Style! I hope you liked this one.

I also want to say, “Thank you,” to Isaac for being my model. I love him. He is the best big brother in the world!

TIPS – FEARLESS KITCHEN - A Luncheon to Remember by Christina Vetter

Spring is in full bloom this April. Trees and fields are at their greenest and flowers of every color blanket the ground. It is beautiful outside. No wonder this time of year finds me opening one after another lace-covered invitation to some sort of a women's get together every time I go to the mailbox. Baby showers, bridal showers, and a variety of other women's luncheons seem to fill the calendar this month. Maybe it's the welcomed warmth of spring before a scorching summer. Maybe it's the beauty of our surroundings. Maybe it's simply our way of breaking out of hibernation after a long and cold winter. Whatever the reason, women seem to want to get together this month more often than the others, and a luncheon seems to do the trick.

I have been to many of these events and while they are breathtakingly beautiful, I started to notice a commonality in the food. Unless they are privately catered, vegetable trays, chips with dip, and finger sandwiches seem to be the fare of choice. Understand me when I say I love every single one of these dishes. However, just because you choose not to cater your party, doesn't mean the food needs to be so predictable. Be creative with it! You'll be surprised how easy and often cost efficient some of the most gourmet hors d'oeuvres really are.

Here are some guidelines when planning finger foods for your next get together.

First of all, plan things that are within your culinary expertise. Don't be afraid of something if it has a fancy title or fancy ingredients. But if your culinary skills are slightly lacking, stay away from tournéd potatoes, soufflés, or any other recipes specifically geared towards experts. By all means, venture out and try these on a Friday night, but the last thing you want to serve while hosting a party is inedible food.

Second, think about the spread of food your serving. Try to have one (no more than two) of the same type of food. For example, don't make every dish your serving paired with a kind of dip. While dips are definitely a crowd pleaser, incorporate composed hors d'oeuvres such as Tomato & Basil Bruschetta or Roasted Pepper Canapés, as well (see recipes below). Also, have other types of options that are true finger foods, meaning something the guests can eat without a fork or plate and usually one to two bites each. These foods can be Wild Mushroom Tartlettes (see recipe below), an Italian meatball in a parmesan cup, prosciutto wrapped melon, etc. If the finger food is not bound together somehow, be sure to secure it with a toothpick. In addition, depending on budget, it is always nice to have an antipasto tray. Simply serve an assortment of cured meats, a variety of nice cheeses, and different flavorful olives.

Last, but certainly not least, never let your guests leave without ending on a sweet note. Women especially love their sweets and will definitely notice if they're missing. Depending on the type of party you're having, such as a birthday luncheon, a full blown cake is not only appropriate but expected. If your event doesn't necessarily call for a cake, there are plenty of other options. Cookies of all kinds and dessert bars such as brownies or blondies are always a favorite, but consider fresh fruit with honey vanilla yogurt or Almond Biscotti (recipe below) and espressos as an option, as well.

Women's luncheons are meant to be classy and comfortable at the same time, and if you decide not to cater your next event don't fall into the trap of mundane food. The food you serve can be beautiful, creative, and gourmet on almost any budget, at any culinary expertise.

Think outside the vegetable tray and your guests will be raving for many meals to come.

Tomato & Basil Bruschetta

Serves 15-20

Difficulty: 

This recipe is my go-to appetizer whenever I'm entertaining. Everyone always loves it and it's very easy to put together. Quality is vital here; nothing will ruin this faster than sandy tomatoes. You always want to make sure you get good quality ingredients in every dish but especially this one.

Ingredients:

- 1 baguette
- 4-5 garlic cloves
- 8 Roma tomatoes, seeded and small diced
- ½ C shredded basil, packed
- ¼ C balsamic vinegar
- olive oil, salt and black pepper as needed

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 350.
- Slice baguette diagonally into ½" slices.
- Using the side of a chef's knife, smash the garlic open. Lightly drizzle olive oil across bread slices; then rub smashed garlic across face of each slice. Bake at 350 for 5 minutes, or until lightly golden.
- In a large bowl, mix tomatoes, basil, and vinegar. Add enough olive oil to thoroughly wet tomato mixture, (about 1/3 C).
- Add salt and pepper to taste.
- Cover and refrigerate for at least an hour to allow flavors to marry.
- Place about 1 tsp of bruschetta on top of toasted baguettes and serve immediately.

Wild Mushroom Tartlettes

Makes 10

Difficulty: 

These are my husband's favorite. It has a silky and rich with flavor filling inside a delicate tart shell. The type of mushrooms used is optional, but I recommend a variety, or criminis. Tart shells can be bought in the frozen aisle of the grocery store near the frozen pie crusts.

Ingredients:

1 Tbsp butter
1 shallot, small diced
½ lb mushrooms
2 tsp brandy
½ C heavy cream
1 Tbsp parmesan cheese, plus more for garnish
1 Tbsp minced parsley
1 egg yolk, whisked with a couple drops of water
Salt as needed
8-10 small tart shells

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 350.
- Over medium high heat, sweat onions and mushrooms in butter until the pan is dry (mushrooms will release liquid and it will evaporate)
- Add brandy and cook stirring occasionally until liquid is almost gone.
- Reduce heat to medium low, add cream and cook stirring often until liquid is reduced by half.
- Take mixture off heat and very slowly, gradually add egg yolk, stirring constantly.
- Stir in parmesan and parsley, taste and add salt if needed
- Fill tartlettes with mixture and bake for about 10 minutes.
- Garnish with parmesan cheese and serve immediately.

Almond Biscotti
Serves 10

Difficulty: 

Sure you can buy pre-made biscotti easy enough, but these are so worth the effort, and the almond flavor is fantastic. This recipe is exact by weight, so have a food scale nearby.

Ingredients:

7 oz all purpose flour
6.25 oz sugar
¼ tsp salt
½ tsp baking powder
½ tsp anise powder
½ tsp lemon zest

½ tsp orange zest
3.5 oz whole almonds, unsalted
2 eggs
2 egg yolks
½ tsp vanilla

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 300.
- In a large bowl mix all dry ingredients including zests.
- Stir in egg, egg yolks, and vanilla until combined. Knead by hand for 5 minutes on floured surface.
- Shape into about 2" thick log. Bake on parchment paper lined cookie sheet until golden brown.
- Allow to cool.
- Slice on a diagonal about ½" slices. Bake for about 15 minutes until golden brown.
- Allow to cool and serve with coffee or tea.

Roasted Pepper Canapés
Makes 35-40

Difficulty: 

These are one of my favorite hors d'oeuvres to serve at a party. They have so many different colors and flavors in each bite and the goat cheese spread takes it over the top. Take care to cut your veggies small and uniformly to make sure each bite has a little bit of everything.

Ingredients:

4 oz goat cheese, room temp
2 Tbsp sour cream, room temp
½ C small diced tomatoes
½ C small diced Kalamata Olives
½ C small diced red onion
1 small jalapeno, seeded and minced
1 large garlic clove, minced
¼ C minced cilantro
1 red bell pepper
1 green bell pepper
1 yellow bell pepper
¼ C olive oil
½ C white balsamic vinegar (can also use regular)
1 large baguette

Directions

-In a small bowl, combine goat cheese and sour cream. Place in a ziplock bag and hold in refrigerator until ready to use.

-Over high heat (only on a gas stove top) place pepper directly on fire to roast, turning as needed until mostly charred and black. (if you don't have a gas stove top, broil peppers on a sheet pan on high, on the lower rack, turning occasionally for even coloring.)

-Take peppers off heat and place them in a plastic wrapped mixing bowl to steam for about 30 minutes or until skin peels off easily.

-Remove skin and seeds from peppers and dice small.

-In a gallon size Ziplock (or large bowl), add peppers and remaining ingredients excluding bread. Hold in refrigerator for at least 5 hours, or overnight to marinate.

-When salad is ready, slice baguette ¼"- ½" thick and toast in a 350 degree oven for 5 minutes.

-Spread goat cheese mixture over top surface of bread, then add about a tsp of salad on each slice.

-Serve immediately.

TIPS - TRIED AND TRUE: Sprinkles and Showers

Spring makes us think of babies! So we thought we'd include an article for new moms, or for those of you who have to buy a gift for a new mom. We polled some moms who are already in the thick of raising their kiddos, and asked them to share their favorite products and why. If you have one to add, please leave a comment after you read!

My son is going on 18 months old now and one thing that has been a life saver for us is a [white noise sound machine](#). If you buy in a store, it's in the home spa section, and it has been one of the best investments for sleep time. It not only drowns out noise from outside, but it also gives our son something to listen to as he drifts off to dreamland. – Christina Vetter

My very favorite baby product is the [Bumbo](#) seat. It gives a young infant who can hold up her head the ability to sit up. This seat was great for two of my babies because they could be in the action without getting trampled on by older siblings. It may not be a good product for more wiggly babies who could tip it over. It should never be used on raised surfaces for this reason since a baby could then roll off and be injured. Still, in an active household with lots of mini-moms, the Bumbo was a five-star baby product. – Georganne Schuch

My second favorite product that I used with only my last two was a [baby wrap](#). There are lots of brands, but I ended up making my own with a long piece of stretchy fabric. It wrapped around my body and allowed me to carry the baby without having to use my arms all the time. It didn't put strain on my back, either. My babies loved being cuddled like this, and I loved having some freedom to keep up with the rest of my children. – Georganne Schuch

This [portable high chair](#) is a great invention! My daughter got this for Christmas for her kids, and it folds up just like the lawn chairs we all have that we tote around to picnics and games. The chair stores away nicely, and is a great thing to have at family gatherings, parties, or wherever you need a chair as a place for your baby to eat, or just to sit for a while so they don't crawl away! These chairs come in lots of cool colors. – Marcy Lytle

My favorite baby item is the [Snuza](#). It's a little alarm that attaches to the baby's diaper and will go off if he stops breathing! I had a baby stop breathing at my daycare, and had to preform CPR that brought him back. I bought the snuza after that to be safe! – Angel Rabideau

I LOVE my [Ergo](#) carrier. It has amazing support, and it works from infant-3/4 year old if needed. It's so much better than any Bjorn or hiking backpack. – Cheryl Carrell - I too love the Ergo carrier because it has a waist and back support, and it fits your growing child. One tip is try it on before you buy it, as they do fit differently for each person. – Kamrin Wolfe

I'm a big fan of ring slings. I didn't use a sling with my first child, but it was so helpful for the other kiddos – especially for sleeping in public, or a quick run into a store, when I didn't want to hassle with a car seat or have them get germs. Someone graciously gifted me with a [Zolo with the zipper pocket feature](#). – Cheryl Carrell

My mom makes adorable, amazing [lovies](#) – which my kids slept with – and still do! They are small and perfect for on-the-go. – Cheryl Carrell

For strollers, [Snap n Go](#) is better than a big travel system for car seats. And [Bob](#) makes an amazing jog/double jog stroller! – Cheryl Carrell

[Selsun Blue](#) shampoo is a must for babies. My doctor recommended it for cradle cap and it worked wonders with both of my kids – Kamrin Wolfe

[Swaddle Velcro outfits](#) – my infant Max lived in these when he was first born. It's the only way he'd sleep because he'd wiggle out of swaddle blankets! – Katy Reynolds

[Petroleum jelly](#) is what we've used for diaper rash, or a red, sensitive bottom. Diaper creams only seemed to make the redness worse, and blistering. We are still using a jar we got right after Max was born, and he's now 18 months! – Katy Reynolds

Changing station basket – [one you can buy](#) – or one you can put together yourself - to have around the house in different spots. The basket holds diapers, wipes, petroleum jelly, and a thermometer. We have a two-story house so I have one of these in our master bath, both kids' rooms, and the playroom, so that I don't have to wander around the house to get what I need quickly! – Katy Reynolds.

TIPS - REVIEWS: For the Kids

Kids love television and even though too much of it is not good, some shows and movies are excellent for our children, and we can enjoy them too! Reading is a must, and why not make the choices entertaining, so that our kids want to read more? And finally, any mom knows that good music in the car keeps the kids quiet at least for a while! Here are our selections for the kids in your house...

MOVIES

My kids are 8, 5, and 2 and they love [Despicable Me](#). The hilarious minions will make your kids laugh, and you'll enjoy the movie too! And now there's Despicable Me 2. Nothing offensive, and everything funny. – Rashelle Tarver

My son Peter (age 9) loves the Percy Jackson series (especially [Sea of Monsters](#)) and the Lego movie. My daughter Kayla (age 7) loves the *Frozen* movie, and Barbie movies. And my daughter Lily (age 3) enjoys any of the Veggie Tales movies. – Misty Barrera

BOOKS

My 15 year-old daughter likes reading adventure/fantasy. She enjoys Jules Verne, like *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *Around the World in 80 Days*. My 11 year-old daughter reads less, but she enjoys adventure, like *Magic Tree House* books and the original *Nancy Drew*. I've passed down a sizable [collection of Nancy Drew](#) and Hardy Boys books to my children, and we're always on the lookout to add to the collection. – Georganne Schuch

My youngest, age 2, is a huge fan of [Goodnight Moon](#), a classic book for your shelves of reading material for your kiddos! It's a great nighttime read before bedroom, as the story is of a little bunny who says, "Goodnight" to everything in its room. – Rashelle Tarver

Anything Dr. Seuss – my kids love! [Maybe You Should Fly a Jet! Maybe You Should Be a Vet!](#) is a great book, and it also says "maybe you should be a preacher" – and my son wants to be a preacher! [Fox in Socks](#) is a fun tongue twister that gets them rolling – Careese Vieregge

I have both of my older boys (ages 12 and 10) are addicted to reading the Hardy Boys series, and also the Geronimo Stilton books. These are great stories, but also have wonderful illustrations! And my youngest (age 5) likes anything at all, as long as we read to him! - Charity Weldon

Rylan (age 4) loves the [Jesus Storybook Bible](#). We read a story at bedtime every night. She can't wait to see which story is up next! The bible also came with CDs (bible on cd) which she asks to listen to every time we get in the car. The narrator on the CD has an English accent & we love listening to him! – Chrissie Mott

My daughter Piper is 7 years old and loves to read. Right now, she enjoys the historical [American Girl](#) books. – Laura Justiss

My kids (ages 8-18) all enjoyed the [Wrinkle in Time](#) series, and the Sugar Creek gang – we listened to them on audiobooks. My daughter Maddie loved [Out of My Mind](#) by Sharon Draper and *Wonderstruck* by Brian Selznick. – Melody Dalglish

My daughter Laura (age 11) loves the [Junie B. Jones](#) series! – Misty Barrera

My kids are reading *The Hobbit* & *Lord of the Ring* series, as well as [The Warriors](#). They are ages 11 and 9. – April Karli

MUSIC:

Right now my home and car CD player is filled with the [Cedarmont Kids](#) album collection. The music ranges in subject from Sunday school tunes, toddler silly songs, hymns, to patriotic classics. It's a godsend on long car trips as well as a nice backdrop for my son (18 months old) playing at home. I have to admit I have even learned a lot from these songs. – Christina Vetter

[Choo Choo Soul](#) is a huge hit for our family – anything that has a beat that the boys can drum to, or sing to – my boys are ages 3, and 5 – Careese Vieregge

My son Reagan, age 9, loves music – all genres! However, one of his favorites is [Switchfoot](#). – Laura Justiss

HOME

PRACTICAL PARENTING: 12 Steps in the Trenches by Georganne Schuch

The only people in the world who know how to be a perfect parent are the ones who don't have children. I just love (eye-roll) to get parenting advice from someone who has never spent time in the trenches. And by trenches, I mean:

- pacing the floor for hours with a screaming baby in the middle of the night,
- facing down a tantrum-throwing two-year-old in the middle of the grocery store,
- calming a hormonal tween-ager convinced that the world will end because of her bad hair day, or worse,
- encouraging a self-righteous teenager to think of worse punishments than missing the latest youth group gathering because she hasn't finished her school work.

So, when you have no experience in the warfare known as parenthood, it becomes quite easy to know all the answers and to anticipate all the scenarios. For the rest of us, we know different. Soothing a crying baby is not a three-step checklist. Two-year-olds have no reasoning capacity. Hormones short circuit any reasoning skills that may have developed from age two to ten, and teens are not mini-adults with a worldview beyond their small circle of friends.

All that to say this:

There are no perfect parents.

This is because one has to have children to be a parent. And once we have children, we realize how imperfect we really are.

Think you have a soothing personality? Your two-month-old will convince you differently. Patience of Moses? Not when a two-year-old is involved. You get the picture.

However, all is not lost. You are not a failure because you melted in a puddle of tears right next to your toddler or considered locking your 14-year-old in the closet until she turned 18, at which time you might enlist her in a foreign work program. Being a parent is really about staying power. You keep coming back every day, knowing it might be Groundhog Day, but determining to make the best of the do-over.

In essence, a good parent realizes there are inherent shortcomings in this whole parenthood journey. It's long. It's tiring. It's monotonous sometimes. It's hard. It's heartbreaking. It's challenging.

But there is even more to parenting than all of that.

The payoff comes after years and years of plodding along. It comes when that very child who couldn't sleep through the night until she was 18-months-old becomes a confident learner and looks at every challenge as an opportunity to overcome. While that tantrum-throwing two-year-old may go through a lot more emotional rollercoasters, even she grows up to have a heart for serving the less fortunate and a love for the lost.

What you think your children are missing by ignoring all your lectures and tantrums, they are really getting by seeing you persevere through the hard times. When you don't give up, they learn to keep going, too. When you take a deep breath and respond quietly but firmly to their melodramatic protestations of innocence, they learn to set a higher standard for their own behavior. When you apologize for your failures, they learn to take a better look at their own sin and repent.

Rather than dwell on your self-imposed failures as a parent, turn them around to see the bigger picture. Make it more about your children and less about you.

1. Start every day with a hug and a prayer. You both need it.
2. Yell less. Laugh more. At them and at yourself.
3. Count down to naptime. Even half-grown kids can use a quiet time to unwind. This is a true sanity saver for all involved.
4. Keep everyone fed, alive, and clothed. Some days that's the best you can do, and that's enough.
5. Make character a priority over education. Only one will actually equip them to be successful in real life.
6. Teach Biblical principles rather than cultural standards. One is eternal; the other shifts with the wind.
7. Live life together. Family is forever.
8. Forgive and forget. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone deserves second chances.
9. Find ways to express love. Say it. Do it. Show it.
10. Know your limitations and those of your children. No one is perfect.
11. Confess your failures and ask forgiveness. Nothing models humility like humility.
12. End every day with a hug and a prayer. You still need it.

Take heart, parent. All is not lost because of your imperfections or failures. Tomorrow is a new day. Get up and do it again.

HOME - TRAIN THEM: Second Chances by April Karli

“I want a do-over!”

It’s a refrain heard often in my house. Sometimes it’s when my girls are playing together and one of them needs to try something again. Other times it’s because they’re in trouble and want to rewind the DVR of life for a chance to redo the moment.

There’s a story in the Old Testament I’ve spent time reading, lately. [Jonah](#) is about a second chance for both the people of Nineveh as well as for the man the book is named for. Despite the wickedness of the Ninevites and Jonah’s attempt to run away from God, they both get a second chance. After spending time in the belly of a great fish, Jonah delivers God’s message as he was first told to do. Surprisingly to both Jonah and the reader, the Ninevites repent of their ways. Over and over in Scripture, from the Old Testament to the Gospels, we see God’s grace and mercy prevail.

As a parent, I am sometimes torn between wanting my children to experience the consequences of their behavior and extending them grace. I believe that part of helping my kids mature in their faith is allowing them to have “do-overs.” It might seem like I’m going easy on them or letting them get away with bad behavior. But, like Jonah, many times they experience both the negative consequences as well as the grace of the second chance.

Second chances remove fear of failure and the burden of perfectionism from our kids’ shoulders. If our kids grow up expecting to mess up, rather than thinking they have to do it right the first time, *every time*, they’ll be free to risk, to fail, and to get up and try again. Their hearts will be open to God’s love and mercy in a way the hearts of those who never mess up can’t be. They’ll know the meaning of forgiveness and will be more likely to freely forgive others as they have been forgiven. Their hearts will overflow with gratitude like [the woman](#) who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears.

I love the lyrics of this song called “Second Chance” by Irish band, The Rend Collective Experiment:

*“Fragments of brokenness
Salvaged by the art of grace
You craft life from our mistakes”*

(embed video here)

embed code for video:

```
<iframe width="560" height="315"  
src="//www.youtube.com/embed/W6RNJ6HDTpU?rel=0" frameborder="0"  
allowfullscreen></iframe>
```

link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6RNJ6HDTpU>

God is crafting life from our mistakes. It's hard to believe that such a thing could be true. But that is what's so amazing about our God. He can take our messes and our mistakes and create something more beautiful than we could ever ask or imagine.

I DON'T DO TEENAGERS: The Need for Belonging by Lynn Cherry

As an eighth grader, my son wore skinny jeans, vintage band t-shirts and Vans. His look shifted during his sophomore year of high school when he opted for cowboy boots, Wranglers and camouflage. Now as a junior, he is wearing polo shirts and Sperry Top-siders. His wardrobe changes reflect the endless quest of a teenager to fit in and yet simultaneously stand out.

If you sit outside the average American high school you will notice groups of teens dressed alike. It was the same way when I was in school – the clique determines the clothes. Every one of those kids is looking for is a place to belong.

Belonging was a top five relational need for both of our teenagers. The [Living as Conquerors](#) model defines belonging as feeling I am a part of a group, and knowing I am accepted even when my behavior is less than perfect.

In order for this need to be met in our homes, our kids need to know we love and accept them, warts and all. Oh man, this can be hard, and I think it gets more difficult as our children get older. Seriously, when you think about it, babies are demanding, inconsiderate of others, and downright disruptive. A teenager with those exact same qualities is much harder to love!

You'd think our children would know they belong simply because they are ours. But belonging is less about sharing a last name and more about having a place to come home to when we've messed up.

The need for belonging is felt most deeply when our children make mistakes.

When this need is not being met, we may see some of the following behaviors:

- Avoiding face to face relationships and opting for online identities
- Withholding and only showing part of who they are
- Isolation
- Trying too hard, making drastic changes to fit in
- Joining gangs or unhealthy peer groups

What is the key to meeting a teenager's need for belonging? Try not to take their behavior personally. Actually, that's a great strategy for navigating the teen years in general. Don't take anything personally! When we make their choices about us personal – it's so much harder to accept our teens completely.

Providing a place of belonging and utter acceptance for our teens will be easier when we remember the Father's acceptance of us - that while we were messy and stained by sin, undeserving and unworthy – Christ laid down his life in love to bring us into the family of God. He provided a place for us to belong.

Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to

*himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.
Ephesians 1:4-5*

Father, help us see our teens through your eyes, worthy of love and sacrifice. Let us enjoy each moment and provide them with a strong sense of belonging.

HOME - SIMPLE SOLUTIONS: The Bloated Inbox by Georganne Schuch

Only a decade ago, we could easily check out of the grind by turning off a handful of noise-makers and taking a short hike on a park trail. No more. It can take a half day and an engineer's degree to turn off all the electronic devices designed to make our lives easier and more enjoyable. Forget becoming incommunicado for a few hours. GPS can track us within 10 feet at a mountaintop hideaway on another continent - all in the name of efficiency and convenience, of course.

These gadgets of communication actually serve to only induce stress – and lots of it – when we let them overwhelm us. Rather than become the slave to their never-ending beeping and flashing, we can set boundaries. After all, convenience should work for us, not against us. My three rules for digital communication are pretty self-explanatory:

1. Limit what comes in.
2. Delete what doesn't apply right now.
3. Organize what stays.

LET'S START WITH EMAIL, the grandfather of modern communication. It's so 20th century, but since most people still use it, we should learn to tame it.

Limiting what comes in involves at least two separate issues. One is spam. Not the kind in a can. Spam is unwanted, unsolicited email from nefarious people who live and breathe to think of new ways to send out more email you don't want. Most email programs have some sort of spam filtering, but rest assured the spammers will figure out ways around the filters as fast as updates come out. It's a vicious cycle, and you're caught in the middle. All I can say, is make sure you have a good spam filter in place for when (not if) you start getting inundated.

Second, never, EVER give out your email address to people you don't want to get email from. Set up a separate account for anything else, such as online purchases, etc. Don't sign up for every sales alert in the universe. Do you really need to know every time a fruit juicer goes on sale? Don't be afraid to not only delete junk mail, but unsubscribe from the lists altogether. Most advertising emails have an "unsubscribe" or "opt-out" link in the email somewhere. Use it with abandon.

Next, review incoming emails a few times a day and delete everything you don't want. Read and address everything that needs to be take care of right away. Once it's done, delete the email or file it. Don't leave it around to clutter up your inbox, making you feel like you're under some sort of digital avalanche. Emails, such as blog you like to read and to-do emails, can stay in the inbox. Gradually work your way through blog subscriptions as you have time, like waiting for the kids during piano lessons. To-do emails are reminders of work-in-process or upcoming appointments. Keep them in the inbox until the tasks are done; then delete them. Set a reasonable number of emails to keep (mine is around 40.) Some people will think that's a lot. Others will think that's unreasonably small. It's all about perspective. These are only emails I want to read, I need to do, or that remind me of something. No expired sales flyers, past due conference calls, or out of date get together reminders.

Once you get past a few hundred emails, searching for one email is like looking for a needle in a haystack. I have a friend who routinely has 1,000 emails in his inbox. To him and people like

him, I say, "File it!" Create folders for projects, contacts, blogs, issues, etc. File emails that relate together. This makes it so much easier to quickly look up an email. If you haven't dealt with an email within a few months, you probably never will. Delete or file old email and move on.

Letting your inbox get bloated makes checking your email depressing, so keeping it cleaned up enhances productivity and mood.

I say grab a broom and start sweeping, or deleting, in this case.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER: And Still He Loves Us by Marcy Lytle

There is no greater love than the love of a friend who gives his life for another person. Jesus did that. Even when we were sinners, unaware and not caring about anyone but ourselves, he came and died on the cross, rose again, and did it all so that we could live.

This lesson is the story of an awesome friend who cares about a girl in need, even when the girl is rude and self-absorbed. Jesus is like that friend, if we just take time to notice his presence when we need him the most.

Preparation: *You will need a few “actors,” two books, a couple of dollars, two sheets of paper, a pack of gum in a purse, and a sealed envelope with a folded piece of paper inside. This lesson will take place near the kitchen table.*

Jana was a girl who liked herself a lot and didn't have much need for others. She was popular at school, very smart, a good athlete, and very pleased with her accomplishments. One day while playing soccer, Jana was injured and hurt her arm and leg. Her teacher assigned a friend to carry her books for her and help her around the school. (*Jana limps, as a friend carries her books.*)

The first day after her injury, Jana was in line for lunch with her helper, annoyed that she needed to be helped at all. However, Jana could not carry her lunch tray and had to have help. As the lady asked for her money, Jana realized she left it at home. The friend readily offered to pay for Jana's lunch. (*The friend loans Jana the two dollars, as they sit down together.*)

Jana was finally alone for a minute when her friend went to get their drinks. (*The friend goes to the kitchen.*) Another kid came up to ask Jana about her injured leg. “What happened?” asked the kid. (*The kid points to Jana's leg, questioningly.*) Jana was too embarrassed to tell the real story about how she just tripped over her own two feet when she fell, so she elaborated about a huge goal she was attempting to score and how another teammate tripped her up. She pointed to her friend who had been helping her around school as being the one who tripped her. (*Jana points to her friend in the kitchen.*) Jana felt a bit of shame for lying about her friend.

In the afternoon, the class had a test over some spelling words they had been learning. (*Jana and her friend sit at the table.*) Jana was always proud of her grades, as she usually had the highest grades in the class. However, when Jana was taking the test, she forgot how to spell one particular word. Her mind was just blank! Not wanting to make anything less than a perfect score, Jana's eyes wandered over to her friend's paper and she copied her answer. (*Jana looks at her friend's paper.*) No one saw Jana; at least she thought no one did. By now, Jana was feeling sick feeling to her stomach.

After school, Jana saw that her friend dropped a new pack of gum out of her purse. (*The friend drops a pack of gum.*) The friend was talking to someone else, and Jana just loved that kind of gum. She picked it up, opened the pack and got out a piece, then stuck the rest in her pocket. (*Jana chews a piece of gum.*) Jana thought her friend wouldn't miss this one pack. She always had gum.

Other kids came up and began to whisper and giggle. (*All whisper and laugh.*) Jana listened to them and joined in the gossiping. One comment was made about the friend who had been

helping Jana, with the others laughing at her out-of-style shoes. (*Others point at the friend's shoes.*) Jana laughed, too.

The same friend who had been helping Jana all day now offered to walk home with Jana, once again carrying her books for her. Jana was quite tired of this friend tagging along, but she couldn't carry her own books, so *why not...* she thought. (*Jana and the friend walk.*) All the way home, the friend tried to make conversation, but Jana ignored her. (*The friend tries to talk, and Jana looks away.*) Jana limped up the steps to her house as her friend dropped off her books and said, "Good-bye!" Jana didn't even turn to wave, but walked in the house and slumped into the chair, alone, self-absorbed and completely unaware of the kindness that had been shown her throughout the day. (*Jana slumps on the sofa.*)

Jana never saw that friend again. She heard she moved away or something. However, Jana thought it strange that she would move so suddenly. Jana didn't like to owe anyone anything, so it was best that this girl moved. She probably would have asked Jana to walk with her every day, even when Jana no longer needed her.

The next week Jana got a card in the mail from the friend who moved. (*Jana opens up the envelope*) *How did she even know my address?* Jana wondered. The card was full of kind words about Jana, about how the friend so enjoyed walking with her and helping her. She even said she knew about the cheating and the lying and the stealing of her gum, but she wanted Jana to know that she still liked her and if there was anything she ever needed, she could write her a note and she would pray for her.

What? This girl still likes me? She must be crazy. I have used her, talked about her, ignored her and even stolen from her, and she still wants to be my friend? Jana's heart and stomach turned inside out and she began to cry. "Why would someone be nice to me after all of that?" she said aloud. Jana owed this girl so much because she had taken so much from her, and yet this friend liked her anyway.

Jesus' love is even greater than the love of the friend in this story. Read [Romans 5:6-8](#) and [Romans 6:22-23](#). Even though we were born into this world a sinner, very selfish like Jana, owing a huge debt for our sins; Jesus paid it all at the cross, offering us a friendship and love that surpasses understanding.

We are all in need of a Savior, and that's why Jesus came to die on the cross. He loves us, wants to walk with us, meet our needs, and carry our burdens, much like Jana's friend did for her. And he knows every lie, every thought, every mean thing we've ever done – and still he loves us.

Pray together, inviting Jesus to be your guest of honor this Easter season, as you acknowledge him as Savior and Friend.

HANDMADE AND HOMEGROWN: Pom-Pom Cuties by Cheryl Carrell

This month, I'm sharing another exciting craft to make with yarn. These mini pom-poms are quick to create, and have the ability to add a bit of whimsy to a wide variety of things. They can be attached to wreaths, used as gift toppers, strung up as a garland, made into a flower, added to hair clips and headbands, or even just piled softly in a bowl or glass jar.

My girls and I made ours in a pretty green and blue color combo, and I love them strung up on my mantle for the spring.

Here are the steps we took:

We started by using a dinner fork, wrapping the yarn around the prongs until it was nice and thick.

Once it has reached your desired thickness, cut it loose from the skein, then cut a long strand that will be used to tie the middle of the bundle.

Slip the cut piece between the middle 2 fork prongs, and tie around the entire bundle as tight as you possibly can. (I double knotted mine, then wrapped it around a second time and tied it again on the back side for good measure.) You seriously want it as tight as you can possibly tie it without breaking the yarn. I did break it once or twice; but never fear, I just cut another strand and started the tying part over.

Next you will use scissors to carefully cut all the loops until you have a fluffy blob. Be sure to get all the small loops down inside, being mindful not to cut your center tied knot.

Trim that little guy up until it's nice and round, and the size you want it to be. Be sure to fluff it as you go, so you don't miss any long pieces. Ta da! - An adorable little pom-pom.

Keep making as many as your heart desires, then add them to whatever suits your fancy.

Happy wrapping, and cutting!

I would love to see how you decide to use your pom-pom cuties.

HANDMADE AND HOMEGROWN: Creative Garden Markers - A Roundup by Cheryl Carrell

There are so many clever and crafty ways to make markers for your herbs and veggies. In my experience, the ones written on with a Sharpie, or made out of Popsicle sticks, only last a season or two (Just something to keep in mind when you're deciding what to make for your garden.) Certain things don't hold up too well with regular watering and hot sun beating down. I haven't experimented with any waterproof top coats, but something like that would likely help.

Here are several links to a variety of ideas for your inspiration.

[27 DIY Garden Markers](#)

[Best of Etsy](#)

[DIY Plant Markers](#)

[Rock Garden Markers](#)

[15 DIY Garden Markers](#)

[Ombre Herb Garden Markers Tutorial](#)

[8 Clever Ways to Mark Your Garden](#)

YOU

STRENGTHENING YOUR CORE: Easter Faith by Marcy Lytle

Easter is the holiday that celebrates the foundation of the Christian faith – Jesus’ death and resurrection. I’ve found that over the decades of walking with Christ, this foundation is where I’ve landed over and over again, and it really is solid.

So what’s the big deal about believing that Jesus died...and rose again?

It’s a very big deal. In fact, it’s the deal-breaker when it comes to whether or not we’re still walking with Christ decades from now.

I grew up hearing about Jesus’ death and resurrection every year, as we celebrated with song, drama, and sometimes dance at this time of year. And sure, I believed it. My parents believed it, the Bible teaches it, and in order to get into heaven when I die, I must believe it, too. But there’s so much more to the story than just believing it. My faith depends on it. And without it, I would have died...more than once.

During a five-year period, our home was burglarized three times, we had three fires, a scorpion’s nest was in our attic (and they appeared daily on our ceilings), the foundation in our home cracked, we were losing our financial stability (and ultimately lost our home), and my husband’s health was declining, making it very difficult for him to work. Theology, head knowledge about who Jesus is, did nothing for me.

One day, I was driving home to our house (which we then called Amityville, because it was full of horrors), and I realized something:

The only thing about my faith that I knew for sure was that Jesus died for me, and he rose from the dead, and he’s coming again.

Every other theological “truth” had been tested and tried, and came up short. Tithing faithfully had not staved off financial ruin, trying to be good and perfect had not ensured a “safe” life, and showing up at church every time the door was open had not made me any holier. In fact, I was floundering and facing the ultimate in-the-face reality of life smacking me hard in the face. And the question I heard in my mind and spirit was,

“What do you really believe? And is it enough?”

When I concluded that knowing Jesus died, rose, and is coming again is enough, this incredible peace overwhelmed me, and I knew I was going to live and not die. In fact, I was going to thrive.

We made it through those years, and we’re still alive and kicking. But that experience wasn’t the only test of our faith. We’ve had sick kids, decisions to make about our future, extreme losses, hurt feelings, and all of the things that make up this wonderful journey called life. And each time, it’s not been the fluffy stuff that’s been under my head at night while I rest, like a plumped up pillow of softness. It’s been the hard core facts that lay beneath my entire being when I’m lying prostrate on the floor because I’ve landed there once again, after a huge blow.

And those hard core facts are central to the life of a believer, if we're going to soar through life above all the chaos below.

Jesus died.

That means he loved me enough to offer the greatest sacrifice of all – laying down his life for a friend – and that friend is me. ([John 15:13](#)) That much love must mean he's got me in his hands. ([John 10:29](#))

Jesus rose.

That means that no matter what life throws at me that is intended to destroy me and mine, we will not be destroyed. Greater is He who lives in me than he who lives in the world. ([I John 4:4](#))

Jesus is coming again.

That means this life is temporary, fleeting, and not even the real stuff. That's still coming. And it's going to be grand, unlike anything I can imagine. And the hope is real, of greater worth than gold. ([I Peter 1:6-8](#))

So, I ask you this Easter. Have you come up against anything in your life that has challenged everything you've been taught and heard at church; all of the nuggets you've read in self-help books, and every piece of good advice you've been given? If you haven't, you will. And you too will be confronted with the questions,

“What do you believe?”

“And is it really enough?”

UNDER THE INFLUENCE: What a Waste by Marcy Lytle

“Why should I go to college, when I probably won’t use my degree?” *What a waste of time.*

“Why am I stuck at this mundane job I’m doing when years are passing me by?” *What a waste of my life.*

“She was so smart, and could have made something of herself, if she hadn’t married that guy.” *What a waste of years.*

“I’ve served God and the church most of my life, only to have this happen.” *I’m wasted.*

Do any of those comments, or others like them, ring true for you? We all feel like some part of our lives is wasted, when we realize we spent too much time doing something that had little value, made no impact (in our opinion), and resulted in exhaustion.

I took one typing class as a senior in high school, as an elective, and I hated it. The teacher made me so nervous when she peered over my shoulder that I made my only C ever in school – in that class. And later, I typed for a living.

I stayed home to raise my children, ditching my career and my degree from a university, only to work at home alone on the computer, “wasting” all of those certificates and accolades I had achieved. However, I would do it over a million times, because I don’t regret any moments spent with my kids.

My husband lived in another country with his mom and little brother, leaving “normal” life behind, never having the opportunity for college and a career, and some said, “What a waste.” However, he will tell you that living across the world, outside of the path where he was headed while living here, built in him character and faith that has sustained him as an adult. Those “wasted” years were actually good food for his soul.

Both of my children received degrees from college, which neither of them is using at the moment, so they may feel at time that they “wasted” four years. However, I truly believe they learned discipline, hard work, finishing the course, etc. – all good things that will serve them well in life.

[Psalm 106](#) talks of wasting away in our sin, *Many times he delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin. Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry...* That’s the biggest way we were wasted, and yet Christ had compassion on us and delivered us. So when we talk of a waste of our life, we need to step back and realize and remind ourselves that we were purchased, redeemed, and set free by Him to a life with purpose, meaning, and good things ahead.

Nothing is a waste, for those who have been rescued.

[Isaiah 43:18-20](#) is a great passage for those of us who feel part of our life has been a waste: *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

Isn't that an awesome picture of the character of the one who redeemed us from our wasted life in sin?

If we can believe that Jesus died for our sins to rescue us from wasting away towards death, we can know that Jesus also can take what we now perceive as a wasteland and change it into a stream that flows.

Maybe you feel wasted in many areas of your life; or that there's little hope ahead, because so much time has been lost in pursuit of the "wrong" thing, the "wrong" person, or the "wrong" career. The truth is that God isn't limited by our waste. The Creator of the earth isn't stymied or confused about what to do with all the waste in our garbage cans. In one fell swoop he can take it out, and throw it away.

Nothing is a waste, for those who believe and love the Lord.

It's amazing and incredible how he does it, but God takes years of rebellion, less than helpful choices we've made, horrible circumstances forced upon us, and mundane years of boredom, and turns them all into something totally new.

He doesn't just wad up our waste, press it down, and toss it over the fence in a heap where the rest of the dump resides. He actually makes something totally usable, beautiful, and exciting out of our lives if we ask him to do so. In fact, what we are becoming won't even be recognizable to ourselves, because we will be more like Him, and empowered to be utilized for his kingdom.

Living in a wasteland? It's only temporary. He has taken note of your distress and he's heard your cry.

Now start looking for the stream...

HEALTHY HABITS: Fat Required by Georganne Schuch

A few decades ago someone decided that people were fat because they ate fat. This rumor actually made some sense, because typically you are what you eat. As a result, the low-fat food industry took off like a rocket. Everything from fake butter to skim dairy products promised to save the world from obesity. Except, it didn't work. People not only continued to gain weight on low fat diets, they developed other health problems, like high cholesterol and heart disease.

How did that happen? Weren't the fats responsible for that in the first place?

Well, what no one really understood at the time was that all fats are not equal. Some fats are not only, **not** bad; they are actually good and necessary for a healthy metabolism and immune system. Additionally, all those low-fat foods tasted really bad. Like awfully nasty bad. So, food producers had to do something to add back in the taste. The primary additions were sodium and refined carbohydrates, which are the primary culprits in heart disease and obesity. Remember that whole "you are what you eat" thing.

Our bodies require fat to maintain healthy function of the brain, heart, liver, nervous system and other organs.¹ Like most things, there are good sources of fat and bad sources of fat.

Sources of healthy fats include: avocados; some plant-based oils, such as olive and coconut oil; fish, such as salmon; nuts, like walnuts and almonds; and flax seeds. Coconut oil, in particular, is known as the "high octane" oil.² While it is slightly higher in calories and classified as a saturated fat, it increases the body's metabolic rate and burns more energy. It does not contribute to higher levels of bad cholesterol. It also makes a great skin lotion. (Off topic, I know.)

Certainly, there are sources of "bad" fats, like red meat and pork, to reduce or avoid, altogether. But the better way to approach the fat conundrum is to **consider your overall diet**. Eating less fast and processed foods is the biggest first step toward a healthier diet. Adding healthy fats in reasonable portions will change your eating habits for the better. Nuts make great snacks – no refrigeration required. Baked salmon with lemon juice and cracked pepper is ready faster than you can say Jack in the Box. Coconut oil is fabulous in baked goods, in my opinion. It might have a slight coconut taste at first, but we all like it.

One tip about cooking with coconut oil: Since it is usually solid at room temperature (except on Texas summer days), coconut oil must first be melted before adding to many recipes. If anything in the recipe is cool, like eggs or milk, pour the oil in slowly while you beat the batter. Otherwise, the oil may return to a solid state and make your batter lumpy. Coconut oil isn't that hard to work with, but you have to get used to it not being like liquid all the time, like other oils.

¹ http://www.naturalnews.com/035069_low_fat_diet_myths_weight_loss.html

² <http://www.organicfacts.net/organic-oils/organic-coconut-oil/health-benefits-of-coconut-oil.html>

**In conclusion, remember that most low-fat options are really just bad fat in disguise.
Using real, healthy fats not only makes you healthier, it just tastes better, too.**

BEAUTY FOR ASHES - Bring on the New! By Pam Charro

I don't know if most people are like me, but I have very mixed feelings about change. While I don't like to feel stagnant, I have grown to appreciate a level of stability and sameness more and more as I get older. Approaching the unknown never used to scare me, but I don't seem to be as adventurous now, as I once was.

I like my comfort!

But God knows how important it is that I move forward in life, even though it's usually uncomfortable. When I think back to how much I would have missed out on, if my life had stayed the same, I realize that all of the upheaval has been worth the discomfort.

So many of life's rich colors have been the result of the uncomfortable and the unexpected.

So why do I still fight fear?

I should know better by now, but fear continues to be a struggle as the years go on. Maybe I just haven't fought hard enough against the negativity. It is important for me to remember when things seem crazy and turbulent that God remains stable and I am in good hands, and that he is for me, and not against me ([Romans 8:31](#)). This must be the reason Jesus encourages us all to build our [houses on the rock](#) (God's truth) instead of on sand (constantly changing circumstances). The only thing I can always be sure of is that no matter how things may appear, I am well taken care of. And that one thing changes everything!

When there is no room in my thoughts for life-sucking negativity:

- Rather than dreading the worst in any scenario, I am free to wonder what delightful new thing God is developing.
- Life becomes exciting and inspired again, instead of something I barely survive.
- All of the newness that is ahead of me becomes filled with glorious possibilities, like a birthday present that I cannot wait to open!

God is good, life is good! It truly is that simple. As I set my mind on really believing this, I am free to enjoy life and embrace the excitement and uncertainty that lies ahead. Fear can no longer rob me of feeling alive! I can view life as the gift that God always intended it to be, rich and full and always worth living.

I will believe what God says is true.

So bring on the "new!"

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

A MOMENT IN THYME: The Crossing by Debra Brown

*[Dr. James Dobson](#) coined the phrase, “**WAIT FOR A TEACHABLE MOMENT.**” And that “waiting” never failed me when I employed it with my children. As I look back on my life, I see God’s teachable moments daily...when I choose to look for them.*

Despite horrible weather conditions and re-scheduled flights, our dream of the whole family playing in the snow together was finally happening. Excitement mounted and expectations soared, as the five of us boarded the airplane to visit the four other family members living outside of Boston at Gordon Conwell Seminary. The plane landed and we stepped into a winter wonderland, complete with snow falling.

Surely this is Narnia, we thought, as we drove into the Gordon Conwell campus. Our eyes feasted upon tall evergreens heavy with snow and a frozen pond. Our little troop exploded out of the car, grabbed our suitcases, and ran to gather clothes and equipment for our first sledding adventure down the great Gordon Conwell hill.

Giggles and snowballs filled the air as we began our trek across a large snow covered field that guarded “our” hill. Eyes on the goal, my first step on snowy ground unnerved me as my feet caved through seemingly solid snow. Laden with heavy boots and many layers of clothes, I lifted my weighty legs out of the 12-inch holes and struggled to make the next step.

This was not part of my dream vacation.

I quickly fell behind, huffing and puffing. Overwhelmed by the unexpected jolt and rigor of each step, I felt totally unprepared for the task at hand. I stopped all forward motion.

“I’ll never make this. It’s too hard. I’m already exhausted.” Discouragement spoke over and over.

“Are you okay, Mom?” My girls asked as they hurried past to help their children.

“Oh, yes, just a little slow!”

I am NOT going to miss this opportunity. I am NOT ready to be the old granny.

Determined to cross, I dismissed my anxious thoughts and began experimenting. I maneuvered my steps to use old footprints, but even those required high leg lifts.

“Let’s try baby steps.” I mumbled.

That was a bit better, but every yard or so my teeth jarred when my foot fell thru the fragile snow and ice.

Halfway there, I stopped to catch my breath and have a talk with myself. “We” came to the conclusion that this was just one of those times I was going to have to gut it up and stop complaining.

Gleeful squealing echoed from the hill.

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Gritting my teeth, I took smaller, flatter, baby steps. I no longer cared how I looked crossing that field. Decrepit granny or not, I was NOT going to miss out on any more fun.

And I did not. In fact, the climb up the hill seemed effortless compared to the trudge across the field. Sledding was exhilarating, our joy together intoxicating.

Back in Austin's near 80-degree weather, I can still hear the laughter, see the beauty of that winter wonderland and feel a bit unnerved at each remembered footfall! Yes, I did cross that field at least twice a day for four days, and even though it did get a bit easier, sheer determination was my motivator!

Oddly enough, the frustration of crossing that field did not diminish the joy of sledding down the hill with my family.

Yet, even now, those moments of crossing continue to stay with me. Why? Why was I so unnerved each time my feet caved? Why was I so easily overwhelmed? God is knocking at the door of my heart, drawing me into his depths. He's prepared a "teachable moment" just for me that is much more than my need to get back to the gym. I must attend to it.

Lord, I surrender my moments. Help me see them as you see them. Lead me to see your loving hand in every moment of my day. Highlight any movement away from you. Let me not gloss over my moments so quickly that I miss your hand leading or your whispers of grace. Thank you for your presence in the dramatic and the mundane moments of my day.

*Thank you for the **"teachable moments."***

MARRIAGE

MARRIAGE – TWO FOR THE ROAD - Fondness and Admiration by Lynn Cherry

“Why is this so hard for me?”

Our therapist leaned back in his chair, popped a mint in his mouth and said, “It’s hard for an ostrich to pull her head out of the sand.”

Can you believe our counselor called me an ostrich? It stung a little, but he was right. It was hard for me to face the reality of my life.

I’ll never forget that particular counseling session. We were sharing our homework for the week and trying to look back through the pain of our present struggle, to remember things we simply admired about each other.

It can be hard to remember the good things when we are hurting. We are reading [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) and in his research Dr Gottman found that sometimes the negativity is so great that couples rewrite their history. They not only forget about the good times, they change the story.

Principle #2 is “Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration.” By applying this principle, we can fan into flame even the tiniest embers of love grown cold.

What we really like about this book is that it not only presents seven keys to building our marriage, it provides the tools we need to do the work. In one of the exercises from this chapter, we each choose three positive characteristics and then shared a time when we saw that characteristic in our spouse. It made me happy to share the things I saw in David and it made me happy again to hear what he saw in me. What a sweet way to start the day.

There is something so powerful about remembering the good times, finding common ground, and paying attention to the things we admire about each other. Years ago, in that emotionally charged therapy session; this exercise helped us realize there was still some love in our marriage even though we weren’t feeling a whole lot of love at the time.

Our takeaway from this chapter:

- Commitment can carry you through a difficult season in your marriage – thank God for commitment!
- Feelings of love are really fabulous. You can stir up loving feelings by looking for things to admire and sharing what you find with your spouse.

Don’t look to the anniversary trip to Cancun to keep your love alive. Friendship, kindness, and mutual respect can fuel the flames of romance every day.

Try this:

List three things you admire about your spouse and share them with each other around the fire pit or chiminea.

[Click here](#) to read about Principle #1 “Enhance Your Love Maps.”

Order your copy of [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) and use the exercises provided to build or rebuild your marriage.

MARRIAGE - DATE NIGHT FUN: Say Cheese! By Marcy Lytle

I recently developed an interest in cheese, since most of my knowledge growing up was limited to Velveeta and Cheddar. Cheese is delicious! And there are so many varieties, so many outings that can involve cheese, and even more ways to define cheese than I imagined. This month, pick one of these fun dates to share with a friend as you smile and say, "Cheese!"

- 1) *Watch a cheesy movie with friends.* It took me a while to find a "cheesy" movie that I would recommend, that would be funny, yet ridiculous, and give you a few laughs. But here it is: [Roman Holiday](#) – starring Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck. Enjoy **Brie** cheese, served with crusty bread and sliced pears. Write "C-H-E-E-S-E" on paper and see how many words you can make using only these letters.
- 2) *Pack up a picnic and visit a cheese shop.* Opt for **Porter Cheddar** and pick up some summer sausage. Prepare Potato Salad too, to round out your picnic basket fare. A great potato salad can be made by just boiling potatoes, cooling and mixing in mustard, mayo, chopped pickles, olives, and onions, along with seasoned salt – delicious! Pack it all in this cute [picnic basket!](#) Make sure you choose a park you've never been to before!
- 3) *Say "Cheese" as you snap photos around town.* Try some **Edam** cheese with French bread and an array of fruit, as you stop to rest between takes. Make this even more fun by choosing a rainy day for the photos, and an in-the-car picnic for your cheese pairing.
- 4) *Queso, anyone?* Try this [queso fundido](#) using **Chihuahua** cheese and chorizo. Invite another couple over, and ask them to bring their favorite cheese dish as well. After you've eaten, take a trip to your nearest restaurant with a patio, and order cheesecake for dessert, while you visit as the sun goes down.
- 5) *Grill up sandwiches and read cheese jokes.* I love the show *The Chew*, and one of the chefs demonstrated how to set up a [Grilled Cheese Bar](#) – what fun! Check it out here, and plan to include another couple or two. [Print out these jokes](#) to read, as you line up, make your choices, and grill together in the kitchen. If you haven't tried **Goat** cheese, now is the time to enjoy it as an option for your sandwich spread.

If you don't eat cheese, then you're out of luck for these fun dates. Maybe you can find your own substitutes for a "cheesy" evening out...or in. Cheese lover or not, make April the month you try something tasty together that you've not tried before!

For more ideas on cheese pairings with food, [click here.](#)

MARRIAGE – AFTER 30 YEARS - The Scorecard by Marcy Lytle

When is the last time you played miniature golf? And when you played, did you keep score?

Miniature golf is a pastime that our family enjoys, especially on vacation, and we always keep our strokes recorded on a card, to see who has the lowest score at the end of the game. And believe me, that person takes advantage of bragging rights when the game is over! It's just a golf game, all for fun, and later in the week, the card is in the trash, and who won the game is just a memory...

However, the scorecards we keep with our spouse seem to stack up in a drawer somewhere, only to be pulled out over and over again, to point out who's winning...and who's losing.

In our early years of marriage, I kept a scorecard. It wasn't one I carried in my hand with a pencil dangling from it, but I instead kept it in my head and in my heart. When I did something nice for my husband, in the back of my mind was the question, "Well, when is he going to do something like this for me?" *Tally mark for me!*

Let me explain.

I'm a planner. I'm good at it, I enjoy it, and I actually thrive on it. So I can plan dates for us easily and in no time. My husband takes a long time to plan just one little evening, and it used to annoy me so much. I planned dates, but then kept "score" of how many times I had planned versus how many times he did, and he always lost.

I think ahead. I mark things on the calendar, I am prepared when birthdays and events arrive, and I expect the same from him. Only, he lives in the moment, and isn't good at thinking ahead. He often spent Christmas Eve wrapping my presents, while I had his wrapped weeks before. Another score for me!

I am a multi-tasker. I can clean house, think of what's for dinner, fold clothes, and talk on the phone, type on the computer and remember we have an appointment in an hour, all while my husband is talking to me, to which I can completely respond to everything he says. However, he has to be doing nothing else when I'm talking, in order to process what I'm saying. I'm way ahead on the scorecard now, because I'm outrunning him by a mile.

Notice in the above three paragraphs how many times I talked about me. That was my focus. I kept score on what I was doing for him, how often I did it, and how much better I was at it. He never measured up or scored on "my" card because I was making the rules, calling the shots, and determining whether or not he was fit for this game I was playing.

The bible talks about giving selflessly, and about how love doesn't keep [record of wrongs](#) (that's what my scorecard was – a record of wrongs). [James 1](#) says to give generously without finding fault. In fact, there are over 1300 verses in the Bible about giving. And none of them mentions keeping records of who gives what, or of *giving* being any kind of game at all. Giving is supposed to be what we gladly do...laying down our lives for others.

One problem with keeping a scorecard in a marriage of who gives what is that emotions are associated with the score. When we feel like we're winning, we're way ahead of him, and he's so far behind he's a loser, we begin to despise him...and love wanes. In fact, love disappears. And marriage is not a game of two people against each other. It's not a war, either.

I finally had to realize one day that my husband was very good at many things I don't even attempt or try to do. But I hadn't noticed, because I considered what I was doing to be of so much more value. What a prideful person I had become! And pride always comes with dark glasses which we wear to say, "Look at me, I'm cool and you're not."

You can bet I'm still tempted to pick up a scorecard and start tallying things up, but when I willfully choose to leave it on the table and love him, giving selflessly out of the skills and blessings God has given me, I see my husband in a whole new light. My eyes are opened to his strengths, which amaze me. He wins.

But who's keeping score? Not me.

ENCOURAGEMENT

ENCOURAGEMENT: HIDDEN GEMS: Free to Be Imperfect Me by Kayley Ryan

Perfection is a tricky thing. Sometimes we think we're perfect, and God shows us that we're far from it. Other times we think we're failing constantly, and God shows us through his love and salvation that we are already made perfect in him.

What is true perfection? Is it even possible?

According to *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, perfection is “freedom from fault or defect.” It is the highest standard of excellence, and yet it is a standard which demands more than we can possibly bring to the table.

What begins as a desire to have the highest possible standard of excellence enslaves us to the debilitating standard of perfectionism. Merriam Webster defines perfectionism as “a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable.”

Wow. I had to read that second part again: “anything short of perfection—unacceptable.”

How would it look to live like that? To always try to be perfect and then throw out every attempt at success that doesn't reach that perfect standard?

I have to admit; I do this a lot. I'll start on an essay, not like how it looks, and erase the whole thing. Instead of writing a rough draft and later editing it for mistakes, I feel as if I have to make it perfect the first time.

I'm not just talking about perfectionism in schoolwork, though. We all have areas of our lives that we would love to be perfect: our friendships, our families, our talents, our jobs...

When I was younger, I really thought I could be perfect. In fact, sometimes I still do—despite how many times I prove myself wrong. I kept coming back to God and begging him to take away my stress, my depression, but I still suffered from both. I honestly didn't see the purpose of my life. I couldn't see that my life was a precious gift from God and that everything I did had a huge impact on others.

Then I came across a passage in Acts that reminded me I didn't have to be perfect.

“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through him everyone who believes is freed from *all things*, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.” Acts 13:38-39

“Everyone who believes is freed from *all things*.” Whatever you're struggling with can fit in that all-encompassing phrase because in Christ, we are freed from all things.

God doesn't want you and me to suffer from the debilitating standard of perfectionism. He wants us to lay our fears, our doubts, our hopes, and our dreams at his feet and then be at peace, for he will free us from *all things* and will bring us fulfillment if we rest in his perfect will.

This resting in God's will was made clear to me on a particularly stressful Tuesday morning in March.

I sat down to pray a quick prayer and read a chapter in the Bible before I had to get to my long list of things to do that week—papers to write, books to read, vocabulary to learn, and problems to solve. I got a clear sense from God that he wanted me to write in my journal, confirming a word that someone at church had prayed over me several months ago. I was supposed to write from God's perspective, starting with the words, "*Dear daughter,*" and letting him write the rest. As I began, I didn't expect to receive anything from God, but he proved me wrong. The only words that were my own idea on that page were the first two: "*Dear daughter.*" Every other word was from God.

He reminded me again and again not to worry. The exact words were:

"How many times do I have to tell you not to worry for you to believe me?"

I was reminded of all the times in the Bible that God tells us not to worry. I heard in a sermon one Sunday that the number is 365, *just as many as the number of days in a year*. There is so much freedom in not worrying, in trusting in God's will wholeheartedly.

Why try to be perfect when perfection can only be found in Christ?

The song, "Free to Be Me," by worship artist Francesca Battistelli, beautifully expresses that one can only find true freedom—from perfectionism, from doubt, and from worry—in Christ.

Sometimes I believe
That I can do anything
Yet other times I think
I've got nothing good to bring
But you look at my heart and you tell me
That I've got all you seek
And it's easy to believe
Even though

...I got a couple dents in my fender
Got a couple rips in my jeans
Try to fit the pieces together
But perfection is my enemy
On my own I'm so clumsy
But on your shoulders I can see
I'm free to be me"

Only when we rest on God's "shoulders" can we see that we are free, free to be imperfect, free to laugh at our imperfections, free to fall down and then to know that God will pick us back up again.

The last words that God spoke to me through my journal entry on that Tuesday morning in March convey that we are only free from perfectionism when we are focusing on him.

"Let me be the focus of your life. I am the reason you are here. Let me define who you are. Trust in me—wholeheartedly. Don't hold anything back. I love you."

ENCOURAGEMENT – MOVING FORWARD – Breakthrough by Lynn Cherry

Have airplane spaces shrunk? I'm cramped between the window and some guy reading an enormous textbook that spills over into my allotment. I'm speaking at a women's conference this weekend so I'm working on my message, typing on my laptop, elbows in, when the guy in front of me leans his seat back. The latch from the tray table catches the top of my lap top. I hear a crunching sound and yank it toward me. This space keeps shrinking, tightening all around me. I feel like the world is closing in.

I give up.

The message will have to wait.

I can't think in this small space.

I click SAVE and fold the screen, twisting and bending to tuck my computer under the seat in front of me.

When my neighbor reaches for his water bottle, I slide MY elbow on the arm rest between us. I'm taking ground, three more inches of space and it feels like I've conquered Asia.

With my laptop gone, elbows out, and the tray table returned to its upright and locked position, I can breathe again. I plug my headphones into my much smaller smart phone and seek an escape.

Are you grateful for music, for the way a song transports and transforms? My fingers press imaginary piano keys. I breathe with the phrasing, surrender to the rhythm. Grace washes over me.

My friend Josh Lopez just released a [new project called Let's Love](#) and this song "Breakthrough" is helping me see beyond my cramped quarters.

It's been a difficult trip with difficult circumstances and difficult conversations. I didn't sleep well. I am weary and running low on hope. But as Josh sings, I feel God loving, restoring, and mending me. I feel hope rising up in my heart, as well. I remember my redemption story and somehow I find the courage to believe that God can redeem these circumstances. I choose to trust him.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

The music builds. My heart swells. I relinquish my hold on the arm rest and REST.

Do you need a breakthrough? Find a quiet place to sit and soak up this beautiful song. Invite God to break through you.

Please share your breakthrough moment with us.

Embed video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-Wmby2i5CE>

ENCOURAGEMENT - TOUGH QUESTIONS: Death & Resurrection Part II by April Karli

Last month I wrote about the [question of whether God ever intended death to exist](#). I said that we live in the tension of death and life existing together, and that how we choose to live in the face of that is of tremendous importance.

On Easter Sunday we'll celebrate the greatest turning point of human history -- the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Churches will brim with joyful crowds singing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," delicious foods will be served at Easter lunch, adorable children dressed in their finest clothes will search church gardens and backyards for pastel-colored eggs filled with treats. New life will be celebrated.

When Jesus walked out of the tomb, his body resurrected, a new world was born. This new world is where death was finally conquered once and for all and God's kingdom began its reign. This brings us great hope.

Yet, often that hope seems in vain. Death is still here. We are a people who long for resurrection. As I said last month, sometimes the darkness and grief of this world are too much to take. It can be overwhelming and hard to believe that everything will be okay -- that Jesus will ultimately have victory over death. The promise in Scripture, however, is that we do not grieve as those who have no hope ([1 Thessalonians 4:13](#)). Christians in liturgical traditions declare the mystery of this hope at the Eucharist:

Christ has died.

Christ has risen.

Christ will come again.

Because of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, we have access to new life beginning here on earth. Many Christians long for the day when they'll finally leave the earth. They mistakenly believe that their new life doesn't begin until after their earthly death. But new life begins now. God is in the process of building his kingdom on earth *in the present*. And what we do with our time on earth matters very much. We get to participate with God in making things "on earth as they are in heaven."

Theologian N.T. Wright explains it this way:

"What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether. They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom." ([Surprised by Hope](#))

Jesus told his followers that whoever believed in him, "streams of living water would flow from

within them.” ([John 7:37](#)) This means that wherever you go, whoever you come in contact with, whatever you do, you have the opportunity to pour out the Holy Spirit like a river. Wherever God’s Spirit is there is [freedom](#), [unity](#), [peace](#), [joy](#), and so much more.

Like Jesus’ friends and disciples mourned and felt hopeless when Jesus died, we grieve and sometimes feel hopeless when faced with the death of a loved one or other tragedy. The truly amazing news is that Jesus’ resurrection means that our hope can be restored! Though it doesn’t always seem so, resurrection begins here and now. We look forward to the day when Christ returns and God’s kingdom will be fully established.

For more, watch [this video](#) from N.T. Wright about the difference the resurrection makes.

here’s the code to embed the video:

```
<iframe width="560" height="315" src="//www.youtube.com/embed/e2rAGimw2hY?rel=0"
frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>
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What difference does the resurrection make in your life on this earth? How do you live differently because of Jesus’ death and resurrection?

Come, and let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. Hosea 6:1

ENCOURAGEMENT – REAL STORIES - A Night Bright as Day by Sue Anne McKinney

10 years ago, I went through the most difficult season of my life. I never felt so heavy, so oppressed, and so fearful. Maybe it was especially dark because it seemed like the season would never end...or that it would end terribly.

2004 started out well. We were living in Colorado and had been there since 2002. Our two oldest children (no longer children, but college students at Clemson) had been home for Spring Break. They both seemed to be doing really well. Both of them were falling in love and it was such a sweet time to share with them. They were full of summer plans and looking forward to the future.

Our youngest, Tamera, at age 16, was a sophomore in high school and growing into a beautiful young woman. Since we moved to Colorado, she had not ever felt truly at home at our new church, but she seemed secure in our love for her and had a few close friends at school.

So, when Tamera came to us after spring break expressing that she thought she may have an eating disorder, I was not sure what to think. As her parents, we both were a little bit unconvinced. Looking back, I am not sure what would have 'convinced us,' but we listened and then prayed and thought,

What are we going to do?

I am grateful that Tamera felt she could come to us and express what was going on. She brought up several things that she had been experiencing and I finally noticed that she was about 15 pounds lighter than she had been at Christmas.

Let me just say that looking up "anorexia" on the internet was very discouraging. This was not something to be blown off. One of the first things I did was take Tamera to our family practice doctor. He visited with both of us and then he asked to talk to Tamera alone. After a private conversation with her, he came out of his office to find me. He only said, "I strongly encourage counseling and sooner better than later." That's all he would say. I felt sick to my stomach.

Later I found out that she had shared with him her suicidal thoughts and that she had been 'cutting'. More darkness. This huge dark cloud settled over our lives.

We did get Tamera into a Christian counselor at an eating disorder clinic in Denver. She referred us back to the MD for medication to go along with the counseling sessions. I distinctly remember sitting in the lobby of her office one afternoon, thinking,

I never in 100 years would have imagined being in this place.

The counselor was great, though. She knew of Tamera's 'cutting' and reassured me that this was not a suicidal act. Tamera seemed to cease the cutting within a few weeks of counseling. She spoke the truth to Tamera and reminded her of who she was in Christ.

Every morning beginning in April, when my husband and I got up, we spent time praying together for Tamera, specifically. We prayed like we had never prayed before. Then he went to work. I sat and continued to pray on our patio that looked out towards the mountains. No matter how much I prayed, the darkness and heaviness felt like a thick blanket on my heart. I had little

Come, and let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. Hosea 6:1

energy and I remember that I could NOT find the presence of the Lord. I knew and trusted that He was with us and cared, but I really did not sense his nearness at all.

I was truly afraid that the enemy might steal our daughter.

I picked up [Streams in the Desert](#), an old devotional, and read it every day. I watched my daughter like a hawk! Was she getting better? Was she starting to put on a few pounds? Was she a little less listless? Was she still cutting?

By the end of June, God caused me to take my eyes off of Tamera and put them on him and HIS salvation. As I look back through my journal of that month, it is full of promises that came from reading His words to me. We had also reached out to friends back in Austin who knew and loved Tamera. With Tamera's permission, we shared what her struggles were and asked our friends to pray.

In mid-June, one man in particular took it upon himself to email Tamera. I still have those emails and her response. He spoke the truth lovingly to her. Though he really did not say anything differently than what we had been saying, it had a powerful effect on Tamera.

Within a couple of weeks, her depression was lifting as SHE made the choice to say "No!" to her enemy and "Yes!" to God's plan for her life and his love for her.

Tamera agreed that this was a turning point that summer.

God had also given us a strong desire to leave Colorado and move back to Austin. I had received a word ([Daniel 10:10-19](#)) that within 21 days we would have our answer. I chose to be content wherever God placed us. Our home is not here, our citizenship is in heaven. On July 7, exactly 21 days later, we had a phone call confirmation that our request to move to Austin was approved. By August 9, we had sold our home in Denver and prepared for our move back to Austin.

The fight certainly was not over at this point, but honestly, it was like the sky cleared, the birds sang again, and the big crushing weight on my chest fell away.

Looking back through my journal, I'm struck at how fast everything really happened between April and August 2004, but in EXPERIENCE, it seemed to last so much longer.

My "take away" gifts from that season:

God sometimes tears us in order to heal us. These are a couple of verses God had given me the previous year for the year ahead: Hosea 6:1 *Come, and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn us so that He may heal us; He has stricken so that He may bind us up.* Hosea 6:3 *Yes, let us know (recognize, be acquainted with, and understand) Him; let us be zealous to know the Lord [to appreciate, give heed to, and cherish Him]. His going forth is prepared and certain as the dawn, and He will come to us as the [heavy] rain, as the latter rain that waters the earth. (Amplified version)*

God uses the prayers and words of our friends to bring strong support to us and effect change in spiritual realms. This event also initiated a morning, prayer time that William I still share

Come, and let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. Hosea 6:1

together every week day. We pray for our kids and our grandchildren and some of our closest friends. [Matthew 18:18-20](#)

Darkness is as light to Him. Psalm 139: 11 *If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for the darkness is as light with you.*

Sue Anne:

Wife, Mom, Grandmother to 5 sweethearts. Loves spending time outside and with her family! She occasionally blogs at austinana.blogspot.com.

Tamera

Now happily married to the love of her life, Max, whom she met in youth group in Austin. Tamera teaches 9th grade science at a high school in Leander ISD. Tamera loves to bake and try out new recipes. She did not inherit this from her mother.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME: LOST by Marcy Lytle

Being separated from the familiar is scary, and can lead to panic. It's not fun to be lost, whether it's simply forgetting where we parked in a mall and being lost for a few minutes, or losing track of a family member in a huge crowd and being separated for a few hours while we frantically search and lose our mind.

The word "lost" is found in many titles of television shows and movies. We recently saw *All is Lost*, where a man sets out on his boat for some much needed time away, only to end up alone in a storm completely lost from all contact with his known world. The television show *Lost* was set on an island where a plane crashed and people from various backgrounds ended up finding their way among strangers. And *Lost in Space* was about a family who set out to fight for humanity, but wound up fighting for a way back home.

However, being lost (or perceiving that we are lost) is not something we aspire to do in life. It's downright frustrating at the low end of the spectrum, and heart wrenching at the other end.

When my daughter was small, we were waiting in line to pay for a few items in a huge department store, when she needed to go the bathroom. It wasn't far from me, so I sent her on her way, only to realize it had been a while and she had not returned. In a few minutes, I heard on the speaker, "Marcy, come to the customer service counter." I made my way over to the counter, to see my daughter standing there crying, because she had come out of the bathroom and not remembered which direction to go (there were two checkout lanes and exits in the store). I quickly swept her up into my arms and commended her for finding a sales person and having me paged. Imagine my surprise (and hers), when she told me she didn't tell anyone anything. I then found out that an employee by the name of Marcy worked in the store, and it was she who was being paged – not me.

My daughter and I have never forgotten that experience.

She remembers how she was lost and God took care of her by having her mommy paged. I remember how I had no idea my daughter was lost and God brought her to me by having my name called on the loud speaker. It's one of those life markers that set into concrete the truth that God watches over us and takes care of us, when we are need and know it, or even when we are in need and don't know it – when we are lost.

Another time, my husband and I took our kids to a huge waterpark with several sections, where we had to ride shuttles to move from place to place. It was in the time before cell phones (can you imagine?) and we got separated from each other. He had our daughter at one ride, and I took my son to another, because he was younger. As we exited the rides and entered the crowd, my husband and I, and our kids, became lost from each other – for about four hours! At first I panicked, and then I became angry that we hadn't done a better job of communicating to each other.

I woke up early this morning thinking about being lost. Most of the time, my mind thinks of that familiar line in an [old hymn](#), "I once was lost, but now I'm found..." referring to how we were lost in sin but Jesus found us. I also thought of the verse that says the good shepherd leaves the 99

sheep, to go [in search of the one](#) that wandered off, again referring to those who are lost in sin being rescued and found by the attentive master.

But this morning, I realized that being lost happens all throughout our lives, even after we are “found” and saved from our sins. We feel lost when a loved one dies, and we have no sense of purpose for living. We feel lost when we graduate from college, entrenched in a huge world of a million choices for a career and we have no idea where to start. We feel lost when change occurs, like our kids growing up and moving on, and we’re left with empty rooms and lost years. And we feel lost when friends and family suffer, grow old, or experience devastating disease and we have no idea how to help or make things better.

That’s the kind of lost I felt this morning, at a loss of how to deal with hurt, bad news, the future, etc. It sort of all caved in on me in the early morning hours, just before sunrise, when the room was still quite dark.

It was then that I realized that the same Jesus who found me in my sin and saved me, who brought me out of darkness into the light, is the one who can find me again while I’m **feeling separated (and in a panic) from the nearness of his goodness. Isn’t that really what feeling lost is all about?**

Feeling lost in this big world, in whatever way we want to define it, boils down to just feeling separated, unable to connect with, or know how to help others; unable to feel that joy that resides down deep; and unable to trust and know that our future is secure. It’s like stepping out of line where we were being held by the hand, into a big crowd where no one knows our name.

I’m confident today that although I woke up crying and feeling lost, I’m going to hear my father’s name at some point today, as he beckons me to come to his “counter” where he will be standing with arms open wide to scoop me up and hold me near. I’m sure that his presence will be mine, because I belong to him and he doesn’t want me to be away from the closeness of his whisper. I know that he will find me, because he knows where I am at all times, and there is nothing that can separate me from his great love.

And finally, it’s a done deal that he’s going to meet the needs of those I love and take care of them, and ease my cluttered mind, and settle my panicked heart, as well as the minds and hearts of those I love.

All is NOT lost, I’ve not crashed and been left to survive on my own, and I’m certainly not on a random flight to find my way home. I belong to Him, the Good Shepherd, the Father of Lights, and the Creator of the Universe.

There’s not one place I can go where He is not there with me...

I once was lost...but now I’m found...

FRESH THYME: Pick up the Darn Can by Marcy Lytle

It was breezy and warm for a fall morning, so my husband and I opted for a tennis game, something we enjoy doing. He took his side and I took mine, and we both opened our can of tennis balls, tossing the empty can back against the fence. We could have put the can away in the bag on the bench, but neither of us took the time to do so. And by the end of the game, I was irritated and annoyed – all because I didn't pick up the darn can.

While I was playing the game, the can kept rolling onto the court or showing up by my feet. This became a hazard, so several times during play I kicked the can hard, back up against the fence. It never stayed there. In fact, it would be a very funny video if there had been someone there filming both of us trying to play tennis, with these crazy cans blowing all over the court...constantly. But it soon grew very un-funny, and my husband finally picked his up can and placed it inside one of the tennis racket covers. His stayed put and mine kept blowing.

I starting thinking about the can and realized that all of us have annoying "cans" that blow around at our feet. All it requires is a bend in the back and a pinch in the fingers to pick up that can and put it away, out of sight, away from our feet. But, just like I did in the tennis game, we keep playing. Did that stupid can affect my game? You can bet it did.

Why did the darn can keep getting underfoot?

1. **It was empty.** If we are constantly giving and giving to others, but never filling ourselves back up with the Word, with relaxation and rejuvenation, or with a bit of laughter and fun, we become like that empty can – hollow and blown about by the slightest breeze.
2. **It had no anchor.** Since the can was empty, it was light. One time it even blew up against the fence behind a tiny rock, but the next gust of wind tossed it right back onto the court. Our anchor has to hold, like a boat out to sea in the waves (have you seen the movie [All is Lost?](#)) or that which is keeping us afloat will sink!
3. **It was windy.** Had the wind died down, I'm sure that can would have stayed put. I knew it was windy, and yet I just let the can keep annoying me and stirring up my anger, to which I responded with a swift kick. However, none of my kicks grounded the can.
4. **I was too lazy to pick it up.** This is the worst part of my confession. I could have picked the can up at any point in the game, put it away (like my husband finally did), and the can annoyance would have been no more. Jesus wants to cover us and protect us, but we have to be willing to ask and to run to him for refuge, when the wind blows.
5. **The balls were in play.** Had the can been full of that with which we were playing with, it would not have blown around. But we were in the game, focused on playing, and didn't want to be bothered with the silly can. There are times when we're serving, giving, worshiping, etc. – using all the great gifts we have inside of us – yet our shell is in need of a bit of grounding.

Let me explain this last point.

We had come to play tennis. When the game was going, the balls were in play, we had no use for the can. But without the can that housed the balls before the game, the balls would have been loose, and probably lost.

Our bodies house our spirit, and yes it's a great thing to be busy for God. But when we're in the thick of the "game" we must take time to fill up, anchor, observe the wind, and flex our muscles to take care of the one body we've been given.

If we don't, we end up losing the tennis game...or maybe even the more serious game of life.

Do you have a loose can on your court?

What other analogies can you draw from this illustration of trying to play a game with an annoying piece of plastic underfoot, one that can actually cause you to trip and fall if you don't take care of it?

Pick up the darn can...and enjoy the serve...and the game.

FRESH THYME: Tell Them by Marcy Lytle

Psalm 78:4 We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.

Our children need to hear us tell them of the great things God has done in our lives. We need to tell them often. We need to tell them at different ages of their lives. And we need to share them with the same love we share a dinner with them, knowing we are feeding their souls.

We just saw a war movie called [Stalingrad](#), which was the story repeated by a son who had been told the story of his mom's survival in a brutal war. She relayed to her son the names and character of the soldiers that cared for her, the perils they faced, and the kindnesses shown to her that ultimately saved her life before he was ever born. In the opening scene of the movie, we see this man (who is now a grown man, and a rescue worker) talking to a lady trapped under a fallen building, as she waits for help. He relays the story of his mom's rescue to her, while the trapped lady waits, so that she won't lose hope. And so the movie unfolds...

When we have kids, we have to grow up in many ways. We soon realize that parenting is about raising these children and not about us and our whims and fancies any more. It's time for us to take note, recall, and realize (and call upon) the faithfulness of the Lord and his goodness in our lives. In doing so, we can offer our kids hope in a dying world in which they live, faith in the God who is real and cares for them, and love from a parent to a child to care enough to share with them the most important gift of life – one surrendered to God.

So what are some practical ways to relay our story to our kids?

We can write it down.

Make a journal for each child when they are born, and start journaling God's faithfulness from the time they make their appearance in the world. Then present it to them when they get married. For instance, our son was seriously ill with high fever, which landed him in the emergency room in the early hours of the morning, only to have God touch him immediately and heal him. My son needs to know that story.

We can share stories over dinner.

Carve out time around the table to share some of your own struggles you had while growing up, and how you now see God's hand over your life. This may help your own kids to open up about their current struggles. For instance, if you were friendless and God brought a new friend into your life, tell your kids. Give thanks together and pray for your own child's needs.

We can pray aloud.

Spend time together praying, not just always alone in your closet. When you tuck your kids in at night, recall God's faithfulness from the day, as you praise Him. Ask them to give thanks, as well. For instance, if you lost your keys and found them, thank God out loud! Even small occurrences need to be recalled and noted, so our kids know that God cares about every detail of their lives.

At the end of the movie I referred to above, the young lady who was trapped under a fallen building emerges, and runs to the rescue worker who talked her through the long period of time while she waited to be brought out to safety. There was a bond made between the storyteller and the listener that will last forever. And that lady will be less afraid next time danger is near.

You've been rescued, if you know Jesus. He has saved you time and again, blessed you over and over, and met your needs countless times. Your kids are just starting out on this journey called life, and things around them will cave in at times, and they will feel trapped. But if you have shared your stories, they will come to mind. They will be their lifeline...because they all connect to Jesus.

Tell them.

FRESH THYME: Therein Lies the Problem by Marcy Lytle

I know [John 3:16](#) and I suppose it's the verse that we all memorize as a kid. And yet, it's this verse that is so crucial to our life as a Christian way down the road, long after that first "I believe." When prayers don't seem to be answered, when life hits us hard, and when questions start popping up because of tough times, this verse is the one that's either the foundation on which we stand, or the one we only memorized and never really believed.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

It's the banner verse that we would hang across the roof of our building, if we had a building that housed the faith of all believers. But that banner gets a few holes in it when the wind blows, it even become brittle when the sun gets too hot, and it downright hangs upside down when our faith is shaken to the core.

And therein lies the problem...

When life is moving along nicely like a gondola on a serene river, and our parasol is up, the music is playing, and the moon is shining on a clear night, we feel secure in the love of God. All is well, so he must love us. We must be in his favor, because life is indeed good.

When we are together with others, singing out loud, raising our hands, closing our eyes and swaying to the music, and we hear the voices that combine together as one, we have no trouble getting caught up in the loving God we so awesomely adore, with every fiber of our being.

When we are in need of money, healing, or direction and we pray and provision appears, healing takes place, and the path is clearly lit, we feel the arms of our loving God as he places what we need in our hands, restores our health, and leads the way – because all we have to do is follow.

However, when the river rises and we're dumped out into the storminess of the dark water, when we're alone in our room with no one around us to sing (and in fact, their singing now becomes annoying), or when we've prayed and cried until no more tears are available and no answers seem to be ours, the loving God suddenly becomes the God who doesn't care, or who maybe isn't even there.

And therein lies the problem...

It hit me like a brick today that if I really believe John 3:16, that God truly did send his only son to die for me – for me and my sin – and then offered me eternal life instead of death – his love is real and He is real.

So why does it matter that we believe this fundamental truth?

It's because when (not if) life is difficult, we can lie back and rest on this one truth and live and not die. This one truth is what matters. All of theology (the study of the nature of God) won't sustain us when everything under us is gone. Study books, life groups, sermons, and worship

songs are great and necessary, but if we don't believe that God loves us – like no other – we will skim along the shore and never walk atop treacherous water – confident that He is with us and will calm the storm.

Do you believe? There will come a time when you will have to make that choice, other than when you first believed. You will have to choose to believe...again and again...[John 3:16](#).

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

MAY 2014

TIPS

THE DRESSING - Kitchen Kuteness

Why not dress up our kitchen this month? Kitchens get dirty every day, cluttered counters drive us crazy, and there never seems to be enough space to house all of our gadgets! However, we spend so much time in the kitchen that it's nice to have it decorated, color-coordinated, and appealing when we step inside to make yet another meal for our hungry bunch...

Tea towels. We have a drawer full of them, and most of the time they're tattered, stained, and decades old. Those are fine for the drawer. But if we choose one or two to change out hanging on the oven door, or draped on a hook, this can set the color scheme for the room! Check out these [beautiful prints](#) from World Market.

Hooks and crannies. Rather than piling our keys, mail, and junk in the corner of the counter, why not hang a cute organizer on the wall, so all of that stuff is up and off of your precious space? Target has a cute washed out wood [organizer with hooks](#) that adds charm to any kitchen.

Cookie jar. I know. We eat healthy food now. But every kitchen needs a cookie jar! My grown kids still look inside mine every time they visit to see what fresh baked goods await, as they lift the lid to peek and taste. Try [these cookies](#) and bake them tonight, then place them inside this [pretty jar with a lid](#).

Fruit bowl. Nothing is more inviting than a pretty clear glass bowl (or a white one) full of lemons and limes. Keep a good amount on hand for making salsa, brightening up your veggies, and squeezing into your water or tea.

Flowers and candles. Do you have flowers in your yard? Cut them often and set out small vases along your bar, or opt for a large vase full of color in the center. Next, keep a [candle](#) in the kitchen, one that smells up the house, and matches your décor. Both of these invite you in and make you enjoy your stay in the kitchen so much more!

No Curtains, Please. Bad curtains can diminish the charm of a kitchen, and with all the cooking, eating, and messing that takes place in this room, curtains can get grimy rather fast! Why not just place something [whimsical](#) atop your windows, and let the light shine in brightly from morning til sunset?

Front & Center. If you have a kitchen table that is a focal point of your room, don't allow clutter to be the centerpiece. A [two-tiered tray](#) is nice for holding ripening avocados and tomatoes. Or make your own centerpiece out of two different-sized, tin pie pans and two candlesticks!

Dressing up your kitchen doesn't have to be costly. Step back and take a look at your space. Clear up the clutter and make places for your gadgets. Next, shop for one particular piece that will be your focal point of color, and go from there, as you add your other pieces.

And next time you step inside to cook, you just might exclaim, "How Kute!"

SEVEN 4 YOU – Fresh Flowers

May Flowers are in bloom, either in your yard, along the highways, out in meadows, and yes, even in those bunches at the grocery store. Bringing fresh flowers into your home just brightens the day, invites guests to enjoy the fragrance, and the flowers look quite pretty! There are lots of ways to arrange them in your house, without having to spend big bucks or take up an entire table! Here are some cute, decorative ways to set out fresh flowers in vases, and other cool containers, to add color to your home:

1. **Tiny vases in a row.** Just snip about 6-7 stems of flowers and place each one in its own individual tiny vase, and line up along your kitchen window. You can find the tiny vases at your local hobby/craft store or use empty small bottles you have at home. You can also place them in a row on a tray and set on your bar.
2. **A pretty arrangement.** Pick your color scheme (all of one color, or mix it up). Opt for three heights – tall, medium, and short. Place the tall flowers in the water first, the medium around next, and fill the edges with the short ones that can sort of spill over the edges. Don't stick them all in at once – take your time, one flower, then the next... Follow steps by [clicking here](#).
3. **Floating in a bowl.** Cut off flower heads; place several in the water, to float in a clear glass bowl. Set atop an end table or even in the bathroom.
4. **Blooming branches.** Snip off a few [branches](#) that contain blooms and place in a large vase. The vase should be about a third as tall as the branches.
5. **Fun container flowers.** Why not use something other than a vase or bottle to house your flower display, or place your vases inside something else? An old watering can, [a wooden tool box](#), or even a large coffee cup can be used as a base for your display of color! No need to spend your dollars on a fancy glass vase!
6. **Just leaf it.** What if you just trimmed a few leafy branches and placed them in little vases along your [windowsill](#)? Perhaps your summer gets too hot for flowers in your yard, but you have some pretty greens. Display them!
7. **Eggsactly!** Surely, you can scrounge up some leftover plastic eggs, and an empty egg carton. This [how-to](#) shows a way to repurpose both of these items from Easter last month, into a beautiful centerpiece for your kitchen or dining table.

Flowers are expensive at the store, so grow your own in pots or in the ground, in your yard. If you haven't got the time, then splurge once in a while on a bouquet, but save money by displaying them in what you've already got at home. You don't have to forfeit your weekend fun money to have a bit of color for the weekdays, when you get back into the routine of life. The sight of fresh foliage is always a welcome at the end of a long, tiring day!

Selah's Style - 5 Ways to Wear a Scarf – by Selah Irwin

For my 8th birthday, my Aunt Marcy (who is the founder of this whole magazine) gave me this amazingly, sparkly scarf! I thought of five ways I can wear it. (The last one is my personal favorite.)

1. This is just the normal look. I folded the scarf in half, wrapped it around my neck, pulled the end through the loop and...

Zazow!

I have a wonderful snappy example.

2. This is called the hippy whippy! This one brings back so many memories from way back in the 60's!

3. You can even use a scarf as a belt! This looks has a lot of pizazz!

4. Here we have a way to use a scarf as a necklace. It looks so pretty this Way, and is pretty easy to do for those times when you are on-the-go.

I simply tied a knot in the end and then wrapped it around my neck two times.

5. Here it is! My favorite!

The Ninja!

I fearsomely wrapped the scarf around my face to create this mystical look! I can wear this to the park and play spies, or I can wear it in a blizzard. I can wear it anywhere!

The possibilities for wearing a scarf are to infinity...and beyond!

FEARLESS KITCHEN - A Taste of Appreciation by Christina Vetter

Every year, Mother's Day seems to sneak up on me. But no matter how predictably unexpected this day arrives, the question remains the same: What to get a mom for Mother's Day? I will be celebrating my own Mother's Day for the second time this year, and I can honestly say I never knew what mothers really needed until I became one. While cards, candies, and showers of pink roses are truly very nice and still recommended, the absolute best Mother's Day gift is something much simpler.

One sunny day my husband gave me the best gift a mother could ask for. It wasn't wrapped in ruffles or pretty pink paper. In fact, it wasn't wrapped at all. My son was about six months old at the time, and my husband offered to watch him all day while I spent some time with my mom and sister. Now a little background...My husband has always been very much in the mess of parenting with me. He'll change a million diapers, feed my precious boy, or anything else I need help with, but up until this point, he had never had him for a full day by himself. After having a relaxing day window shopping and eating lunch with the girls, I came home to a semi-clean house, a happy baby, and an exhausted husband. Now the day off would have been a real treat in itself, but then he said the best thing a mother's ears can hear. With a heavy sigh he muttered, "I don't know how you do this all day, every day. This is hard." And there it was. Acknowledgement. One of the best gifts he has ever given me.

When's the last time you told your mom how much you appreciate all she's done for you? Or acknowledged how difficult it can be to be a mom? One heartfelt declaration would mean the world to her. Keep that in mind when you're racking your brain for a gift this Mother's Day.

To show how much I appreciate the moms in my life, I'm doing something a little different this month. Instead of sharing some of my own special recipes, I'll be honoring my mother and mother-in-law by sharing their best recipes. (*Thanks moms!*) These recipes are very often requested whenever we visit for dinner and I know you'll enjoy them as much as we have! My mother in law, Lucy, whips up a killer Steak and Summer Salad that I'm sure your family will swoon over, and my mom, Claire, makes a fantastic Banana Nut Bread as well as a Miller's Meatloaf that will have you drooling.

Whatever you decide to get the mothers in your life this Mother's Day, top it off with a taste of what they deserve: true appreciation. Happy Mother's Day to all my fellow mommies out there! You're awesome!

Banana Nut Bread

Makes 2 loaves

Recipe courtesy of Claire Miller

Difficulty: 

This is the best banana bread I've ever had. It's moist and full of banana flavor. The nuts are optional but I think it adds a great texture to the bread. Great job, Mom!

Ingredients:

3 overly ripe bananas
1 C sugar
2 eggs
3 oz buttermilk
2 ¾ oz vegetable oil
1 ½ C flour
1 Tbsp baking powder
¾ Tbsp baking soda
1 C chopped walnuts or pecans
2 Tbsp melted butter

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 290 degrees
- Mix bananas with sugar until liquefied.
- Add eggs, buttermilk, and oil one and a time- mixing in each ingredient well.
- In a separate bowl, mix flour, baking soda, and baking powder.
- Add wet ingredients to dry ingredients and mix until no lumps remain.
- Add chopped nuts and mix well.
- Pour into 2 greased 9x5 loaf pan (about ¾ full)
- Dip a spatula in the melted butter and make a crease down middle of loaf to create a spilt top during baking.
- Bake at 290 for about an hour, turning the pan every 15 minutes.
- The loaves should be as dark as possible without burning.
- Allow to cool, turn out of pan, and slice to serve.

Lucy's Steak and Summer Salad

Serves 4-6

Recipe courtesy of Lucy Calliccino

Difficulty: 

My mother in law, Lucy, makes this dinner almost every time we come to visit, and it's my favorite recipe she has! It pairs perfectly with your favorite cut of steak, and is equally yummy eaten by itself. It's fresh, light, and brilliantly tasty!

Ingredients:

-3 ripe Roma tomatoes, small diced
-1 red onion, small diced
-1 (5oz) pkg arugula, chopped
-1/2 C Kalamata olives, small diced
-1 small jalapeno, seeded and diced
- 4 oz feta cheese, crumbled
-olive oil

- Salt and black pepper
- 4 steaks, (I prefer Sirloin)

Directions:

- Mix tomatoes, onion, arugula, olives, jalapeno, and feta together in a large bowl.
- Add enough olive oil to coat (you want it to be slightly wet looking, but not soggy).
- Add salt and black pepper to taste. Refrigerate for at least two hours.
- Meanwhile, salt and pepper both sides of the steaks and grill until desired doneness (I prefer medium rare).
- Serve salad right on top of steak and eat together in every bite.

Miller Meatloaf

Serves 6-8

Recipe courtesy of Claire Miller

Difficulty: 

Don't be fooled, this is nowhere near your average, dry meatloaf. This recipe is originally from Alton Brown but my family has adopted it as our own. There's nothing better than some mashed potatoes and corn to go along side this scrumptious meatloaf. It's true home cooking at its finest.

Ingredients:

- 6oz garlic flavored croutons
- ½ tsp black pepper
- ½ tsp cayenne pepper
- 1 tsp chili powder
- 1 tsp dried thyme
- ½ onion roughly chopped
- 1 carrot, peeled and roughly chopped
- 3 garlic cloves
- ½ red bell pepper
- 18 oz ground chuck
- 18 oz ground sirloin
- 1 ½ tsp salt
- 1 egg

For the Glaze:

- 1 ½ C ketchup
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- Dash Worcestershire
- Dash Tabasco sauce
- 1 Tbsp honey

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 350.

- In a food processor, combine croutons, black pepper, cayenne pepper, chili powder, and thyme. Pulse until mixture is a fine texture and place in a large bowl.
- Combine onion, carrot, garlic, and bell pepper in food processor and pulse until mixture is finely chopped but not pureed.
- Combine the vegetable mixture, chuck, and sirloin into bread crumb mixture. Add salt and egg and mix thoroughly.
- Pack the meat mixture into a loaf pan to create a shape. On a parchment paper lined baking sheet, turn the meat out of the pan on to the center of the sheet.
- Bake at 350. After 10 minutes, add the glaze: mix together ketchup, cumin, Worcestershire, Tabasco sauce, and honey and brush over the top of the meatloaf. (It will want to run off, so keep brushing occasionally if needed)
- Continue baking until internal temperature reaches 160 degrees, about an hour. Slice into desired portions to serve.

TRIED AND TRUE – In a Pinch

Have you ever repurposed an item for something else, because you were “in a pinch” and necessity took over? We all have! Either we’re making a recipe and we are missing one ingredient, or we’re organizing a drawer and we have a bright idea of just what to use for those loose earrings, or we might even be inspired to keep plastic bottles for who knows what! Here are our ideas for what to do when we’re in a pinch:

No salad dressing in the fridge? In a pinch, you can take some mayonnaise, juice from a jar of banana peppers, olive oil and black pepper, and mix up your own dressing! Just start with the mayo, and add in the other ingredients until the consistency looks and tastes like dressing. Pack it up, and you’ve got your salad lunch complete!

Empty water bottles? I recently bought a planter trio for my table, and when I set the tiny potted plants inside, the planter pots were deeper than I thought. In a pinch, I cut the bottom of plastic water bottles (I just needed a couple inches) turned them upside down in the planters, and placed the pots on top. This worked great!

Old baby socks? Have you seen the small, sock phone protectors that you can buy? Why not use your baby’s socks that he/she has outgrown when you’re in a pinch for protecting your phone? Find a cute colorful one, maybe one with stripes, and slip your phone inside. This way your phone is protected from all that scratches, inside your purse!

No money for curtains? One cool way to dress up your windows in a pinch (a money pinch; that is) is to go hiking and bring home a large branch. Spray paint it as you wish, and set it atop the frame of your window for an awesome – free – window dressing that’s whimsical and cute!

Empty egg cartons? I needed something to organize all my stud earrings, without having to take off the backs and attach each one to an earring stand every evening – too much work! I had heard about [using egg cartons](#) for small items – I placed one in my long skinny drawer – and it works! Each of the dozen dips in the carton holds and sorts my earrings of all colors. I love this pinch!

Out of baking soda? There's nothing worse in baking than being half way through mixing ingredients to find you're out of a staple like baking soda! The good news is that you *can* use baking powder...just triple the amount you use. For example, if the recipe calls for a teaspoon of baking soda, add 3 teaspoons (aka 1 Tbsp) of baking powder. It works, because among other things, baking powder has baking soda in it. It will change the taste but at least you're not throwing an entire batch of dough in the trash. Just FYI...this trick does not work the other way around. If you try to add baking soda in place of baking powder, you may end up with a nasty tasting, GREEN product! Yuck! – *Christina Vetter*

Bra straps showing in the back? In a pinch, take some of your wrapping ribbon and tie it under your two straps in the back and pull them together (you may need to loosen them a bit first). Tie the ribbon off in a knot, slide it down to where it feels comfortable, put back on your shirt – and no straps showing!

Cheeks lost their color? In a pinch, you can put lipstick very lightly on your fingertip, rub it into the cheekbone area, and you're back to looking alive once again! Your grandmother may have literally pinched your cheeks, but that hurts! This method doesn't!

Rainy game days got you down? In a pinch you can store the [plastic bags](#) that house your newspaper, keeping them in the back of your car. These are great for muddy shoes after those soccer games or picnics, when the rain unexpectedly shows up and your kids start to climb in your freshly vacuumed car!

Is your catch-all box a mess? If you've got a box where you toss pens, tape, pencils, scissors, etc. and all of the items keep falling over, you can use your empty kitchen jars in a pinch! Instead of buying an expensive new organizer, place your small empty jars (spice jars, pickle jars, etc.) inside the box, placing scissors in one, pens in another, and so on. Everything stands up!

No wrapping paper or bows? In a pinch, use your newspaper, brown mailing paper, or even construction paper for small gifts! Or...use old bandanas, out-of-use cloth napkins, or scrap fabric, and wrap the gift, tying in a knot on top! Use your kids' stamps, or ones you have, and stamp the plain paper. Or use old hair bows or headbands to tie around small items. Voila! You've created a masterpiece!

Company coming and you're out of candles and room spray? In a pinch, (and even all the time,) just place a small pot of water on the stove. Add whole garlic cloves, a couple of bay leaves, 2-3 sticks of cinnamon, dashes of nutmeg and half of an orange and a lemon, quartered. Bring to a boil, then turn down to simmer. Your house will smell so inviting! (Be sure and don't let the pot run dry of water...and turn off the stove when you leave!)

Only one avocado and you're craving guacamole? If you've got peas, and mayo, you can still whip up a mean dip! Just mash these three together, add in salsa and red onion, along with lime juice. Season well, and get out the chips!

A little chilly? In a pinch you can use a scarf as a cover-up. Just take your largest one, tie it around the handle of your purse, and when the restaurant gets a little too cold for comfort, place the scarf around your shoulders for a warm-up!

Got chopsticks? Not only are [chopsticks](#) a handy tool for eating as billions of people on the eastern side of the globe would agree, they are a useful kitchen utensil. I use them to fish pasta out of cooking water to test for doneness, mix small amounts of gel food coloring into white icing for decorating cakes and cookies, to flip shrimp or other small items over when sautéing, and more! They are one of my favorite and most versatile kitchen tools! – April Karli

Mason jars on hand? I love spring and summer flowers. I keep a half-pint mason jar handy for all the bouquets my little ones bring me. These flowers are usually too small for a regular vase, but a small jar is just perfect to sit in the kitchen window and brighten my day...in a pinch. – Georganne Schuch

Dirty Hair? When I am in a pinch for time in the morning I reach for [Rockaholic Dirty Secret Dry Shampoo](#). I spray it at the roots and rub it in. It smells great and helps me get through another day without washing my hair! – *Lynn Cherry*

Thirsty Teens Hanging Around? I like to keep [Arizona Arnold Palmer Half & Half Iced Tea Lemonade Mix](#) in my pantry. I never know when I'm going to have extra boys hanging out at our house and this is a great alternative to soda. – *Lynn Cherry*

TIPS - REVIEWS – Summer Reads

Summer is just around the corner, and reading is always a great pastime for kids, as well as adults, when it's just too hot to be outside in the heat. So find a shady spot, a place in the cool of your house, or even on your pillow before you drift off to sleep – and enjoy our picks for a summer read!

Christy Miller Books

I remember reading [The Christy Miller book series](#) by Robin Jones Gunn during the summers when I was an early teenager. It was an age appropriate, Christian "romance" about a girl named Christy and a boy named Todd. I don't remember too much about the actual story lines but I remember thinking how relevant the story was to my life at the time. It was also set at the beach, so that helped escape from the occasional summer boredom.- *Christina Vetter*

Robert Louis Stevenson's works

My daughter and I plan to finish reading all of Robert Louis Stevenson's works (we've already read two of his books). Stevenson is a wonderful author for pre-teens and up. His writing style is not too heavy, but wonderfully descriptive, and his subjects are captivating. [Treasure Island](#), for example, captures the reader's imagination with a tale of adventure of pirates and a deserted island. [A Child's Garden of Verses](#) is perfect for young readers to memorize. I still remember verses from [The Swing](#) which I memorized as a young child, "up in the air so blue." – *Georganne Schuch*

The Book Thief

I haven't read the book yet, but I saw the movie. And usually, books are better than the movie. This is a great summer read because it captures your attention and places you in another setting apart from your own world, entirely. It's the story of a young girl outside of Munich who is fascinated with books, and learns to read and share her stolen books with her neighbors, all while bombing raids are going on, and there's a Jewish man hidden in her basement. Consider renting the movie, after you read [The Book Thief!](#) – *Marcy Lytle*

Rush Revere and the First Patriots

My husband got this book for Christmas...because he put it on his list! It's a great read for all ages. This book is a time travel piece full of adventure, and laden with knowledge about the freedom we celebrate on July 4th, and all sort of historical interest! You'll land into the streets of Boston in 1765, a turbulent time to be an American, in this book by Rush Limbaugh, [Rush Revere and the First Patriots](#). "Let's ride!" – *Marcy Lytle*

The Artist's Way

My summer reading project is [The Artist's Way. A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity](#) by Julia Cameron. A fellow writer recommended this book. The first chapter was very inspiring. There is a companion video course available online [here](#). This book was written to help people discover

and recovery their creativity understanding that creativity is one of God's gifts to us, and the art we create is our gift back to God. – *Lynn Cherry*

The Biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

[The biography of German Christian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy](#), by Eric Metaxas, details not only the life of an intelligent man and his conversion to Christianity but also chronicles the rise of the Nazis in Germany which led to war in Europe. Bonhoeffer's dedication to the German church starkly contrasted the Nazis' hatred for all things Christian. He poured out his life in the fight against Hitler, which eventually led to his imprisonment and death just weeks before the Allies liberated the concentration camp where he was imprisoned. This book taught me many insider history facts and challenged me to consider the underlying intentions of seemingly innocent changes to things, such as civil liberties. The Nazi party did not take over Germany and its citizens' Christian sensibilities in a wave, but little by little until the nation was overwhelmed by evil. – *Georganne Schuch*

Hope Was Here

Written by Joan Bauer, [Hope Was Here](#) was a homework assignment for my American Literature class a couple years ago, but as I entered into the story and allowed myself to read it for fun and not just for homework, I was pleasantly surprised by the clever writing, the relatable, genuine characters, and the engaging, yet simple plotline. I found myself hoping with the main character as her redemptive story reminded me that hope can be found anywhere, even in the darkest of places with the loneliest of pasts. Narrated from the perspective of a sixteen-year-old girl named Hope, *Hope Was Here* shares an encouraging message through a profound yet simple writing style embellished with metaphors, imagery, and vivid descriptions. It's a story of hope—and not just *hoping*, but of *bringing* hope to others--and it will definitely inspire and encourage whoever reads it. – *Kayley Ryan*

HOME

Practical Parenting - Stylin' with Tweens – Georganne Schuch

Summer is upon us, and I say we're all happy to see some warm weather for a change. Let's break out the sandals, shorts, and swimsuits! But before we get too carried away, I always remind my girls that there is only so much clothing you can take off, regardless of how hot it gets.

Several years ago, as my oldest daughter grew out of the cute little girl clothing, I faced a huge dilemma. How was I going to let her dress as she grew into a young lady? This decision would not only form our standards as our other daughters matured, but would teach them what modesty really means.

We considered these questions as we shopped for tween clothes:

- What is the attitude of the heart when selecting clothing?
- Who else is affected by our clothing choices?
- Where is certain clothing not appropriate?
- How can clothing communicate something about us?

Even as a tween, clothing reflects a girl's personality and sense of style. I want my daughters to know how to choose clothes they like that fit them well and do not conform to someone else's thoughts for how they should look. Additionally, clothing choices begin hinting at priorities. Where do their thoughts lie? In looking attractive to the opposite sex, fitting in with a certain group of people, or being the person God created them to be?

Only one person can wear an article of clothing at a time, but everyone else sees it. Does the outfit communicate a need for attraction? It's nice to be noticed, but even little girls should realize that all attention does not equal the right kind of attention. I want my girls to know that boys who only notice them when certain features are featured will likely see someone else more interesting before long.

The clothing culture in the area in which we live is very casual, even in what most people consider dressy situations. Black tie simply means starched jeans and polished boots. I get that, but there are still places and events which call for a higher standard of dress than flip-flops and tank tops. When we went to see *The Lion King* on stage, we wore dresses. Yes, it was a matinee performance, and no, it wasn't Broadway. But the occasion was special to us, so we dressed nicely. I've been caught overdressed and underdressed for different events, and I'd rather look a little too nice than not nice enough.

Clothing doesn't really make the person. However, as long as someone doesn't speak or do something too stupid, clothing definitely creates a certain impression. Is that impression one of respect and modesty or one of carelessness and flamboyance? Is there any real competition between Kate Middleton and Lady Gaga? Of course not. The Duchess' classy look earns her a lot of compliments for the right reasons. She looks nice. An over-the-top entertainer's only goal is to hype an image. An image most people laugh at.

With these thoughts in mind, my husband and I formed a short checklist to use for clothes shopping.

1. No skin showing from the shoulders to the knees.
 - a. This means no spaghetti straps, tank tops, or crop tops. Short sleeves are necessary during our 100+ degree summer days, but it won't really be cooler to lose those few inches of cloth. The more modest look prevents clothing "accidents," as well.
 - b. The right length of shorts and skirts gets longer as the girls' legs get longer. I'll date myself by calling them Daisy Dukes, but short shorts aren't attractive on very many girls, anyway. Few girls have Barbie legs, and a longer length short or skirt will help more than it will hurt.
2. No tight or ill-fitting clothes. We pass down a lot of clothes, but each of my girls has a different figure. What looked perfect on one, won't work for another. Therefore, each girl gets a few articles of clothing tailored for them. We don't compromise for the sake of saving a few dollars. Likewise, no one gets an outfit just because it looked good on the store mannequin or a friend.
3. No bikinis or skimpy swimsuits. Too much sun exposure is dangerous, especially on young ones' skin. We have found that swim shirts paired with board shorts or swim skirts are comfortable, cute, last longer, and adapt to active play in the water.

With these guidelines in hand, clothes-shopping for tween and teen girls is a real exercise in patience and perseverance. Few stores share our unique sense of propriety and style. However, we think it is worthwhile to teach our children a standard of dress and to encourage them to develop their own flair. As a result, our teenage daughter often carefully considers her clothes and is learning to pair different articles to create a number of outfits from a few things. She stays within our parameters, and no one would accuse her of being under-dressed.

Rather than accept what the going fad is, I encourage you to consider how clothing may shape your child's image and help her make wise choices. She may stand out from the crowd, but isn't that a good thing?

HOME - TRAIN THEM - Sex & Teens: Pop Culture, Purity Culture, or a Better Way? By April Karli

I'm part of the generation raised in churches that emphasized what is now known as "purity culture." True Love Waits and wearing purity rings came along shortly after my time in youth groups. But, many of the ideas about modesty, rules about sex and dating, and warnings of the negative consequences of breaking those rules are the same ones I was taught.

Now, along with my husband, I want to thoughtfully raise my own girls to have a healthy understanding of their sexuality, and some day, to make mature, godly, and wise choices.

I think all parents wrestle with this regardless of their faith backgrounds. We know that sex is significant and want to teach our kids responsibility when it comes to their sexuality. As I talk to other parents, it seems that many of us find it's a far more complex issue than we were brought up to believe it was. **Simply telling our kids, "Wait until you're married," didn't work for us and we doubt it will work for our kids either.** [Research indicates](#) that churched teens and singles are sexually active at almost the same rates as their unchurched counterparts despite the emphasis on modesty and refraining from sex outside of marriage.

Even more concerning to me, are the warped beliefs our kids potentially could receive about themselves, their bodies, and about sex through the black-and-white route of teaching them about sex. Many girls grow up saddled with shame and anxiety about how they dress and carry themselves fearful they will "cause their brothers to stumble." Many boys grow up believing they are unfeeling, sexually-controlled creatures who have little restraint or responsibility over their urges. These false narratives have severe consequences, such as the [sexual assault at Patrick Henry College](#), and other stories like it.

[A recent article](#) cites research indicating that girls who grow up in purity culture have the same levels of shame and self-loathing as those with a history of sexual abuse and assault. This should be a sobering wakeup call for Christian parents. It does not, of course, mean that we should not teach our children Christian principles of modesty, wise physical boundaries, and even to wait for sex until they are married. **However, how we teach these things must change.**

This is a discipleship issue. **The shame and false beliefs children grow up with continue into adulthood and negatively affect their relationships with friends, their spouses, their children, and even God.** I don't believe any loving parent wants that for their child. In fact, the reason so many parents emphasize sexual purity is to spare their children shame and other negative consequences. However, it would seem the efforts are backfiring. From the same article:

"When we continue to shroud sexuality in silence and an abstinence-only discourse, we continue to burden faith-filled children, adolescents, young adults, and adults with a deep shame that interrupts their ability to fully know God's love and grace. Shame

*modulates distance in intimacy and sexual expression of God's active love. When people are filled with shame and self-loathing, their affected self-esteem takes precedence in interactions with others. It dominates and eclipses a person's ability to see and love another. **In essence, sexuality encased in silence and shame keeps people from intimately knowing both God and each other, and cripples our ability as a community of believers to truly love and be a healing force in our hurting world.*** (bold mine)

There has to be a better way for kids growing up in the church to learn about sex and physical intimacy. **There has to be a way between what our culture teaches them about sex -- that it's no big deal, and what purity culture teaches them -- that God cares more about their genitals than about their hearts.**

Teaching sexuality as a spiritual discipline is a good place to start. Spiritual disciplines are habits that nurture spiritual health and foster spiritual growth. They orient us to God and to the community around us in such a way that God can work both in and through us. Choosing to wait for sex until marriage is chastity - a spiritual discipline which has been practiced for centuries. Chastity's counterpart is fidelity, or remaining faithful to your spouse. In either case, we choose to refrain from sexual activity outside of a committed, marriage relationship. Depending on the person and the situation, both can be difficult. But, like any act of giving something up for spiritual reasons, we do so to turn our hearts toward God.

In addition, pre-teens and teens growing up in Christian households understand that God is growing the fruits of his Holy Spirit in us -- one of which is self-control. I can't think of many more opportunities to test self-control than among hormonally-charged teens! Self-control is a fruit that will serve them well long into the future!

The act of waiting allows kids to "grow up" in every way. **When waiting for sex is viewed as a spiritual discipline it becomes a positive choice made because the teen, and later adult, wants to be close to God.** It's not done out of fear of punishment or negative consequences which lead to shame and disconnection from God and others. The habits of chastity and self-control eventually will grow into spiritual and emotional maturity that will benefit them in their future relationships.

And the best news is that we have a God who forgives and is full of grace. Many Christian young people are choosing not to wait until marriage for sex. The Christian community can continue its shame-filled warnings, or it can extend the grace, acceptance, and forgiveness that Jesus modeled.

I wish I had been taught healthier ideas about sex. I wish that my reasons for waiting until marriage were because it was a way for me to grow spiritually mature and closer to God, not because I was afraid I'd be "ruined" for my future husband if I didn't, or that God would be disappointed in me. But, I choose to allow God to work in the fertile ground left behind by that

manure and grow something completely new, both for myself, and especially for my own children, as they approach adolescence and young adulthood.

My desire is that both of my girls will wait for sex until they're married, or at least out of their teens and in serious, committed relationships. (I know the statistics and am a realist!) But, greater than my desire for them to wait for marriage is for them to know that no matter what their sexual history ends up being, they will never be "ruined," they should never feel ashamed, and their Heavenly Father will always welcome them with the arms of forgiveness and grace.

I DON'T DO TEENS – The Need for Consistency by Lynn Cherry

I have a 13-year old and earlier this week he was being so completely, well....13.

“What is going on with you?”

“I don't know. I just feel sad and mad at the same time.”

“About what?”

“I am really gonna miss our van.”

After 230,703 miles, countless everyday moments and some awesome road trips, our 2002 Honda Odyssey consumed her last gallon of gas. It was hard to let her go, but the reality is, she wouldn't “go” any further.

My son's moodiness makes so much sense in light of this month's relational need. Daniel was not yet two years old when we drove off the lot with our brand new minivan. This is the only vehicle he's known. He grew up back there in the passenger side bucket seat.

The [Living as Conquerors](#) model defines consistency as having life in order, responding with self control, knowing what to expect from the behavior of others. Consistency was a top three need for both of our teenagers. It is also my number one need, which explains the tears I cried when we turned over the title and sold my beloved companion for parts.

When sorting by definition alone, my 16-year old ranked consistency as last of the 10 needs. He was surprised when the assessment questions put it up at the top. But it is so true. He doesn't like it when our routine is changed. Chaos and disorder stress him out and it upsets him when people don't follow through with their commitments.

Perhaps consistency is such a high ranking need for our teenagers because there is already so much change happening inside their bodies and minds; an unstable environment outside their bodies is just too much.

But the world is full of inconsistencies. To quote one of my husband's favorite rock bands, “...changes aren't permanent, but **change is.**” It's nice, as much as we are able, to be consistent in our own behavior and to provide stable surroundings for our teens. It also helps to be aware that even changes like a new vehicle for the family can affect our children.

My need for consistency is known to contribute to controlling tendencies. When things feel shaky, my default is to dig in my heels, pull on my bossy pants and take over. One thing I know for sure about teenagers is that try as I may, I cannot control or dictate everything in their lives. I'm learning now more than ever in my parenting journey to relinquish control and throw myself headlong into trusting a steadfast God.

We can encourage our teens to join us in taking their need for consistency to God knowing he never changes:

- Malachi 3:6 I am the LORD, and I do not change.

- Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.
- James 1:17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.
- Numbers 23:19 God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?

Our teens will find comfort and peace as they learn to trust an unchanging God, and we will too.

Join us next month as we explore the need for encouragement.

When have you noticed the need for consistency in your teens?

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS - 4 Steps to iPhone Peace by Georganne Schuch

Some of technology's so-called convenience can really get on my nerves. Anyone else want to scream at someone to talk to them in real life? No 140-character tweets or status updates. How about a conversation using my own voice? It makes me wonder if some people can even talk in complete sentences using full words. KWIM (know what I mean?)

Last month, I recommended some ways to reduce the clutter of the email inbox. Now, let's talk about the phone. The smartphone, to be specific.

True confession, here.

I have a handy dandy smartphone. I get email and text and Facebook and Twitter. I have games and apps to help amuse me (or my kids), to schedule my day, to inform me of current events, and to track my whereabouts. And I am guilty of paying more attention to it than to the people with whom I am sitting in the same room. Rude, I know.

Oddly enough, my teenage daughter seems to be just like me. Go figure. So, I have proposed a few guidelines for the use of our phones. It hasn't been met with joy and gladness, but nevertheless it gives us a little peace from a tiny device that seems to suck the living out of our life.

1. **Breaks:** Yes, I need my phone for work, and I'm on call most of the time. However, most people won't complain if I don't answer during dinner, for example. Therefore, we have five no-phone times:
 - During meals. We sit down to an honest-to-gosh family meal almost every night. And a ringing phone or beeping email is banned.
 - While driving. My teenager is starting to pay a lot of attention to my driving habits. So, I don't text, check email, or dial while I am driving. I might glance down at a red light, but I wait until we are stopped in a parking lot to respond.
 - After 9 p.m. and before 8 a.m. Ok, I check my email first thing in the morning because I often get some work emails from late night colleagues, but generally I don't respond except in an emergency. Night time should be a time to relax and recharge. That's hard to do if a phone is under your pillow. And, really, it's not recommended to sleep with electronic devices anyway.
 - During school. I have my phone nearby for work and because I have a bit of downtime while I'm letting someone finish an assignment, but my daughter should not be distracted by the beep and flash of her phone.
 - With people. Make time for the people you're with. Live in the moment. Stop and smell the roses. Come on! Enjoy life. The smartphone is a poor substitute for friends. It can't hug you or laugh with you or give you high-fives.
2. **Talk and text nice:** Talk on the phone and in text with the same attitude you would use face-to-face. A lot of communication is lost via digital delivery, and, trust me, that loss can be detrimental to a relationship. Think twice about word choices. Put extra thought into how you use humorous comments. It's not about abbreviations. It's about manners.

3. **Know who you're talking to:** Don't give your phone number to everyone. Don't post it on your social media pages. While you can block an unwanted number, you may still have problems with prank calls, sales calls, and just people you'd rather not talk to all the time. Be judicious about who gets your number in the first place.
4. **Limit apps:** There are about a gazillion apps that can help your workout, track your calories, manage your time, and do everything but make your coffee...now that would be a great app. But do you really need them ALL? Of course not. If I have something I want one to do, I might try a couple of apps, but then I pick the one I like best and delete the others. I have one great meal planner/grocery list app, one to-do app, two health-related apps (one for calorie counting and one for tracking my steps), and a few other odds and ends. I periodically delete the apps I don't use. I'd rather have room for pictures, anyway.

Don't let your smartphone turn you into a zombie or trick you into missing the great things going on around you. Look someone in the eye, smile, and speak. Enjoy the scenery. Notice the details of life. You might be surprised how enjoyable you find it.

A Night to Remember - Whatever... (By Marcy Lytle)

The purpose of this devotional is to train our minds to think true thoughts about ourselves, and true thoughts about God. With a little bit of practice, we can train our minds to think the truth, and we can experience a healthy self-esteem and a happy heart, which results in a happy face!

Preparation: *Print out this lesson and cut out, and cut apart, the eight individual phrases in bold below. As the lesson unfolds, you will roll them each up and place in an empty coffee can, which represents our mind.*

Read Philippians 4:8 out loud together.

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Read each rhyme you've printed out, and ask each question below that goes with the rhyme. After each one is read and discussed, have a child roll up the rhyme and toss it in the can (brain.)

Did you know there are some **true** things we can always count on, about Jesus? He loves us. He's always with us and will never leave us. We need to make sure we keep the truth of Jesus in our thoughts every day. What are other true thoughts about Jesus?

Did you know that what we think needs to be **noble**? In other words, our thoughts should line up with God's word and be clean and free from evil. Can anyone recite a verse you've memorized?

Did you know that we should always think **right** thoughts? Our thoughts need to be honest and righteous, and any other thoughts should disappear and never return! Have you ever thought something about someone that is not right?

Did you know our thoughts can be **pure**? This means clean, simple, and unmixed with all sorts of trash. We can't think pure thoughts if we're always watching and listening to dirty shows and music. What are your favorite good shows you enjoy?

Did you know our thoughts should be **lovely**? This is when we think and give thanks for the goodness of God in our lives. Lovely thoughts of our wonderful God, because he is good all the time, should fill our minds. What's lovely about God's love for us?

Did you know our thoughts are to be **admirable**? There's only one person who's worth thinking about so admirably – that's God! Think about the things he's created, and how he sent his son to die for us, and then how powerful he is that he raised Jesus from the dead! These are admirable thoughts!

Did you know our thoughts can be **excellent**? The most excellent thoughts we can think are thoughts of how God has a future for us, a plan for good, and how he's in control. He loves us and his thoughts towards us are kind. What other excellent things does God think about us?

Did you know our thoughts should be **full of praise**? In fact, our thoughts of God should make us feel like clapping, shouting, or dancing! Stop and think a thought about God, and then raise your hands in praise!

Now that all of these wonderful thoughts are in our minds, the blessing of having good thoughts shows on our face!

Have the kids draw a happy face on the can with a big marker!

Place the can in the middle of the family and pray together for minds that think on good things.

Keep the can in the family room for a while, and once a week have someone draw out a reminder and read it!

- **If it's true, stick with me like glue.**
- **If it stinks, don't think.**
- **If it's right, stay in my sight.**
- **If it's pure, think on it for sure.**
- **If it's lovely and nice, think on it twice!**
- **If it's marvelous things he has done, name them one by one!**
- **If it's going to be in your mind, then think his thoughts – which are always kind.**
- **If you're ready to offer praise, your thoughts to God now raise!**

HANDMADE & HOMEGROWN - Gone Fishing/Edible Weeds – by Cheryl Carrell

Get your little ones ready for summer with this fun fishing set.

Supplies you will need:

Photo 1

Fabric

Scissors

Pins

Paper and pen to make fish pattern

Magnets/ washers

Sewing machine

Stuffing

Dowel, or stick

Yarn

Hot glue

Basket or bucket

Photo 2

- Once you choose your fabric, start by making a pattern for the fish.
- Cut out your paper pattern and pin it to your fabric. Be sure to cut 2 for each fish that you want to make. I folded my fabric, so I could cut several sets at once.
- Sew around each fish with right sides together, leaving a 1.5 – 2 inch opening on the tail for turning right side out and stuffing.
- Turn each fish right side out and place a magnet or washer in the head of the fish.
- Next, stuff with batting to your desired fullness. Be sure to leave it loose enough to stitch the end of the tail closed.
- Fold the open ends in, and stitch across, as you can see in one of the photos. If you want a more finished look, you can do this part by hand. I wasn't worried about perfection on my project.

Photo 3

- Repeat this process for each fish.
- Finally, take a dowel rod or sturdy, smooth stick, and tie some yarn or twine to the end. Attach a magnet to the other end, by hot gluing two magnets to each other on the end of the yarn. You can dress it up a bit by gluing a scrap of fabric over the end of the stick, as well.
- Feel free to add any embellishments you might want. I chose to leave my fish plain for the sake of time, but it would be super cute to add some button eyes, or other coordinating fabric details.
- Once you're finished, use a cute basket or bucket to store your little fishes inside.

Photo 4

If you're not into sewing, but want a quick and easy version of this fishing game, try this mini set instead. It only took me about 20 minutes to make.

Photo 5

- Cut out as many little fish as you'd like. I happened to have a bunch of felt, so I made them multi-colored.
- Add a paper clip "fin" to each fish.
- Use the same steps for making a magnetic fishing pole as above.
- Store in a small bucket, and fish away all summer!

Edible Weeds

Did you know that some "weeds" are edible? Before you just toss every single thing you pull up from your back yard, you should check to see if you're throwing away a perfectly good salad.

My kiddos and I have really enjoyed picking and snacking on [henbits](#) lately. They're in the mint family, and they grow like crazy down here in central Texas. The leaves and flowers are both edible, and have a very mild taste.

Do you know if you have any [edible "weeds"](#) in your area?

YOU

UNDER THE INFLUENCE - The Spoiler by Marcy Lytle

It's a sobering, heartbreaking, thought to realize that we see The Savior as The Spoiler sometimes. And that's just how we see him whenever we think he's spoiling our plans, ruining our future, or just plain messing up a good thing we have going.

Have you ever looked up and wondered, "Why are you spoiling it all?" Maybe it's not that evident to where we speak it aloud, but the thought does often reside in the deep recesses of our minds.

Remember the story of the [loaves and fishes](#), in the Bible? There was barely enough food for one person, and yet Jesus made the food multiply in order to feed thousands. After he fed them all and they had "their fill," Jesus warned them in this verse (27): *Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*

- Jesus' blessings in our lives don't spoil, and neither do they spoil our plans. His work in our lives is for an eternal end, not for just what we see on this earth.

Remember Jesus' words about how [he's the gate](#), and if we enter through him we will "find pasture?" He then reminds us that the only one who kills, destroys and spoils things is the "thief." He ends his warning with this verse of hope (10): *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

- Jesus provides everything we need, just as a good shepherd does, by caring for his sheep. His work in our lives is to fill us with things that satisfy, not that which can be stolen.

Remember the [foundation of your belief](#) in Christ, that Jesus was resurrected from the dead? Through his mercy and grace, he gives us this same "living hope" that we will have an inheritance that never perishes, never spoils, and never fades. The end of the passage says this in these verses (4, 5): *This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power...to be revealed in the last time.*

- Jesus isn't like our earthly fathers who die, and leave us a limited inheritance that fades over time. His inheritance is preserved, covered, and held in place by his mighty power for us...when he comes again.

Remember the ["crown of glory"](#) promised to those who believe? It's not a crown made of glue, sequins, and paper that can be flattened with one stomp of the foot. These verses include this promise (verse 4): *...you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (or spoil.)*

- Jesus is not the Spoiler. In fact, he's the Rewarder. He rewards us with that which will never spoil or fade or die.

Hebrews 11:6 says this:

*And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he **rewards** those who earnestly seek him.*

I feel awful and sad at the grief I must bring my father when I see him as a spoiler. In essence, I'm saying he's a thief and out to rob me of something good. It's when I stop and consider that Jesus is one who rewards those who love him, his vision and purposes for our lives is eternal, and all that he has for me is set into place – unshakeable – that I repent of labeling my Father anything other than what he is...

The Rewarder

STRENGTHENING YOUR CORE - What Does It? by Marcy Lytle

Knowledge doesn't do it. I know God is good, he's in control, and he's got the power. I know it in my mind, yet in my mind is where the battles always start, the questions always surface and torment always begins.

Experience helps, but doesn't do it. I've experienced God's provision, mercy, and grace. Even the children of Israel experienced miracle after miracle of God's provision and direction, and yet they disbelieved and wandered.

Kind words don't do it. Other can encourage, I can read sweet notes that lift the spirit, and I can hear niceties spoken to me all day, and still when the darkness arrives at midnight and I'm lying with my head on my pillow, the doubts and fears close in.

Logic doesn't do it. Logic only works for me with if...then statements and certain equations that have certain outcomes. But life isn't like that. Neither is God.

So...what does do it? And what is "it?"

"It" is "finding peace in a moment of panic."

Have you been there?

We start thinking about "what if," and in a matter of minutes, the tears are flowing because of something that "might" happen. We begin wondering about the future and the grim outlook that we see in front of us because of circumstances, and soon we're in a pit of despair and feeling hopeless. We're at the same crossroads where we've been a dozen times before; and He's always led us down the right path, yet again we wonder if we're going to fall off a cliff this time. And we worry that all of the heartache that life brings is going to damage us, render us useless, and scare us half to death...or maybe even to death.

I lie awake thinking...which is always a dangerous thing...because it's then that I stand at the precipice, the highest step, the edge of a skyscraper...upon which I teeter before falling into a sea of blackness, hoping I'll be stopped by a net placed below by God. Isn't it interesting how in the darkest of the night, the mind is at work, when it should be still?

I finally drift off to sleep, only to wake up a few hours later with the thoughts surfacing again. And I go through all of the above nouns – knowledge – experience – kind words – logic - and yet – I'm still afraid.

So if all of those things don't do it. What does?

One would think that knowledge implies faith. However, knowledge of the word has nothing to do with faith. I must choose to believe what I know.

One would think that experience would prove to be a stable rock on which we stand, in the worst of storms. However, there's always the idea that *this* storm is possibly the one where we might be abandoned, left to drown.

One would guess that kind words and even truthful words would sustain us and stop the fretful tears from flowing. But kind words only sit in our memory for a season, and in time, all of the other words, thoughts, and lies cover up the kind words...sometimes for good.

One would esteem those who are logical, because they've got it all figured out, don't they? It makes no sense to worry, when no variables have been replaced with numbers, so why worry about what's not there? But that kind of thinking doesn't soothe the soul. It only works the brain harder.

The "it" that helps me find peace in a moment of panic, in the wee hours of the morning, is worship.

I begin telling God how awesome he is. I name his character, I call out his good name, and I lift up the name of his son, Jesus. I begin to stop asking for this and that, relaying all my fears for the umpteenth time, and instead I lay them down - in favor of worship.

What helps me when I rise to begin my day, so that thoughts don't flood my house and send me sloshing through the muck for the next eight hours, is worship. I put on music with lyrics that talk of God's love, mercy, goodness, and grace. And I dance. I move. I lift my hands and I sometimes shout.

What helps me the most, when total panic knocks at my door, is laying aside every request that I'm making of God, and choosing to worship instead.

[Genesis 22](#) is the first mention of the word "worship" in the bible, and it's in the context of Abraham about to offer his only son Isaac on the altar. In his worst moment of obedience and fear, he took his son aside and they worshiped. It was then that they were able to return and obey. And you know the rest of the story – Isaac was spared. Abraham became the father of many nations. And we tell this story to our children.

As you lay your head down tonight and the thoughts start to swirl like a tornado, destroying everything you thought was grounded in your heart, choose to worship.

Praise him. Thank him. Recite his name aloud.

Worship does it.

HEALTHY HABITS - 3 Most Essential Oils by Georganne Schuch

All the healthy living in the world will not necessarily keep a person from ever getting sick or needing some kind of medical treatment. Eating well, exercising, and living “right” is no guarantee that something won’t go wrong at some point. We age, and our bodies need help.

I employ a variety of natural, what some call holistic, health remedies. I believe they help me minimize or control some health problems I have and avoid other health issues I have faced.

My most recent natural remedy discovery is essential oils.

Essential oils have few side effects when used as recommended and do not interfere with medications, except maybe making them unnecessary. They are made by various methods, including distilling and cold pressing. The resulting oil from the process is highly concentrated, meaning that a drop of the oil may be the equivalent of a pound or more of the plant/fruit used.

Let me share three of the most essential of essential oils: lemon, peppermint, and lavender. They smell so good, but you won’t believe what else they do.

Lemon, to start with, has antiseptic properties, so it can be used to treat various illnesses, the most notable of which is scurvy. Sailors took crates of lemons on voyages to keep them from getting the disease. It smells great and cleans like a germ-busting ninja. I add a few drops of lemon juice to my water every day and rub several drops over each kidney to help with chronic kidney pain (resulting from multiple kidney stones). This is a long term experiment, and a remedy which may always be necessary since I am plagued with recurring kidney stones. I also use lemon in my homemade cleaning products. I spray it on the grout of our shower to reduce mold. It has a fresh smell, and I don’t feel I’m going to suffocate like I do when I use most cleaning products.

Peppermint is an all-around good oil to use for digestive issues, colds, and general aches and pains. It is classified as a “cool” oil, so while it feels warm on application, it can be applied directly to the skin without complications. My husband rubs peppermint oil on his stomach when he has indigestion. I have used it liberally with all of us during the cold season this past winter. At the first sign of a sore throat or runny nose, I put a few drops on my little girls’ feet and cover them with socks. I like to put it on my chest when I’m feeling a little stuffy, but it should be mixed with a little carrier oil, such as jojoba or coconut, when applying on a younger child. The smell is strong, and they complain that their eyes burn a bit. I also like to dilute it in oil to rub on achy muscles or joints. I used it on a trip last fall when my knee got stiff.

Lavender is probably my favorite essential oil. It is well known as a calming scent and widely used in lotions, candles, and bath products. I add a few drops to my bath water after a crazy day. Beyond the wonderful smell, lavender also has antiseptic properties. I used it on a burn and an incision to help heal both wounds. My teenage daughter puts a drop on acne, and I have found it a lifesaver with allergies. I apply a few drops on my temples for headaches and itchy eyes. Before I used lavender for allergies, I was prescribed steroids for an unusually bad allergy attack which left my eyes swollen shut and itchy. Now, I use lavender as soon as my eyes start itching, and every time, it has resolved without the need for prescription steroids. What a relief!

For all that I love about essential oils, let me give a very short list of cautions:

1. Don't be stupid and guzzle a bottle. Not all oils or brands are meant for internal use, so like with anything, read and follow directions on how to use them.
2. If an oil seems uncomfortably warm or burns when you apply it to skin, you can either dilute it with an oil, such as jojoba or olive, or only use it on your feet. The skin of your feet is not affected by the hotter oils, and the oil is still absorbed and effectively treats what ails you. I recommend covering the feet with socks for a little while to make sure the oil doesn't rub off. This is how I use peppermint with my younger children when they have colds.
3. Do not use water to dilute an oil for personal application. Water and oil repel each other, so it doesn't work. Of course, you can still use the oils in water when cleaning. Shake the container well before spraying.
4. Don't rub your eyes after using oils on your hands. Peppermint, especially, will make you regret it. You won't go blind, but there is still the ouch factor.
5. More is not necessarily better when it comes to essential oils. A dropper insert easily portions the oil and prevents waste.

These three essential oils have replaced at least 10 other products that we previously used, making the cost of quality essential oils very affordable. They are considerably safer than most cleaning and skincare products which usually have chemicals added; and my older girls are able to use the oils without worrying about special dosing instructions.

Other oils offer even more specialized benefits, but lemon, peppermint, and lavender are practically an entire first aid kit all by themselves.

Beauty for Ashes - The Healer – by Pam Charro

Jesus [once said](#), "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

Apparently the people around Jesus either did not care for the physician who was right in front of them, or they were more interested in proving themselves healthier than the people around them than they were in getting well.

Being sick is no fun, but denying it doesn't make it less true.

Part of the reason I wanted to become a counselor was so I could try to prevent so much of the shame and suffering that I felt. And while prevention is important, there are just too many ways to be wounded to keep suffering from happening. Becoming hurt is a way of life, and finding healing is one of the things we all need to do, no matter who we are.

Once, when my daughter was sick, I asked God to make her well and He immediately did what I asked. The next time she got sick, He didn't respond the same way. I was disappointed because she just kept throwing up for hours and hours, and when I asked Him why, He said, "She will never come to me if I keep healing her on your behalf."

A short time later, my daughter came up to me and said, "Mama, we need to pray for God to make me well." It was an important lesson that my children (who I love so much and want to protect from all suffering) need to seek God on their own. They need their own relationships with Him so that He can be their personal healer, just as I needed Him to be mine.

The beautiful thing about being sick is that we have a healer who loves to make us well.

Even though we must all suffer to some degree, finding the one who makes us well makes it all worth it.

And He so wants to be found.

**Proverbs 8:17 I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me.**

A MOMENT IN THYME – Coen’s Song by Debra Brown

I LOVE, LOVE, LOVE my grandchildren. And because I love them, I have chosen to discipline them. However, I’m learning better ways to train up my grandchildren than the methods I used with their mothers. I give them the freedom to make choices. I honor those choices, and then cover them with a tenacious love – much like God does with me.

Five-year-old Coen scrunched his face into a mad scowl and began to tear up. I talked faster hoping to avert a tantrum, but to no avail. He chose to be mad, and his crying rage erupted.

"Coen, if you would just use your words, we could work this out."

Mr. Mad continued his bellowing.

I stepped up to the next level of negotiations.

"Coen, you have two choices. *Mad* and stay in your room or *Happy* and play with Mams. You choose."

Mad won.

Exasperated, I chose not to use the "guilt card" that I'd used so often with my children, but instead, I honored Coen's choice and turned to exit the room. Unexpectedly, a song popped out of my mouth.

"I love you when you're happy,
I love you when you're sad,
I love you when you're very, very, very, very mad.
I love you when you're grumpy,
Yes, this much is true:
I just love you, Coen. Yes, I do!"

As I entered the living room, I realized that the howling had ceased, and I turned to find my giggling Coen running into my arms.

"I love you too, Mams!"

That funny little love song penetrated Coen's anger and dissolved all his frustrations.

Love had bridged our gap.

God's tender, tenacious love once again came to our rescue.

Since then, we've sung that song many times. I often find myself humming that little refrain, joining the Lord as He sings it over me.

"I love you when..."

He LOVES me.

Happy, sad, mad...

He LOVES me.

Totally.

Completely.

Every moment of every day, God is committed to loving me with no conditions. He will not let me go.

I pray you can hear Him singing His funny little love song over you.

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - Turn Toward Each Other (by Lynn Cherry)

“Do you know where they moved the honey, Honey?”

“Is it by the peanut butter now? It used to be by the sugar, Sugar.”

Silly little conversations at the grocery store matter more than you think. We are reading [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) and through his love lab research Dr. Gottman found that couples who engage in lots of chitchat have a better chance of staying happily married.

That’s great news for us! We can do boring. In our everyday lives we’ve gotten good at these humdrum, ho-hum interactions. It’s as simple as sending a text in the middle of a day to ask how a meeting went, or calling on our way home from work to see if we need garlic bread to go with dinner.

David feels valued when I remember to ask about the new client. It shows him I was listening when he told me about the meeting and that I’ve been thinking about him as I go about my day. Principle #3 is all about paying attention – Turn Toward Each Other Instead of Away.

It’s easy to get wrapped up in our individual worlds. When we turn toward each other we create a sense of partnership. We are in this together. Lately we’ve felt like Job and Jobette, with challenges coming at us both from every angle.

We were really grateful for the Stress Reducing Conversation tips in Exercise 2:

1. Take turns
2. Don’t give unsolicited advice
3. Show genuine interest
4. Communicate your understanding
5. Take your spouse’s side
6. Express a “we against others” attitude
7. Express affection
8. Validate emotions

We’ve come a long way. Back in the early years of our marriage, when David shared a challenge he was having, I thought it was my duty as his wife to help him see the other person’s perspective. He always felt like I was siding with the opposition. It was horrible! He hated it. I’ve gotten better about helping him see I am on his side.

Yes, we’ve grown a lot in our 23 years together, but there is still room for improvement. Last weekend I was huffing around the house, picking things up, putting things away, (this is what I do when I’m frustrated,) all the while complaining about an issue in our

world and being generally grumpy. David asked me, “Are you just going to be in a bad mood all weekend?” That was helpful – not!

I responded graciously-not! “Could you just acknowledge that this is a really crappy situation? Can you identify at all with how I might be feeling?”

Thankfully, I am blessed with a husband who hears and responds. And when I was grumpy again a few days later, David sat beside me on the sofa and put his arm around me. He comforted me with his presence and invited a calming conversation. He turned toward me when it would have been preferable to turn away!

Our takeaway from this chapter:

- Do the everyday things of life together. Pay attention. Notice the details. Be boring.
- Use the stress-reducing conversation to help each other process non-marital difficulty and create a sense of solidarity.

Make an effort to turn toward each other this month. Notice the little ways your spouse is turning toward you.

Join us next month for Principle #4 - Let Your Partner Influence You.

Try this:

Go for a walk together and talk about one non-marriage related issue that is causing stress in your lives. Listen empathetically. Ask how you can support each other. Remember to follow up on the issue in a few days.

[Click here to read about Principle #1 Enhance Your Love Maps](#)

[Click here to read about Principle #2 Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration](#)

Order your copy of [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) and use the exercises provided to build or rebuild your marriage.

Tell us. How did you turn toward your spouse this week? Did you notice your spouse turning toward you? We want to celebrate with you!

DATE NIGHT - Mexicana Mayo by Marcy Lytle

Cinco de Mayo is this month, so why not incorporate a bit of the Mexican flare in your date nights out? From salsa music, to eating salsa, Mexican celebrations are fun for all! Being that I live in Texas, we have so many flavors of the Mexican cuisine! And I enjoy something about each dish! Adding at least one bit of Mexican culture to each weekend date this month will spice up your time with that special someone!

1. **Salsa dancing.** If you like groups; then find a place that teaches salsa dancing, and sign up! If you prefer your privacy, rent a [salsa video](#). Prepare [three kinds of salsa](#), along with queso and chips, for your fuel as you dance, learning every step together...from start to finish! End the evening watching [La Bama](#), a top Mexican-American film, as you put up your feet up to rest.
2. **Tri-color celebration.** The Mexican flag is red, white and green, so why not have a date night that includes these colors? Together, make a snack dip using [white beans](#) – this is oh so yummy! Also, put together your own [kale chips](#) using a bit of red chili powder that gives your taste buds a kick! Pack it all up, and head to a park with green grass, spread a blanket and enjoy.
3. **Take a siesta.** A Mexican siesta is traditionally taken in the middle of the day – a nap – or a rest from work. Pick a day when you both can take off, and make your date “night” a date “day” where you go out to lunch, catch a nap, and enjoy [Horchata](#) – a Mexican cinnamon-vanilla rice drink! (You’ll need to make this ahead of time!)
4. **Fiesta with Friends.** Throw a Mexican Fiesta and invite two other couples for a [Mexican pileup dinner](#). Shop for your ingredients and prepare the food fare together, before your guests arrive. Also before the fun begins, visit a party store and pick up cute sombreros or paper flowers for your table décor.
5. **Pinata blast!** Remember as a child, when you squealed with delight when the piñata broke at a party and the candy fell out? Why not spend the evening on a candy date? Plan your route for the night, stopping by at least four candy or “sweets” stores. Perhaps a chocolate at one, a Mexican pastry at another, a cake ball at the third stop, and a [churro](#) to top off the evening! With just a little bit of researching, you can find these places (or recipes) on the internet.

Spicing up date night is always a good thing, whether it’s with spicy food or red-hot fun! Don’t let this month go by without trying at least one of the above ideas. Half of the fun is in the planning!

Ole!

AFTER 30 YEARS - The Fan by Marcy Lytle

My husband and I sleep with a fan on, every night. We have since day one together. It helps drown out all of the little noises and distractions that would otherwise keep us awake. We have been known to even carry it with us on road trips so that we can sleep well in the hotels! That fan has been a lifesaver, our common connector, and enabled us to enjoy our rest for years!

On the few occasions when we have not had the fan, neither of us slept, and we were grumpy the next day, and this affected our relationship.

So what does this have to do with keeping a marriage strong? So glad you asked...

Over the years and decades of marriage, we get distracted from one another. We both get busy with our work, the kids take up all of our spare time, and much-needed time alone becomes something we crave like a cold glass of water on a hot, humid day. All of these “distractions” are part of life, necessary, and something we have to tend to. However, when these distractions keep us from connecting and enjoying our time together, we need some sort of wind (fan) to blow these distractions away, at least for a short time!

Kids. Kids demand food, money, time, and emotions. And often when we’ve given in to all of these demands on a daily basis, there is no time for our spouse. We can’t connect with him any longer, because we’re spent, our mind is full of schedules and things to do regarding the kids, and the noise of all that clutter drowns out any eye contact with our spouse, much less time alone. We need to turn on the fan!

Work. Either we work outside the home, or we work inside the home, or we work both. He works, too. Work pays the bills and meets the demands of the above mentioned – the kids. So there’s no getting around work, it’s a part of our lives. And even in the evening, after our offices have closed, the kids are in bed, and the lights are out – our minds are on our work and what has to be accomplished tomorrow. He leans in for a kiss and we turn the other way, because we’re stressed, worn out and, well...distracted. We need to turn on the fan!

Time alone. When we do finally have a chance to be with friends, read a book in a corner for five minutes, or run to the store alone (where we are going to hang out for hours because he has the kids), we cherish and relish these moments of quiet. And they’re good to have. They’re necessary in order to thrive. But often we desire time alone more than we desire time with him. Our time alone becomes our deepest need, because we are pulled on by too many things, we’re tired, and we can’t take one more person demanding time, energy, or emotion from us. So he is pushed aside, while we carefully carve out the next time we will enjoy our personal “get away.” We need to turn on the fan!

“Stop!” I hear you scream. You’re thinking that kids, work, and time alone are the three top priorities in your life, and he will just have to understand!

Believe me, I’ve been there. My kids kept me up late at night many times with homework, problems that need to be talked through (until 2 a.m.), or because they demanded solace due to a heartbreak. My work consumes my time day and night, and I can easily sit on the computer

and never look up to realize my husband is sitting across from me, awaiting his turn for conversation. And when I'm on a mission to accomplish something on my own, if he even speaks to me I sometimes explode, leaving him wondering what he said wrong. When all he did was ask me a question. Have you had similar experiences?

The fan in our bedroom drowns out all of the noises that would otherwise keep us both awake, wired, restless, and bothered. My suggestion is that we need a different kind of "fan" to drown out the other stuff, so that we can rest and enjoy our time with our husbands. So what does that fan sound like?

It sounds like music. Turn on some music and hold your husband's hand as you listen to the lyrics and the melodies. Even a three minute song, or a dance from the kitchen to the bedroom, will do you both a world of good.

It sounds like the wind. Head out the door to the park (even if the kids are in tow) and enjoy the breezes. Set out a blanket, lie back, and listen to the kids' laughter in the background as you both dream together about the awesome future ahead.

It sounds like His voice. Even if it's five minutes in the morning, read a few verses together before you get started on the day, or before your head hits the pillow at night. Connect over a nugget of truth that will encourage both of you as you face tomorrow's challenges.

It sounds like your voices. Conversation is such an art that our culture is losing these days, with all the texting and emails. Let your husband hear your voice, and you listen to his, as you talk about whatever he wants to talk about, or whatever you'd like to say. Listen to his voice, look into his eyes.

Think about what distracts you from time with him, and ask God to help you purchase (yes, it might cost you something) a "fan" that makes a sound that will drown out everything around at least for a while...so you can lie together, be together, and see each other.

Then when it's time to wake up and face another day, the fan is placed behind the door, and the noises of the day return. But once you've experienced the effects of the fan, you can't wait until the night falls again...when you can turn it on again... in favor of a moment with him.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems - Behind the Wheel Part 2 – Never Stop Learning – by Kayley Ryan

I wrung my hands together nervously, filled with excitement and apprehension. Little things like putting the key in the ignition, placing the gear in drive, and switching on my brain, seemed terrifying with a police officer sitting next to me.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm my nerves and focus on what she was telling me.

“Turn on your parking lights. Good, now apply the brakes,” she would say.

Before taking my driving test at the DPS office, no one besides family members and friends had been in the car with me.

Then, on a Friday morning in March, my driving ability was carefully scrutinized by a DPS officer, and the stakes were a little higher than just having worried parents watch and critique me. **This was the real deal.**

Okay, so maybe I’m making it a bit more dramatic than it really was—something I’ve been known to do before—but you just can’t downplay this part of a teenager’s life. Learning to drive, for the first time, is scary.

But even scarier than that is the feeling you get when you’re completely on your own. There’s no one to correct you and no one to warn you at the last second that a car is in your blind spot—and that you shouldn’t change lanes until the shrill voice of your mom yells, “Clear!”

When the DPS office issued me my very first driver license on March 21, I couldn’t contain my excitement. Who knew that a piece of paper with a black-and-white photo of me could get me so hyped up?

Now, it’s almost two weeks later, and I have yet to feel completely confident on the road. However, that’s probably a good thing.

Teenagers should be excited when they get their licenses for the first time, but they shouldn’t just throw all the rules and restrictions out the window the instant they drive out on the asphalt.

The first time I had to drive anywhere by myself was to my church on Sunday, and though it was a familiar route that I had driven multiple times before, I was still about to wet my pants with nervous excitement.

Once again, those small, seemingly inconsequential steps to driving (like checking my mirrors and adjusting my seat) became a source of terror. And I hadn’t even started the car yet.

Before turning the key in the ignition, I closed my eyes, clasped my hands together, and prayed.

Incredibly, God’s peace just swept over me. He reminded me that I didn’t have to be afraid, that He had my back, and that the best way to prepare for my very first independent driving experience was to ask Him to be with me.

If I don't recognize that I'm nowhere near being a perfect driver and that I need God to be with me through every stop, start, turn, and lane-change, then I won't be at peace.

Already, I second-guess the GPS, forget where I'm supposed to turn, change lanes way later than I should, and forget the directions to places I've been to numerous times before. So it is that much more important to ask God to be with me while I drive.

Along with asking God to be with me, I have to remember that I won't ever stop learning and that I shouldn't get so comfortable behind the wheel that I do away with caution altogether.

The moment I refuse to take further advice from drivers who are older and more experienced than me might be the moment I get *too confident* in my driving.

If there's one thing my driver's training course taught me, it's that an inflated sense of confidence in my driving skills can have disastrous consequences.

That's why it's important for me to keep *trying*, however difficult it may be at times, to review my driving, to allow others to do the same, and to be willing to correct myself and admit when I'm in the wrong.

So, if you're like me and get frustrated with parents' constant critiques and worried remarks while you're driving, or if you haven't been able to start driving yet, then remember this:

- **Learning to drive is a journey.**
- **It's not something that should be rushed, and more importantly...**
- **The learning part of driving doesn't end when you get your license.**

I may have a license, but I'm certainly not the most experienced person behind the wheel. Although my parents aren't there to constantly remind me of it, I still have rules to follow, and I will *always* have something more to learn.

“Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.” (Proverbs 9:9)

Moving Forward – The Wonder of Mercy by Lynn Cherry

Have you ever experienced mercy? You know what you deserve but for some reason the debt was cancelled, the speeding ticket was replaced with a warning, and all the pain you would have known is lifted.

Mercy is a wonderful thing.

In the words of a very wise little boy I once knew, mercy is when “you don’t get somethin’ you’re supposed to get.” He would know. There was an infraction of the family law in our home and disciplinary action was about to be taken. This little boy appealed to the judge, otherwise known as Daddy, and pleaded for mercy. Daddy paused and saw the opportunity to share a God moment with our son.

We all make mistakes and we should be punished, but we have a God who delights to show mercy. The Bible says he is *rich* in mercy. He has lots of it. So instead of getting what we deserve – we get his love and forgiveness.

**But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much,
that even though we were dead because of our sins,
he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead.**

Ephesians 2:4-5

We stand before the judge, our Father God, and we know we can’t plead innocent. The truth is we are guilty. We could plead guilty, but then what? We could never pay the price or carry the burden of our sin. But because of the cross, we can plead the blood. We throw ourselves on the mercy of our God, who in his unfailing love has made a way for us to be restored.

Jesus lived a life of tenderness toward the sinners like you and me. He came for the sick, the blind, and the captive. One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus knew he was getting what his deeds deserved.

Still he asked Jesus, “Remember me.”

Jesus responded, “Don’t worry, I will. Today you will join me in paradise.”

Jesus also bathed Peter in mercy after he acted out in anger, disbelief, and betrayal.

Jesus says:

I know you messed up. I came to make it right. I carried your sin. I’ve paid your debt.

Mercy triumphs over judgment, over guilt, over shame. ([James 2:13](#)) It’s almost too good to be true.

Aren’t you glad you don’t get what you deserve?

May we never lose the wonder of God’s mercy!

Take a moment to enjoy the wonder of mercy as my friend Amy Smith Riojas sings:

Embed this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNwJCvF2ROQ&feature=youtube>

TOUGH QUESTIONS - What Does Jesus Want Us to Be Outraged About? By April Karli

This column usually covers topics defined as “difficult issues.” I enjoy addressing hard-to-answer questions, and often there is no lack of tough question or difficult topic to discuss.

Though I don’t shy away from hard topics, I opened my social media accounts this week weary of the controversy and outrage over “tough issues” that piggybacks from one week to the next. Chick-fil-a, World Vision, Hobby Lobby, Duck Dynasty, the Noah movie, and on and on.

What will it be next?

[Research](#) and [opinion](#) documents how churches are losing the Millennial generation along with others. Many have noted that the church is better known for what it is against than what it is for. Sadly, Christians are viewed as narrow-minded, judgmental, anti-science, homophobic, and unwelcoming to anyone wrestling with doubts. What Christians choose to be outraged about fuels these perceptions.

These seemingly regularly-scheduled controversies and social media expressions of outrage are distractions from the real work of God’s Kingdom. I cannot imagine Jesus allowing himself to get caught up in a debate about chicken sandwiches, human resource policies, or a summer blockbuster. He’d be too busy feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and showing the people following him how to do the same.

I have not been immune to the effects of the outpouring of opinion and outrage. I’ve allowed myself to be distracted, become discouraged, and even cynical. I’ve felt disoriented and displaced. Oftentimes the people of God feel less like family to me and more like an embarrassment.

**What the controversies and conflict have brought me to over and over again is one thing
-- Jesus.**

As I read the gospels, pray, and talk with friends, it is Jesus that comes to the forefront time and time again. Jesus didn’t argue points. Jesus didn’t become outraged over insignificant controversies. Jesus didn’t allow himself to be distracted, disoriented, or cynical.

Why?

Jesus was focused on people. He cared about individuals more than he cared about making a point. From religious leaders like Nicodemus ([John 3](#)), to the outcast Samaritan woman at the well ([John 4](#)), to the children the disciples thought were a distraction to Jesus ([Luke 18](#)), and a man with leprosy ([Matthew 8](#)), Jesus encountered each person as an individual, meeting their needs, touching them, healing their wounds, both inside and out.

The longer I look at Jesus, the more I see someone committed to the message of God's love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Those are lovely church words. They are also radical and dangerous to practice. In fact, it got Jesus killed.

I don't think Jesus would be outraged about our minor first-world controversies. Rather, I think he'd be too busy focused on the people around him who needed his healing touch, his listening ear, and his loving embrace to even notice.

My prayer is that I'll be more like Jesus, focused on the needs of the real people around me and less focused on the controversies. As a writer and communicator, I don't want to be known for a loud, clanging, and love-less voice ([1 Cor. 13](#)). I want to be known for my feet, for if they bring Good News, they are beautiful ([Isaiah 52](#)).

**How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation.**

REAL STORIES - The Scars We Carry by Joyce Sawyer-Liggett

Revelation 21: 4

God will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more; neither shall there be anguish (sorrow and mourning) nor grief nor pain any more, for the old conditions and the former order of things have passed away.

I'm embarrassed to tell you my story, but I'm going to anyway.

I'm a 56 year-old woman, old enough to be a grandma, and yet deep within me is an extremely wounded little child, hiding and afraid. Life has seemed harsh to me because I was raised by two other wounded people. My mother was an early "women's libber" (politically liberal to the extreme), and my father was someone who never recovered from his own father's abandonment and suicide.

What this all has to do with [Smile of a Child](#), (a TBN children's program), is that I sometimes leave the programming on all day and through the night, sometimes muted, sometimes not. The sweetness and wholesomeness of *Smile of a Child* deeply ministers to the child within me.

You see, I was a naturally God-tuned child. However, in the home where I was raised, I was almost crushed by my mom's cynical, jaded outlook on life, and by my father's unspoken grief. My mother wanted to believe in goodness and innocence but she had experienced too much pain to allow herself that luxury. And because I had come to believe in goodness and innocence as a teen, she thought I was grossly unprepared to live life in the real world. So much so that she treated me as if I was insane, and acted towards me, not spoken above-board (important to note) - but subtly - with an attitude of pity and inadequacy.

What a confusing home!

To articulate what's happened to me helps explain. The wounds are so cunning and invisible that I've not found many who can relate.

I was targeted as the "insane one." When in reality, it wasn't me.

How damaging this was!

And though I can understand intellectually the "what" and "why" of my struggles, my heart still gets discouraged and hopeless sometimes, as it must have when I was a child. I must communicate again that I appreciate the TBN channel being available 24 hours a day, as I shudder to realize how many other people are like me, wounded as a child.

My mother desperately wanted to protect me from the ridicule, harshness, and disappointments in life. My mom's fears actually handicapped me, the opposite of her goal.

Knowing what I do now, these years since her passing, I can reassure her that I'm okay.

In fact, I'm more than okay.

I've found a faith that explains unexplainable things, the One who is totally, totally, totally trustworthy...and reality-based. And I can attest to the fact that *unbelief* is the true enemy. And now, because of the Glorious One, who was willing to die the most outrageously horrific death, I can live!

I can live!

Sane!

Secure!

Free!

Strong!

Abundantly!

I'm so sorry my terrified mama wasn't able to trust. I want to place my arms about her shoulders and share my security. I want my wounded father to know the One.

There ARE many of us who DO put our trust in Him. And we are NOT insane...or disappointed. Our families may not understand us and may be embarrassed by us, but that's okay. He understands.

Our parents who meant well were wounded, and we must forgive them, and all the generations before them.

The scars we carry are only reminders of what was; not what is, because of the scars he carries...for our healing.

Joyce just completed an Early Childhood credential and was blessed to work in the local Jewish Community Center Preschool. She worships at Seed of Abraham Messianic Synagogue. G-d is also fulfilling her creative and compassionate dreams of encouraging others by the publishing of this first article. This dream is being facilitated by the faith and recognition of her talent by Marcy Lytle. Thank-you, Marcy. Joyce lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Branded by Marcy Lytle

Designers must be pretty confident to have their name sewn into the front of their shirts, on the pockets of their pants, and etched into the labels on their bags. When we wear designer labels, we are bearing the name of the one who created that which clothes our bodies. And if we don't look good in it, if the fit is not just right, and the product falls apart, that designer's name is trashed.

I thought about this, and thought about friends and family, and how each of us is so different. I had a teacher friend who only carried purses that cost several hundred dollars, because she felt that made others like her more. When my son was young, he loved to own and wear soccer team shirts that bore the name of great teams. And yet, I really could care less about the brand of clothing I wear, as long as it fits and looks good.

Did you know that when we come to Christ (believe in him and accept him as Savior), we are branded with his name? This can be a good thing, if we wear his name well and others see it and want to wear it, too. But this can be devastating when others hear that we bear his name, and yet what they see is so ugly that they turn and walk away, vowing to never wear that name themselves.

Let me explain.

Many verses in Bible the talk about God's house bearing his name, and how people can defile – or make detestable – the place where God resides. And this [does not please Him](#).

- If we call ourselves a Christian, it doesn't take long for those who know us to see whether or not the label we wear is attractive, looks good, and holds up under wear and tear.
- If we talk behind our co-worker's back, are rude to our husbands, or dishonor the Lord by holding on to judgments, bitterness and hatred – we are not a brand anyone will be interested in copying.
- If we, however, speak kindly to everyone, treat our spouses well, and honor the Lord by daily walking and becoming more like him (full of grace and mercy), others will see and want to know what makes us look so good.

Brands on products are supposed to be recognizable, attractive, and speak loudly, saying, "Buy me." And there are some brands that do just that. It's because they've had a proven track record over time that their product is solid.

Many times, we cannot afford the name brands we'd like to wear. Or we get ourselves into debt trying to wear them anyway.

There's no debt involved in being branded by Jesus. He paid our debt on the cross. There's no worry about whether or not we can afford to wear his name. It's free for the asking. And there's no pressure to make his name "fit" us perfectly. He calls us perfect and pure, because of his great love that was [poured out upon us](#) for a perfect fit every time we call on his name in worship and praise.

Think about the brands you wear, physically, and spiritually. Why do you wear them? How do you feel when others see what you wear? And are you wearing a brand that will last?

Isaiah 61:3 ...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

FRESH THYME: A Bothersome Story by Marcy Lytle

On a recent road trip, we met a man who told us a true story that bothered me. It was a sad story, an interesting story, and one that hurt my heart. He was just a man we met in a furniture store, but he had a story to tell, and we listened.

This man's son is a national poker player, a legal one at that, and has won many titles, with many earnings. However, this man's grandson goes to a "Christian" school near where I live, and the parents there soon learned of the profession of the young teen's dad. Word got around, and pretty soon the parents weren't letting their kids play with this young man because of his father's profession.

The father then reacted to this treatment of his son in a way I've never heard of before. He had the money, so he proceeded to build a home/mansion outside of town with a small amusement park to house every fun thing imaginable for his son. And the only ones invited to play in this park with his son are ones whom the son invites – true friends.

I was sad about this story, because I have a similar story about my own son who took a non-Christian friend on a camping trip with other families from our church, years ago. The little boy let the s-word slip out – *shut-up* (yes I was surprised that this was deemed to be a bad word by some), and one of the moms at our campsite instructed her son to not play with my son's friend anymore. Our reaction was to quit camping with these folks.

I was interested in this story because I found myself thinking about how we as Christians react to those around us who are different than we are, and how that our reactions speak louder than any lofty words of "witness" could ever speak. In other words, we ruin our witness of Jesus' love and acceptance for all when we segregate out ourselves and our kids from those who don't fit into our box of acceptable friends and behavior.

I was hurt by this story, because of the effect this father's reaction was going to have on his son. I suppose it could go two ways. His son could be blessed and see the love his father had for him that he would build him such a place of fun. But more than likely, he will learn to react to those who don't accept him in life by getting revenge against them and secluding himself away.

I've thought on this story many times and asked myself these questions:

- How are parents supposed to "protect" their kids from bad homes, or at least ones where we "think" bad stuff is going on?
- How do we determine if these friends and their parents are really bad influences?
- How should we react if our own kids are rejected by others who are more "religious" than we are?

I think we have to look at the example of Jesus.

When Jesus was small, his parents took him to the temple where he learned the word, and grew in favor with God and man.

When Jesus became a man, he frequented the homes of those who were unlike him, and he hung out with those who didn't believe in him, because he was grounded in who he was, and in whose he was.

I believe it's our responsibility as parents to train our kids in the word, but in doing so, we must have first and foremost in our training the command to love God with all our hearts, and others as ourselves. Perhaps the parents who were concerned about this "poker playing dad" could have talked to the dad and found out that his job was legal, or maybe they could have invited the whole family on an outing if they were fearful of sending their kid to this stranger's house alone.

Caution is wise, when it comes to our children. But exclusion is just wrong.

And when we become parents, it's our responsibility as Christians to love other children and adults who are different than we are, which means including them in our campsites, realizing they might not be as polished as we think we are, and being humble enough to admit that we too have faults. This then allows us to invite a little boy who's not a believer over to our fire, to hear our family converse about how glad we are that he's joined us on a weekend outing.

How our children see us respond to others will be their greatest influence in how they respond when they too grow up to enjoy camping with other families, as well.

I hope the little boy in the story the man told us enjoys the big playground his dad makes for him. And I hope he has lots of friends who come and play. But more than that, I hope the parents who wouldn't let their kids play with the little boy will think twice before turning their backs on a fellow classmate just because of fear.

And I hope we all (myself included) look to Jesus for our model on how to love our neighbor, and not to our peers of how to exclude them.

FRESH THYME – Marriage is Fun and Easy – by Justin Christopher

Honestly, I have thought about writing on this subject for a long time but have not done so in fear of offending friends who are struggling in their marriages. I know many people who have difficult marriages, so I did not want to write something that would feel condemning to them.

But I have another fear that has been weighing heavier on me. I fear that too many people are receiving the message that “marriage is hard.” Single people and dating couples who hear this message over and over again are prone to not want to get married thinking marriage is not life-giving or they enter into difficult marriages because they suspect this is normal and just the way it is supposed to be.

I am here to proclaim that **marriage can be fun and easy**. It really has been my experience (thanks to God and Brenda.) This should be a word of hope to those who are tempted to despair and a word of warning to those in difficult dating relationships.

For those in difficult marriages currently, please know that I am writing this primarily to those who are not yet married...and prayerfully consider my fourth point.

Marriage is Fun and Easy

Maybe I am the first to tell you so, but marriage is awesome! I've only been married 12 years, but I can honestly tell you it has been awesome, fun, and easy. Sure Brenda and I fight occasionally, but rarely. If you single and/or dating people are reading this blog, hear this:

Marriage can be fun and easy, without many conflicts.

Don't believe the lie that marriage is difficult. It does not have to be. Nor should it be. Don't look for friends to justify your bad relationship. Find friends who have fun and easy marriages and learn from them (especially if you're not married yet.)

Spiritual/Emotional Maturity

I have thought long and hard (I mean for years and years) about why Brenda and I have had an easier marriage than so many of our friends who believe marriage is “hard.” I've have many answers to this question. Truthfully, many answers are circumstantial (past wounds, different personalities, parents' modeling, etc.) The biggest answer; however, is spiritual maturity.

To me, spiritual/emotional maturity is most simply the ability to consider others above yourself. Spiritually and emotionally mature people are able to do many selfless things like overlook an offense, serve when they are unwilling, listen to understand instead of to win an argument, admit when they are wrong, ask for and receive forgiveness, etc.

Those who are genuinely able to do these things at a heart-felt level are way ahead of those who unable to do so. This is why it is essential for those in dating relationships to examine the relationships of their boyfriends/girlfriends. Do they have these selfless-type of relationships with their families and friends (let alone with you)? If so, they may be a person who is fun and easy to marry. If not, *buyer beware!*

Spiritual and emotional maturity is the primary key to having a fun and easy marriage.

“Christianese” and Red Flags

As Christians, we believe God can change people. This is true, but I have seen too many people overlook red flags in their relationships because they believe God will change the person. God can change someone, but you better watch Him do it before you get married. And it takes month and months (if not years) to see if someone has **really changed**, because anyone can fake it for a few months, especially when they're on the hunt for a spouse.

Here is one thing I have noticed. If your dating relationship is hard (lots of fighting, on again off again, etc.), then your marriage will be even worse. Some folks seem to think slapping a “marriage tag” on things will make everything better. In almost every case, I have seen it get worse.

Don't get me wrong, fighting and disagreements are normal. If a dating couple has not experienced some sort of conflict I would never encourage them to marry because they still have not been real with each other. They are still both faking it. But there is a HUGE difference between a couple that has had conflict while dating and worked through it in a spiritually mature way and a couple that has continual unhealthy conflict.

Whatever conflict you experience in your dating relationship will be **amplified** in marriage. Don't let your Christian beliefs that God can change people blind you to the red flags in your relationship. There is no need to marry someone who has been hard to date.

Hope for Those Already Married

If you're married and struggling, I urge you to honor your vows. I firmly believe that those who stick to their vows (learning to humble themselves and seek their spouse's interest above their own) can see their difficult marriages change for the better. I have seen this happen, too. There is hope when we submit ourselves to God and to each other.

Once the vows have been stated, this is the only Christian option. Before the vows have been stated, there is room to quit the relationship and wait for someone else who is more spiritually mature (actually... more time for you to become spiritually mature) and to wait for someone who is "fun and easy."

To reiterate, I am writing to those not yet married and I feel for my friends in difficult marriages. I just want to be a voice to say marriage can be fun and easy. This should be our expectation. I've experienced it to be so.

Justin Christopher is a husband, uncle, Longhorn, fantasy football freak, pet lover, landscaper, minister, neighbor, Jesus-follower, and friend (not necessarily in that order). He is the University of Texas Director of [Campus Renewal Ministries](#) in Austin, Texas.

FRESH THYME – NUMBERS by Marcy Lytle

One of the first things we do as a preschooler is learn to count, because numbers are important. However, certain numbers can be dangerous and downright unhealthy for us, as women. In fact, one guy in the bible got in big trouble for counting numbers, when he was instructed not to do so.

Why are numbers so important?

Our kids start their first experience on the game field, perhaps in a soccer game, and very soon they learn that if their team has the highest “number” of goals, they win. Along with that win comes bragging rights for the team, and even more bragging rights for the person who scored the most number of goals.

Our daughters enter the teen world and pretty soon they realize that their weight, the number of pounds they weigh, is important. And it’s not about health...at least in their eyes. It’s about being liked, being popular, and being eyed by the boys. Numbers on the scales are a big thing. In fact, the number of pounds they weigh becomes an obsession, and sometimes leads to an eating disorder.

Our sons and daughters are off to college, graduate and enter the world of the working class, and are hit in the face with big numbers. Numbers in salary, numbers in cost of living, and numbers in how many and how much they can acquire. Pretty soon, they find themselves in debt because they can’t keep up with the numbers. And ulcers, sleepless nights, and stressful marriages result.

So back to this guy in the bible – David is his name – who led an army. God explicitly instructed David to not count or take a census, regarding the number in his army. God wanted David to listen, follow instructions, and win victories without relying on his own strength or numbers. However, David was curious, perhaps ambitious, and maybe tempted with pride. Maybe he wanted to know that his army was the biggest – that would boost his confidence when going into battle. Maybe he just wanted to show himself how big and bad he could be, how far he could push, how high he could climb. Or just maybe, he wanted to be the envy of all the other leaders of armies around him.

Whatever the reason, David disobeyed God’s instructions and [he numbered](#) the people. And he suffered the consequences.

In the New Testament, we read the story of the [loaves and fishes](#). This time, the disciples were dumbfounded at the small amount of food available to feed such a large crowd of people. They knew it was impossible to feed a crowd with five loaves of bread and two fish. But Jesus took the small amount, gave thanks, and that little amount fed multitudes.

Are numbers a bad thing? Certainly not. They’re a necessary part of life. But here’s what is bad, when it comes to numbers, specifically relating to our relationship to God, our heavenly father:

- When we decide that numbers (i.e. weight, salary, etc.) are part of our identity, and we are worthless without specific numbers, we've lost what it means to find our purpose and worth in Jesus.
- When we focus on the lack of numbers (i.e. money, number of cars in our driveway, entries in our resume, etc.) we become driven to achieve at all costs, we may be tempted to go into debt, steal from others, or rob our families of time because we've got to make another dollar. This reaction results in hurting ourselves, and those we love.
- When we boast because our numbers are great (perfect weight, awesome salary, long resume, padded bank account, etc.) our eyes turn off of God – from whom all blessings flow – and on to ourselves – from whom all pride puffs up.

There was a reason God told David not to count the number in his army. God wanted to do mighty things for David, win victories, and proclaim his power, but he knew the heart of man – that of seeking worth, purpose, and glory in another; in himself. And God knew that man's best attempts would fail.

God wants us to succeed. He wants us to be healthy. And he wants to bless us with everything we need.

However, God wants us to have a healthy weight because we're enjoying life and the food he provides. He wants us to succeed in business in order to bless others and point them to his Son. He desires that we experience victory when it seems there's no way to do so, in order that we realize we can do all things in his strength – not ours.

There's always a reason for God's instructions in our lives. And there are always consequences when we disobey. But there's also always grace and forgiveness, and new mercy every morning, when we turn back and obey.

He knows the cost of living, he knows now much you need to weigh, he knows how hungry you are, and he knows you feel the urge to strive, in order to succeed.

God counts the very hairs of our head and knows how many there are. Let him do the counting. We can just listen for his voice, lay our head in his lap, and obey what we hear him saying to do...or not to do.

Will that be enough? You bet, it will. In fact, it will defeat armies full of enemies.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

June 2014

TIPS

The Fearless Kitchen - Frozen Treats by Christina Vetter

As temperatures soar this month, I am noticing life slow down. Everywhere I go I see my fellow Texans walking a little more sluggish than normal into the grocery store or around town. At times I can even hear their inner Wicked Witch of the West screaming, “*I’m melting, I’m melting,*” as the scorching sun beats down on their shoulders.

Snow cone stands, ice cream shops, and alike are overflowing with people pouring into their doors, begging for just the slightest taste of relief. As I brave the sea of sweaty crowds, I’m saddened. I see people so desperate, they are willing to stand in line in the sweltering heat as they wait to buy a four dollar scoop of ice cream. What a sad sight indeed. Take heart my fellow triple-digit survivor, relief is here.

In hopes to help avoid this situation, this month I’m sharing some delicious frozen treats that I hope will take some of the edge off summer suffering without emptying your wallet. Sweet Cherry Semifreddo, Apricot Sorbet, and Cherry Bourbon Ice Cream are on this month’s menu.

Feel free to repeat as necessary; I know you’ll love them!

Sweet Cherry Semifreddo

Serves 4-6

Difficulty: 

Semifreddo is a traditional Italian frozen dessert similar to gelato, but much creamier. It’s not “icy” like ice cream. Instead it’s thick, smooth, and very creamy. Cherries are my absolute favorite and this recipe cures that craving extremely well without spending a fortune on an ice cream machine!

Ingredients:

½ C sugar
1/8 C maraschino cherry juice
¼ C egg whites
¾ C heavy cream
¼ C diced maraschino cherries

Directions:

- In a shallow pan, over medium heat, dissolve sugar and cherry juice together until it reaches a syrupy consistency.
- In an electric mixer, whip egg whites and cherry syrup together on medium high speed until stiff peaks are formed (you’re making a meringue).
- In a separate large bowl, whip heavy cream until solid.
- Gently fold together cherry meringue, whipped cream, and diced cherries until just blended. Do not over mix.

- Line a 9x5 loaf pan with plastic wrap and pour cherry mixture in, spreading evenly. Press down more plastic wrap directly touching the top surface of the mixture, leaving no air in between.
- Freeze for 8 hours or overnight, slice to serve.

Apricot Sorbet

Serves 6

Recipe Courtesy of [Bon Appétit](#)

Difficulty: 

Sorbet is so wonderful on a hot day. It's an icy, fresh, and fruity way to kill some of that summer heat! This recipe is a home run!

Ingredients:

- 1 C sugar
- 1 lb apricots, pitted and sliced
- ¾ C sparkling wine
- 2 C water, plus more

Directions:

- Bring sugar, apricots, sparkling wine, and water to a boil in a medium saucepan.
- Reduce heat and simmer, stirring occasionally, until apricots are very tender, about 10-15 minutes. Let cool completely.
- Puree mixture in a blender until smooth. Add enough water until mixture reaches 4 cups.
- Transfer mixture to a large shallow baking dish, and freeze until solid, at least 4 hours.

Cherry- Bourbon Ice Cream

Makes about 4 cups

Recipe Courtesy of [Bon Appetit](#)

Difficulty: 

Quick disclaimer: an ice cream machine is required for this recipe! If you don't have one, they can be found at Bed Bath and Beyond, Target, and most other homegoods stores.

Ingredients:

Vanilla Ice Cream:

- 1 ½ C heavy cream
- 1 C whole milk
- ¼ C sugar
- Pinch of salt
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 5 large egg yolks
- Additional ¼ C sugar

Cherry-Bourbon Syrup:

1 ½ C halved pitted cherries
2 Tbsp sugar
1 Tbsp water
1 Tbsp bourbon-

Directions:

For ice cream base:

- Mix heavy cream, milk, ¼ C sugar, vanilla, and salt in a medium sauce pan.
- Bring mixture to a simmer, stirring frequently to dissolve sugar. Remove from heat
- In a medium bowl, mix egg yolks and additional ¼ C sugar until pale in color, about 2 minutes.
- Slowly mix in ½ C warm milk mixture, then mix remaining yolk and milk mixtures together.
- Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly until thick enough to coat a wooden spoon, 2-3 minutes.
- Strain custard into a medium bowl and allow to cool in refrigerator.
- Process custard in a ice cream machine according to manufacturer's directions.

For the syrup:

- Cook cherries, sugar, and water together in a small saucepan over medium heat until it reaches a syrupy consistency, stirring constantly about 8-10 minutes.
- Remove from heat and stir in bourbon. Allow to cool.
- When vanilla custard is finished churning, fold in cherry mixture before transferring it into an airtight container and freezing until firm, at least four hours.
- Ice cream will last up to one week.

TIPS – Reviews – Music Must-Haves

It's just music this month that we're reviewing for you. Whatever inspires us, speaks to us, moves us, or just plain makes us feel good...we're sharing with you. Music has a way of transporting us out of the mundane, worrisome hours, or fearful nights, into his presence and up atop a mountain to where we can see things from His perspective. And sometimes it's just an escape for a few moments of fun. Enjoy!

Jeff Deyo

Some of my favorite music lately is by [Jeff Deyo](#). He does a really powerful version of "More Love More Power," and another great song of his is called "Bless the Lord." His music has brought my worship up another notch. – *Pam Charro*

Mute Math

Recently I've fallen back in love with the band [Mute Math](#). My husband considers them "indie" style, but their lyrics and relaxing beat make them one of my favorites. – *Christina Vetter*

Hillsong Young & Free

[Hillsong Young & Free](#) is a blast! Staying current with music trends will keep you young & free! I love celebrating my freedom with this music. The song "Back to Life" reminds me of all Jesus has done in my life - *in the night, through the struggle, through the trial, you have made my burden light, you have brought me back to life again.* I gotta get up and dance to that! – *Lynn Cherry*

Embed this Super Summer Fun Music Video -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDn5GX1m1IU>

Still Believe

I just got this new CD [Still Believe](#) by Kim Walker Smith on a road trip, because I had heard one song from it. It's now my go-to worship music that I also do my morning exercise to, swaying, leaping, falling...all in response to the lyrics and the melodies. Kim's title song "Still Believe" is awesome, and well as "Wasting it all on You." – *Marcy Lytle*

Imagine Dragons

Right now I'm listening to Greg Laswell, Imagine Dragons, Florence & the Machine, Mumford & Sons, One Republic, Lifehouse. Mostly the [Imagine Dragons station on Pandora](#). – *Rachel Toalson*

Classical for Studying and Relaxation

It's not an album or artist, but I like to listen to the [Classical for Studying and Relaxation Station](#) on Pandora when I'm working. It creates background noise that I sometimes need to help me get going. Sometimes, too, when I'm trying to write and my kids are around, I put in my

headphones to drown out the sounds they make. It's perfect because I'm not distracted by singing along or loud music - just the right blend of white noise and creative stimulation. Occasionally, something weird does come on that I have to thumbs down! – *April Karli*

Selah's Style - Bathing Suit Cover-Ups – by Selah Irwin

Make a splash this summer using my cute tips for creative swimsuit cover-ups!

This is the sunny day style. If you have a cute skirt that is getting to short for you, why put it to waste? You can actually use it for a cover-up at the beach! Add a *fantabulific* sun hat and your favorite bathing suit, and there you have it! A perfect summer day style!

This is my rainbow awesomeness! This cover-up is made out of terry cloth so it can warm you up when you get out of the spine-shivering pool water. You can also use it as a towel!

If you are going to do an active water sport, you can wear board shorts. I like these because they are purple and flowered, and purple is my favorite color!

If you are going to a pool party, this is such a cute birthday present idea! We got a beach bag, water bottle, and beach frame from the dollar section at Target. We added a cheap towel and flowing cover up. It was all under \$20! Any girl would love to love it!

Hope you have a great and splashy summer!

SEVEN FOR YOU - Girls and Their Groans

I would absolutely love to have a conversation with another woman that didn't include phrases and questions like, "I am so fat," "I feel old," or "What diet are you on?" And furthermore, I absolutely love other women who love themselves, just as they are! I'm not talking about bad health; I'm talking about bad self-image. Every woman has "something" they see as lacking in their bodies, and somehow their eyes only see how imperfect they are, when standing next to someone they see has "having it all."

This month I'm addressing seven body taboos that girls like to groan about, and hopefully give you a better perspective on your unique features that you were born with...or you've encountered...now that you're getting "older...."

Cellulite. According to [Scientific American Magazine](#), 90% of women have it. And yet women everywhere hate it! I'll admit it, I'd love to have the smooth legs I had when I was – say 10 years old – but I don't. And as I age, I'm finding that cellulite doesn't just stay within the confines of your thighs. It migrates! So if most women have it, let's quit letting it define the way we view our bodies. We can still wear sleeveless tops, and shorts (just not SO short), and let people that see us go ahead and talk. Let them talk about our cellulite and get it out of their system. And once we liberate ourselves back into the land of fun summer clothes without the angst, we are free to enjoy a stroll on the beach, or a night out with friends.

No Gap. This is a new one to me, but it's trending, so it's worth addressing. Supposedly, we women are supposed to have a gap between our thighs. [Thank you, Beyonce!](#) I don't have a thigh gap and I'm not sure I want one. I suppose if my thighs rubbed together and caused me problems, I'd work at obtaining a gap. But why are celebrities our standard of measure? Most of their photos are touched up. And we can touch up our own photos! If you've got two legs to stand on and get you places, be thankful for your thighs, gap or no gap.

Tummy. Flat tummies are for the young, I've decided. Anyone who's gone through menopause knows that it's hard to maintain a flat tummy after that phase of life. But even young girls struggle with the "pooch." Girls stand in the mirror, suck in their stomach, and let out a huge sigh...when it doesn't look flat enough. Women spend hundreds on Spanx and even plastic surgery to get rid of their bellies. I'm all for looking good in our clothing, and for eating so that we are in good health, but a [tummy pooch](#) isn't something to cry about on your bed, while your little ones look on and start wondering if they too have a pooch. That's not funny.

Fine Lines. There are creams, commercials, and even lifts that can erase these. But do we really want to erase these lines, when they're called "fine?" Fine wine is wine that has aged to perfection, and I'm thinking fine lines indicate a face that has aged gracefully with wisdom. Eventually, the lines will not only be visible, but they will be sagging, and honestly – there's nothing more beautiful than an old woman full of the years of life that show on her face, next to the twinkle in her eyes, that never fades.

Jiggly Arms. I realized I had these when I looked in the mirror with a mirror. You know, the mirror where you try to see what you look like from behind. And there it was. The back of my

arms were jiggle. I exercise routinely, including a workout for my arms. But ladies, as we age, our skin comes loose from the bones and it's just not quite as taut anymore. Again, there are a few women on television who have toned, firm arms, and they've learned to wave so that any jiggle does not appear. So if you're into toned arms, go for it. [Work at it.](#) But don't let your arm definition be what defines you as a beautiful woman.

Flat Chest. I've got a big chest, and believe me it's not pleasant. Women with flat chests have always wanted big ones. And [big bucks are paid](#) to enhance the upper torso. I don't get this one. Never have. It makes me believe that most of these maladies that we girls groan about – if we didn't have them – we'd find something else to take up our gripe time. Big chested girls want reductions, and flat chested girls want enhancement. Get the picture? I say enjoy what you've got, and if your man doesn't like the real you – get another man – or pray for the one you've got to enjoy the woman he's got.

Big Feet. Another trend I've read about is women having foot surgery so that they can fit into super expensive heels. It's called [Cinderella Surgery.](#) Again, if we have painful feet because of injuries or problems, that's one thing. But to have expensive cosmetic surgery to wear a pair of shoes that costs in the hundreds of dollars? Are you laughing, yet?

What is your main gripe about being a girl? It's worth thinking about how much time we spend looking in the mirror, talking with our girlfriends, and sitting in depression over how we look to other women, and what they're going to think of us if we don't fix that which we groan about.

And it's certainly worth taking a look at what we do have, accentuating our pluses (which far outweigh our minuses) and hanging out with friends who love us for who we are...inside....and out.

THE DRESSING The Bermuda Short

I am not into short shorts, and I'm sure most people are glad I'm not. But neither am I into wearing jeans all summer long. So...I opt for the Bermuda short. It's a short that is completely versatile, since it can be worn to a picnic, out on a date, or even to a dressy affair! The Bermuda short isn't just for a trip to Bermuda, ladies. It's got to be part of your summer wardrobe here at home!

Let's start with the [cargo Bermuda](#). This denim look from JCP is one that can be worn with heels, as pictured here. Top it with a crisp, white button down shirt, or a [white peplum top](#) for a day out shopping, or date night on a patio, while the summer breezes blow.

The [chino Bermuda shorts](#) are my favorite, especially in khaki, like these pictured from Macys. How about pairing these shorts with a [solid color](#) like yellow, apricot, or teal? You can sport heels, or cute flats and a hat, to complete your summer outfit for traveling in an airplane, or just to visit friends.

If you like a cuff and a tighter look on the leg, go for these [flirty Bermuda shorts](#) from Old Navy. A navy [bandana print blouse](#) will look cute with these shorts, along with red flats. Add a cardigan for a chilly theater date, and switch out your shoes for heels.

[Sateen Bermuda shorts](#) can be found at Kohls, and paired with a cute sheer [peasant top](#), with a tank underneath, is a complete outfit! Add a dainty necklace around your neck, and this outfit can be worn to your next picnic dinner or out on an afternoon boat ride across the lake.

A pair of [Bermuda shorts in a stretchy twill](#) from H&M are crisp and clean for summer wear. Top them with a [striped tshirt](#), a brown belt, and brown leather sandals. This is a comfortable look, yet the white shirt gives the look a step up from casual...to chic.

Look at these [gym Bermuda shorts](#) from the GAP! You might want several of this style, for playing tennis, going on walks along trails, or for riding your bike. These [space-dye tees](#) come in all colors, and one of these paired with your shorts is all you need for movement and comfort! These are great for packing in your suitcase, too!

Kmart has [plaid Bermuda shorts](#) in lots of colors. Paired with a solid slouchy [short-sleeved hoodie](#) and a cute pair of tennis shoes, and you're good to go wherever it is you have planned for your summer outings. Owning a pair of plaid shorts instead of just solid-colored ones adds a kick to your wardrobe and a *spring* to your step...even in the summer!

Start now, while summer is still early, and purchase several of these shorts for your outings, your trips, your walks, and your visits. You'll be glad you have them, and when fall arrives, you can still wear them with tights and jackets!

TRIED AND TRUE – Writers Faves

This month we are sharing our writers' faves (a tradition we started last year.) They are just a list of things we've found that work for us, and so they might work for you, too! Since summer is here, we're listing our favorite hair product, scented candle, drink, packing tip, and lotion, so that you can treat yourself to something new to try...just for you!

Christina Vetter: My favorite hair product is [Paul Mitchell's Super Skinny](#) smoothing serum. It's great at taming my lion's mane of wavy hair and it lasts forever! I have a special infatuation with Sprite with cherries added (aka Shirley Temples). I can drink them any time and any place. They are so refreshing! For packing, I'm a big believer in travel sized toiletries. No sense is packing huge shampoo and conditioner bottles and wasting the space. I keep my toiletry bag packed with all my essentials at all times. That way, when it's time to pack, I can just grab it and be done. The best lotion in the world is [Jergens Ultra Healing lotion](#). It's the most moisturizing lotion in the world without leaving me greasy. I love the smell too, even if my husband thinks I smell like my grandma.

Georganne Schuch: I stopped using shampoo a year or so ago. I have very thick, naturally curly, dry hair, and I found that even the moisturizing shampoos dried my scalp and left my hair frizzy. Now I only comb a conditioner through my hair in the shower and rinse it out. Then, I rub a small amount of [argon oil and lavender essential oil](#) in my wet hair and finish with a hair gel to keep the frizzies away. For a summer drink I love the light, fizzy taste of mixing ginger ale and cranberry juice. When packing, take more shirts than pants. You can wear pants several times, and shirts are easy to wash. Regarding lotion, I also stopped wearing most commercial lotions. My daughter and I make most of our skincare products. For facial lotion, I use jojoba or avocado oil mixed with a drop of lavender essential oil. For body lotion, we like whipped coconut oil, but it melts easily during the summer. Our alternative is a cocoa butter balm that is especially good for my younger daughter's eczema.

Pam Charro: For my favorite hair product I use anything with argon oil because it really seems to tame the frizz and fly-aways. I don't have a specific brand of candle, but I LOVE [lavender lemongrass candles](#) made of soy. I also get fresh [lemongrass lavender lotion](#). It smells so yummy, I could almost eat it! For a summer drink: water, water, water. I don't drink much else. My packing tip is to roll clothes instead of folding. This way, they don't crease.

Lynn Cherry: For my hair, I use [Rockaholic Haircare Dirty Secret Dry Shampoo](#). This is my little secret to squeezing in another day in between washing my hair. I love it, it smells fabulous, and really works! My favorite candles are [Pure & Simple Natural Soy Candles](#), hand poured in Austin, Texas. They are non-carcinogenic, clean burning and the fragrance fills the room. Somthin' Sassy is my new favorite scent! For a drink - [Vitamin burst acai berry k-cups](#) are my just-in-time-for-summer drink. Brew over ice and drop in a few berries. It's the next best thing to Starbucks! My packing tip is to keep a summer vacation packing list document that you update regularly. Mine helps me remember to pack the things I forgot last year. And, it's a sweet reminder of items I used to pack when the boys were small. I can reminisce while I get ready to make new memories. My favorite lotion - [Bath & Body Works True Blue Spa](#) – I just wait for a

sale and stock up!

Marcy Lytle: I love Garnier Fructis Wonder Waves. I spray it on my hair, especially the ends, and scrunch them up, and I get waves and curls. I can only find it at Walmart. My favorite candles are [Milkhouse Creamery](#) candles – all scents! And for a favorite summer drink, I enjoy water with cucumbers and blackberries that have flavored it. Try it! It's very refreshing. Packing for a trip, I love this [toiletry bag](#) by Eddie Bauer. It holds everything, and hangs up for convenience, wherever we go. For a favorite lotion, I use [Nivea Sun-Kissed Radiance](#) lotion because it moisturizes AND gives my skin an even tan for the summer months.

Rachel Toalson: My favorite hair product is [Kiss My Face](#) organic big body conditioner – it's light and free of chemicals. Instead of candles, we diffuse essential oils like thieves and cinnamon, and blends like hope and relaxation. Essential oils lift spirits and protect against sickness, and are a natural way to scent the house. My packing tip? Don't wait until the last minute! The drink I love in every season is red wine. And my favorite lotion is [Everyone Lotion](#) in lavender. It's eco-friendly and helps me sleep!

Kamrin Lytle: My favorite hair product is [Aquage salt spray](#). It helps style my fine hair without using a heavy hairspray. For a candle, [Woodwick biscotti](#) makes my house smell like a coffee house, and the wood wick crackles as it burns! And for my favorite summer drink, I love Java Chip frappucino or Café Espresso frappucino (can you tell I love coffee?). [Aveeno](#) (which is oatmeal-based) lotion is great for my sensitive skin. And as for packing, I like to sleep on the plane, so I bring a few makeup essentials in my carry-on so that I can touch up my face, in case we go somewhere right out of the gate!

We hope you find something new in the list above to try for yourself or to give to a friend. Summertime is here, vacation is near, and it's time to relax and feel good! What are your favorites? Share them with us!

HOME

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER - WINGS TO SOAR by Marcy Lytle

Paper airplanes are nostalgic, simple, and easy to make, and can be easily used to teach your children all about our Creator God, his mercy, his grace, and his restorative power. Set aside an evening this month to fold, crease and fly, as you all soar with Him.

Preparation: You will need plain white paper for each person, two pieces each. You will need colored paper (red, blue, yellow and green – or four colors of your choice), and two empty shoeboxes (large) or other boxes with lids.

Prior to the study, take the colored paper and make nicely creased [paper airplanes](#) and place them in a shoe box, careful not to bend or destroy them, and set this box aside, hidden from view from the family. Hand out to each person their white paper.

You have plain paper in your hands, and you are going to **create something useful** out of both pieces. (*Take the papers, fold them and shape them into paper airplanes.*) Place the two paper planes down in front of you and look at your creation. You took something plain and ordinary, folded it, shaped it and used your hands to create something so cool out of that plain paper, two paper airplanes. However, these planes won't fly or be useful unless you use your power to fly them. (*Practice flying them across the room.*)

Just suppose you could give these paper planes a voice and allow them **freedom to fly at will**. As long as they keep in good shape, you will daily give them air and power to fly. Again, just suppose these two planes decide to try to fly on their own one day, but they crash into a wall. (*Fly your planes into a wall and smash the front ends.*)

Some of you may get disgusted with your little paper planes and just wad them up and throw them away (*have a one person do this to one of their planes*). One of you may think your plane is not fit for flying anymore and you may discard it, tossing it to the side because it is no longer useful to you (*have one person do this*). Yet another owner of the plane may place a mark on the plane (*have one person put a black mark on a wing*) so that when it flies, others will know it's suffered a crash. One particular owner may just give the plane a good lecture on how stupid it is to fly on their own (*have one person do this.*)

However, being the loving creator of your creation, you **remember why you created the planes in the first place**. They were created for your enjoyment, for your pleasure, for demonstration of your power and for flying. You decide to park each wadded up plane, each discarded plane, each marked plane and each stupid plane into a special hanger. (*Place the planes in the shoebox*). By now, the other planes have crashed a few times and they too are in need of a complete makeover. (*Place the rest of the planes in the shoebox*).

You had a plan before you shaped these planes and gave them wings, because you knew they were just plain paper and you knew they would need some extra special, tender loving care. You lovingly gave up your own life so that these destroyed airplanes could fly again. It really didn't make sense to the planes, why their creator had to die in order for them to fly, but that's what happened. However, because their creator was the eternal holy God (are you surprised?), he was victorious over death and lives again!

This loving creator took each one of his creations, one by one, out of the hanger. (*Have everyone look away while you replace the shoebox with your box full of new creations.*) The wadded up airplane miraculously transformed into a brand new one (*ask someone to set out*

one of the blue planes). The discarded airplane with a bent nose from diving into a wall was completely remade as well into a strong plane with bold color (*take out a red plane*). The airplane full of shame from carrying around that dark mark was made clean again and restored to beauty (*show a yellow plane*). The stupid airplane was now restored to wholeness again as well (*show a green airplane*). Even the other airplanes that didn't fall as hard, who weren't as marred and broken, still needed restoration and they too were made over into colorful, bold, strong creations. (*Line up all of the colorful planes in a row.*)

Take a look at these new creations remade by the creator's loving hands.

The creator could have destroyed them all, never to fly again. However, he loved his creation. He had mercy on his creation and gave his life so they could fly again. Each one of these planes, still having his own voice, is now choosing now to listen to the creator and only fly in His strength, only go where He directs. And when the airplane gets tired or runs out of fuel, he takes refuge in the hanger where the Creator loving restores him again and again....

What a cool inventor, huh?
What a loving creator, right?
What a merciful God we serve, don't we?

Read these verses together as a family:

Isaiah 42:6

This is what God the LORD says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.

PRACTICAL PARENTING - Break it Up – by Georganne Schuch

For every season, there is a schedule. One schedule rarely lasts as life changes, you know. And if anything changes, it is life.

We adopt a more laid back schedule when we are out of school. Of course, everyone is still expected to get out of bed and get dressed, but we aren't rushing to get the day started for school. We might have other projects, though. Like unearthing all the Barbie remains from the back of the closet and behind the dressers. It's like our own summer archaeological dig.

The key to a successful summer schedule is a little down time, a little fun time, and a little productive time. Ear plugs help mute the cries of boredom and plans of mutiny. It also helps to dangle those fun activities in front of their noses to get a little more cooperation in the midst of less exciting chores.

Down time

While we might have an extra movie night every week, we do not have an open-ended television/computer policy. Down time is about a relaxed morning routine. Fewer outside activities. Less piano practice. More self-directed reading choices. Increased outside activity, which may or may not include yard work. Fresh air is the key, here.

Fun Time

It's not one party after another, but we plan our fun going into the summer months. We pencil in a few play dates, swim days, and playground picnics. We select a weekend or two for mini-road trips. And, as finances allow, we plan some type of vacation, which usually involves extended family since my relatives all live elsewhere.

I find it's important to get these on the calendar early or the summer slips away as one painting project after another cleaning spree blurs the days. For instance, we might plan every other Tuesday for play dates. Everyone gets one turn to pick a friend to meet for a few hours of play or manicures, in the case of my teenager. Every Thursday might be afternoon-out-of-the-house day where we visit the library, go to the park, or swim. We pick two or three day-long road trips to make, such as the zoo in a nearby city or a wildflower farm in a neighboring county. As the days get hotter, we strongly favor air-conditioned activities, such as the children's museum or an aquarium.

We have not always had the resources to take vacations, but when we visit family we usually fit in one or two touristy hotspots. One of our favorites is the [Civil War park in Vicksburg, Mississippi](#). I know we're history geeks, so pick your own favorite stop to make along the way. Maybe [half-buried Cadillacs](#) is more your speed. Or perhaps the world's largest yo-yo winds you up. Have you seen the world's largest basket? We have, and it's only missing the biggest French bread stick sticking out the top.

Whatever you do, don't forget the fun this summer.

Productive Time

Most people have a running list of little (or big) projects they never seem to get to do. Summer is a good time to tackle some of these. You might pick one or two big ones and a few smaller ones. The goal is to actually finish them, and not further complicate your list by adding a half-dozen semi-completed projects. My plans for productive time this summer involve organizing a few out-of-control areas of the house and sprucing up some tired, worn-down furniture with a new coat of paint. These are special projects which will not take a lot of time or money, but will make my life a little easier and the décor more pleasant. Of course, picking the paint colors is anything but easy. Am I the only one who becomes totally indecisive when looking at paint? How can a shade too much yellow really make a difference? It does. Believe me. It does.

I am going to rope in a few of my children to help this summer. I haven't always wanted their input, which usually included more cleanup than contribution. This is particularly true when you're dealing with ultra-small children. However, a little investment in time and patience will eventually make them true helpers. Mine usually provide a running commentary. I know that can get old, so I frequently need a drink or snack, which they are quick to supply and give me a few minutes of quiet time.

Overall, summer life doesn't have to be one long dry spell of monotony. Break it up with relaxation, fun, and productivity. Enjoy the summer while it's here because about the time you fall into a routine, it will be time to start school again.

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS - Pack and Gather – by Georganne Schuch

Few things are as frustrating as turning the house upside down looking for all the things which are supposed to leave the house with you on a routine trip. It is one thing to spend a few hours packing for a week-long trip, but it's not the same when you're just leaving for the afternoon.

The Bag. To help reduce such chaos to something resembling sanity, I have begun pre-packing for routine errands. Going to the grocery store? All the bags are stuffed in the cooler and handy to throw in the back of the car. Library day? A book bag by the door holds all the books and movies needing to be returned. For instance, we keep all our swim gear (goggles, sunscreen, swimsuits) in a large bag that is easy to grab. We stuff towels in another bag, and off we go.

The Food. When we're gone for more than a few hours, we need snacks and drinks. I keep our insulated lunch bags in one cabinet and the cold packs in the door of the freezer. We usually just throw in finger foods, like baby carrots or grapes. Then, we fill our water bottles with ice, and everything stays nice and cold. Unless, of course, someone has kicked half the lunch bags under the car seat and lost her water bottle, in which case I order a purge of the vehicle to find all the lost lunch bags with moldy food.

The Cooler. I like to use reusable grocery bags and because we live 30 minutes from the nearest grocery store, I have to use several coolers to safely transport our food home. So, I keep my reusable bags in one of the coolers. Now, if I can just remember to take the bags inside the store with me.

The Car. On days when we might be gone all day running errands, I spend the previous evening gathering everything we will need for the day. I have the children set out the clothes *and* shoes, so there isn't as much scramble to leave. If there are heavy items, I get my husband to put them in the back of the car for us. Too often, we're ready to leave on time but have forgotten that we need to drag a big box down the steps to the car.

The Babies. When I still had very young children and needed to carry a diaper bag, I restocked the bag after every trip out of the house. I learned quickly what we really needed, like diapers and wipes, and what was only for emergencies, like two changes of clothes and five tubes of diaper cream. I divided up the bags and kept an emergency bag in the car that was only restocked after an emergency. This halved the size and weight of my everyday diaper bag. I figured I didn't need to rival a disaster relief organization in equipment and supplies just to run to Walmart. I did, however, occasionally misjudge what we might need, such as the time my toddler took a spoonful of the hot salsa at a Mexican restaurant and spit it out on her shirt then had a huge blowout an hour later after it had done untold damage to her intestinal tract. But we do live in an area where we are rarely more than half a block from some place to buy just about anything we need.

List all the errands and routine trips you do on a weekly or even monthly basis which require some level of organization and see how you can reduce the time and effort to prepare.

The Family Practice – Choose Connection – by Rachel Toalson

All those birthdays kept piling, and the ache came back around every year, the ache that said he was no longer a baby; he was no longer a toddler, he was no longer a little boy.

We had one and then another and then one more after that, and then two more together, so life began to blur.

After the birth of our twins, after the fog of that first year, my husband and I began to brainstorm what it might look like to live more intentionally, to mindfully slow life down in its tracks, to choose rest and connection over hurry and fragmentation.

I didn't want to get to the end of my life and regret the way I had lived it, rushing from here to there, gifting my kids with the leftovers of my full-time-working-mama time, trying to clean and tidy and take care of home business in all the thin spaces.

I used to beat myself up about the way work would crawl into the time I should have spent with my children, the way I could not even fully focus on their words for that to-do list trapped in my mind, the way days turned into weeks and weeks into years until it felt like I had nothing more to show for my hours but frustration and desperation and wish-I-would-haves.

Time is a spender, and I knew if I didn't pull tight those running-wild reins, I would mourn the passing of these years with young children.

So last summer my husband and I sat down and identified 13 family values that we wanted to define our boys, (we have five of them) and ourselves, and our lives lived together.

It marked the beginning of our journey toward living intentionally.

In the past year, we have taken one value each month and lived life through its lens.

And we have learned much. I have learned much.

- I have learned that it's really, really difficult to listen earnestly always (the first month's value) to all the talking young children do, especially when you haven't been listening earnestly, ever.
- I have learned that I often speak to my children with a hurried or annoyed tone of voice and that I love with my tone even more than I love with my words (the second month's value: We speak truthfully. Respectfully. Lovingly.)
- I learned that my children have an endless capacity to forgive, like Jesus, and that forgiveness is more courageous than almost anything we could ever do (third month's value: We forgive immediately. Always. No matter what.)

We are certainly not the same for this year of living intentionally.

But we are far from done.

So when I was asked to join the team at THYME, I knew this column would be a place we could walk intentionally, together, encouraging one another to live mindfully and

courageously and purposely, and granting grace for the days we don't (because we all have our failure-days.)

In this column, I will share some practices our family will adopt each month, in hopes that you will join our imperfect progress. These are not additional expectations to place on an already too-full-of-stuff life, but they are philosophies of living and being that I believe look a whole lot like Jesus.

May we cherish each and every moment (even the bad ones, once they're past us and not upon us, of course!) we have with our children.

This month, let's adopt these practices:

Listen earnestly. When our children speak, let's give them our attention. Put down phones, shut laptops, turn off TVs, close books (books are my most frequent not-listening distraction). Let's listen to what they have to say, to the way they see the world, to the spiritual thoughts of their hearts. Shoot for 10 minutes a day.

Pick a moment every day to just be with our children. Notice the way their eyes shine when they talk about that story they want to write. Notice the way their voice rises and falls when they sing their favorite song. Notice the way their legs tuck at the last minute when they're jumping off the couch, like they're a practiced gymnast, even though they're not. Just notice.

Pick one night a week this month to turn off the screens and hang out as a family. Play a board game. Go on a family run or a nature walk or a trek to the park. Write a story together or paint together or make thank-you cards together. (*Warning:* it's addicting. We call this Family Time in our home, and we're up to four or five times a week. It's a sacred and holy time, so when we have guests over for dinner, they have Family Time with us.)

TRAIN THEM – Spiritual Conversations with Kids – by April Karli

When my oldest daughter was in Kindergarten her best friend got sick. Really sick. She developed a fever that wasn't responsive to any treatment. After multiple trips to the ER, she was eventually admitted to the hospital. It was terrifying for everyone when the doctors couldn't pinpoint the source of her illness.

My daughter didn't understand when her friend wasn't available to play or didn't show up at church. The girls were born just two months apart and had known each other all their lives. They saw each other several times a week. As a parent, it was hard to know what to tell her. I wanted to tell her the truth, but I didn't want to frighten her.

When the doctors eventually made the diagnosis of [Kawasaki's Disease](#) I was able to give my daughter a name for the reason her friend was sick. We'd been praying, sending cards and care packages to the hospital, and even made a video of my daughter telling her friend how much she missed her and to get well soon. In her own five-year-old way, my daughter understood the severity of her friend's sickness.

The spiritual conversations I had with my daughter became about real-life application rapidly. Why was her friend sick? Was God going to make her better? When? What if she didn't get well, etc.

She and I had spiritual conversations frequently. We discussed her thoughts and questions about the Bible, Communion, nature, and God. Sometimes I'd bring up something to talk about, but more often than not, she would initiate our chats.

Kids are naturally curious about everything - including spiritual matters. **The key as parents is listening for opportunities to have spiritual conversations.** We don't have to know all the answers! In fact, seeking Scripture together or asking others what they think is the mark of a humble and teachable heart. Our kids will learn from that example, too!

A few weeks ago at our house church we were learning about Lazarus. I told the kids to imagine how stinky a full-grown man must have been after several days of being dead. One preschool girl in our group who never holds back said, "My daddy is stinky when he farts!"

Her comment might not seem especially spiritual, but she demonstrated both that she was paying attention and that she understood we were talking about a stinky man! What she said was a hook to bring her back into the story of Jesus bringing his friend Lazarus back to life.

Last year after the rash of deadly tornadoes in Oklahoma, my friend's young daughter (who lives near where the storms struck) painted a picture expressing her feelings of sadness over all the loss in her hometown. This was an opportunity for a spiritual conversation which, knowing her parents, I'm sure they took advantage of. Affirming their daughter's feelings of sadness was in and of itself a spiritual thing because God cared deeply about her sadness.

Recently on Facebook a friend posted a conversation between himself and his toddler-aged daughter.

Daughter: Look, a hairplane!

Daddy: Does the hairplane take you on hair-raising adventures?

Daughter: Like Jesus!

Another great example of a spiritual conversation! They don't all have to be serious like the story I opened with. Everything can become a spiritual conversation - from seeing an airplane, to discussing daddy's odors, to tornadoes, to questions about why God allows a little girl's friend to be sick.

Spiritual conversations can happen anywhere, too. Although I would love to report that our family has profound spiritual conversations around the dinner table every night, that's not the case. Our spiritual conversations happen quite often in the car driving to swim practice or while out running errands. Homework can bring up spiritual conversations from time to time, and bedtime is another good opportunity to pray with kids and talk about spiritual things.

There are opportunities throughout the day and in many places for spiritual conversations with kids. Jesus used stories and simple, common objects to teach people about the Kingdom of God, and we as parents can follow his example. There's no need for a special book or curriculum, or for us as parents to be experts in theology! We need only to listen attentively looking for opportunities to explore the wonders of God and spirituality together with our kids.

I Don't Do Teenagers – The Need for Encouragement by Lynn Cherry

Last fall my 80 pound seventh grader decided he wanted to play football. I can only assume the coach recognized his scrappy little “brotherness” when he positioned him as center. It surprised us all to see this actor/singer type snapping the ball, making blocks and taking hits.

The team came together and started to win...until the day they faced a super-sized opponent. Seriously, I'm not sure these boys were in middle-school. They towered over and overpowered our team. They intercepted passes and took down our running backs with ease. Toward the end of the game, Danny made a couple of bad snaps and he walked off the field carrying the weight of the team's loss on his small padded shoulders.

We did our best to point out the other team's exorbitant size and mistakes made by fellow teammates. In the end what finally lifted our boy's crushed spirit was one word of encouragement from his big brother.

“You played hard out there, Buddy. You never gave up.”

Encouragement is the soul's helium. Lifting. Lightening. Liberating. Raising the pitch of a gloomy conversation to new octaves.

The [Living As Conqueror's](#) model defines encouragement as someone acknowledging our attempts to reach new goals, accomplish something, or to do the right thing.

Teens need encouragement.

I think sometimes I forget my teenagers are still children who are learning, growing and trying their hand at new things. It's easy to spot and celebrate developmental progress when our kids are younger. After all, there are milestones to reach. I was awesome at encouraging them through the baby, toddler, preschooler and elementary seasons. I cheered them on like a cheerleader on Friday night. If I'm honest, I don't hear myself encouraging them now like I used to.

Thinking about these 10 relational needs has been so good for me. It keeps me on the lookout for opportunities to encourage my boys.

Here are a few ideas:

- Don't wait till they master a task, encourage the process
- Acknowledge attempts that fail
- Notice when they initiate a job
- Praise them for taking responsibility
- Carry age-appropriate expectations
- Be honest. Teens know when you are just blowing smoke
- Don't be patronizing
- Suggest new goals and offer to help them strategize
- Point out their uniqueness

- Tell them you believe in them
- Celebrate accomplishments
- Brag about them out loud while they eavesdrop
- Send a “You’re Terrific” text message
- Replay those proud moments when they do the right thing
- Express confidence in their ability to make good decisions
- Don’t undermine encouraging efforts by spewing negativity when your teen falls short
- Remind yourself of the previous idea often
- Express loads of gratitude when your teenager turns the table and encourages you

We want to hear from you. Did you find an opportunity to encourage your teens this month? How did they respond? What is the most effective method you’ve found for encouraging your teens?

Join us next month as we discuss the need for recognition

YOU

A Moment in THYME – Get Up! By Debra Brown

Sometimes you stumble upon a moment in time that shifts your life's paradigm. One spring day over 25 years ago, my family and I encountered such a moment, marked forever as the day we saw Hebrews 12:1 in action.

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. (NASB)

GET UP!

We piled in the car and headed off to our favorite place in Austin, the University of Texas Longhorn Stadium! Not to see the Horns, but to watch a girl from our hometown run in the UIL Girls State Track Meet for small schools. It had rained early that morning, and although it was still overcast, it was a good day for a track meet. Nearly 10,000 spectators gathered to watch the various races.

While we waited for our friend's race, runners settled into their blocks for the 400 meter State Finals. (400 meters being one full lap around the track.)

The pistol sounded.

One lone runner shot out of the blocks like a bullet, her small band of maybe 100 followers cheering wildly. Rounding the first curve, this runner effortlessly gained 10 yards on her opponents, then 15...20...25.

She ran like a gazelle. Within minutes, everyone in the stands knew that the race belonged to this runner.

In record time, she had rounded the half way mark, a good 40 yards ahead of the other runners. That's almost half a football field.

Suddenly, 25 yards from the finish line, she hit a wet spot, hurling face first onto the track. A simultaneous gasp erupted from the stands. Time suddenly switched into slow motion.

Instantly, the crowd was on its feet. "GET UP!" 10,000 spectators shouted in deafening unison. "GET UP!"

The lone runner wrestled to her feet, her arms flailing toward the finish line.

"GET UP!" We roared, willing her to run.

The second place runner approached, as our runner fell again, her smooth-soled shoes slipping and sliding, unable to gain traction.

"GET UP!"

The second place runner sped past, securing first place. Our runner crawled toward the finish line, another runner quickly approaching.

“GET UP!” 10,000 voices now ONE VOICE intent on one purpose.

Frantically, she pulled herself up, half limping, half-running forward, and then falling as the third runner crossed the line to claim second place.

“GET UP!” The chant continued like mighty waves rolling down thru the stadium, *propelling* her, NO, *carrying* her to her destination.

She clawed her way up, dragging herself over the finish line to win third place.

Our victory shout shook the stadium, as the rest of the runners crossed the line.

I sat down dazed, totally spent. Mixed emotions ran through my heart. Sorrow for the runner who should have won that race; amazement at what I’d just seen.

The rest of the track meet is a blur. I have no memory of our hometown girl’s race. But I do remember the unusually quiet car ride home, everyone’s thoughts on that race. As we turned into our driveway, it hit me.

We had just seen Hebrews 12:1 **in action!**

I thank God for that runner, that young high school girl who possibly felt no victory in crossing that finish line. I yearn to tell her that losing her race was not for naught. I’d love to tell her all that I have learned through the years from that one moment in time, as I hear once again those echoes....

“GET UP!”

BEAUTY FOR ASHES - God's Perspective by Pam Charro

Have you ever brought a burden to God and then gone about your day feeling just as heavy as you did before you prayed? I know I have, many times! It has been frustrating for me to wonder what the problem was. I prayed, just like I was supposed to. I was open and honest.

Why didn't it seem to do any good?

I think the problem has usually not been my prayer or my openness, but my perspective (or lack of God's perspective) on my situation.

God is so much more than a wish granter and He deserves that I take the time to dwell on the amazing person that He is. It is impossible to have a powerful prayer life (or relationship with God in general) without meditating on the one we're praying to!

[Psalm 22:3](#) says that God is holy, and He inhabits the praises of His beloved (that's you and me!)

- When we are truthful about who He really is, He shows up.
- When we dwell on Him, our perspective about our situation changes and His power can go to work.
- When we think about His goodness, His loving concern for us, and His perfect ability to make all crooked things straight ([Luke 3:5](#)), this enables us to truly leave our burdens with Him instead of continuing to carry them around (and we can't really effectively do anything about them, anyway).

Then all that is left for us to do is trust and enjoy life.

God cares about each of us and wants to hear from us, even though He already knows what is going on, because He wants a relationship with us. But a big part of that relationship means acknowledging who He is and what that means for us, as people that He cares about. He knows that He loves us and is the perfect one to handle our problems.

Our freedom comes when we agree with Him.

HEALTHY HABITS - STOP. By Georganne Schuch

If I had to come up with one word to describe our culture today, it's overload. Everywhere we look there is more to see, more to hear, more to try, more to buy. I'm not against new experiences or shopping, in general. But so much of it is crammed down our throat through advertising and marketing. I'm really at the point of saying, "Enough!" It's not healthy to hear and see so much. Our brains overflow with the stimulation, and we never just stop.

Stopping is healthy. We need to stop to think. We need to stop to breathe. We need to stop to weigh options and make decisions.

When we don't stop, we are rushed into bad choices. We lose perspective on what is happening around us. Life becomes a blur. That's not healthy.

Stopping is hard, though. Sometimes we might feel like we are in the middle of a fast-flowing river, carried along by a current we can't escape. I've been there. But even in the midst of so much forceful activity, you can stop. You might have to dig in a little harder, but you can do it.

How to Stop:

1. **Turn off the noise.** The radio. The television. The iPod. The computer. The phone. It's all noise that distracts you from thinking your own thoughts. Or not what someone else wants you to think.
2. **Stretch your body.** Do something physical. Go for a walk or a swim. Breathe deeply to clear your mind.
3. **Stretch your mind.** If you read, consider carefully what you're reading and how it affects your mood and your perception. Find someone you can have a real conversation with. Skip the gossip, and discuss something important to you. Ask hard questions. Consider alternative views. This exercise isn't to open up doubts about your beliefs but to hone them to become what you believe and not what you think you're supposed to believe.
4. **Step out of the box.** If you always stop at one place for coffee, pick another place. Sit in a different chair at church. Walk a different trail at the park. Meet new people. Do something out of the ordinary for you.

Once you escape the barrage of incoming noise and overload of busyness, reconsider what is important to you.

What have you discovered about yourself?

What can you change to avoid the ongoing overload that distracts you from your goals and your beliefs?

Nothing is healthier than knowing who you are and bucking the trend of overload.

Stop.

STRENGTHENING YOUR CORE – Holiness by Marcy Lytle

When I hear the word “holiness” I automatically have visions of women in long dresses, sitting upright and chaste, without makeup, without expression, and well...without joy. Holiness and joy seem mutually exclusive, don't they? I mean all of that doing “without” must make one feel lacking and therefore a bit frustrated, right? [Jack Hayford](#) says the call to holiness is much more than a “prohibitive summons.” I love that!

When I hear the word “holiness” I also think of God and his majesty and glory – way up there – and me way down here. He is looking down on me in my pitiful state of flesh, shaking his head at how I just don't get it. And if I linger in these thoughts, I start to feel ashamed and condemned because my life is far from being holy...like God is holy. After all, he's perfect, and I'm not.

When I sing the word “holy” in a song to the Lord, I feel this awe at his beauty, a wonder at his power, and humility in his presence. It's a great feeling to worship a holy God, when we know that we are accepted because of Jesus. But it's an uncomfortable irritation to try and please a holy God when we feel like an outcast.

So if holiness is more than a prohibitive summons of “Don't do this” and “Don't do that,” and come to me and “be perfect,” then what is it?

I find the answer in [Romans 6](#).

When we receive the “gift” of Jesus Christ and his forgiveness (verse 23) we are given this new life, where our sins are erased, and forgotten. Okay, we get that. We've heard that. We know that.

In verse 14 it says, “...sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.”

This visual, if we truly get it, can replace all the old pictures of holiness and all of its lackluster, unappealing ways of looking glum and sullen, like we're just a step away from death.

Before we come to Christ, we are driven and ruled by sin. In other words, we act selfishly, we speak whatever we think, we react to others out of anger and hurt, and we cower in fear over anything that's scary. We strive to be good and overcome these things, but ultimately we're driven by what feels good, looks good, and tastes good. And all of our best attempts at being good still lead to death...

Once Christ died and “mastered” death, he was free to live, and so are we.

In other words, we can offer to God every part of ourselves to this same resurrection power that mastered and conquered death. We too don't have to be driven by sin. In fact, we are under grace, and it carries us. It doesn't drive us. That's a very different picture.

Imagine with me.

A little girl grows up trying to please her father by looking pretty, obeying what he says, sitting with her legs crossed, and never uttering a word, because her father has a switch in the corner to swat her legs if she even thinks about uncrossing them or rising before she is called. And try as she may, this little girl cannot get it all right, because her arm itches and she must scratch it, her face gets dirty and she must wipe it, and sometimes she just has to let out a sigh because she's just so tired. She can never be perfect enough.

However, what if that little girl sits next to her father, smells the fragrance of his cologne, enjoys his embrace, and feels his hand tilt her chin to gaze into his eyes, and hears him say, "You're beautiful, you're mine, I'm with you, I'm everything you need, and you please me." What then? That little girl will snuggle up in security and peace, knowing everything her father has belongs to her. And he will do the scratching, the wiping, and the healing, because he loves her.

The first little girl is a slave to a harsh father because of fear. The second little girl can't wait to obey her father because of love – his great love for her.

I always told my kids that I wanted them to obey me because they loved me and trusted me, not because they were afraid of me. What kind of relationship would that be? Not a good one.

So back to "holiness."

In verse 19 we are told that just as we used to "offer" ourselves as slaves to impurity (selfish ways and motives) we now are to offer ourselves as slaves to righteousness, "leading to holiness."

**Did you know that being holy just simply means you have offered yourself to Christ?
That means that the work of holiness is his job, his work, and by his power.**

Whew! What pressure that relieves!

We are going to mess up from time to time; in fact, we often do this daily. An angry word slips out, we get so busy we forget to speak to our neighbor, and we think something so horrible we wonder where it came from...and we start to feel so dirty once again.

But stop! Those mistakes no longer define us, drive us, or master us. Christ in us – his mercy and grace – covers our sin.

Holiness doesn't have to conjure up negative emotions, ideas, and visuals. Holiness is perfection – his perfection. And his perfection is what God sees when he looks at us – because of his Son.

In this crazy, wicked, selfish world in which we now live, I yearn and long for holiness. But I'm not yearning for a list of what I can and cannot do. I'm longing to experience His power in my life to pray, worship, and live in a way that brings life and light to those around me. And I can do this because sin is no longer my master. My Master loves me and is waiting for me (and you) to crawl into his lap, smell his fragrance, and receive his gifts.

He is holy. Therefore, I am holy. And holiness pleases Him.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE - Chronically Flesh by Marcy Lytle

You can't keep a bird from flying over your head, but you sure can keep it from building a nest in your hair.

That's an old saying my mom used to quote, and I've never forgotten it. Just this week, I thought of it again, in reference to thoughts. For the sake of this article, let's say the thoughts are the birds in the phrase, and the nest is when the thoughts take residence and cause havoc in our minds...building a nest.

Have you ever been at the beach and a seagull makes a "deposit" on your head? It's downright gross and can ruin a perfectly good time. However, can you imagine if the bird actually landed over and over again on your head, leaving scraps, twigs and paper, creating a huge nest, entangling your hair, until you can barely walk from the pressure and discomfort?

That's what unwelcome thoughts are like. They are little deposits that land in our mind, and we're not sure where they come from, but they're disturbing to say the least. Let me explain the process to which I'm referring, and why I like to call the diagnosis of this sort of state of mind, "chronically flesh."

When we have a chronic illness, it's one that lasts a long duration of time, and it wears on our bodies. Try as we may, with medicine and good health, we still suffer when we are chronically ill. The same goes with having the diagnosis of being "chronically flesh." We have this body and this mind that we have to contend with over a long duration of time.

So here's how the nest-building, in our chronically flesh mind, might look on any given day:

We hear a stirring message of the devastation and poverty in Africa, and we can't shake the thought of those poor people – so we give our money to a good cause. Within a few days, we're out in the marketplace and the thought of the poor is no longer there, but instead a thought arises of how our friend just got a new house and we've just got to get one that is better. Twig #1 has landed.

We look into the eyes of our husband lovingly and longingly, because we're thinking of how wonderful, kind and considerate he was, to get up and make us breakfast. By evening, he's angered us and we're thinking what a slob and nasty man we've married. Twig #2 has been dropped.

We think about a friend who has hurt us and we hope "she gets hers" because she deserves to suffer. We get a phone call that this same friend has cancer, and suddenly we think of only the good things about this friend, and feel completely grief-stricken over the bad news. Twig #3 falls into place.

As you read these three possibilities above, take a look at how a thought process starts in our minds and can quickly turn, at a moment's notice. I call these fly-by's. These thoughts of selfishness, jealousy, anger, and revenge are symptoms of our chronically flesh minds. In

other words, we cannot help it when these birds fly by and drop these evil thoughts into our minds.

But notice something. I never said we were terminally-flesh. That's the beauty of a life with Christ. The birds can fly by all they want to during the day, but they are not allowed to take residence atop our heads, because...why?

We have the mind of Christ.

Jesus himself was tempted with thoughts that came to him via the old sly one. Thoughts of grandeur were planted in his mind when the devil tempted him to throw himself off a cliff and watch the angels escort him back to safety. So Jesus too had "birds" fly over his head, but they never made a nest in which to live.

I used to feel condemned, ashamed, and broken when I thought some of things that entered into my mind. It's just like that nasty seagull, when he flies over and you end up being the "lucky" one, you feel as though you need a bath. And so you take one. And you're clean once again.

Our minds are chronically flesh, and until we are completely restored, renewed, and remade into the likeness of his image, thoughts will encircle. But that's all they are – just thoughts.

Thoughts don't define us, we don't have to act on them, and they certainly do not have power to rule over our minds. They're just symptoms of the flesh that haven't quite disappeared...yet.

The cool and most exciting thing is that there IS a cure for this. This flesh-ridden mind is not our final state, so we are not terminal. Christ lives in us and is renewing our minds daily, so that the fly-by's get less and less as the years go on. The birds quit encircling us quite so often, as we learn who we are as daughters of our king. And one day, our minds, souls and bodies will be transformed into a spirit than cannot be touched – because we will be like him.

So if you're beating yourself up today because of thoughts you've had, how utterly fickle your mind is, or how disgusting you make even yourself, because of something you remembered, entertained in your head, or even saw a picture of, remember this:

We belong to him, and our minds are his. Those thoughts that fly over are not a part of who we are. They are not part of the fabric of our being. They fly over...and they leave... if we know the truth.

Did you wake up full of life, but you later had thoughts of suicide today? Have you relished in God's love this morning, but tonight you're wondering if he even knows your name? Have you felt sorry for your neighbor, but had thoughts of running down an enemy?

Your thoughts don't have to collect together like twigs, into a mangled nest atop your head. Just turn from them one by one, as they fly over, and continue walking towards the sun (son) and enjoy the beauty of the waves, as his mercy comes ashore and washes over your feet. And

if you feel dirty from one of those exceptionally nasty, fleshly thoughts – jump into the ocean of his love and let him wash you clean.

Get the picture?

MARRIAGE

AFTER 30 YEARS - The Wedding Ring by Marcy Lytle

Wedding rings, wedding dresses, even the wedding itself – does any of it really mean anything? Divorce is as common as marriage, so obviously the wedding vows don't keep a couple together. [Trash the Dress](#) – a disturbing trend – indicates that the wedding dress is of little value because it's discarded and even burned, in some cases right after the ceremony is over.

What about the ring?

I was so happy to be engaged when my husband and I shopped for my ring that I really didn't care about the size of the diamond. I was just excited and ready to get married. But as years went on, our life changed, and attitudes settled in, the size of my diamond bugged me, and other things affected my view of the ring as well.

When a girl becomes engaged, suddenly she sees a ring on every engaged girl on the college campus, at work, or even while waiting in line for food. The diamonds sparkle and shine, and she's happy that she too has one on her finger – or not. I did. But we didn't have much money, so we opted for a small diamond.

It wasn't until years later, when we encountered financial difficulty and loss, that I began to realize my diamond was a lot smaller than the ones shining on the fingers of my friends. I began comparing all that I was losing, with all that my friends were gaining. I honestly didn't care about diamonds, the size of them, or any such thing, until I began thinking that God preferred to bless others more than he did me.

This was the first thought pattern that affected my view of the ring.

When I was first married, I wouldn't think of not wearing my ring out in public. But I realized after a couple of decades, I was leaving it off more and more, tucked away in my jewelry drawer, forgetting to place it on my third finger daily, as I had always done. And it wasn't because I forgot to wear it, or it was uncomfortable, or anything practical like that. It was a subtle attitude I began wearing, instead of my ring.

I was going through another phase in marriage, the one where the wife becomes dissatisfied with just about everything, and subtly blames her husband. He's not spiritual enough. He's not rich enough. He's just not like I thought he would be by now. You know the thoughts, because you've had them too.

My action of not wearing my ring on more days than I did wear it was demonstrating on the outside what I was feeling on the inside – bummed with the state of my marriage. But in reality, my marriage was good. I just felt slighted somehow because I wasn't getting everything "I" wanted and thought "I" needed. I felt "he" wasn't meeting up to all of my expectations.

Now, I wasn't thinking each morning any such thought and purposefully leaving my ring in the drawer. But I realized, after a while, that my heart wasn't in the ring anymore, and I didn't care whether I wore it or not.

This was the second thought pattern that affected my view of the ring.

So what's the problem with not wearing your wedding ring? There could be no problem at all, but it's worth checking your heart. Are you not wearing your wedding ring anymore? Or maybe you've quit dressing up for a night out. Perhaps you've lost your zeal to make a meal or prepare anything at all for your spouse, because of your own disappointments or because decades have rolled by and you've settled into not caring. It could be that you no longer look into his eyes because all you see is a man you "used" to love and admire.

The issue isn't really with the ring, at all. It's with our hearts.

Think back to the instance, or set of circumstances, where your initial zeal of the wedding ring, the marriage vows, or even that first kiss lost its appeal and happiness, and consider the hurt that started you on a path away from him. If it's huge and unbearable to get past, seek help from a counselor or friend. It's silly and selfish, repent and start to love again.

Marriage is too precious, the ring is too pretty, and the vows are too compelling to waste another day despising the things that you once held dear.

The wedding ring. Is it in your drawer or on your finger? And why is it where it is?

DATE NIGHT FUN - Freebies and Fizzies by Marcy Lytle

June is here, and all of the expenses that come with summer vacations, kids' activities, etc. Date night might get pushed aside, but wait! There are ways to still have date night, spend little or no money, and enjoy some fun, refreshing drinks to keep you going! This month we share five ideas for a fun night out that will keep your wallet full, and satisfy your thirst – a two-for-one!

1. **Journals and Juice.** Pack up a tote bag with a few snacks, a couple of pens and/or drawing pencils, a large blanket, and two journals. Make this [wonderful juicy drink](#) and carry it along for sipping while you drive to your destination – a beautiful park with shade trees. Spread the blanket and draw, write each other poems, or make wish/dream lists, and share. No cell phones allowed on the blanket!
2. **Five Stop Work-out.** You'll need to plan ahead a bit for this one. Scour out five places around town where you can stop and enjoy some sort of exercise together: a trail, a slide and swing in a park, a climb up a hill for a pretty view, a walk along a pretty street, and some steps up and back down. Make this [lemonade recipe](#) ahead of time and carry it with you in a big jug for chugging as you head to the next stop.
3. **Downtown Walking Tour.** This can take place in your own town, or in a town you can drive to in less than an hour. Google the town and walking tour, to see if there is one already printed up for you to use (there are lots on line!). If not, then just head for downtown, and map out a walk along a historical district. Observe architecture, old ghost signs (those left in faint paint on the brick), and any historical plaques you can read. This is a leisurely stroll, hand in hand, around the square. Before you leave the house, prepared iced water in mason jars, along with sliced cucumbers and blackberries. Pack a straw, and when you arrive downtown, sip these refreshing waters as you stroll.
4. **Games and Granitas.** This is a stay-at-home date. Start by making this great [watermelon granita](#) together, for enjoying later. Then settle in for an evening of card games. You can invite another couple to join you for this date, if you like! Check out these [fun card games](#), and play the night away!
5. **Spa under the Stars.** Wait until you have a clear sky at night and set up this date night out for fun! Pack up a bag that includes lotion, a scented candle, and some easy listening music picked out to play. Drive to a place in the city where you can park, sit atop the car (in a safe area!) and enjoy your "spa under the stars" along with this [great pineapple drink](#). Rub each other's hands with the lotion, then give a good neck rub and/or foot rub, light the candle, and lay back and listen to the music.

Summertime is meant to be relaxing, not stressing over finances. And to enjoy a great date night out doesn't have to always include dinner, a movie, and big bucks fanning out of your wallet! It can include preparing for the night together, packing up a few essentials and heading out for time away...or time at home...it's your choice!

Two for the Road – Let Your Partner Influence You - by Lynn Cherry

I did not marry a typical man. I knew this way back when we were picking out china and planning our wedding. David wanted to be involved. It was his wedding, too. It occasionally irked our wedding planner when I waited for David to weigh in on a decision. She wasn't accustomed to grooms being so interested.

Make no mistake - David is a manly man. But he also cooks, cleans and cares more about our home than I do. I pay the bills and balance the checkbook. Our marriage has never been defined by historical gender-bias.

That being said, we buck the trend Dr Gottman found in his research regarding this principle. We are reading [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) and this chapter bothered David. It seemed to indicate that the average husband is resistant to his wife's influence. It's not that way in our home.

When we look at our family and friends, we feel like the majority of the men we know are looking to their wives to influence them. This book was published 15 years ago, so it is possible the seismic shift Dr Gottman envisioned has actually happened.

It needed to happen.

It's easy to forget how far women have come as a gender. My seventh grader has been learning about women's suffrage – one tangible way we can understand society's willingness to accept a woman's influence. It was 1920 when women gained the right to vote in the United States. Less than 100 years ago. Other countries embraced a woman's political opinion in the much more recent past. Here is the reality - women in Saudi Arabia have yet to receive this right.

Jesus was revolutionary in his interactions with women. He valued women and elevated them to a place of influence unseen before his time. The church as a whole has been slow to embrace Jesus' view of women. Some have pitched their tent on Ephesians 5:22 *Wives submit to your husbands*, as more significant than verse 21 *Submit to one another* or verse 25 *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*. Great damage has been done, and progress languished, in the name of submission.

If we first submit to God, we see the importance of respecting and honoring each other regardless of gender. Male and female were both created to reflect the image of God. Dr Gottman draws our attention to Biblical matriarchs and *Shechinah*, the grammatically feminine Hebrew name for God, the physical expression of his glory.

Women are beautiful and brilliant. The emotionally intelligent husband embraces the truth of Proverbs 18:22 *The man who finds a wife finds a treasure*. He knows she is not just a treasure to be seen but a treasure to be heard. He welcomes her influence.

When we are able to hear our spouse's perspective, it not only makes them feel valued and respected, it strengthens the marriage. This is just one of the ways that two are indeed better than one!

In these first four principles we lay the ground work for healthy relationships, but even the most solid relationships face conflict. Join us next month for Principle 5 - Solve Your Solvable Problems.

Try This:

Take some time to play The Gottman Island Survival Game (from page 123) with your spouse:

Imagine you are stranded on a tropical island. You've washed up on the beach along with items from your sunken cruise ship. Individually select and write down 10 items from the options below. Prioritize them 1-10. Share your list with your spouse and use your influence to come up with a consensus of 10 items together.

2 changes of clothing, AM/FM and short wave radio receiver, 10 gallons of water, pots and pans, matches, shovel, backpack, toilet paper, 2 tents, 2 sleeping bags, knife, small life raft with sail, sunblock lotion, cook stove and lantern, long rope, 2 walkie-talkie sender receiver units, freeze-dried food for seven days, 1 change of clothing, 1/5 of whiskey, flares, compass, regional aerial maps, gun with six bullets, 50 packages of condoms, first aid kit with penicillin, oxygen tanks

[Click here to read about Principle #1 Enhance Your Love Maps](#)

[Click here to read about Principle #2 Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration](#)

[Click here to read about Principle #3 Turn Toward Each Other Instead of Away](#)

Order your copy of [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) and use the exercises provided to build or rebuild your marriage.

We want to hear from you. Do you see this trend? Are the men in your world more apt than the women to hold on tight to their position? Is your husband open to your influence?

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems – What to Do with Summer - by Kayley Ryan

You know the feeling – you start the summer off with a pledge to tan in the sun, hang out at the beach with friends, or get that bikini body you’ve always wanted—and then at the end of the summer, you find that you’ve done nothing but sit in front of a TV screen or get lost in social media into the wee hours of the morning.

I’ve been known to waste away the days of summer by sleeping in and then waking up half past noon to watch TV until I’m too lazy to stay awake and too bored to do anything else.

But I believe summer shouldn’t be boring; it should be a wonderful, productive, challenging, yet diverting time where friends can get together to participate in activities they haven’t had the time for during the school year.

Now, you might be thinking, *Wait a second! A productive summer? That sounds like work!*

Yes, we need to be productive, we need to be challenged, and we need to try new things and learn new skills. Otherwise, we might become so bored that by the time school comes back around we realize we haven’t really taken the time to enjoy ourselves.

So, how do you have a productive summer?

My suggestion is this: take the time at the beginning of the summer to think about what new skills you want to learn, what new activities you want to try, or what old projects you want to complete.

Need ideas to spark your brainstorming session? Here were some of my ideas from last summer:

- **Learning a new sport:** Though I found I wasn’t exactly cut out for volleyball, I at least got to try it out at an open gym. And, it wasn’t a total loss. Now if there’s a jungle ball game going on, I’ll be able to jump in without embarrassing myself too much.
- **Starting a writing club:** I was amazed at how many of my friends actually wanted to improve their writing skills during the *summer!* Every Friday morning, we would get together to brainstorm on our stories while munching on snacks. And the best part: each and every one of us finished a poem, section of a story, or short story by the time the summer ended!
- **Improving my fitness:** I was determined to start eating healthy, balanced meals, to exercise at least three days a week at the gym or at home, and to do it all with an accountability partner, my good friend Christi. I started a 12-week fitness plan and arrived at the gym at a certain time each day, armed with notecards that detailed the exercises of the day to ensure that I didn’t slack off.

In fact, that last idea of improving your fitness can seem overwhelming.

That’s why it is so important to set specific, measurable goals.

Don't just say, "I want to have abs by the end of the summer," but instead tell yourself, "I will do this particular core exercise at least three days a week for 10 minutes in the morning before I take a shower."

And summer activities don't have to be all work and no play. Maybe you can plan a pool party with your friends, make a hilarious YouTube video, take a walk in the woods, watch a live play instead of a TV show, ride your bike around the neighborhood, or dabble with paint on a canvass while listening to your favorite tunes.

Some of my goals for this summer include:

- **Applying for an internship** at a local newspaper to try my hand at news writing
- **Learning how to cook** and perhaps compiling my own cookbook of favorite recipes
- **Learning basic car maintenance** from my dad – how *do* I change the oil in my car?
- **Practicing the art of photography** – *Hand, please stop shaking while I take this photo!*
- **Learning a new software program** – something besides Microsoft Word!
- **Maintaining a tight fitness schedule** and *not letting myself slack off*
- **Finishing a book series** – I'm only a quarter of the way through Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and am determined to finish!

If you're like me, your list might be at least half a page long, and you don't know how to narrow it down. Why not talk to a peer or elder to help determine what you can *realistically* do during the summer?

Or, maybe you're the kind of person who doesn't want to do anything during the summer – believe me, I've had numerous summers like that – and this productive-summer-idea seems overwhelming.

Well, let me encourage you with this: when God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1), he also created you and me. And he created us with an express purpose,

“Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” (Genesis 1:28)

So, how do we apply this verse today?

God calls us to be creative as he is creative, to essentially create with him. By taking our God-given talents and improving upon them, we are doing just that.

So, I encourage you today to recognize that you are a co-creator with God, meant to encourage and inspire others with your gift and not to hide it away. While we all might enjoy a little sleeping in here and there, we need to be creative with our summer as well.

Allow yourself a little down time, but also go out and try new things! If you take the time to challenge yourself, learn new skills, improve upon old ones, and set specific, measurable goals, you will be amazed at how productive and fun your summer will be.

Moving Forward – Waiting for Morning by Lynn Cherry

Over the course of my life, interactions with the alarm clock on my bedside table looked like this:

6:30am

6:39am

6:48am

6:57am

7:06am Wait, what? 7:06am! AAAAAAHHHHHH!

My college roommate nicknamed me the Snooze Queen. I remember wondering as a tired mom of preschoolers if I'd be happy when my kids were teenagers who wanted to sleep in until noon on Saturdays, because then I'd finally be able to sleep in, again, myself.

Not so much. My back gets tired. My to-do list calls and I get up while the boys sleep on.

I am only an occasional insomniac, most likely attributable to hormonal fluctuations. Thank you very much peri-menopause. I usually don't get up out of bed. I've decided that even if I'm not sleeping, my body is still resting when I'm in lying down. I tell myself that surely I am dozing off between glances at the clock.

12:38am

1:45am

3:12am

4:57am

Sure, a minute is a minute.

An hour is an hour.

But some nights drag on longer, darker.

I toss and turn, rest-less.

On nights like those, I wait for morning. I long for light to shine. I watch for reasonable waking/rising numbers to roll across the face of the clock.

I watch and I wait. I try not to think about being sleep-deprived come the day, but I never wonder IF that day will come. I think about the juicy grapefruit I'm going to eat when I get up. Knowing full well, the sun will rise. This system our Creator put in place is quite dependable. I trust it completely. The earth will turn. Gravitational forces that suspend us in space will hold. It's a truck load of trust in things I've never seen.

Can I trust and wait for the Lord with the same doubtless faith?

*I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.*

I wait for the Lord

more than watchmen wait for the morning,

more than watchmen wait for the morning. Psalm 130:5-6

Imagine being a watchman on the city wall. Awake through the night, keeping an eye out for any threat of danger. I'm sure those nights were long and the waiting dragged on. Perhaps things improved for watchmen when timepieces were invented and hours were measurable, anticipation building as torchlight revealed the arms circling around the face of the castle clock.

I feel this anticipation now. It's been a long, dark night. But I know morning is coming. I am so eager for day; I can almost see the light peaking over the horizon.

I am waiting for the Lord, holding on to his promises. I am eager to enjoy the fruit of his faithfulness. I see myself taking a big bite and grabbing a napkin as the juice runs down my chin. I can almost taste it.

And so I wait.

REAL STORIES - The Flow of Thanksgiving by Misty Barrera

Have you ever received a gift that you weren't exactly thankful for, in the beginning?

I've been blessed with many gifts in my lifetime, with the biggest ones being five children God has given my husband and me to help raise for His Glory. Our second oldest child (and oldest daughter) turned 11 years old last March. Aside from a new diagnosis of dyslexia, she was a completely normal 11 year old (fighting with her siblings, cherishing her time with her grandparents, and looking forward to a new adventure in middle school).

On July 22, 2013, our world was turned upside down with an unexplained illness.

We went to Dell Children's emergency room where we thought our daughter only needed some rehydrating to help with generalized weakness. After being discharged that evening and spending the next day watching her, it was apparent that something more serious was happening. We took her back to the hospital, and at this point she was neurologically impaired. So we went straight back for a spinal tap, CT of the brain, and a slew of other tests.

Before a week had elapsed (with still no answers as to what was going on), our beautiful red-head could not swallow, talk, walk, sit up, or hold up her own head, and had to be helped with repositioning in the bed. We had to place a feeding tube for nourishment. She was hooked up to the EEG monitor multiple times. We met with neurology, ophthalmology, psychiatry, rheumatology, infectious disease, internists, and as many new brains as they could locate to try to determine the cause for what was going on. There were a couple of occasions where she stopped breathing briefly, and we thought we were going to lose her. Once, she blacked out while trying to stand with physical therapy, and she lost all color.

Again, things looked bleak.

After a month of being in the hospital without any real answers, we were discharged to San Antonio Children's Hospital for a month of inpatient rehab where Laura worked hard with physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists. There were times when she seemed to be able to do things and then, the ability was lost. We were told she was showing trouble with motor planning. If she was trying to tell herself to hold her head up, she failed. If she was focusing on something else, for a little while she was successful. By the end of the stay, she still had her nasogastric tube in place for feedings. The doctors couldn't figure out why she was unable to swallow effectively/consistently, but her rehab doctor held onto the belief that she would, and so decided not to have her go through surgery for tube placement through the abdomen.

A few days before discharge, the neurologist walked in and said, "Neuro's not done with her yet."

What did that mean?

Since discharge from San Antonio in September, we've had quite the roller coaster ride, including re-hospitalization. There have been some improvements and months of unanswered questions, and seemingly unanswered prayers.

In January, we were given a diagnosis.

Laura showed an abnormality in one of her genes; a mutation that the lab had never seen before, but one that was slightly consistent with Rapid Onset Dystonia Parkinsonism. Given her presentation being almost text-book for this disorder, this is the diagnosis we are organizing her treatments around.

What does any of this have to do with my original question posed?

How does this correlate with His gifts?

In the midst of all of this, my husband is also going through formation and discernment towards becoming a deacon. One of his instructors pointed out that we all have many gifts and even ones we don't readily consider as gifts.

As I look back on our adventures starting in July, 2013, **we have received the gift of being parents to a disabled child.** As I looked around the children's hospital, I considered how many parents were there, in similar shoes as ours. If they were being expected to endure this, why not us? At one point, I considered Mary having to watch her son suffer and die for us. If Mary, who is said to be blessed among women, was allowed to suffer, then why not us?

Would we love for our daughter to be whole and healthy again? Absolutely and in a heartbeat!! I even confess that I've seen her old classmates or girls her age in the store and ached, coveting their health.

Then I remember that we are all born with purpose and we are all given gifts, and we are not to covet our neighbor's things (including their health). If I could return this gift of parenting a disabled child, I would. But then I consider... I would not have the same insight I have. I would not be able to connect with those parents that I see in the stores or in the therapy waiting room in the same way I can now.

In asking to return our gifts, we also are asking God to receive back Laura's gift and the gift that she has been to others. Through it all, she has shown herself to be so full of faith and love for God. She's never shown any bitterness and has been a remarkable example for anyone going through such difficult situations - and all at the age of 11. Her favorite thing to tell people is "God is with you," even in the middle of what seems to be her darkest hour.

Perhaps someday, God will bring her to complete healing. Perhaps this is just a season that we are going through. Perhaps, we should just embrace all the gifts that God has given us and give thanks for the strength and support to enjoy them no matter how difficult they can be at times.

When our second oldest daughter comes home from school crying about how much she misses "the old Laura and the way she picked on me," when our 3-year-old points at Laura's school

picture from last year and points out “that’s before Laura got sick,” when I consider how much I have to help toilet, shower, and change our middle school daughter and how this could be permanent... These are the times we are challenged and our selfishness begs God to take back these gifts.

When we see the smile on Laura’s face as her dad and uncle spin her on the dance floor in her wheelchair at her cousin’s wedding, or see her climb stairs and write notes, participate in her religious education class and see the expressions on others’ faces when they come into contact with the personality that still exists inside this altered body... These are the times we shout, “Hallelujah and praise God for each and EVERY gift!”

Through it all, we hold onto faith that God is always in control. All gifts flow from Him. Any difficult situation (even washing the dishes) can be made easier by following a flow of thanksgiving. “Thank you, Lord, for the food that was on these dishes...for the people that ate the food... for the hot water, soap, and sponges to scrub them with...for the job that paid for the food...for the transportation to get to the job.”

I’ve found that in finding thanks in everything, the worst of the situation is improved, and I realize that God is great...and so are His gifts!

Misty Lytle Barrera has been blessed with a loving marriage and five beautiful children (ages 3-21.) She was raised Pentecostal, had Baptist missionary grandparents, a Lutheran mother, and married a Catholic. She is a family nurse practitioner who is passionate about helping people any way she can.

- 1st one is of her briefly before her
- > illness.
- > 2nd she's sleeping with her EEG hooked up to her head and
- > her tube in place for nutrition.
- > 3rd she's working with PT on trying to walk. She couldn't
- > hold her torso up and PT is having to move her feet for
- > her.
- > 4th is when she got her tube pulled out because she was
- > finally able to eat.
- > 5th is her being able to walk while trick or treating.

TOUGH QUESTIONS – Where is God in the Dark? By April Karli

When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer. - Corrie Ten Boom

When I was a kid, we went outside with my dad on summer evenings to play catch. We'd stay outside until it was too dark to see the ball. As the sun went down and dusk settled, it became more and more difficult to see. Although our eyes adjusted, at a certain point it was just too dark to catch the ball anymore.

About the time it was too dark to play catch, fireflies began dancing in the backyard for us to chase and the stars and planets started twinkling in the sky.

Darkness can be beautiful.

Darkness can also be frightening.

I don't like to walk through dark streets or parking lots alone at night. Nor do I trust my feet to safely guide me down the stairs without flipping on a light after dark. When my family goes camping in Colorado we wear headlamps or take flashlights for late-night bathroom visits lest we trip over a rock or run into a bear! Of course, imaginary monsters inhabit the darkness, too. Other monsters that aren't so imaginary, like depression and evil, are also residents of the darkness.

Very often when it gets dark we begin to believe God is absent. Why do we believe God is only present when things are going well? Why do we create false division between light and darkness making one all good and the other all bad?

In the Bible, God is present in the darkness from the very beginning. In [Genesis 1](#) the Spirit of God was present in the darkness, "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." God creates light and separates the light from the darkness, but he doesn't abolish the darkness.

There are other examples of God's presence in the darkness. God came to Jacob at night and wrestled with him until daylight ([Genesis 32](#)). God called Samuel at night while he was sleeping ([1 Samuel 3](#)). Though he later regains his sight, Paul is blinded for days and Jesus speaks to him calling him to the purposes God has for him ([Acts 9](#)).

God is most definitely present in the darkness, but we need to trust his presence with us. The author of Hebrews calls that faith:

"The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, **this faith**, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. **It's our handle on what we**

can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd." ([Hebrews 11:1-2, The Message](#))

It's not that faith or sitting in the dark is easy. It takes discipline. Our eyes have to adjust to the darkness, we might bump into something or get hurt, and there is risk involved. But, admitting that the darkness isn't all bad is honest. Life isn't full of light and sunshine all the time. And darkness doesn't mean the absence of God or that he has removed his blessings from our lives. Rather, through faith, we believe God is walking with us even with it's too dark to see him.

In her book, [Learning to Walk in the Dark](#), Barbara Brown Taylor says this:

"Meanwhile, here is some good news you can use: even when light fades and darkness falls -- as it does every single day, in every single life -- God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going and no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof you are alone....Here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day."

I do not know how to walk well in the dark myself, yet. But I am learning. And I hope to take others by the hand and help them learn to walk in the dark, too. Like Barbara Brown Taylor says, the light fades and the darkness falls in all of our lives. We must learn to not fear it, but to walk in it and trust God's presence with us whether we're in the light or the dark.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – A True Story - by Leroy Nienow

The year was 1962, and my sister and I were being sent home from grade school. I was 12 and she was a year younger. My teacher had called me by the wrong last name again, and I objected! Next thing I knew, my sister and I were in the principal's office and he was talking to my mom on the phone.

"I'm sending them both home and I'd like you to address the problem," he said.

That's the day we discovered that our father... really wasn't.

These original song lyrics below tell a true story of fathers and children, and how God's love, the love of the father... is continually drawing us to restoration.

A PART OF ME

Verse 1

*I was all of 12 years old
When, without a warning we were told
About a father we had never known.
Mamma, nervously confessing of
A couple of kids, a case of "Puppy Love"
And living with the seeds that she had sown.*

*He felt responsibility,
But finally had to face reality,
He was just a 15 year old boy in love
And he would never have a thing to say,
'Cause ev'ryone else was gonna have their way,
Now that push had come to shove!*

*...and how he hated to go,
'Cause we would never know
Ohhh...just how much he really cared!
And he cried:*

Chorus

*"I am the father you may never see,
But wherever you are, you are a part of me
And children, I will be loving you silently
Although we may be apart, you'll always be in my heart
I am the father you may never see,
But your love will always be a part of me!*

*The love of the father, the love of the son
They can't be divided, for the two are one!*

Verse 2

*Then when I was 21
When life for me had only just begun,
Mom said you'd like to meet us, if we'd care to go.
But you were someone we had never known,
Another dad had raised us, as his own
So we simply told her no.*

*But 20 years have come and gone
Time enough to tell me I was wrong,
I'd never even thought of all that you'd been through
And looking back, I'm feeling regret
I'm sorry now, that we never met.
I'd like to try to make it up to you!*

*But I don't know what to say
No words could ever convey,
Ohhh, just how much I really care...
Except to say:*

Chorus

*"You are the father I may never see,
But wherever you are, you are a part of me
And father, I will be loving you faithfully
Although we may be apart, you'll always be in my heart
You are the father I may never see,
But your love will always be a part of me!*

Bridge

*The love of the father, the love of the son
They can't be divided, for the two are one!*

Verse 3

*They tell me you were only two,
Too young to know why your Dad abandoned you
Just another daddy who would go unseen.
So many fathers...we never knew,
Well I have one I'd like to share with you,
Won't you let me tell you who I mean?*

*He isn't on the T.V. screen,
Or featured in some famous magazine
He isn't in religions based on things you do!
And yet you'll find Him everywhere,
If you'll just open your heart and then receive Him there.
He gave his only Son for YOU!*

*Yes, it was Jesus who died,
His body crucified...*

*Ohhh, to show how much He really cares!
God's calling you!*

Chorus

*"I am the Father you may never see,
But wherever you are, you are a part of me
And children, I want to love you eternally
Although we may be apart, you'll always be in my heart
I am the Father you may never see,
But your love will always be a part of me!*

*The love of the Father, the love of the Son,
They can't be divided, for the two are ONE!*

*I am the Father you may one day see...
And your love will always be A PART OF ME!*

In 1991 Ronald Lowrie put down his hand gun and instead of committing suicide, he prayed to God for a reason to live. The next morning I woke up, after 28 years of indifference, with a sudden, undeniable curiosity about my "birth father."

That November Ron was reunited, after almost 40 years, with me and my sister.

The following September, Ron asked Jesus to be his Lord and Savior! Three months later, on December 15, 1992, Ron passed from this world to the next,....and finally met his Father!

LeRoy Nienow is a playwright, lyricist, actor & director originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He moved to Texas in 1979 and is best known for his original Musical, "The Gospel Accordin' to Texas!," which has been acknowledged by two mayors and two governors and has been seen by almost 50,000 people throughout Central Texas. He and his wife Maggie have been married for 31 years and have a son, John "Luke" who attends Texas State University.

It Means the World to Me - by Melissa Critz

Father.

That little word conjures up so many images and words in different ways for people. Some see Playful Dad running crazily around like a wild horse while a big strong 'cowgirl' wrestles him down and tames him – much silliness ensues. Others see the stern frown and feel the lash of a belt as Discipline Dad takes over. These reflect the two extremes. Somewhere in the middle is the Empty Dad.

This is what I know.

I grew up in a family that didn't reject Jesus but certainly didn't put Jesus first on a daily basis. On Sundays, one parent would drop off the kids for Sunday school. I was the oldest so I was always the one to make sure that my brother and sister made it to their classes and then also collected them when class was over. This about entailed all of my spiritual connection with my parents.

Now, don't get me wrong. They weren't neglectful in the worldly sense. We weren't for want. They did not abuse us and did express love for us...but there was an emptiness.

My father worked long hours and was rewarded with rather chunky paychecks. As I mentioned, our family was blessed materially – a 300 acre ranch to go to on weekends, nice cars (Cadillac and Corvette among others), a pool, huge home, and horses – five – for me. I was in heaven!

But something was missing.

Oh, I do have some snippets of fatherly memories involving wrestling and tickling. But life took hold and so did the enemy – divisiveness between my parents turned into years of arguing and disagreements.

My saving grace was truly, knowing the Lord.

My mom made sure that we kids went to camp during the summers. We attended Sky Ranch Christian Camp in East Texas. My faith grew in leaps and bounds. I sought the Lord in prayer for my family faithfully every night while at camp and throughout the year. I accepted Jesus as my Savior while at camp when I was 13. Following the way of the world was NOT my path. I was solid on the Rock because my Father was my dad.

In NO way do I blame my father, nor do I harbor resentment towards him for not being there – I actually feel pity and sadness for him. He missed out and still does to this day.

What I do know is that I would NOT be here today with my four precious children and my committed loving husband if it weren't for my heavenly Father. He is my dad.

Do I miss the physical presence of an earthly father? Oh I would be lying if I said, "No."

I certainly do. I hear others share about their papas, calling them in times of need, their daddies saving them by coming to fix a leaky water heater or fixing a broken down car. I have never had that.

BUT I do have something that is so much more. My heavenly Father always hears me without judgment. He loves unconditionally every day, every hour, every minute. His advice is pure

wisdom – lacking for naught. My Father is both compassionate and complete in His justice. He disciplines and corrects for my good – our good.

In regards to my children, they all have a father that makes provision for them while at the same time teaching them to be wise with what they have. He is very involved in their lives. Laughter is key in our family, and joy pervades this house. Discipline and correction definitely are a part of our lives but it's followed with love and acceptance. Seeing this makes my heart melt.

My children will not know the emptiness that I have felt and still do, at times. They are not only blessed with knowing their father loves them, but that their Father loves them too. Christ is the center of our lives. Our great Papa is full in our lives. **No emptiness exists by knowing Him.** He fills those sterile holes that the world tries to keep open. Love, surpassing all pain and hurts, abounds in knowing Him.

Knowing God as my Father – it means the world to me – it means heaven to me. I can seek Him for any matter, small or large, and if it means something to me, then He cares. I cry to him and He upholds me. No belt stings me, but His compassionate justice continues to guide me on the narrow path and for that I am grateful.

I continue to give my earthly father to my heavenly Father who knows his heart. I do hope that he will be saved. I may never know in this world BUT I know that my Father is bigger than all that is in the world.

God is my Papa.

God is my Father.

Thank you, for loving me and never letting me go. I love you, my Father.

Melissa Critz currently resides on a little piece of heaven in Liberty Hill, Texas with her husband and four children. Home schooling and domestic engineering is her "job." The older two children have graduated and attend UMHB while the younger two are currently in high school. She enjoys riding her horses, reading, writing, relaxing with good vino on the front porch, and laughing with her family.

FRESH THYME – **Carried into Knowing** - by Rachel Toalson

Here I am, in a room dark with storm, nearly a week removed from these wisdom-words from the Rev. Scott Heare: “We know God first as King, and then we try to fit him into our idea of Father. What if we understood Him first as Father and then, in our hearts, He rose to king?”

Seven days after that question lays me bare, I still fumble for words.

This question-fighting has come and gone and risen and fallen all the days of my life:

God as Father, what does this mean?

I have never known my father well, but my memory flashes murmur love and affection and shelter (at least the earliest ones) like the one where I sit on a lap strong and sound, crunching cucumbers soaked in vinegar and salt; and the one where I hang arms around a waist from my balance on the back of a motorcycle, my hair clapping the distance behind us; and the one where I sit at a feast laid thick on the oval of a table, buttermilk biscuits curling steam from those browned-just-right tops, and he sitting across the table swallowing that glass of milk. We all loved just to be like him. I remember green eyes that never cried, at least not for the showing, and black-brown dirt coating the underneath of fingernails and a days-old beard scraping my face when he leaned over me for that good night, sleep tight kiss. I remember hands gentle and kind when I was good, and I remember hands steel-hard when I wasn't, hands that embraced soft and belt-whipped hard all in the same day.

And then I remember *gone*, a hole where he used to be.

How do I, lugging around this orphaned heart that urges me to succeed on my own because *there's no one else to help me* and store that treasure away *because there's no inheritance left for me* and win that approval and acceptance and accolade *because I must prove my inherent worth*, grasp this Father God? How in this fallen world can I know and comprehend those father-gifts of presence and provision and without-condition love when I have never known this way?

How can any of us grasp and know and comprehend?

The rain, dropping from a sky grey and dim, like tender fingers rapping my window, luring me toward soaking, toward wisdom, toward greater and more valuable understanding, and that thunderous voice calling, “Come. Sit. Stay awhile.” And so I climb into my bed like a mighty lap, and I rest my head on a slate pillow like an arm, and I wait for knowledge to bind me tight once more.

Maybe we don't fully know and understand until we become parents ourselves, because then we know this love that flames like a fervent fire and this protection that bristles warning at the slightest affront and this trust that beckons little ones into playground freefalls and upside-down walking-on-the-ceiling and spinning, spinning, spinning until that can't-walk dizzy.

From this parent-place, I think of a man who opened arms wide to three children who shared no blood with him, three children who did not make easy that father-replacing, and three children who warmed slowly yet surely and completely.

And then I think of that night, visiting for the first time as a Mrs., when my father pulled me away from the stereo noise flying through that house and said those words, "I'm sorry for leaving you kids," and I think,

***Yes, I do know this God as Father** because there it is right there on the side of that bed, in a house I have never known but for now, in swimming-green eyes that spill for me this day, and there it is in the man my heart calls father, stepping slow into slippery-rock holy waters to stand with my family and baptize my children.*

Maybe this knowing and trusting God as Father begins with seeing our own fathers, the ones who have failed us or will fail us (because we have all fallen short of God's glory) through the love-film eyes of Him, those eyes that cast sin (all those mistakes) as far as the east is from the west, those eyes that tunnel deep into that father-skin all the way to that father-heart, those eyes that forgive and forgive and ever, always forgive.

I had a father, who did not know what leaving would do to me, and I have the Father, who did know what that leaving would do to me and who I would become because of it and how this world would be changed by it.

Yes. I know this God the Father.

And so, in the dark of this room, where thunder shakes the window fierce, I lift hands high, like a child begging for carry.

Carry us into this knowing, Abba Father.

"Consider the kind of extravagant love the Father has lavished on us—He calls us children of God! It's true; we are His beloved children" (1 John 3:3).

FRESH THYME – Because He Loves Me - by Stephanie Goode

What does it mean to KNOW God as my Father? As it has been said and sung, "To KNOW Him is to LOVE Him."

How do we get to know Him? We must first experience Him!

O Father! My life is a mess! My marriage, a shamble! My life unbalanced, my heart, shut off! My heart like broken glass is full of sharp, painful shard! What do I do God? It's so still, so quiet. I can't hear you! Aren't you listening? I need you. I stumble forward, slowly drifting. Angry! Father, are you not speaking?

"I am, but you're not obeying!"

Fine! Then leave me alone! Just give me what I want.

Sadly...my Father's heart is broken, torn. He loosens the reins, he knows he can't force his will, can't make my choices. My Father watches in agony with eyes of love and compassion as I create an even bigger mess. He knows he will have to clean up my mess, but he never complains. He just keeps gently calling, calling my name.

He keeps instructing, "That's far enough, turn around."

I glare at him with disdain and toss my head with a haughty laugh! How I must have hurt him, but he continues on with me, fighting demons I know nothing about...anticipating my return.

He knows it will be hard though, for I have so much pride, such a stiff neck! My Father though, he never stops getting in the way, providing a way, a way back home! He lays the paths before me.

Oh, but I was the smart one! After all, I had watched all kinds of shows like CSI! I was good at hiding, running, escaping the flame!

I won't get caught!

At least that's what I thought!

The time had finally come when my Father had had enough!

Again, he put a roadblock before me, a sign saying, "Daughter, come home!"

With arrogance, a dead heart, and a wild spirit, I relented. I was not repentant, no not yet, but oh my Father, how he rejoiced in just that one step! He was not worried for he had great faith in me! He knew my heart and he knew how to fix it. **Isn't that truly what every daughter wants?**

Oh, daddy, please just fix it!

Time slowly continues on...

My God, my Father, always by my side, always has a plan for the rebellious, black sheep gone astray. He tests us, pushes the limit.

Do you still love me? If you do then you would...

But He said, "Because I love you, I won't!"

My soul was so weary, worn out! My heart was broken into a million teeny, tiny, beautiful, stained glass pieces. Rejected, abandoned, used, scarred, and tainted, and blanketed with my sin! Unconditional love, forgiveness, and acceptance, offered and rejected.

Your Father's heart heard my desperate, confused cry. You wept for me, with me, as a Father does.

My God, My Father, I'm knocking on death's door! I want it, I need it! If you loved me you would...

"Because I love you, I won't!"...

To my every plea for death, you answered, "My grace is sufficient for YOU!"

I can see your big hand reaching down for me into the ravishing pits of sorrow, but I cannot reach it, not even the tip of your finger!

You answered me, "Just be still, I'll stretch further! I won't let you fall!"

I love you Father, but can you still love me? I'm afraid! Send me a way out, a different way, my way!

"I want to" you reply, "But not that way. I know what's best! You must trust me! Haven't I proven myself yet? I will do it again because I love you, I forgive you! I will carry you. I will get you through this mess! You will sing again, you will dance, you will twirl, you will run, you will be successful in my purpose because I love you! I love you with my very life!"

Trust? No! God you know that was stolen from me long ago! I can't! If you loved me you would...

"Because I love you, I won't. Take my hand, I'll lead you home! Come to me! Let me comfort you! I feel your pain! You have nothing to fear, I am here and I will never leave you! The road will be hard!"

My Father, he's so honest!

"You will turn back to me many times, and many times I will forgive you."

His grace reaches me! My Father, God, has never broken a promise! My plans are not His plans, nor are my thoughts greater than His!

To know, know, know you, is to love, love, love you...and I do, yes I do!

Stephanie Goode is from Henderson, Texas and has blessed daily for 18 1/2 years being married to her best friend and being a mother to her "Fantastic Four" boys! She is a Natural Health and Nutrition Consultant and enjoys studying, reading, writing, speaking, junkn', and helping others. Her greatest passion; however, is serving God and living each day in great expectancy of his blessings, direction and answered prayers!

FEATURE STORY

FRESH THYME – Divorced Dad - Remember your Children

Divorced, distressed, depressed, stressed! You're a mess! I know. I have been there.

To numb the pain, maybe you stare at the TV endlessly or work excessively. Or worse, maybe you fall to the temptations of lust, bitterness, alcohol, or drugs. You have sleepless nights and emotional breakdowns. You are not alone. The sad statistic is that 40% of first marriages, 60% of second marriages, and 70% of third marriages end in divorce.

You are wounded emotionally and probably crippled financially. And if you have kids, the divorce becomes even more complicated and traumatic. Your empty nest syndrome comes early. Your house is empty of the laughter of young children at play. Furniture and possessions are gone. You are all alone.

Welcome to the dysfunctional family.

If you're a Dad, you may have lost custody of your kids and now only see them every other weekend. How can you raise sons and daughters this way? Is there any hope? What can you do?

Get over it! Snap out of it! Your kids need you more than ever now. Give yourself time to heal through prayer and counseling and lean on your family for support. But don't leave the children out of the picture while you try to self heal. Being with your kids is the most important part of the healing process. Value every minute you get to be with them.

Your fight with your ex spouse is over. The fight for your kids has just begun. They need a Dad to stand up for them, support them, and unconditionally love them. You need to let them know the divorce has nothing to do with them, and you need to love them now more than ever.

Nurture that love for your offspring. Let it become a burning passion. Nothing is more important than your children. It is not about finding another relationship or climbing the corporate ladder. It is not about you; it is about laying down your life for your kids. Your kids are your ministry. Let God's love fill your heart, and your love for your kids will flow naturally and without wavering.

You are in a difficult situation. How can you limit the damage done to your children? What tactics or principles are necessary as you go through this adversity?

Let me offer some "be-attitudes" that you can follow. Not a legalistic set of rules to follow but allowing God's Spirit to fill you and have you become the father your kids need.

Be available.

How can you be available when you only see your children every other weekend? Obviously, you can call them often but also get on facebook, twitter, instant messaging, or text messaging. Whatever technologies your kids are using, be available to let them communicate with you. And when your kids call you, drop everything to listen to them and be there for them.

Be communicative.

Get to know your children's passions, interests, activities and friends. Get over your pride and bitterness toward your ex spouse and keep the lines of communication open with her. Your kids are more important than your past differences and hurtful feelings. You need to communicate about their health, who they are hanging out with, problems at school, or disciplinary problems at home. You will learn much more about your kids.

Be forgiving.

You may have legitimate reasons to feel wronged by your ex spouse, but you have to forgive. Especially, you need that attitude around your children. It is not the time to bash your ex wife in front of your kids. Take the high road. They need both parents support and love. Don't turn them against their Mom. If your ex spouse is doing this to you, don't worry about it. The kids will figure it out. When they are older and ask questions, you can be honest with them. But don't ever turn the discussion into a one-sided assault against your ex spouse. No one is entirely innocent in any divorce.

Be a kid.

Have fun with your children! From rollercoasters to water parks, to movies, to sports, to board games, find ways to play with your kids. Joke with them. Laugh with them. Enjoy every precious minute with them. Search out fun activities going on in your community each weekend you have them.

Be disciplined.

You need to enjoy your children, but you are also their parent. You can't just be their buddy. It is tough to discipline your kids during the short time you are with them, but they still need your direction.

Be a role model.

Your children's perspective of our Heavenly Father is being shaped by how you relate to them. It is a very sobering and heavy burden of responsibility. Will they see you as loving, forgiving, and gentle yet firm in discipline, or will they see you as a judgmental, harsh, angry father figure?

Be a spiritual leader.

The time to be with your kids is so compressed now, but you must still make church and spiritual guidance a top priority. Pray with them. Discuss the Bible with them. They are looking to you for leadership.

Be a rock of stability.

Preserve traditions. Keep the children's home and school environment the same, if possible. Show the kids that you have not changed and your relationship with them has not changed, as they transition into this divorced scenario.

Be there.

Try to be at every school function, health appointment, and outside activity that you can. Find ways to bridge the gap between you and your children. Try to get them involved in sports or artistic endeavors that maybe require practices and events to attend. And when you are there, focus on the kids and them alone and give them your devoted support.

Be healed.

You will find that every minute you spend with your children is healing to your heart. You will long to be with your kids because you know the positive effect it will also have on you. As you focus on them and not on yourself, your sense of purpose and well being will be magnified.

Be faithful.

“Fight the good fight of faith” for your kids. It is a marathon fight, not a sprint. It is a daily fight. Don’t lose hope. God has given you a measure of faith. Hold onto that faith unwavering. Remember your children, and they will remember you. They are your legacy. Be faithful to them.

God is good. God will get you through this adversity, this storm. He may not calm the storm, but he will be there with you all the way through it. Don’t get discouraged. God has a date circled on his calendar when you finally will get to look back and be grateful for the wonderful kids you had and the beautiful adults they have become.

I know. I lived through it. And my two beautiful young adult ladies have surpassed my wildest dreams and hopes for them. By the grace of God, I pray your kids will flourish too as you “be the father” they so desperately need. God can turn your mess into a message of his redemptive power!

Bo Clearman

Father of two beautiful daughters, grandfather of three wonderful grandkids, full time IT Specialist, full time Longhorns fan, part time vocalist, Facebook goofball, parenting my parents, and being parented by my kids.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

July 2014

TIPS

The Dressing - Atop Your Head

I've never seen so many cute things to wear on your head for summer! From hats, to headbands, to scarves, to really cute buns...there are so many ways to dress up your head when your hair doesn't feel quite right! Summer is hot, and anything we can do to eliminate another "tangle" when getting dressed is welcome. Am I right? Here are our summer picks for the top of your sweet head, from ages 1 to 92...

A cute hat for a date. My favorite is the [Fedora](#). Maybe you don't think it looks good on you, but more than likely it does, and you're just afraid to wear it. Go on...look around...try one on...and find a cute one that matches your color scheme. I chose navy because I wear a lot of blue, but you might choose brown, or tan, or black! A hat is a great adornment when you're not in the mood to wash your hair!

A cute hat for outside. A friend of mine wears this cute [bonnie hat](#) when out on a walk or out in the garden. She looks adorable! We recently went for a walk on a hot day, and she wore it, and it worked! It shaded her face, she was able to pull back her hair, and the hat was a welcome accessory, for sure!

A fashionable headband to match your bag. Recently, we gave my niece a beach bag and a headband as a birthday gift, from [Francesca's](#). The cute stretchable headbands (available everywhere!) look great, and they come in all colors and styles. Don't get the stiff plastic headbands, because they make heads hurt! A nice stretchy one feels great, and you can even buy your own ribbon and make one yourself (IF you're so inclined...)

Clips to pull it back. Long hair, short hair, straight hair, or wavy hair – clips and pins are fun. Just pull back your hair with a [cute barrette](#), or pin one side up and leave the other side down. Look for these fun clips at Target and purchase several, for days when your hair won't "do right" because it has a mind of its own!

A pony tail or bun. Pony tails and buns. I'm not sure they're cute on everyone, but if you've got hair that's hot on your neck, I say go for it! These cute little [bun makers](#) can be found on line and at stores like H&M, and they're for making a perfect bun to sit atop your head. And a pony tail looks cute up high, at the base of your neck, or right in the middle – as it swings side to side as you walk confidently down the street!

Braids on the side. I'm not sure if the movie *Frozen* inspired the side braid, but I've seen it everywhere, especially on the young girls. But even a small braid can be worn by all ages. A braid is a great option for unwashed hair, hair that's unruly, or for a day when you feel brave and bold and are ready to "let it go!" Check out these cute ways to [add braids](#) to your style.

A scarf for style. Our youngest writer showed us how to wear a scarf on our heads in one of our previous issues. A scarf is great for tucking in your purse, or tying around the handle of your bag, so that it can be added to your outfit when you're at the end of the day, you're headed out for a fun evening, but you look in the mirror and say, "Wow, my hair! What happened?" You just need a [thin scarf](#), place it around your head and tie, and bring the ends out across your shoulder!

What are you wearing atop your head this summer for protection, for fun, or for style? Don't let the summer heat make your limp, dry hair a thing to be messed with. Opt for something cute...and set it right there... on top of your head.

Seven 4 You - Habits of a Non-Worrier by Marcy Lytle

I love Psalm 23, and I suppose it is one of the most quoted from chapters in the Bible, and it's easy to understand why. In fact, it's probably also one of the most memorized chapters, as well. But quotations and memorizations are just rote recitations that have no power, unless our faith is attached to that which we commit to memory. Without faith, Psalm 23 is just another pretty set of verses.

I've read this chapter again lately, peering into the words and what they mean to me...the sheep...following Him...the Shepherd. And since worrying is an easy default for me, I broke the chapter down into seven habits I'm training my mind and heart to practice, so that following the Shepherd without fear becomes second nature to me.

Visualize this. Believe it. Say it out loud.

Smile when you're done. Breathe in deep and exhale.

Read it again.

- 1. She acknowledges the Shepherd who leads her, believing he will provide food, direction, and protection.**
- 2. She rests when he leads her to do so, quietly listening to the songs he sings in her ears.**
- 3. She receives restoration of her weary soul by drinking from the water he provides.**
- 4. She realizes that where he leads is a path worth walking, and she follows.**
- 5. She sees the shadows and the darkness but feels his presence near.**
- 6. She knows enemies are lurking in that darkness, but she sits down to eat, fearing no evil.**
- 7. She looks behind her and sees goodness and mercy at her heels and this gives her strength.**

*The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You have anointed my head with oil;
My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Psalm 23

Selah's Style – Boredom Breaker – by Selah Irwin

Are your kids bored this summer?

I give you.....drum roll please.....the boredom breaker 3000! Teach them how to make fun new stylish jewelry like this:

You can make this **necklace** in a snap clap!

First, go to your local craft store. Purchase tiny glass bottles, little tiny gold beads, clear charms, craft paper, [Mod Podge](#), hooks with a screw, a chain, and amazingly wonderful key charms.

Next, cut out craft paper to fit on the back of the clear charms and secure it with Mod Podge. Fill the bottle with the tiny beads. Screw the micro hook into the top of the bottle. Hook the fabulous stuff on the chain.

This is sure to sparkle up your neck!

[Stringing beads](#) is always fun to do in the summer sun!

This **bead creation** looks *fab-tabulous* with a summer sundress!

Here is a fun **swirly bracelet!**

Slide beads on a [swirly wire](#), bend the ends so they don't come off, and slap the bracelet on your wrist!

That's all there is to it!

This **neck chain** has some sweet pizzazz!

We bought [metal stamps](#) off of eBay. You can stamp whatever word you want on your round discs, but we chose *love*. Fill in the cracks with black Sharpie. Loop the stamped circle on a bead chain and that's what you do to make your dreams come true!

These are some fun things for when your kids are bored and have nothing to do.

Good-bye for now, from your friendly neighborhood Selah!

The Fearless Kitchen - All American – by Christina Vetter

Fireworks lighting up the sky, smoke billowing from the grill, ice cold lemonade in your hand, there's nothing quite like celebrating Fourth of July in America! For one day, the entire country puts aside any political differences or economic gaps and celebrates simply being free. As choruses of The National Anthem ring out, we remember the sacrifice that veterans and current soldiers have made to keep our various generations living in such a liberated country.

Independence Day is also a time to appreciate how wonderful it is to live in a nation full of so many different backgrounds and ethnicities. No doubt, the melting pot of people that make up our country creates a wonderfully diverse and ever changing culinary scene; however, there are a few foods that have become truly "American." I'm sad to admit that if I were to ask my French or English friends about American food, their response would unfortunately fall in line with something that came out of a brown paper sack or through a drive-thru window. But that's not what the American home kitchens are cranking out this month. Although we may be known worldwide for our golden arches and dollar menus, there are still many foods that have become iconic to Lady Liberty.

This month I'm happy to share an Independence Day meal that I think bleeds red white and blue: The All American Burger, Oven Baked French Fries, Apple Pie, and Homemade Lemonade. I know there are so many variations on these foods, but I tried to conjure up the most traditional preparations I could think of in hopes of staying truly "American." I hope you and your family will enjoy them as much as I have. Happy Fourth and as always, Happy Eating!

Apple Pie

Makes a 9" pie

Difficulty: 

"As American as baseball and apple pie." I don't know if there is a more "American" dessert than the apple pie. There are so many delicious pie recipes out there, and this one is no different. You can buy pre-made pie crust, but I encourage you to take the extra time to make this one from scratch. The taste is totally worth it! Tip Make sure you place the pie pan on a cookie sheet as you're baking it, to catch any drips.*

Ingredients:

For the filling:

6 C peeled, cored, and chopped granny smith apples (about 5 XL apples)

1 Tbsp lemon juice

2 Tbsp cornstarch

1 tsp cinnamon

½ tsp nutmeg

¼ tsp salt

½ C butter (1 stick)

½ C white sugar
¼ C brown sugar
¼ C milk

For the crust:

2 C flour
½ tsp salt
2/3 C shortening
1 Tbsp vinegar
5 Tbsp milk

Directions:

-Preheat oven to 350F

For the filling:

- Place peeled, cored, and chopped apples in a large bowl.
- Add lemon juice, cornstarch, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt to apples and toss until thoroughly mixed.
- In a small sauce pan, melt butter. Add both sugars and stir to dissolve.
- Remove from heat and add milk.
- Pour mixture over apple mixture and toss until apples are fully covered. Set aside until needed.

For the crust:

- Place flour and salt in a medium bowl.
- Cut in shortening using a fork, food processor, or by hand until it resembles a coarse crumble.
- Add in vinegar and 1 Tbsp of milk at a time until dough makes a soft ball.
- Roll out into two circles, approximately 12" in diameter.

Assembly:

- Shape one circle into a 9" pie pan and pour in filling. *Tip- Don't overfill the pie. It's okay if you can't fit all of the filling.
- Place other circle on top of pie and slice an x into the top to allow steam to escape. Or create lattice top by weaving dough strips through each other. Seal all edges.
- Bake at 350 for about 60-75 minutes or until top of pie is golden brown and filling is bubbling.
- Allow to cool completely before serving.

Oven Baked French Fries

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

My family, like so many others, loves French fries. However, I try to minimize our intake of fried foods, so I came up with this baked version. They are still crispy, salty, and just as addictive as the deep fried version without the guilt that pours out of a drive thru window.

Ingredients:

2 lb Russet potatoes
1/3 C vegetable oil
Kosher salt and black pepper

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 425F.
- Meanwhile, peel and cut potatoes into ½" x ½" x 2" fries.
- Soak potatoes in cold water for at least 30 minutes, changing the water once.
- Dry potatoes off with a paper towel and in a large bowl, toss with oil and a heavy helping of salt and pepper.
- Spread potatoes onto two parchment paper lined cookie sheets and bake for 40 minutes or until golden brown, turning potatoes every 10 minutes.
- Remove from oven and sprinkle with another dash of salt. Serve immediately.

The All American Burger

Makes three 1/3 lb burgers

Difficulty: 

Even though there are so many fantastic varieties of burgers out there, the original stands on its own. The best ground beef is going to be an 80/20 beef to fat ratio. Don't be scared by that high fat content, it's vital to avoiding a dried out hockey puck of meat.

Ingredients:

3 seeded hamburger buns
1 lb ground beef (80/20)
1 Roma tomato, sliced thin
3 slices American cheese (optional)
1 small white onion, sliced thin
¼ C sliced pickle chips
Iceberg lettuce
Kosher salt and black pepper, as needed
mustard, ketchup, mayonnaise, as needed

Directions:

- Heat a grill to about 375F
- Meanwhile, divide the ground beef into three equal portions and lightly shape each portion into a wide circle.
- Heavily season top and bottom of burgers with salt and pepper and place on grill.
- Cook burgers until internal temperature reaches 160F, turning only once.
Tip: A lot of people prefer a medium doneness burger to fully cooked, but this is not a food safe practice.
- Place cheese on burger if desired, and cook until melted.
- Transfer burgers to buns and add desired toppings.

Homemade Lemonade

Makes 1 Gallon

Difficulty: 

Homemade lemonade is one of life's greatest treats. I crave that refreshing taste as soon as the summer starts to roll in. I like my lemonade on the tart side, so feel free to increase or decrease the lemon juice as you see fit.

Ingredients:

1 ½ C sugar

1 C lemon juice

1 Gallon water

*optional add-ins: crushed raspberries, strawberries, etc.

Directions:

-In a large pitcher, mix ingredients together. Refrigerate until cooled, and serve over plenty of ice.

Tried and True - Dog Days

Maybe you had a dog, or a cat, or some other pet when you were small, and all you have is fond memories of the cuddles and snuggles that pet brought to you as a kid. However, your mom may have a different story of the pain that puppy was, because she had to feed it, clean up after it, and listen to it bark incessantly while she was trying to sleep! And now you're all grown up, and your kids want pets.

We're weighing in this month on our own experiences with pets, and sharing our two cents on why you should...or should not...get your children a pet when they pull on your sleeve for the umpteenth time, and beg, "Mom, I promise I'll take care of it! Honest!"

Marcy: Our kids both had a dog – each one had their own. And honestly, I grew tired of the constant battle they had with their dad over feeding the dog and walking the dog. The dogs wore a path in our grass, dug in our plants, and we always had to get someone to take care of them when we traveled. But even with all of the trouble they were, I'd do it all over again. Kids love dogs, and dogs love kids, and every family should have one...in my humble opinion.

Pam: We haven't had any pets in our home since having kids, but we are definitely considering it and think it would be a good thing in many ways. Growing up, all of us took turns feeding our cats and changing the litter box, and that will probably be how we do things in the future, as well. Pets add so much love to a home, and the responsibility is good for children. We are very much looking forward to it.

Christina: I think pets are a great companion for kids! My husband and I plan on getting a dog soon, and even though our son is too young to help care for it, once he gets old enough he will definitely be expected to help. I had pets growing up and we were responsible for certain things with them, even though I'll admit my parents did most of the care taking. I think certain pets are better suited for kids than others, but in general I think family pets are simply part of growing up.

Georganne: We have pets, and our children help care for them. It's not a chaos-free arrangement, but so far no animal has died from lack of care...if you don't count the chick that drowned in its water dish or the rooster that was stalked by a fox. Hey, we live in the country. In fact, animals have taught our kids many life lessons. They were there when our older dogs died, and they have helped train a new puppy. One of our daughters nursed a chicken that was severely injured in a mosh pit of bigger chickens and has earned that chicken's undying devotion. Ever see a chicken jump up in someone's arms? They have developed compassion by caring for helpless animals, and they have faced heartache when something happens to one of them.

Debra: As a child, I had MANY pets from cats, dogs, lambs, etc. because we lived on a farm. Also, after we moved into town, we had pets. I learned so many things from my pet experiences. I learned about life, death, accidents, grieving, strays, responsibility, making commitments, disappointment, suffering, patience and so much more. We lived in a small town, and it seemed a lot simpler in community life. We tended the pets as a family as far as I remember, but I think a great deal of the care landed on my Mom. I do remember those EARLY Saturday mornings when I had to get up and tend to a barking dog or a demanding cat. I am thankful for the many memories of my pets and our family's experiences with pets.

My children also had cats and dogs, learned much and we have stored many memories of which we enjoy remembering during family gatherings. Our girls cared for their pets *when they were home*, but as they grew that became less and less. Learning responsibility is not always fun or easy; we all had to be stretched when a pet was more of an inconvenience than a joy. They also learned many things and have stored precious memories. I especially remember the time my husband, Jim, ran over a kitten. The suffering, and disappointment over their loss, but mostly I remember how their love for their dad brought a rich depth of forgiveness to our family. I remember how one of our cats displayed deep compassion when a daughter was ill. Those pets added richness to our lives.

However, our family has always been a *very busy* family. I believe that having a pet must be a family decision, as their care affects each member. As our children grew, having a pet became less a joy because we were gone so much. Also, we were not able to develop the pet's loving personality of our later pets because they stayed alone so much. *Having a good pet takes time and dedication.* Another problem was allergies to pets, so often the pets had to stay outside, which meant we didn't spend very much time with them. Are pet a good thing or a bad thing? It totally depends on the personality of the family and the investment they are willing to make.

There, you have it! I'd say we all agree that pets are a good thing for our kids, a learning experience in responsibility, and a pain for the parents – but worth every muddy carpet stain, hair on the sofa, and rut in the yard. Pets are part of the process of growing together as a family...

Reviews – Current Sightings

In the theaters now:

Earth to Echo

It's rated PG, it's a modern day ET story, and the characters are kids. Sounds like a winner, right? I'm giving this movie a NO, instead of a NOD. There's really no sex, no violence, and no language...but there should be a 4th criteria...unlawful acts. Three young boys are sad that they're families are being forced to move due to construction, but become very curious when all of their cell phones go wild, and they discover a little "foreign object" in the desert near their homes. Oh, the story is full of intrigue, suspense, and adventure...but it's also full of lying to parents (who are dumb, by the way), stealing a car, driving without a license, showing up at a party with drugs, etc. all of which is shown to be adventurous and fun. As an adult watching this movie, I know it's all played out in fun for the storyline, but as young tweens watching, I'm not so sure they wouldn't copy the events...and the ending might not be so neatly wrapped up in a bow. [Earth to Echo](#) – not so neat-o.

Begin Again

If you like music, you'll probably like this movie. I loved it. There's a lot of language, which is why it's rated R. However, the characters draw you into their story right away. Keira Knightley plays a singer/songwriter (yes, she sings!) whose boyfriend is also a singer, played by Adam Levine (from *The Voice* and the band Maroon 5). Mark Ruffalo plays a washed up album producer, who is a divorced dad with an estranged teen daughter. Knightly shines in her role, and I found myself really liking her spunk and determination to not get sucked into the music industry and its stipulations. [Begin Again](#) might be one of my favorites this year...so far. – Marcy Lytle

Maleficent

My husband and I rarely go see these types of movies, but thanks to the new *X-Men* being sold out at the last minute, we recently spent a date night seeing [Maleficent](#). To be honest, I wasn't expecting much. I'm sort of a Disney purist when it comes down to it, and the thought of switching to the villain's point of view seemed at best to be grasping for a new way to make money on a classic. I'm proud to say I stand corrected. Unfortunately, there were quite a few political undertones (the kind that kids don't even pay attention to), but overall I was pleasantly surprised in this movie. Without spoiling the movie, I loved the way they twisted the original story's ending. It was sweet and a nice change from the oversaturated teen romance movement. I don't know if I would buy the movie, but I'd be happy to download it from Netflix on a relaxing night when that time comes. – Christina Vetter

Jersey Boys

I thought I knew Frankie Valli's music, but I had no idea how many songs he made famous! This movie is the story of the Four Seasons, the group which Frankie Valli was a part of, how it came to fame, all the ups and downs of the four guys in the group, but mostly the story of

Frankie and his personal life. The music alone is worth going to hear, but the story was interesting and entertaining. The movie portrays the pitfalls of the entertainment business and how it affects family and relationships negatively. I was pleasantly surprised at these young actors I didn't really know, but you may recognize them from television shows. [Jersey Boys](#) is worth seeing on the big screen – it's a bit long – rated R for language throughout. – Marcy Lytle

The Grand Seduction

This movie isn't in the mainstream theaters, but rather at the artsy/independent film theater. It's a comedy and I went expecting to laugh out loud, but I didn't. It's set in beautiful Newfoundland and the story is of a small harbor town in desperate need of a doctor, if they want to stay afloat and attract a new factory that will bring jobs to the people there. A few men in the town get together and devise a scheme, actually a lie, to lure a young handsome doctor to come to their town and stay. The story itself is funny, entertaining, and the characters are quirky enough to make you laugh. However, there were a few sexual dialogues that distracted from the cuteness of the movie. The audience cracked up several times during [The Grand Seduction](#), because it *is* a funny movie. I'm just a hard case – I smiled a few times – and was entertained. – Marcy Lytle

Something to watch at home:

We watched [The Monuments Men](#) movie last week, and I loved it. It is based on a book by Robert Edsel documenting a group of American and British military men who helped identify and protect important structures and retrieve stolen works of art during World War II. I liked it so much that I purchased the book to read. The movie takes some license with events, for example no one died trying to prevent the Ghent altarpiece from being stolen. I thought the movie was entertaining, though the language was bad. I also liked seeing a different side of World War II that did not involve as much blood and guts. I enjoy historical films and books, and I thought *The Monuments Men* did a good job of presenting the historical significance of a little known part of the war while providing solid entertainment – Georganne Schuch

HOME

Practical Parenting - The Art of Sharing – by Georganne Schuch

When you have more than one child, you're going to have problems with sharing, regardless of how many toys you have. Your toy collection could rival FAO Schwartz, but chances are both kids are going to want to play with the same toy at the same time. Consider this scenario:

Child 1 walks up to the toy kitchen, rakes off all the clothes and books piled on it, and begins to make a pretend spaghetti dinner with a mismatch of dishes, Legos, and Barbie shoes.

Child 2, formerly engrossed in dumping all the toys out of the toy box, suddenly develops a whim to cook herself a pretend steak dinner with leftover plastic vegetables, a Hot Wheels car, and an assortment of crayons.

It doesn't take a fortune teller to see the train wreck coming down the tracks here. Suddenly, Child 1 is throwing the dishes at Child 2 who screams bloody murder to share the toy kitchen that has acted as a laundry basket for weeks. My kids have never seen a wrestling show, but I bet they could take Hulk Hogan down when it comes to fighting over a toy.

After refereeing more of these fights than I care to count, I have come up with an overall philosophy of sharing and a few guidelines on keeping the peace, or some semblance of it.

First, everything is not meant to be shared, and I'm not talking just toothbrushes and underwear. I mean that everyone has a right to OWN their own stuff, as in have total control and preference for items that no one else has a right to take, play with, or in any other way use and abuse. One of my daughters has a special stuffed animal that she will probably treasure for the rest of her life. Because it has been well-loved and is still a desirable sleeping mate, no one is allowed to play with it. It's hers, and it's been hers, for a long time. If she chooses to let someone borrow it, such as when a younger sister is injured, that's her choice. Otherwise, anyone caught with it is immediately found guilty of theft. I mean, really, do you let people walk up and lay claim to your car or your laptop just because they take a fancy to it? Of course not. So, everyone has stuff that is "theirs." And if it's theirs, then it is off-limits to the general population.

Second, when something is meant to be shared, it has to be shared in an appropriate manner. No grabbing, no demanding, no screaming, and above all, no bodily contact (wrestling, hitting, pulling hair, kicking, pinching, etc.). If one child is playing with it, anybody else who wants it must ask politely for a turn and then must wait for their turn, patiently. If it's a game, then the first player can finish before turning it over to the second player. This is a great way to learn to take turns and see how much more fun it is to have a playmate.

Third, there is a certain age at which this will make more sense, so forcible sharing among toddlers may only aggravate an already volatile relationship. When, not if, a disagreement over a toy arises, I tell each of them to play with their own toys if they can't play together. When, not if, the disagreement escalates, I take the toy and put it in time out. If it causes such turmoil, it

can't play until it can be nice again. I don't have the time or the patience to pass the toy back and forth for turns, nor does it serve any purpose for teaching sharing.

Fourth, when my older children save their money to buy their own items, such as clothes, jewelry, electronics, those items become solely their property. No one else can borrow without asking. Period. And even then, there is an appropriate amount of time after the purchase where borrowing it is not encouraged. Everyone has the right to get the first scratch on their new shoes, after all. If someone else wants a similar item, they are encouraged to save their money to buy one of their own.

How do we put this philosophy into practice?

1. When we have friends over to play, we put up toys that we don't want to share for whatever reason. It may be breakable, have a special meaning, or not be appropriate for the age group of the children coming.
2. Everything belongs to someone. If it's not yours, ask before you borrow it. Never assume it is okay to take it. This might save them a shoplifting charge at some point in life.
3. Relationships are more important than things, and things that cause ongoing problems between two or more people might need to find a new home.
4. Working, saving, or otherwise earning something makes it yours. Though we practice a lot of common good ideals at our house, we are not socialists. You earn it. You keep it.

Generosity is a great character trait, and sharing is just one way to express it. But before young children learn to share, they need to learn boundaries and respect. They have to care before they can share, anyway.

Train Them – The Spiritual Side of Racism – by April Karli

Racism is a hotly controversial topic. To be honest, I do not feel entirely equipped to write about it. I am a white person living in a mostly white suburb. Most of my friends are white and my family is not mixed-race. However, I am intentionally trying to educate myself about the negative effects of racism beyond what I learned about civil rights in school. And I am thankful to have many friends from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as friends who have adopted non-white children both domestically and internationally, who share their lives and struggles with me, teach me about their cultures, and are honest about how it feels to live, work, or raise children of color in a mostly-white society.

This spring I had an opportunity to teach my kids about how **racism is at its core a spiritual issue**. Oftentimes we avoid talking about it altogether, make excuses for it, or pretend it doesn't exist anymore. This can be as harmful as overt racism in my opinion. It's passive racism. It is a sin of omission.

My youngest daughter's 3rd grade class read [*Just So Stories*](#) by Rudyard Kipling. Kipling was a popular English writer of short stories, poetry, and novels in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is probably best known for *The Jungle Book* which was the inspiration for the animated Disney film. Kipling's work is considered by many literary critics to be both brilliant as well as racist.

Just So Stories is a delightful collection of tales Kipling wrote for his daughter, his "Best Beloved." Each is an origins story -- how the elephant got its trunk, how the camel got its hump, the beginning of armadillos, and so on. The language is old-fashioned, poetic, and difficult for a 3rd grader, so I began reading it aloud for my daughter. The story of how the leopard got his spots recounts a man and a leopard hunting together. The man uses the black ink left on his newly blackened skin to give the leopard spots. When the leopard asks the man if he will now paint stripes or spots on himself, the man, who is freshly colored, "blackish-brown...with a little purple in it, and touches of slaty-blue," replies, "Oh, plain black's best for a n****r."

You might imagine my shock at stumbling across that word. In a book assigned to my 3rd grader. For which I'd received no warning from the school about beforehand. She was assigned to read the book independently. Had I not been reading it to her, I would have never known she'd seen that word used to describe a person of color.

Before you begin thinking I am in favor of censorship, let me say that I believe original texts should be read - **when it's age and developmentally and socially appropriate**. As *Just So Stories* is a collection of tales, there are editions of the book available with the racist stories and words scrubbed out. This allows young students to be exposed to Kipling's beautiful prose and poetry without the racism.

When I brought my concerns to the school I was extremely disappointed in their response which was to tell me that ***racist language was common during that time period, and without reading those books there would be very little for the students to read.***

I don't buy that for a minute. It's a common excuse, but that answer is lazy and lets the people of privilege, the Kiplings, and, yes, the white people, off the hook. "It was common to use that word back then, so it's okay," does not make it okay. **This is where it becomes something beyond a simple school administration issue and crosses the line into the area of faith formation and how our children are being taught to be like Jesus.**

Racism is about treating others poorly based on the color of their skin. As citizens of God's Kingdom, it is our responsibility to make sure that all people are treated with respect and honor. I believe it's my job to teach my children about racism within the context of God creating **everyone** in His image. Correcting racism is part of God's plan of redemption to bring His kingdom to earth, in part by how we treat others, even those who aren't like us. We see this in Jesus' ministry and throughout Scripture:

- [The Good Samaritan](#) - the portrayal of a Samaritan in a positive light to Jesus' Jewish audience was shocking.
- [Jesus and the Woman at the Well](#) - again, Jesus speaks to a Samaritan, as well as to a woman.
- [Peter's vision](#) - God tells Peter to eat animals previously considered unclean removes barriers between Jews and Gentiles
- [Paul's letter to the Galatians](#) - This brings it home all the way. "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Teaching our children from a young age that God created people different and helping them appreciate those differences is a critical part of helping them be like Jesus. We have different color hair, skin, and we're different shapes and heights. We speak different languages and practice different customs. Kids notice these things and often point them out. Rather than shushing our kids out of fear of being rude, it's ok to acknowledge the differences as long as they aren't saying anything hurtful. We can teach our kids to celebrate the diversity they see around them!

In a recent [TED Talk Melody Hobson](#) discusses how diversity leads to stronger businesses. She acknowledges that racism is a touchy subject, but emphasizes that we must not be color-blind; rather, she says we can strive to be "color-brave."

I love that term -- color-brave. The day my daughter ran across the offensive word in her book I wasn't upset because now she had been exposed to racism and I wanted to shelter her from it. My kids have been exposed to the history of racism in our country. Last summer we spent part of our vacation visiting the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated as well as other notable historical sites in the Deep South. I was upset because I had not been

warned ahead of time that she might run across the offensive term. I was unprepared as her mother to help her process that word or to unpack the layers of meaning it has. I even feared she might have read it as something funny and naively repeated it to a friend!

How can we parents, no matter our color or ethnicity, raise children in God's kingdom to be color-brave?

- We can talk about racism and identify it when we see it rather than saying it's "okay" because it's "common."
- We can point them to Jesus and tell them stories about how Jesus interacted with those who were different from him.
- We can model healthy inter-racial relationships for our kids by getting out of our comfort zones and intentionally befriending people who are different from us. That is being color-brave!

I told a friend recently that I would like my kids to grow up and feel comfortable if they were the only white person in the room. My oldest daughter attended an all Chinese church once with a neighbor. When I asked her if she felt awkward she told me, "No. It was fun!" I hope that both of my girls can have more experiences like that in the future because I believe that breaking down barriers between our differences is part of what God's kingdom is all about.

You can watch Mellody Hobson's TED Talk here. It's well worth the 14 minutes!:

<iframe src="http://embed.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave.html" width="640" height="360" frameborder="0" scrolling="no" webkitAllowFullScreen mozallowfullscreen allowFullScreen></iframe>

I Don't Do Teenagers – The Need for Recognition by Lynn Cherry

Camera - check!

Teenager taking his maiden voyage – check!

A photo for Facebook – check!

Me in the driveway soaking up tears – that was not on the checklist.

I stood there, snapping pictures while my son backed out of the driveway alone. It honestly felt like yesterday I was fastening the 5-point harness on his car seat, and now he was in the driver's seat.

It's been a journey. I've had my share of gasps. I've stepped on my imaginary brake. I've commented multiple times about how close we are to slipping off the shoulder on the passenger side. I've reached over and grabbed the wheel to make room for the vehicle in the left turn option lane that opted to turn. Those first few months were challenging.

But just last week as my son drove to church while I finished my make up – the greatest perk of not having to drive myself – I simply pointed out the truth.

“You're a good driver.”

“What did you say?”

“You're a good driver, Honey. You are doing a good job.”

“Really, Momma?”

He was giddy.

It surprised me how much my casual comment meant to him. All I did was take the time to recognize how far he'd come.

The Living as Conquerors model defines recognition as words of thanks or acknowledgement. Having someone regard me highly for what I accomplish and being respected by others and feeling honored in the relationship are all acts and words of recognition.

Based on the relational needs assessment, recognition was one of the top three needs for both of our teenagers. I see this need expressed in two main areas:

Teenagers want to know that their contribution matters. We made more unilateral decisions when our boys were smaller; but now that they are older, they want to weigh in. I'll admit I still revert to, “Because I told you so,” but I'm also learning to pause and allow them to express their thoughts and feelings. This builds mutual respect.

Teenagers want their efforts to be acknowledged. When I complimented Michael's driving, I acknowledged a major milestone of young adulthood. It was more than something nice to say. I spoke to a specific area of competence and expressed my confidence in his ability. It was a breakthrough for both of us.

I wonder if sometimes we withhold recognition in an effort to protect ourselves from the reality that our children are growing up and becoming more independent. They need less and less of us. Recognizing their accomplishments on the journey to adulthood is one way that forces us to grapple with our hesitancy to let go.

Thankfully, there are still those glorious moments when the things they need from us make us feel like we are needed!

Join us next month as we discuss the need for comfort.

How do you see the need for recognition in your teenagers? Have you found a creative way to recognize their accomplishments?

Simple Solutions – 15 Ways to Cool Off – by Georganne Schuch

It's summer in Texas which means it's hot in Texas. You can't find two more synonymous phrases in the English language. There may be a few diehards who can go without air conditioning, but I'm not one of them. I don't need it cold enough to hang meat in my house, but I don't want to leave a trail of sweat when I walk around, either. Our electrical bill each month during the summer reminds me how much I have to pay for the luxury of cool air. It ain't cheap.

So, I've been scouring the Internet for ideas on controlling our utility bill this summer. I've added a few to our normal habits, and I'm hoping we can get by without taking out a second mortgage.

1. Keep the blinds closed on the side of the house where the sun is facing. We open the blinds on the opposite side to light up the house and leave off the overhead lights.
2. Plant trees around the house to provide shade.
3. Install solar screens to reflect sun from the windows.
4. Use ceiling fans to circulate air. It doesn't actually reduce the temperature in the room, but it makes it feel cooler so that you can turn up the temperature on the thermostat. We have an extra fan in the bedroom for nighttime relief. My husband likes it very cool to sleep.
5. Install a programmable thermostat and LOCK it! Program it to raise the air when no one is home and lower it when needed. I suggest locking it because we have a phantom in our house that turns the thermostat down and forgets it until frost forms on the windows. Not cool.
6. Use the oven and other heat appliances as little as possible. The oven heats up the house, usually at the hottest time of the day. We grill and use the crock pot quite a bit during the summer. Salads are great summer meals, as well.
7. We don't have a two-story house, but one article suggested turning off the vents downstairs to transfer cool air upstairs, where it gets stuffy because hot air rises.
8. Take a step back in time and hang your clothes out to dry. Okay, maybe not your underwear, but the dryer uses a lot of electricity and produces heat, so it makes sense to reduce its usage by using the free heat the sun provides to dry your clothes.
9. If you have an attic, an attic fan helps draw hot air up and pushes it out of the house.
10. Check for air leaks around doors and windows. Seal them up. You don't need to "air condition Texas," as my dad says.
11. Turn off and unplug appliances that aren't needed all the time. Many appliances have a low power mode that continues to draw current when they're off. They're nicknamed power vampires.
12. Check your insulation and add more if necessary. In our previous house, we added a second layer in the attic to keep our cool air down and our hot air up.
13. Maintain your air conditioning unit with regular maintenance. Change the filter regularly.
14. Take fewer hot baths and showers. I'm not suggesting ice cold water, but use a cool shower to cool down after working outside.
15. Stay hydrated with cool liquids. While I love coffee, I tend to drink less of it during the summer. Ice water keeps you hydrated and cool at the same time.

Bonus: If it's too hot in your house, find a cool place to hang out, like the pool or the library, or the freezer section of the grocery store.

A Night to Remember - The sluggard by Marcy Lytle

It's easy for our families to become sluggards in the middle of the summer. By definition, a sluggard is an idle person who sits around and does nothing. The Bible has a lot to say about sluggards. In fact, sluggards get into lots of trouble and bring trouble on themselves and upon others. Rest and relaxation are part of a great summertime experience. However, the constant life of a sluggard is really no life at all.

Preparation: Ask someone to be the scribe as you and your kids move around the house, Bible in hand, reading verses about sluggards, and making your list of summer activities so that the word "sluggards" is not anywhere in your vocabulary! Just carry a notebook or clipboard with paper, to jot down your ideas as you go. Then discuss them at the end of the study.

Sluggard verses are found in Proverbs. Let's look at each one as we move around the house, observing our own ways as individuals this summer.

The Pantry. *Read Proverbs 6:6-8* – Ants know to store up food for days when food will be scarce. Let's peer inside our pantry and look at all of God's blessings he has given us. How can we be wise this summer, with our food? *(Invite your kids to suggest creative ways they could organize the pantry, create a fun dish with what's in the pantry, or read the labels and learn more about what they're eating.)*

The Bed. *Read Proverbs 6:9* – Let's look at the beds in our house and see if they're made, free of clutter, or unmade and a mess! *(Talk about the bed, why it's important to get up instead of staying there all day, why it's necessary to wash the bedding, and make the bed.)*

The Kitchen Faucet. *Read Proverbs 13:4* – The sluggard always wants something but isn't willing to work for it. If we're thirsty but never turn on the faucet, will we be satisfied? *(Discuss ways to satisfy other kinds of thirst like boredom, apathy, or laziness)*

The Messy Place. *Read Proverbs 15:19* – When we behave like a slug, we create hazards and messes along our path and it blocks us from making good progress. *(Point out messes in the house, in closets, drawers, on the floor, etc. and make a list of organizing projects to be done this month, working together.)*

The Dining Table. *Read Proverbs 19:24* - What a lazy person that just lays his head in his food but has no energy to eat it! Imagining sitting at a table full of food waiting for someone to spoon feed you like a baby. God expects us to digest his word. *(Ask for ideas on how to read the word daily and make it a habit, just like eating).*

The Window. *Read Proverbs 22:13* – Laziness and refusing to work results in weak muscles, and lack of zeal, which can lead to fear. There's nothing to fear when we are full of His word and His strength *(Talk about the things you fear, and agree together as a family to stand up together in boldness against any "lion" that dares to roar.)*

The Home. *Read Proverbs 24:30* – We don't want our home to be overrun with junk, messes, uneaten food, and fear...all because we've become summer sluggards. We want a home that is clean, inviting, and a place to welcome guests to enjoy our blessings. *(Look around your home and give thanks, and make a list of ways to make it more inviting – perhaps new curtains, fresh flowers, or creative artwork!)*

Go over the list you've made, and agree to place a calendar where everyone can see it, with each of the suggestions filled in, so that the family is not bored, not lazy, and definitely not sluggards!

The Family Practice - It Doesn't Have to Be So – by Rachel Toalson

As the oldest daughter of a librarian, I was weaned on stories.

All those tales of *Robin Hood* and *Anne of Green Gables* and the pirates of *Treasure Island* fill my memory, and before I even got to school I had an imagination that wrote continuation stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House Series*. I read every chance I got, moving outside to a hammock when my parents urged me to get some Vitamin D.

And now, grown, still I carry a book of poetry in my purse for red stoplights and long checkout lines and school pickup. Somehow, I thought that when I became a mother, my reading time, that hour a day, sometimes more, would remain nonnegotiable. Except a baby cried in the darkest hours of the night, and a boy needed rocking to sleep, and another needed help cleaning up the milk he'd spilled all down the table and the chair legs and his whole front side.

The reading time just slipped right through my fingers.

I thought, for a few months, for a quarter of the new-parent year,

That's just the way it is, just the way it will be from here on out, for the next 18 or 20 or 25 years.

And then I remembered how stories shaped my childhood, and why wouldn't those same stories, and different ones, shape the next generation, too? So, four months after that firstborn, our story time sat on a typed-up schedule, sacred and untouchable.

There's a black-and-white picture, hidden in a red album, of me lying on my stomach next to my four-month-old son, reading from the works of Jack Prelutsky while he had his tummy time and worked those neck muscles that, even then, turned toward words and pictures and pages.

Now, in the days since becoming a mother, most of my reading time happens with my children. They have read the entire *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Charlotte's Web* and all those favorite classics and new beauties like *The Tale of Despereaux* and *The Underneath*.

Stories play a vital role in a child's life, so that...

- When a family reads *Mary Poppins* together, they can talk about the amazing power of an imagination that sees bears talk in zoos, people float when they laugh, and a nanny who flies on the wind.
- When a family reads *Farmer Boy* together, they can talk of the difficult days when morning meant milking cows, harvest meant picking acres of corn, and clothes meant tailor-measured pants and homemade boots.
- When a family reads *Wonder* together, they can talk about the wrong of ridicule and the bravery of being different and the dishonor of judging someone for how he looks.

Stories inspire us and teach us and lift us to become more than we might be without them. They teach us kindness and virtue and love (at least the right ones do.)

And maybe it doesn't come naturally in this world of screens, and maybe it'll take work, and maybe they'll kick and complain and run the other direction those first few times, or the next 100 times after that, but the effort of pursuing shared story time is always worth it. Not just for the people and the places and the things our children get to hold in their hearts, but for the ways reading teaches concentration and verbal communication and writing and creativity and deep-down truth.

This month, let's try one (or more) of these:

1. Take 30 minutes of TV time and turn it into story time. Read on your couch, all piled up like a parent-child mountain. Read on the floor, with kids stretched across your back. Read under the cover of a tent in the middle of your living room. Just read.
2. Include a Silent Reading time at some point during the day. Silent Reading is a time when everyone in the family is reading a book. The best way to teach kids to make time for reading is for them to see you making time to read. Sit down. Put your feet up. And open that book you've been meaning to get to.
3. Choose audio books on trips. Most public libraries have both classics and newly published books available for checkout. When our family drove to Florida last fall (28 hours with stops), we listened to seven audio books together, and the boys were (mostly) entertained, at least until the last two hours (when everyone felt like jumping out of a moving vehicle.)

I think of all the stories my children carry around within them, all the moments we've shared in connection together, and all the ways we have bonded over tales. They never even had to consider whether they loved reading or not.

So for those moments when we think becoming a parent means setting aside all those books we read, I say,

It doesn't have to be so.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - Batteries Needed – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever been annoyed by batteries? I have. I get annoyed at how quickly they go bad. I am irritated when I need them and I don't have them. And I simply despise the fact that something needs batteries, anyway. Why can't it just work without them?

I was just thinking these thoughts recently, when I realized that I operate my spiritual life sometimes with the same annoyed attitude. I get annoyed at how quickly I can turn from a spiritual high...to the lowest valley of lows. I find myself irritated when I need a quick fix and an answered prayer, but neither seems to be available at the moment. And I simply feel contempt for myself that I cannot maintain my spiritual high on my own, without any help!

All of this thinking resulted in a list of 20 reasons "batteries" are needed to run our spiritual lives. And those batteries include the Word, good friends, lots of prayer, and the grace of God, five reasons for each:

1. His Word is truth and the only thing that quenches our thirst.
2. His Word empowers us. We have no power without it.
3. His Word is like food. Without digesting it daily, we run down and eventually die.
4. His Word provides the power to light our path, a lamp that shows us where to walk.
5. His Word makes us full. Without the Word, we keep craving that which never satisfies
6. Friends who listen without judgment give us energy to keep going.
7. Friends who pray for us comfort us and lighten our load.
8. Friends who stay when others leave are like a cool breeze on a hot day.
9. Friends who provide when we're in need strengthen our legs so we can walk.
10. Friends who smile because they love us fill us with hope.
11. Prayer is the boost that lifts us up toward heaven.
12. Prayer is agreeing with God's will in our lives and shines his light into our darkness.
13. Prayer is praise, and both are effectual in empowering our lives.
14. Prayer is the connection to God's heart.
15. Prayer is potent and gets the job done.
16. Grace is beautiful and when we wear it, we can walk in it.
17. Grace is that which saves us; therefore, it is that which sustains us.
18. Grace is free and always available, never hard to find.
19. Grace is sufficient and perfected in weakness.
20. Grace, mercy, and peace are the battery trio that keeps us alive and useful in His Kingdom.

Next time you're fumbling through a drawer looking for that elusive AAA battery you need to fill that empty cavity in the flashlight, the remote, or any other gadget, stop and see how you're battery compartment is faring in your heart. Are you at full power and strength? Or are you empty, dark, and unable to move a muscle?

Batteries needed.

Under the Influence - The Crooked Path by Marcy Lytle

We love to go on road trips. But we don't take the highways, the straight paths, the ones that get us there quickly. We take the back roads, the curvy ones, the ones where the cell phones don't work, and the ones that might not be paved.

Crooked paths and roads are often perceived as bad. And in life, when we take crooked paths where we deviate from God's word, that's dangerous. But what about the crooked paths we're called to travel, because God is leading us there?

The highways are great for quick travel, but the views are pitiful. There are mostly billboards, others cars whizzing by, and a long stretch ahead, for our viewing "pleasure," which ends up so boring, we find ourselves struggling to keep our eyes open. However, the back roads provide much more entertainment, cool little places to stop, and the wonders of nature surround us.

Consider [Lombard Street](#) in San Francisco. That street is about as curvy and crooked as a street can be, and yet it's flocked to by thousands of people to drive down it because it's so beautifully lined with flowers, and such an exciting experience to have.

So what's so great about the crooked paths, the back roads, and the off-the-beat paths?

1. Your speed has to slow down. Hairpin curves cannot be maneuvered at a high rate of speed, or else your car will go careening off the side of a cliff.
2. When your speed slows down, you observe. Driving at a slow pace enables you to leisurely enjoy the sights around you. You can spot the wheels of hay tightly wound on an open field. Your eyes open wide when a roadrunner scurries across the road in front of your car. Bridges and streams are so quaint and picturesque, when they're not in the middle of a big city.
3. The most satisfying meals are prepared and served...outside the city. There are no chain restaurants on the back roads. But there are hospitable folks who want you to stop and visit while your food is made fresh from their gardens or farms.
4. You have to keep your map handy at all times. Narrow, unpaved roads sometimes lead to nowhere...or away from everywhere. Having a map to follow keeps you going towards your destination, without getting lost.
5. Exploration is a must on the back roads. In order to enjoy the full experience of a back roads trip, you must stop, and stop often to read historical markers, walk through a ghost town, or peek in the windows of an abandoned old schoolhouse. These are the true memories of a road trip.

Did you know Ecclesiastes 7 says this?

Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.

Instead of seeing a deviation in our spiritual paths as something to be avoided at all costs, think about these verses, and enjoy the crooked path until God leads you out onto the open highway again.

- Sometimes you need to slow down, and taking a back road is the only place where God can lead you – where you can visibly see the dangers of the cliffs – the only way to go.
- Sometimes you lose sight of the beauty of God and his creation, which actually strengthens and builds your faith. Slowing down and driving around curves might bring you upon a beautiful covered bridge, or a snow-covered mountain peak you'd never see in the city.
- Sometimes you need a meal that God himself sends your way, straight from a stranger, instead of that familiar place where everyone stops to eat along the way.
- Sometimes on the highways, you toss the map aside in favor of the thrill of speeding along past everyone beside you. But God knows your need for direction, and he wants the map in your lap at all times...and he wants you to read it.
- Sometimes God wants to reveal to you experiences and parts of his character that are only available on the difficult climbs, the scary loops, and the bumpy roads.

Observe the path down which you're headed. Is it crooked and full of turns because you've traveled toward the darkness? Or, are you following God with all of your heart, mind, and soul and he's taking you to bottom of a scary hill with steep inclines and sharp curves?

As you start up the hill, instead of looking at the crooked path, look at what's alongside and up ahead and you might be surprised at the beauty and awe that awaits you...

Healthy Habits – Food that Fools – by Georganne Schuch

Not a day goes by that we don't eat. We don't eat to live. We live to eat. Amen. Pass the gravy.

The problem (and you knew there was a problem hidden here,) is that at some point someone decided that food all by itself wasn't pretty enough. Vanilla ice cream wasn't white enough to look sinfully delicious. Candy-coated chocolate wasn't bright enough to attract kids' eyes and make them beg as if they would die without it. Mac and cheese is supposed to be neon yellow, right? So, someone decided a little food coloring was the answer. Sounds pretty innocuous for the most part...except it was anything but innocuous.

[What exactly is in food dye?](#) How about [petroleum products, insects, and coal tar?](#) Pass the Pennzoil with a sprinkling of beetle. In fact, food coloring has been used for centuries in various forms, most of which involved using one food to color another, like carrot juice to give an orange tint. But food manufacturers began looking at alternatives to use in mass production in the early 20th century. Many of their alternatives were gradually banned as they proved dangerously toxic. In a unique approach to food safety, no testing was done in advance of adding the dyes. They just waited to see what effects were reported and adjusted their recipes accordingly.

The list of food dyes allowed in food was gradually reduced to about seven. However, these still deliver a disturbing amount of chemicals to the consumer since they can be found in everything from cough syrup to cereal. [Food dyes](#) have been blamed for a multitude of problems from cancer to migraines to ADHD. The fact that such dangerous additives are still allowed in our food, when many other countries have banned them, is the million dollar question. No one can claim food safety laws make any sense whatsoever.

If you decide, like I do, to avoid processed food with dyes, you will have your work cut out for you. Read the labels, if you can. The print is so small that you might need a magnifying glass. The best tell-tale sign that a food is artificially colored is by looking at it. If it's pretty and whispers your child's name, you are probably looking at a rainbow of food dyes. There's nothing pretty about it after it's eaten though. I've seen my children poop that rainbow for days after a birthday party, but even that's better than vomiting it all over the carpet, because that food dye is the same dye used to color the carpet in an industrial setting...and it doesn't come out. Ever.

Nature's food, the kind grown in the ground and picked from trees and bushes, is as pretty as it gets, and you won't find any petroleum, insects, or coal tar in it. You like green? Try some broccoli, steamed with lemon juice. Sunny yellow? Toss summer squash in some olive oil and throw it on the grill. Who doesn't like red? Watermelon, strawberries, raspberries, tomatoes. Red must be God's favorite color, too.

So, whatever you pass at the picnic table this summer, don't pass the dyed food.

Beauty for Ashes – The Most Important Thing – by Pam Charro

Have you ever gone through something that just didn't seem to make any sense at all, and wondered where God was in all of it?

I have felt that way many times, especially when the pain seemed unbearable and/or the trial just went on and on and I couldn't imagine how anything good could possibly come from it. And, even if it did, how could it be worth all of this?

This is real suffering here!

I am thinking these thoughts lately, because many of my friends are going through trials that make my life look like a walk in the park. My heart goes out to them so, and I wonder how I would view my circumstances and my God if I were in their shoes. I hope that their trust in a good God is stronger than I suspect mine might be. If my past hardships are any indication, I would probably not pass some of their tests very gracefully.

What comes to mind is this:

I suspect sometimes maybe I just think too much. I know that God doesn't expect me to never consider my situation, so I'm not saying that thinking is a bad thing. But I catch myself questioning God's motives and trying to figure out what He might be up to, as though anything I could come up with would even come close to His thoughts and plans for me and my situation. And I think He isn't aware of or doesn't care about how much suffering I am going through.

I suspect sometimes maybe I just have to say it. Eventually, all that I can do is stop grinding my gears and just let Him be God, even when I don't like what I see. I have also started saying out loud, "You are good, and I trust You in whatever You are doing." Hearing myself say this out loud seems to help a lot, and I know He appreciates it, too.

I don't necessarily think that the rest of my life will be smooth sailing just because I am learning to not overthink and to speak my trust in God out loud. But the process itself is what brings me closer to Him.

And I suspect that might be the most important thing...after all.

A Moment in THYME – Navigating the Windy City – by Debra Brown

Sometimes, can't you just "smell" an adventure coming? Can't you just sense that something important is coming your way, and you have to run toward it? That describes my quick trip to Chicago. No question about it, I soon found myself in the middle of another one of life's unforgettable teachable moments!

We were off to Chicago for a quick overnight business trip. I love my Southwest Airlines Companion pass. I fly free anytime Jim travels. It is no surprise that my family knows me as Mrs. Bags-Packed Brown, because they know that I can't pass up an adventure!

Once in Chicago, we hit the ground running with only 45 minutes to get to Jim's meeting. Navigation is my primary job on business trips, and I was having trouble acclimating myself as we made a wrong turn out of the rental lot. But we quickly recovered, and entered the interstate, gaining needed time. I studied the phone map attempting to force the screen to read the same direction we were traveling. Map screens can be obstinate.

"I-90 East or West?" Jim suddenly asked.

"Left," I said, frantically checking the GPS on my phone. There were no E's or W's.

He asked a bit louder, "Do I go East or West?"

I pointed left toward all the skyscrapers, saying, "That way." I failed to realize that both roads exited LEFT.

A steely silence filled the car as we passed the exit. Jim didn't seem to appreciate my navigational skills. He grabbed *his* phone, pulling up the GPS. An invisible clock ticked.

Recalculating.

We exited a few miles off course, a lethal mistake in Chicago. Congested roads plagued the city. Stoplights controlled every intersection, and construction signs blocked the main streets.

Oh my. "Late" is not in Jim's vocabulary.

Just as we arrived at our destination, Jim's client texted, "WHERE ARE YOU?"

With a hurried kiss goodbye, he left me in the driver's seat in downtown Chicago.

A kiss is a good sign, I thought.

Relieved, I grabbed the phone and punched maps. As a hound dog tracks a squirrel, the scent of an adventure filled my nostrils. I had no time to stop and nurse hurt feelings.

BIG, BUSY and VERY LOUD sufficiently describes Chicago's business district. Like an ant maneuvering on a crowded sidewalk, I refused to be intimidated. With only an hour and a half to shop, I pulled out into traffic.

Don't ask me how I was able to find a parking garage and my favorite shop, but could not navigate my way back to my husband. It's a mystery!

I *thought* I knew where I was, and where I wanted to go.

Somehow my phone map locked on North. I was traveling south, while navigating from the opposite direction. (Is that clear as mud?) The parking garage had spit me out in a foreign country – under the subway. Like a rat in a maze, I kept hitting roadblocks. Not a good thing in downtown Chicago during rush hour.

If I ever wanted to see Jim again, I needed to get everything going the “right direction.”

To say the least, I was frustrated, but amazingly enough, UNAFRAID. Deep down, I knew that this situation was no accident. There were just too many mishaps.

It's funny, but I'll always remember that quick trip to Chicago with great fondness. Chicago was much more than a good story about the perils of navigating with phone maps. Those 24 hours in the month of May will be forever bookmarked in my heart. God was speaking loud and clear through my navigational mishaps.

- He was using a physical experience to pinpoint a spiritual roadblock in my life.
- He was breaking some new ground in my life, and *He had my attention*.

How exciting is that?

God loves me extravagantly. So He took the time to take me on a journey to the Windy City!

And...do you want to know the best part?

He didn't waste one moment of that trip! **Not one moment!**

But that's another story...

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - Solve Your Solvable Problems by Lynn Cherry

When we choose a life partner we choose a particular set of flaws, faults and foibles.

Welcome to the real world where every marriage has conflict.

We are reading [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) by Dr John Gottman and this month we learned there are two kinds of problems – perpetual problems and solvable problems. About 69% of marital conflicts simply can't be resolved because they are deeply embedded in fundamental differences in values and dreams. We have to find a way to cope with those issues. Dr Gottman presents strategies for making peace with perpetual problems in the book. In this article we are going to discuss his five keys to solving the problems that actually can be solved:

1. **Use a soft start-up** – Dr Gottman found in his research that a conflict tends to end the way it began. So if we start up a conversation with intense accusations things are sure to stay heated and go down in flames. It takes patience and practice to develop the skill of a soft start-up. When we are able to begin a difficult conversation with grace and understanding we have a lot better chance of finding a safe place to land. It all boils down to having good manners.

Talk to your spouse with the same respect you would use to address an issue with a friend or co-worker.

2. **Learn to make and receive repair attempts** – Repair attempts are the efforts we make to tone down tension. There is a great list of suggestions in the book. Some that have worked for us are:
 - Can I get a do over?
 - I need to take a break and calm down
 - Let me rephrase that
 - I really blew it
 - I could be wrong about this
3. **Soothe yourself and each other** – Rising conflict can cause emotional and physical flooding. When we feel flooded, it's hard to really hear what's going on in the conversation. So we take a break. We do some deep breathing. We relax our bodies. When a marriage is embroiled in conflict we can begin to see our spouse as a trigger of the stress in our lives.

So try this the next time you find yourselves in a heated conversation and you feel your blood pressure rising - take a 20 minute break and avoid replaying the argument with righteous indignation or innocent victimhood. Regroup and then soothe each other with a shoulder massage or a foot rub. Choosing to surrender and being calmed by your spouse can rewire the programming that views them as a stress trigger.

4. **Compromise** – The ability to compromise takes us back to our previous principle and our willingness to be influenced by each other. It hinges on redefining the “win.”

Here's a true confession. I really need to be right. Historically, a win for me was my dear husband admitting he was tragically wrong and then enthroning me as the Queen of Right. You can imagine how fruitful our discussions were. This book really freed me to rest in knowing that it's okay if we don't end up on the same side of an argument. Sometimes the win is agreeing to disagree and standing tall, side by side on a small patch of common ground.

5. **Be tolerant of each other's faults** – We were talking to a young friend who was considering marriage, but there was this one thing about their potential spouse that really irritated them. My husband asked, “Is this something you can live with for the rest of your life and choose to be okay with? What if it never changes? Can you accept them just the way they are?” That's not to say they'll never change.

One of the amazing things about human beings is that we do have the ability to grow and change. Through Christ we are made brand new. God calls us to a life of transformation. But we tend flourish and grow best in an environment that feels safe.

Doctor Gottman puts it this way, “It's just a fact that people can change only if they feel that they are basically liked and accepted as they are. When people feel criticized, disliked and unappreciated they are unable to change. Instead they feel under siege and dig in to protect themselves.”

After observing a couple in his Seattle Love Lab, Dr Gottman is able to predict with 90% accuracy whether they will stay married or divorce. The presence of conflict is not a determining factor. It's how they respond to each other during conflict that reveals their future. The important thing is acknowledge the problem and keep talking about it.

Next month we will discuss Principle 6, Overcoming Gridlock.

We'd love to hear from you. What do you do when you feel your blood pressure rising during a marital conflict?

MARRIAGE – Date Night Fun – Christmas in July *by Marcy Lytle*

We have this family tradition of Christmas in July, where we get together to exchange small gifts, we turn the A/C down so that it feels chilly in the house, we pull out the blankets, put on a cheesy Christmas movie, and eat food that we normally eat in the winter. It's great fun. So why not have some great fun with our spouses, on our dates, in the month of July...revolving around Christmas? Here's how...

1. **The Christmas Story.** It's not just a story for kids. There's great insight to be gained from reading the Christmas story in its entirety, in the middle of summer. Why not find a place where you can ride horses (or if that's not your thing, you could ride bicycles), make a trek in the heat of the evening, and collapse under a shade tree and read...[Luke 2:1-20](#). Imagine what it would have been like to make that journey on a donkey, to be ostracized by society, yet to know something great is about to happen. This story is a great story for couples to read, to ponder, and to pray together for their own future together, as well as for other couples they know.
2. **The Christmas food.** I personally love Christmas cookies and [hot wassail](#). Invite another couple over, have your [dough](#) chilled and ready, and have a rolling and cutting party. Each couple has to roll, cut, and bake a dozen cookies each. Sit around a table as you decorate the cookies together, sipping on hot wassail. Not sure what to do with two dozen Christmas cookies? After you've enjoyed a few yourselves, wrap them up and deliver them to some friends with kids. Go together in the car, knock on the door of the house, and sing a carol when they open the door as you present your gift!
3. **The Christmas gifts.** Set a limit, say \$25-\$100, and spend some time thinking about an "event" date you could give to your spouse this month. Perhaps there is a concert, an outdoor festival, or a sporting event your spouse would enjoy. Purchase the tickets and wrap in Christmas paper, leaving it under his/her pillow, to find the morning of the event, with a greeting of "Merry Christmas in July." Your spouse is sure to be pleased!
4. **The Christmas music.** Are Christmas carols not "your thing?" Lay aside your aversion to the music of the season, and pull out a [Christmas CD](#) loaded with carols. Plan a secret rendezvous with the car completely packed for the evening. Include your CD (or loaded music), a blanket, a thermos of hot chocolate, and peppermint sticks. Then find a place high atop the city where you can park, snuggle, and listen. If possible, make sure Silver Bells is the last one you listen to. Then hit your city sidewalks for a stroll in the moonlight, hand in hand, as you ditch the blanket for the "feeling of Christmas in the air" as you enjoy your peppermint sticks together.
5. **The Christmas lights.** Lights just create atmosphere. They really do. An unlit Christmas tree comes alive when the lights are plugged in. Create the same atmosphere on a date night this month! Pull out the strings of Christmas lights and place them strategically around the house in at least three locations. For example, wrap them around the dining table. Take another set and drape them over your patio deck or outdoor chairs. Place a third hanging from the fireplace (and yes, prepare the fireplace for burning!) Invite your date for a night "in" and present them with good food, great conversation, and romance as you light up each area one at a time, plugging in each string as you move to each location. End the evening watching a [Christmas movie](#)

you've downloaded or rented from Netflix on TV, with only the flicker of a small burning fire and the string of lights.

Nothing is too silly, too farfetched, too much work, when it comes to setting up a fun date for the one you love. In fact, it's necessary to have time for chills and thrills, and why not incorporate a bit of the most "wonderful time of the year" in the middle of the dog days of summer?

After 30 Years – Dating Advice – by Marcy Lytle

I've been asked the question many times, "Is it okay to date a non-believer?" A young girl meets a guy at school, on line, or at the mall, and he sweeps her off her feet because he's handsome, fun, or even a really nice guy. However, loving God with all of his heart is nowhere in his vocabulary or actions. And so she wants to know if it's okay to date him.

My answer is "No."

And here's why:

- Dating is a precursor to marriage, and there's no good to be gained from dating someone with whom you do not want to spend the rest of your life.
- Dating leads to touching and feelings, and these two things create memories, ones that can never be erased.
- Dating, even if it's just for simply having fun together, is fellowship. And fellowship between light and darkness cannot really occur. (II Corinthians 6:14).

Some will argue that even dating and marrying a Christian is no guarantee of a happily ever after experience. This is true, because at any point in a marriage or in a lifetime, one can make the choice to turn away from what is right and good.

Some will argue that a Christian dating and marrying a non-Christian can be actually quite great, if the couple is best friends. This is also true, but when kids come along, and life hits you hard (as it will), faith has to be the foundation – or cracks occur.

If I've learned anything in my 30-plus years of marriage, it's the true value in having a Christian husband. I'm not talking about a religious man who sits by me at church and lives a different life at home. I'm referring to a man who loves God with all of his heart, and pleasing God and obeying His word, in love and deed, is first and foremost his priority.

I was allowed to date anyone I liked, as a teenager. Some of the guys I liked went to church with me, and were good, God-fearing guys. And some of these same church-going guys were not honorable or righteous. I also dated guys from school, who never set foot in a church building, but I just liked their personalities, and we had fun. I dated all kinds of guys, giving a piece of my heart to each one. So by the time I married, there were pieces of my memory, my affection, and my heart that I left with each one of the young men I at one time adored.

My husband, however, waited. He didn't date around just to be cool or to have a girl to kiss. He waited until he met "the one" and then he gave me all he had. It was pure. It was lovely. And it was holy. He loved God first, he trusted Him for a wife, and he waited until God presented him with a woman who loved God, too.

I can't tell you how many times I've thanked my husband for the gift he gave me that I, in turn, was not able to give him.

If you're dating, consider this:

- It's a lie that you have to "shop around" to find a good man.
- It's a lie that you have to experience many men before you settle down with the one who makes you happy.
- It's a lie that you're going to miss out if you wait on God, because all the good men will be gone.

It may be an old-fashioned way of thinking, but I believe it's a healthy one. Don't date those who do not share your same faith. There are no "guarantees" that just because you marry a Christian man you'll have a perfect marriage. All marriages take work. But if you start out with the foundation of a shared faith, and you both nurture and water that faith in God (and each other) over the years, you'll be satisfied, delighted with each other, and experience a holiness in your union that you won't read about in romance novels, or see on the big screen.

It's not okay for a believer to date a non-believer. In fact, it's downright dangerous.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems - Head Over Heels – By Kayley Ryan

I tend to think of God as my Savior, my Lord, and my King, but I often neglect an essential part of who he is: my Bridegroom.

Yes, I know it sounds a little weird, but I think God likes to communicate with us in ways that are most relevant to our lives right here, right now. Most teenage girls will agree with me when I say that school is not all that is on our minds during our boy crazy, adolescent years. But if we really want to be swept away by a knight in shining armor, what better place to look for that admiration and affection than in the One who promises to forever be with us (Matt. 28:20) and to never forsake us (Deut. 31:6)?

At this time in a girl's life, it is essential that she know she is loved and cherished. However, relationships with guys cannot be the only source of that love. A guy can sweep a girl off her feet, compliment her, do everything he can think of for her, but there will still be times when he loves imperfectly, just as there will be times when the girl does the same. The love one receives from *people* will never be as eternally perfect and fulfilling as the love one receives from God.

Perfect, unconditional love only comes from God, as John describes in 1 John 4:8, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

When I first read those words, I wasn't exactly sure what they meant. God is love. Okay, now what? It took me a while before I had a revelation of God as pursuer and not *just* of God as savior and king.

A few years ago, I began reading a series of books by Christian author Ted Dekker called the *Circle Trilogy*, which constitutes the books *Black*, *Red*, *White*, and *Green*.

I began avidly reading *Black*, the first book in Ted Dekker's poignant, thought-provoking series in which the main character Thomas finds himself in an alternate reality where he meets Elyon, the Maker who created everything and who loves his people.

Sound familiar?

But for me, this book was not just a revelation of God as creator, but of God as pursuer and lover.

One particular passage in *Black* describes the very first real encounter Thomas has with Elyon, where he hears the words,

"I love you.

I choose you.

I rescue you.

I cherish you."

I can't tell you how much I sobbed the first time I read that passage.

Since then, I began to see God as one who was willing to do anything, to be spat at and mocked, to be whipped and tortured, to die an agonizing death on the cross—all to pursue me.

But why would he do that? Why willingly undergo so much excruciating pain, not just physical but emotional and spiritual as well, to win the love of people who have continually rejected and pained him?

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

Unconditional. Undeserved. Perfect. Eternal. That's the kind of love God shows to us.

If God is willing to do anything for someone who doesn't deserve him, why shouldn't I be willing to dive head over heels in love with him?

I should be rejoicing, screaming my love in word and deed, and falling so in love with God that rejection or loneliness cannot possibly faze me.

So, I encourage you today to think of God in a new way, to see him for who he is: our Pursuer, our Rescuer, and our Bridegroom who loves us with an unconditional love, despite how we might act towards him.

**“As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.”**

Isaiah 62:5

Moving Forward – God Gifts by Lynn Cherry

Giant scorpions, one-eyed witches, epic battles and Greek mythology – not my first choice in movies, but my boys were watching [Clash of the Titans](#) and I got sucked in.

Our hero Perseus is angry with the gods. Everyone he loves is killed by Hades so when the opportunity arises for revenge, Perseus raises his hand to volunteer. As they embark on their mission, a glowing silver sword falls from the heavens, a gift from the gods forged on Olympus. Perseus' refuses the gift.

And that scene is what got my attention.

“Scoot over boys, make room on the sofa for Momma.”

Their small band of warriors faces powerful enemies and there are casualties. I find myself yelling at the television.

“Get your god sword! Somebody throw him the god sword!”

Did I mention the boys had friends over?

It was so frustrating to watch Perseus struggle knowing there was a supernatural gift at his disposal. I wasn't the only one who was frustrated. At one point in the movie the leader of the group confronts Perseus, “Your pride is killing my men. You were given gifts. Use them.”

Perseus refuses again. He doesn't want to acknowledge the gift. He wants to accomplish the mission in his own strength. The team leader gives up and tells Perseus, “When you need your sword it's in my bag.”

I don't want to give away the entire movie. But finally, in a moment of pain and anguish, Perseus picks up the sword and in the end he uses the god sword for the good of all.

Now I'm not suggesting we turn to Hollywood's interpretation of Greek mythology for life lessons, but sometimes movies show us things in vivid color that we wouldn't consciously consider, and that's what happened when I watched this movie.

I thought about my God gifts and I asked myself three questions:

1. Are there gifts I've been given that I'm not using?
2. How does me-trying-to-live-in-my-own-strength affect those around me?
3. Would life be better for us all if I embraced my gifts and learned to use them effectively?

I then thought about how pain is such a powerful motivator. Through life's most difficult experiences, I have discovered gifts and dreams I didn't even know were in me.

What about you? Are you using your God gifts? How would you answer my three questions? Here are my responses:

1. I'm so glad our God is not like "the gods." He lavishly gives gifts to each one of us. We are all his sons and daughters. He reveals and trains us to use our gifts. What we do with our gifts is the gift we give in return.

Now may the God of peace....equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him...Hebrews 13:20-21 NIV

2. We need to grab hold of the gifts we've been given, because our own strength at its best is never enough.

[Not in your own strength] for it is God Who is all the while effectually at work in you [energizing and creating in you the power and desire], both to will and to work for His good pleasure and satisfaction and delight. Philippians 2:13 AMP

3. When the story in a battle movie sweeps me away, I can endure sword fighting and even the green guts of a giant scorpion, because something in me rises and exclaims, "I've got the God-sword and I'm not afraid to use it!"

In the end, the gifts of God within us are exactly what we need to win the battle.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. 2 Corinthians 2:14 NRSV

What is holding you back from using your God-gifts?

The Mystery of the Meal

I love to watch travel shows, particularly travel shows about food. I agree with the hosts of these shows who I've heard say that the dishes prepared and eaten by the people of a country or region reveal much about them. From the cured meats, cheeses, and wines of France, to the steaming, brothy noodle bowls of pho slurped up in Vietnam, to the fresh olives and vegetables of the Mediterranean, to the complex spices used in the foods of Central America, to the fast-food dotting the landscape of North America -- food has much to say about the people who prepare and eat it.

We Christians, citizens of the Kingdom of God, share a meal together called the Eucharist. Whether we eat it weekly or less often, it, speaks to who we are as God's people. **Jesus could have given us any number of ways to remember him. Why did he choose a meal?**

Food has a way of bringing people together. When we are gathered around a meal, hearts connect. Stories are shared as the dishes are passed around the table. When everyone is full and content, the conversations often turn more meaningful. People open up and become vulnerable. Others offer words of healing, comfort, and peace.

In the same way, when we gather around the Lord's Table we open our hearts to both Jesus who saves us and to one another. Eating from the same loaf of bread, and drinking from the same cup of wine declares our unity. It brings us all to the same place of acknowledging publicly how much we hunger and thirst for Jesus. No matter our backgrounds, no matter what we have going on in our lives, no matter where we are from, we are in the same place of humility and need.

My favorite words in the prayers offered before Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer* are said by the priest just before the bread and wine are served:

“The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.”

The words, “*feed on him in your hearts,*” are full of meaning. When we partake of the bread and wine we are allowing Christ to fill our hearts; he is fueling our spirits the way food fuels our bodies. The fact that Communion is something done with others, in community, reveals how we belong to and need one another.

Karl Barth said this about how Communion connects us to each other: “Holy Communion is offered to all, as surely as the living Jesus Christ is for all, as surely as all of us are not divided in him, but belong together as brothers and sisters, all of us poor sinners, all of us rich through his mercy. Amen.”

What does the simple meal of bread and wine teach us about who we are as God's people? It teaches us that we need Jesus - not individually, but collectively. And it teaches us that it

doesn't take much more than open hearts, prayer, and a few simple ingredients to bring people together to be nourished by Christ.

In [*Bread & Wine*](#) by Shauna Niequist she says of opening her home to others that, "The heart of hospitality is about creating space for someone to feel seen and heard and loved. It's about declaring your table a safe zone, a place of warmth and nourishment." Shauna is not talking about Communion, but of having people over for dinner. However, I feel that the same principle is true of the Eucharist.

The meal of Communion teaches us and others that God's people are about creating a safe zone at the Lord's Table, where hearts can be healed and nourished, and the bonds of our unity as brothers and sisters in Christ more firmly established.

Real Stories – The Greater Miracle by Dania Heffington

I don't know what I really expected to happen. A miracle, I think. Something magnificent – like a huge angel just appearing in the room, brandishing a flaming sword would have been nice.

But that isn't what happened. No angel came to my rescue. In shock, I called 911 and asked for help. Someone had broken into my house and raped me.

As I sat alone in the dark waiting, I reached for the only thing that I could think would bring peace and solace – my Bible. And the scripture it fell open to was this:

Psalm 139: 1-3

*You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*

He may not have sent an angel (or at least one that I saw with my own eyes), but that didn't mean He had forsaken me. God was still there, watching over me.

The next few days were a blur – statements, tests, more statements, line-ups. Finally the man was caught and confessed to not only my rape, but three others in the area. He was put away for life and I never had to see him face to face.

Fine by me, I thought at the time.

For six months, God brought wonderful people around me to help with my healing. In the midst of recovery, I confess I got a little angry with God. Not because of the actual rape, but because He didn't send a fiery angel.

Was I not worth that to him?

Was I just one of invisible thousands who adhered to the Christian faith?

It was during this time that I learned to relate to God in a deeply, intimate way. I learned of the depth of His love and that *He* guards my faith, jealously.

An interesting thing about the Kingdom is that when you walk in the power of grace, you find yourself doing things you would never have dreamed of doing - like forgiving. But, in true form, God continued to grow my concern for the man until I found that I was asking God to please put someone in the man's path that could introduce him to Jesus.

Do you understand how big of a transition this was? From initially thinking that castration may not be such a bad punishment for sex offenders, to praying that my attacker would come to know the Lord...only God can do that.

And here's the blessing.

About 10 years after the rape, I received a call from a court in Ohio asking if I would come share my story as a part of the prosecutor's case against the same man!

Apparently, the man was accused for rapes in that area of the country (which had been committed before he moved south.)

After praying about it and discussing it with my family, I went. I remember walking into the courtroom up to the witness stand and sitting down. That was the first time I had seen the man face to face since he had broken into my house. And what I saw broke my heart.

There before me was a shadow of man – a man who was obviously tormented by the choices he had made and then, the consequences of those choices. He was aged beyond his years. He was physically withdrawn; as if by doing so, he wouldn't be seen by the people around him. And his eyes...his eyes had no hope.

That was over 15 years ago.

I don't know if the Lord has sent a messenger of the Good News to this man, but I continue to pray. I pray that he has the chance to encounter Jesus.

I may not have gotten a miraculous angel, but I did get to experience the miracle of forgiveness in my own life.

I hope he gets to experience that, too.

If you have experienced a violation of the unthinkable kind and find yourself angry at God, unable to heal, and are in need help, you are welcome to contact Dania here: Dheffingto@aol.com.

Dania Heffington currently works with [ABBA](#) (Austin Bridge Builders Alliance) where she has spent the last few years helping build bridges between many different individuals and groups. She enjoys connecting people with others who are like-minded in order to see what the Lord might do as they begin to have conversations. She is the mother of two girls who just finished their first year of college and is enjoying this new season of life.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Healthy, Wealthy & Wise by Marcy Lytle

Sounds like a good trio, doesn't it? It seems our culture in America has the first two aspirations down pat, as we exercise and eat organically to obtain a healthier lifestyle, and we push hard to climb that ladder toward wealth. But being wise? That's a whole other story...

When we're young and start out on life as an adult, we often begin by seeking wealth. As the years move on, hopefully we become savvy on how to stay healthy. And becoming wise takes time, loss, suffering, and study, none of which can occur overnight.

Wealth is something highly attractive, as we watch television and movies, and observe the lifestyle of those who have money. Big cars, big bank accounts, and big houses tend to be at the heart of our desire when we're young. And often, achieving that wealth comes at great cost to our families, our time, and our health.

Health is something that's now become a status symbol, hasn't it? If we at least "appear" healthy, we are considered to be the envy of our peers. We plant our vegetables, only buy organic, drink green, pump and run, and work at making our bodies firm, our hearts strong, and our immune systems function well.

Wisdom is something different altogether, because there is no job, nothing tangible, and not one pill or exercise that grants us this particular noun, among our list of adjectives describing our life. [Job 28](#) says wisdom cannot be found in the land of the living, and it cannot be bought with the finest gold. So what that tells me is that wealth and health don't produce wisdom. And yet, [Proverbs 4](#) instructs us to get wisdom. Obtain it. Let it define us.

The end of Job 28 says, "The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom."

Usually, we quote Proverbs when talking about wisdom. But there's a lot of wisdom to be gained from reading Job. Job was healthy and wealthy, and looked up to by all who knew him. And then he lost it all – in a big way – a way I'm pretty sure most of us reading have never experienced. He said this, after he lost it all, "Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness." All of Job's health and wealth gained him nothing...except loss...when it was gone.

Job's friends even attempted to instruct and teach Job wisdom. ([Job 33:33](#)). But it wasn't until [Job 38](#), when ".the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm" that Job began to gain wisdom.

Wisdom is gained from hearing God's voice in the middle of the worst of our circumstances, because it's then that we truly hear with more than just our physical ears.

God then begins this long monologue of questions he poses to Job, questions about God's power.

Do you give the horse its strength?

Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom?

And one last question...

“Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?”

At the end of the questioning, Job puts his hand over his own mouth and states, “I am unworthy.”

To which, God continues his quiz and statement of facts about those things which he has created, including a long description of the leviathan (symbolic of Satan) and how no sword, iron, or arrow can even make a dent in the fury of this beast. In other words, no attempt of man can stop the raging monster of the sea...or the earth.

You see, when we are in the depths of despair over the loss of our health or wealth, two things for which we strive for our entire lives, we must come to the realization that nothing we do really prolongs our life or keeps our life intact, except God. And we must come to understand that even the worst creature of the sea, the worst enemy of our soul – Satan himself – is under the thumb of God.

After this long speech by God, and after extended listening by Job, this man who has lost his health and his wealth gets it. He gets wisdom, as evidenced in his reply in [Job 42](#):

“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted...My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.”

And in the last part of this book of Job, God rebukes Job’s friends, and then Job prays for his friends. The ones closest to him, the ones who tried to help him but only ended up hurting him, now become Job’s subject of prayer instead of target of revenge.

The final few verses of Job say that the Lord blessed the latter part of Job more than the former part...and Job died; an old man and full of years.

Are we not supposed to seek wealth...and health? Of course, both of those are good. A healthy balance in life of eating and living well, and money gained in order to live and give, are great to have. But there will come a time in our lives when neither of those sustains us. It happens to everyone, because those things were never meant to be our livelihood or our measure of success.

It’s then that we must look at the wonder of the God we serve, the power with which he formed the earth and all living things in it, and the awe at the way he controls even our worst of enemies.

When we come to understand that no weapon formed against us can prosper, because God’s plans and purposes in our lives are for good, and not evil, we get it.

We get wisdom.

Want to just be healthy and wealthy, without wisdom? That sort of life results in a person empty and alone, without hope.

Seek wisdom. Ask for it. It's the only way out of a self-absorbed, futile life of pain and misery.

*For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He holds success in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.*

Proverbs 2:6-8

FRESH THYME - Open the Window by Marcy Lytle

I absolutely love the view out of my two front windows in my kitchen. My kitchen is small, but I have these two huge windows that look out to my front and side yard. And this view starts my day, and sets the tone. I cannot wait to open the blinds, and enjoy another new day.

At night, those blinds are closed, so that people cannot see into my house. But as soon as the light of day shows up, the blinds are open, and a lamp is turned on in the corner. My husband's coffee is grinding, I'm hungry for my bowl of cereal, and so the day begins...

Out my huge front window is my front yard. There is a large Hawthorne bush a few feet in front of the bed up next to the house. Sometimes, a bunny shows up beneath the bush, or I see a squirrel dart up our oak tree to the right. This bush gives me a bit of separation from the busy street out past my front yard. And just to the right of the window is another pretty bush with red berries, whose limbs just peek over the edge of my window. The beautiful greenery, along with freshly mown grass, honestly causes me to sigh at beauty and life, right outside my window.

Out my side window in the kitchen is the view of my neighbor's house, but between us is a garden bed on both sides of our house. Mine just includes a few bushes, some mulch, another large, stately tree, and leaves scattered on the ground. My morning view is not complete without this side blind being open, as well as the front blind. Until this one is open, the light in the kitchen does seem fulfilled.

It's amazing to me how different my kitchen seems before...and after...the blinds are opened.

Before, it's dark, I have no idea what's going on outside, and I can only "hear" the noises but cannot define them. The back side of the mini blinds has a silver tint to it, so the walls look large and uninviting, and the kitchen seems smaller than it really is.

After, the room is lit, it appears to be larger than life, and I can actually see the little birds that I only heard before, and I can count the cars that are driving past, as well as receive the warmth of the light of a brand new day. What was just a wall is now a portal!

This morning, I want to linger and just gaze out those two windows and never move. I want nighttime to never come, because I don't want to close the blinds and sit in the dark, because that means another day is gone.

When's the last time you opened a window that has been closed for hours, days, or even months and years? Perhaps you closed it because of hurt, loss, or misunderstanding...or you didn't like what you saw out your window.

Genesis 8 says this: *The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible. After forty days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth.*

Maybe you've been in a flood that has seemed to last a bit too long, you've rocked back and forth until you're sick to your stomach, and you haven't seen the "sun" and aren't even sure you'd recognize it if you did.

Consider now that the waters just might be receding, the mountains might be visible out your window, and the sun might be shining. But you'll never see it if you don't open the window.

Enjoy the view today as you sit and gaze at the beauty outside your window.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAynC5jmwX4>

FRESH THYME - Public School Confessions by Marcy Lytle

I'll admit it. When my kids were growing up in public school, I judged the other parents who homeschooled. Not all of them...but some of them...because of comments I heard them make. But I soon realized that when I judged them, I was reacting in the same way right back and I had to ask forgiveness. So what made me so angry?

Whether or not a parent chooses to homeschool or send their kids to public school should not be a dividing line, a reason to segregate, or a license to criticize. And it goes both ways. We who send our kids to public school should not be criticized as "not loving our children," and those who choose to homeschool should not be labeled as "odd and arrogant." And yet, I saw both of these attitudes as I raised my children.

My kids were in a youth group where the homeschoolers hung together, and the public school kids gathered in a circle, and each group had their own unique characteristics. The homeschool kids couldn't seem to relate to conversations about current trends or music, and the public school kids were seen as being a bit "tainted" by the world. This made me sad, because visitors who showed up to the group weren't sure where they fit, and often neither group of kids reached out to them.

On a camping trip, my kids brought their music with them, which included secular tunes, and the homeschool kids didn't know the names of the artists or the lyrics to the songs. My kids also brought a friend who wasn't "polished" in his speech and let an "unkind word" slip out, and one parent just pulled his kid from playing with "our" group.

Another time, I overheard a parent talk about how a friend's child was struggling with academics, and he was sure that kid couldn't be in public school, if academics were hard.

Of course, I heard the talk from homeschool parents and kids, but I'm sure they heard the talk from the public school parents as well. None of it was healthy or wise or uplifting.

After a while, I had judged so many parents that hurt my feelings that I didn't want to be around them or their kids. However, I soon realized that my attitude was stinky, haughty, and rude. All things I had seen in "them." This led me to call a few parents, confess, ask forgiveness, and move on. It wasn't easy, but it freed me and allowed me see the "other side" in a different light.

Some of my best friends homeschool their kids. And some of my best friends send their kids to public school. All of these parents love their kids.

What I've learned, now that my kids are out of school, and well into adulthood and married life, is that we all have to raise our kids according to our own conscience, what fits with our own children, and that which brings our own family peace.

If fear is our motivation for keeping our kids home, our kids will sense that and buck. If we feel like we're sending our kids to the wolves when we put them on the bus, our kids will sense that and be afraid.

But if we have prayed and obeyed what it is that God has told us to do with our children then we can rest and not be anxious when our neighbor makes the other choice. Our kids can be taught to love each other, play together, and enjoy each other's company, actually reveling in their differences and learning to be accepting, caring, and including individuals. This makes for healthy, well-rounded, adults who contribute to society while maintaining high standards of morals, all encased in loving Jesus and loving others.

If you homeschool and enjoy it, and it works for you and your kids, then do it with all your might and be at peace, but don't ostracize or huddle in your home, away from those "worldly" kids. If you send your kids to public school, and your kids are thriving and learning and making new friends, then be happy with your decision and continue to pray for them and be involved, but don't look down on your neighbor's kids who are home all day.

But most of all, we cannot be swayed, influenced, feel guilty, or lie awake at night wondering if our kids are missing out, being left behind, achieving enough, or growing up spiritually to be what "we" want them to be. **There's a time when we have to pray, listen, obey, and do our best, knowing that He's got them in his hands, and will guide them, bless them, and keep them at home...or in the classroom down the street.**

I confess. I enjoyed the public school experience for my kids and never thought twice about keeping them home. Yes, there was curriculum I didn't love, teachers who made me mad, and other kids who were mean, but my kids learned to thrive and learn, and they did both well. But I also confess that I have friends who homeschooled and have produced kind, caring, smart kids who love God and love my kids. And my kids love God and love them.

And that, in my opinion, is worth far more than any academic standing that comes written on a certificate at graduation.

FRESH THYME - There's a Snake in my House! By Christina Vetter

This past Sunday, my family and I were having a relaxing afternoon when we were interrupted by an unwanted visitor.

My one-year old Levi was happily entertaining himself next to our screen door while Dan and I were enjoying some *Friends* reruns on television. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Dan shoot up off the couch and run over to where Levi was playing. Then my eyes widened at the sight of the trespasser.

A two-foot black snake was making himself at home in *my* house! He was slithering across my foyer, right within an arm's reach of my naïve, innocent toddler. In a frantic dash, I jumped faster than I've ever thought possible off the couch and grabbed my son into the safety of my arms right before he could reach down to grab the snake. Thankfully (for his sake) the snake quickly slithered his way out of our house the same way he came in. He managed to squeeze through a minuscule space between the screen door and the door jamb before Dan could introduce him to the shovel, and the drama was over.

When we moved into this house out in the country, we spent the first two weeks patching any holes or openings, trying to make it impossible for critters, bugs, or any other unwanted visitors to enter. We had closed the gaps we could see, but this snake had found the most seemingly unimportant, barely visible, least threatening opening and squeezed his way in.

Isn't that so often the case when it comes to our spiritual houses? We work hard to close the big gaps and imperfections of sin in our hearts because we know the risk we take in leaving them open. We are quick to close the holes of pornography, murder, or cheating, but what about those tiny, seemingly insignificant, "blue collar" sins? What about gossip, jealousy, worry, or even selfishness? These may not seem like such a big deal, but these cracks are plenty big enough for the enemy to slither his way into our hearts and wreck havoc in our spiritual houses.

I know what you're thinking...

Those aren't THAT big of a deal. That's just the way women are, it's not like we're hurting anyone or breaking any laws.

But we are. We're hurting ourselves and we're breaking God's law every single time. Whether we murder our neighbor for forgetting to return our garden hose, or we are secretly bitter towards her because she has a nicer car, nicer house, etc, a sin is a sin to God. He doesn't categorize the severity of them because He knows that every single one, whether big or small, is a plenty big enough crack for the enemy to wriggle his way into our hearts.

Don't ignore some of the cracks in your spiritual house because they seem small or insignificant.

- If you feel the Holy Spirit's conviction, listen to it! Any addictions, any weaknesses, or any cracks are the perfect opportunity for the enemy to sneak his way in, no matter how tiny or inconsequential the cracks may seem.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to tell you which holes in your heart need to be filled and for the strength to run away when you're within an arm's reach of the snake.
- Allow Jesus to make your home as solid as a rock by pursuing and obeying his word and listening to his voice.

It's a constant construction project, and we will never be perfect, but thankfully Jesus is. And he always has been in the business of repairing our broken and bruised houses.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

August 2014

TIPS

The Dressing – Those Bare Arms

August is here, and we've got one more month to wear those sleeveless dresses and bare our arms. It doesn't matter if our arms are toned or jiggy, they're worth a little attention at the wrist, on the extension of the hand, or anywhere up to the elbow! Here are a few, affordable, ways to dress up your bare arms that have now seen a little sun and shine with a golden glow.

The Watch. This Around the World leather [watch from Urban](#) is so cute and adds a look of worldwide travel to your arm! It's a neutral color and you're sure to get questions and compliments as you sport this watch with your favorite chambray shirt and skirt, out on the town.

The Braid. This multicolored [bracelet from World Market](#) is wide, colorful, and will be something you can keep wearing in into the fall season. With the combo of braided thread and gold weaved throughout, this bracelet will feel good and look good, as you dress up your end of summer wear.

The Charm. Not into chunky, bold bracelets? This [charm bracelet from Kohls](#) carries with it a dangle that reads "Wisdom," something we all need! It's dainty, "charming," and a cute gift for a friend, or a little something for yourself, to dress up your arm!

The Pearl. I love a pretty bracelet, and this [pearl one from Modcloth](#) can be worn to the dressiest of restaurants, or to the beach with a tshirt and shorts. Sometimes all you need is one piece of jewelry to dress up a plain outfit. Add some pearl stud earrings, and you are ready to go from daytime to nighttime, with just a switch of an accessory.

The Cuff. This beautiful sterling [silver cuff from the Noonday](#) Collection will set you back a few dollars, but it's a classic look you'll wear for years, and your money will be well spent! Silver earrings on your ears, and silver swirls on your arm look great with just about any outfit you might dream up to wear...anywhere!

The Hinge. A peacock on your arm just might be the accessory to put your outfit over the top! Pair this hinged peacock [bracelet from Pier One](#) with a little black dress or your maxi on the beach, and you just might start strutting your stuff! What a cute, affordable, piece to own!

The Bangle. This "heart of gold" [bangle by Kate Spade](#) can be found at Nordstrom and it speaks class, and simplicity. It can be worn alone, or in a grouping of other bangles on your arm. It's slim and looks great with that summer suit you wear to work, or your casual tee with white jeans you wear on the weekend.

Aren't these bracelets so pretty? Dress up your wrist at the end of the summer before the sleeves unroll, the cardigans emerge, and the jackets get dusted off for the cool breezes ahead. Consider the bracelet (or watch) as one of your wardrobe staples this month!

Sugar...No Cream Please – by Marcy Lytle

I am not a fan of coffee. However, my husband owns a gold card at Starbucks and adores his morning latte'. And although I hardly even know how to use his fancy coffeemaker, I do know that every time he orders a regular coffee, or makes one at home, he only wants sugar – no cream. Others drink their coffee black, with no additions. And some of my friends pour it all in – the sugar, the cream, the spices – and more!

For some odd reason, I woke up thinking of that phrase,

“Sugar, no cream...please.”

And I thought of how we live in a culture to where we all want our treats, and we want them made specifically how we order them, and we want them now, in a cup with a sleeve, so that we can get on the road again to our destination, while sipping and driving, feeling completely satisfied and happy with the \$5-plus bucks we've spent. And we do this day after day.

For me, it's not coffee. It's popcorn with Goobers, at the movies. If I don't have both, I don't feel that I've truly lived, and I certainly cannot enjoy the movie – no matter how much drama is set before me on the big screen! Maybe for you, it's a pedicure that you want performed perfectly, every week.

I don't think there's anything inherently bad in ordering, “Sugar, no cream, please.” But there are a few things that living in a world where we can demand service, voice our own personal creations, order that which satisfies our cravings, and get it all done quickly so that we can move on, just might affect our spiritual lives, as well.

Check out these tidbits for thought:

1. *God isn't a barista*, and although we might order our life with a bit of sugar and no cream, he knows that sometimes we need a day with salt and sour.
2. *God doesn't satisfy all of our cravings*, only those that bring glory to Him and result in our image being conformed into that of his Son.
3. *God isn't in the business of fast food*. His food comes in the form of digesting daily the Word that takes time to chew, and sometimes a lifetime to digest.
4. *God doesn't offer gold cards*, depending on how much we pray and order from his window. His service is free for the asking, and the price we must pay is surrender of our will.
5. *God doesn't offer caffeine boosts*, extra soy, vanilla, and extra whip on the top. His living water quenches our thirst and satisfies every receptor in our heart, when we stop to gulp it down.
6. *God doesn't have a limited menu*, isn't only open certain hours, and a waiting line a mile long. His menu is limitless, he never sleeps, and his lap always has a spot for you.
7. *God doesn't require a vocabulary* of terms that when strung together sound like a new language altogether (grande vanilla soy latte no whip extra hot) in order to be served. He only requires faith.

Next time we order up our coffees, our movie snacks, our hand and feet treatments, and anything else we demand to have it our way and *now*...

Let's stop and make sure we're not living the same fast-paced, all-about-me, sugar-topped life when it comes to walking with Him.

"Sugar, no cream, *if it pleases you*..." might be our revised phrase of choice when we sit down to a little time with the One who truly satisfies every longing we have...

Selah's Style – Little Comforts

Our youngest writer, Selah Irwin, broke her arm and was unable to write her column and show us her fashion style this month! So...our webmaster's little girl Ayla (Selah's cousin) is our model for the August issue, and she's 16 months old...sporting her clothes that her mom says are affordable, easy to pack (for those last minute trips before school starts), and so very cute!

Rompers

One piece rompers are the best for toddlers! There's no fussing with shirts riding up and shorts falling down. They're also easier for changing diapers, rather than completely pulling off shorts. Since we're nearing the end of the summer, you might find these on clearance at [Target](#) and be able to use them for another month or so...before the fall season and cooler temps arrives!

Shoes

Baby shoes need to be comfortable and soft, yet sturdy for young walkers! [Stride Rite](#) is a brand that's been around...forever! Ayla steps out in style with her shoes that feel good...and look good, too! (Ayla loves shoes and enjoys showing them to friends)

PJ's

Did you know [Old Navy](#) has cute pajama sets for toddlers? There are no scratchy tags on these pj's and they fit so nice and snug, with a longer shirt and cuffed bottoms, yet are so comfy! [Children's Place](#) also has cute sets, and this store offers all sorts of discounts! These pj's are super affordable so that you can buy several!

Denim Skorts

This little skirt has built-in shorts, and it's made of jersey, but looks like jeans! It goes with everything! In this photo from last month, Ayla and her brother Gideon are wearing coordinating outfits from [Old Navy](#), a place where you can often find matching pieces for siblings! Check them out!

Kids clothes are still relatively inexpensive, especially if you look for deals, use your coupons or extra savings. And since their clothes are so small, they roll up nicely and fit so neatly in backpacks, tote bags, or small suitcases. Look at this cute, personalized ladybug suitcase you can order online from [Personalization Mall!](#)

Join us in praying for Selah's full recovery...and look for her to be back with us in the September issue!

The Fearless Kitchen - Breakfast of Busy Champions – by Christina Vetter

As hard as it is to believe, summer is wrapping up this month making way for school to roll in. Back to busyness. Back to chaotic. Back to the family schedule. We no longer have time to cook a major meal every morning. I don't know about your family, but in my house, a typical breakfast this time of year will resemble less likelihood to IHOP platters and more to a "grab and go" menu.

After many, many, many, (did I say many?) empty boxes of cereal, I have decided to boycott the Fruit Loops for a while. Instead I've been coming up with all sorts of breakfast items that can be eaten on the way to school, work, or anywhere else your day takes you. The secret is mass production. Sunday evenings I am usually found in the kitchen up to my elbows in flour, eggs, whatever I come up with to make for the week's breakfasts, and my trusty gallon size Zip-locks. I've made dozens of breakfast tacos, massive batches of cinnamon rolls, and a never ending sea of muffins. While there are plenty of items that can be made ahead of time, the easiest have definitely been baked goods. They hold their freshness longer than some of the other items. Scones and muffins are my "bread and butter" when it comes to breakfast preparation.

This month I'm happy to share my most successful baked goods with you. My typical go-to items are Chocolate Chip Muffins, Cranberry White Chocolate Chip Scones, Cranberry Orange Muffins, and Oatmeal Spice Scones. I hope these recipes can alleviate some of your family's stress of the morning hustle and bustle. They're a favorite around the Vetter house and I hope you enjoy them as well. As always make sure to leave any questions, comments, or tidbits in the "Comments" section below!

Chocolate Chip Muffins
Makes 6-8 jumbo muffins

Difficulty: 

I came up with this recipe by accident truthfully. I only had half of the AP flour that I needed, so I tried substituting the rest of the flour with bread flour. Who knew!? The results were super yummy! The texture isn't crumbly or airy. Instead it's more of a dense meal on the go. These are staples in the Vetter house.

Ingredients:

1 C AP flour
1 C bread flour
¾ C sugar
1 Tbsp baking powder
½ tsp salt
¾ C chocolate chips
1 C milk
2 eggs
1 tsp vanilla

2/3 C vegetable oil

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 400 F
- Mix dry ingredients, including chocolate chips, together in a large bowl
- In a separate medium bowl, combine wet ingredients together.
- Mix wet ingredients into dry ingredients and stir until combined.
- Bake 25-30 minutes (for jumbo size muffins) or until toothpick comes out clean.

Cranberry Orange Muffins

Makes 6-8 jumbo muffins

Difficulty: 

I love these muffins. The orange and cranberry flavors complement each other very well, and of course anything with almond extract is high on my list. Yum!

Ingredients:

- 1 C AP flour
- 1 C bread flour
- 1 C sugar
- 1 Tbsp baking powder
- 1 Tbsp orange zest
- ½ tsp salt
- ¾ C milk
- ¼ C orange juice
- 1 C dried cranberries
- 1 tsp almond extract

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 400F
- In a large bowl, mix dry ingredients, including cranberries, together until combined.
- In a separate medium bowl, mix wet ingredients together.
- Combine wet and dry ingredients together until fully combined.
- Bake for 25-30 minutes for jumbo muffins or until toothpick comes out clean.

Cranberry White Chocolate Chip Scones

Makes 8 scones

Difficulty: 

For a glaze, quickly whisk ¼ C powdered sugar with 1Tbsp of milk, adding more or less milk for desired thickness.

Ingredients:

2 C flour
½ C sugar
1 Tbsp baking powder
¼ tsp salt
1 Tbsp butter
1 Tbsp lemon juice
¼ c milk
1 egg
¼ C dried cranberries
¼ C white chocolate chips

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 425 degrees
- Mix all dry ingredients in large bowl.
- Cut in butter until it resembles a crumbly cornmeal (this can be done in a food processor, with a pastry blender, or by hand)
- In a separate bowl, mix all wet ingredients. Add to flour mixture.
- Add cranberries and chocolate and mix just until dough comes together.
- Flatten out dough on a flat surface into a ¾” thick circle. (Think hockey puck shaped)
- Cut dough in half, quarters, then eighths, ending with 8 evenly sized triangles.
- Bake on parchment paper lined cookie sheet for about 12 minutes or until very slightly golden brown on the bottoms.
- Allow to cool completely before glazing if desired.

Oatmeal Spice Scones
Makes 8 scones

Difficulty: 

These scones taste great and smell fantastic while baking! They go great with some strong coffee first thing in the morning. For a glaze, mix ¼ C powdered sugar with 1 tsp milk and drizzle over when cooled.

Ingredients:

1 ¾ C flour
¾ C instant oats
½ C brown sugar
½ tsp salt
2 tsp baking powder
1 tsp cinnamon
¼ tsp nutmeg
¼ tsp ground cloves

¼ tsp allspice
1 stick (8Tbsp) cold butter
1 tsp vanilla
½ C milk

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 350 F
- In a large bowl, mix dry ingredients together.
- Cut in chunks of butter until dough mixture resembles coarse cornmeal.
- Add milk and vanilla and mix until combined.
- Flatten dough into a circle, about 1 inch thick
- Cut into 8 triangles and bake on a parchment paper lined tray for 20 minutes.
- Allow to cool completely before glazing.

Tried and True – 11 Homework Helps

School is starting up in a few weeks, and so is the routine of early to bed, up at the crack of dawn, off to school, and the dreaded hours of homework in the evening...when our kids just want to be outside enjoying the nice weather before winter settles in. Instead of yelling at our kids, threatening punishment, and spouting off lectures we heard as a kid, here are a few tips on getting your kids organized and getting their homework finished on time...with family time to spare.

1. **Provide healthy snacks** within reach, in cute containers, for kids when they're working. Consider bento boxes with nuts, fruit, hummus, or other fun things to eat, along with a fun drink. Get the kids to make these on the weekend full of snacks suited to their own tastes, so that everything's ready for the week ahead.
2. **Set up a homework station.** It might be a different spot for each kid. Perhaps one will enjoy a chair by a window, another kid might like a big blanket on the floor, etc. Keep the homework station off the bed.
3. The first week of school, sit down with each child and find out each teacher's homework policies, and together **create a homework board** at home. Ask kids to fill it out each day upon arrival at home, so that they can plan how much time they'll need for the evening. Help them with this.
4. Reading big books can be daunting, so **use a formula.** See how many pages are in the book, i.e. 400. Next, ask when the book has to be completed, say in three weeks. Finally, divide the number of days available to read into the total number of pages. For example, if during that three week period your child has 12 nights they are available to read, divide that into 400. This means he/she has to read approximately 33 pages each day, so that they aren't stuck reading the majority of the story the night before a test.
5. Teach your kids before school starts how to **keep a log of assignments.** Let them purchase a notebook, and show them how to enter their assignments: Math – 40 problems – due tomorrow. English – 20 vocabulary words – due Thursday.... Have them mark off assignments as they are completed, and praise them for a job well done!
6. **Meet your kids' teachers.** If homework becomes an issue because it's absurdly long, have a talk with the teacher. If homework can't be done because your kids are too involved in lessons, games, and other activities, consider allowing your child only one activity during the school year instead of three.
7. Rigid rules make for snapped spirits. Here's how it plays out. If your child proves that he can watch a 30 min show before doing homework and still get his lessons completed, **don't be so rigid with your "homework first" rule.** Let your kids prove to you their responsibility, and let out the reins little by little, as they mature. You can always pull them back in, if they wander off too far from the plan!
8. **Be available for help, but wise to manipulation.** Your child will have questions, and will want your help. And sometimes your kids try to manipulate you into doing "it all" for them. That's not wise. However, if your son is behind on coloring a map and you can pick up a colored pencil and shade in Wisconsin in yellow – by all means – do it! But if your child is asked to create and draw his own version of the Mona Lisa, you can encourage him, but don't do it for him!

9. **Insist on a good night's sleep.** If you allow your children to stay up too late, when they have to get up early for school, they're going to be tired when they come home...and grumpy. And neither of those makes for a pleasant homework experience. Set up a routine and a bedtime appropriate for each child's age, and stick to it.
10. **Keep a full box of homework tools,** beginning with day one. Include pencils, pens, markers, tape, rulers, etc. so that you aren't running to the store for this and that, wasting precious family time with your kids. And stock up on poster boards. This can be a central station for all, or each kid can decorate and make their own, with tools needed for their specific grade.
11. **A bookshelf is a good investment.** Georganne (who home schools five girls) has a bookcase in the area where they do school, and all the girls' schoolbooks belong there. They each have a notebook to hold their assignments and other work. Each notebook is a different color, so that it is easier to pick out of a pile of books. We take time every few weeks to straighten up the bookshelf and make sure all the papers, projects, folders, notebooks and books are where they are supposed to be. Too many of them like to go missing, which always delays our school plans.

The more ownership, creativity, and input you get from your kids before school starts in setting up the schedule, the homework station, the box of goodies and tools, the more your children will be likely to dread homework a little bit less. Help them develop habits when they're young, so that by the time your kids hit high school, they no longer have to follow 11 steps – because they've got it down.

And if one night is chaotic, everyone cries, the dog chews up the project, and your daughter forgets about an assignment that she suddenly remembers at bedtime, don't panic. Hopefully, the good days will outweigh the bad ones, and you can all live and learn together...and laugh. After all, a good belly laugh is as good as a dose of medicine, and everyone feels better the next day.

Reviews – Current Sightings

This column is now movie reviews only, and it will be updated as new movies come out each week. That means we are inviting you to visit this column weekly to see what movies have been seen and reviewed. We will try to give a short synopsis, as well as our own opinion, along with a nod or a no, regarding suggestive content.

Movies are great fun to watch, but it pays to be informed before we spend two hours ourselves, or send our kids, to be entertained.

Some will be movies that are currently in the theater, and other will be ones you might want to see in your home, because they're out on DVD or Netflix.

We hope you enjoy!

In the Theaters...

At Home....

HOME

Practical Parenting - 8 Steps to a Clean Room – by Georganne Schuch

Most parents have had more than a few spirited conversations with their children about cleaning their rooms. If you haven't had such a debate, odds are you have a maid. Such conversations have been known to make me twitch and mutter to myself. But one day I came to the realization that I don't have to get mad about them not cleaning their room. I can help make it easier to clean their room by lightening the load, so to speak.

See, my basic philosophy about stuff is that you are responsible for tending to what you own.

Don't like to mow the lawn? Have a smaller yard.

If your house feels like it is closing in on you, don't browse the real estate listings for bigger homes (with bigger mortgages); de-clutter what you have.

Can't get all your clothes in your walk-in closet? Donate the clothes from previous decades to a charity.

If you own less, you have less to tend. See how much sense that makes?

In order to teach this lifelong lesson early to my children, I laid out a plan that not only de-clutters their possessions, but also helps them prioritize their most important possessions. Here is our step-by-step room-cleaning plan:

1. Pick up all the clothes off the floor and on the bed, clean and dirty, you want to keep and put it in the laundry basket or drawer where it belongs. *Time to complete: 5 minutes.*
2. Gather all the shoes from various corners of the room, find their mates, and return to the shoe rack or basket, whatever your mode of confinement may be. *Time to complete: 5 minutes (may vary in order to find lost mates).*
3. Pick up only the toys you are most obsessed with and find a real home for them: toy box, drawer, or bed. There should be no more in this category than what you can carry at one time. *Time to complete: 2 minutes to encourage only the most valued toys are selected.*

By this time, you should be able to see that there is actually a floor under the mess. This is great progress.

4. Now, gather and put away less desirable toys, but ones which still carry some intrinsic value. These must also have a home, such as a toy box or drawer. The dresser, desk, bed, ceiling fan, or toy kitchen's oven is not a home. *Time to complete: 5-10 minutes.* While this may take longer because it is a broader category, it should not be drawn out too long or playing with the toys will quickly ensue, which defeats the purpose of cleaning the room in the first place.
5. Send one child under the bed(s) to retrieve all the "things" that have been shoved under there. "Things" is the only word to describe what may be hiding. You never know what you may find. Treasure will most certainly not make the list, though. *Time to complete: 5-10 minutes, depending on how many beds.* This is a dangerous mission and one best

left to smaller children who stand little danger of getting stuck under the bed. Alternatively, a rake is helpful.

6. Sort through all the “things” unearthed from under the bed and deal with appropriately. *Time to complete: 2 minutes as this is usually trash and missing doll or Lego paraphernalia.*
7. Set a large trash can in the middle of the room and have a reverse ticker-tape party. Pick **up** the torn paper, wrappers, bags, and other assorted trash and throw it all away. *Time to complete: 2 minutes, no sense in getting nostalgic over the torn corner of a colored food menu.*

At this stage, the room should resemble some semblance of human housing and not a stall in a barn.

8. Finally, there are inevitably toys and miscellaneous items that still have no home or reasonable purpose. Bag these to donate. The bag probably won't be full every time, so keep it somewhere out of sight (out of mind) and add to it every few weeks. When it's full, discretely drop it at a nearby second-hand store. *Time to complete: 2 minutes, work quickly before reality sets in.*

In roughly 30 minutes, a child can restore a bedroom from bedlam to order, or thereabout. Of course, you have to factor in another 30 minute for crying protests and frantic begging, so realistically it will take about an hour. However, if you faithfully work the system, especially the last step of culling extraneous items, you may find less protesting and faster results as she realizes the freedom afforded to cleaning up fewer possessions, at least until the next trip by the toy aisle at the store.

Train Them - Those Challenging Questions – by April Karli

It was close to noon on a hot July day. Five kids between the ages of six and twelve were talking, singing, and otherwise making noise in my car. Only two of them belonged to me. The other three I've known several years. They aren't family - technically - but close. Our families have been friends since they moved to Austin. We met several years ago in a home fellowship where it was easy to rapidly form deep, close friendships over dinners, late night conversations, and card games.

Our car idled at an intersection. We were on the way to a swimming pool complete with slides, a diving board, and other fun features. In the median sat a middle-aged man in a wheelchair. He ate something out of a clear plastic container, a cardboard sign folded on the ground next to his chair as he chatted with another homeless gentleman who had walked over carrying a large duffle bag.

“How does someone become homeless?” The question came from the back of the car asked by a soft-hearted nine-year-old boy with love for super-heroes and animals.

I wasn't entirely sure how to answer him. It's a complicated topic which can be scary for some kids. I wanted to respect that kids mature at different rates in their ability to handle difficult subjects like homelessness. However, this wasn't simply a chance to explain what causes homelessness. **Before me was an opportunity to teach the kids about suffering and compassion, and I didn't want to let that pass by.**

I explained that there are lots of reasons people become homeless. We discussed mental illness, job loss, the economy, and the status of veterans returning from war as possibilities. I avoided politics as much as possible only answering questions truthfully. (For example: No, soldiers are not given a “huge sack of money” when they come home from a war.) We briefly discussed compassionate ways to respond to and help the homeless. The kids were all interested in the subject, and it produced a thoughtful conversation.

When kids ask questions it can be easy to offer quick, black and white answers or to avoid answering because we ourselves are unsure of the answer or want to avoid controversial topics. **Anytime a child asks a question of eternal significance, it's a chance to teach them what we already know or to model how to think through a topic.** My experience with my own kids, as well as with kids in my house church and elsewhere, has taught me to approach questions with care and consideration.

I understand that Christians disagree on non-essential issues, and I want to respect that parents might tell their kids something at home different from what I believe. **It forces me into a position of humility, not assuming that my answer is right or that I know better than what another person believes or is teaching their children.**

Seeing the question through the child's eyes also offers me a completely different perspective. Telling a nine-year-old what causes homelessness led me to think about the subject in a way I never had before. I write Sunday School curriculum for preschoolers as a freelancer. It can be challenging to communicate biblical truths in a way a four-year-old can grasp without turning the Bible into cliches or nursery rhymes. **Kids don't want cliches in response to their spiritual doubts and questions any more than adults do.** My job is to distill truth in a way the kids can grasp. It's difficult at times, and the most fun job I've ever had!

God can use the questions kids ask us to sharpen and convict us. I admit that I don't notice homeless people on the side of the road all that often. I've stopped seeing them. But, my young friend saw them. He noticed. And his noticing revealed to me something of how our Heavenly Father's sees that homeless man, too. God both sees and cares deeply for that man.

We adults can dismiss the theological and spiritual questions kids ask or choose to be intimidated by them because we believe we need special training to answer them. Or we can join the children around us exploring the questions, teaching kids what we've already learned and know, and grow together in our knowledge of God.

For me, I choose to join the kids on their playground of questions!

I Don't Do Teenagers – The Need for Comfort – by Lynn Cherry

“Your boy is in his room. He wants you.”

“Why? What happened?”

“She broke up with him.”

“Oh. No.”

My son's first real girlfriend told him she looked down on him intellectually because of his faith. That's a stinger. A break up and persecution in one smart slap. My husband delivered the news while I was on my way home from running errands. I dropped grocery bags in the kitchen and knocked on my son's door. I could hear him crying.

I wrapped my arms around him and prayed silent prayers.

“God of all comfort, we need you.”

We sat on his bed until he could get words out.

“I just wanted you, Mom. I knew you'd help me feel better.”

The Living as Conqueror's model defines **comfort** as having someone express genuine care and concern when I am hurting, acknowledging what I am feeling with words or appropriate touch.

Moms are a great source of comfort for children - rubbing their backs when they are sick, kissing boo-boos and singing lullabies. However, I don't find near as many opportunities to offer comfort to my teenagers. It feels good to be needed and yet I can tell something in me is shifting when it comes to meeting the need for comfort in my teens.

In a previous, middle school break-up scenario, my son's “girlfriend” texted and said her mom told her she was too young to have a boyfriend. He was sad. He texted the news to my husband and I, both.

David replied so sweetly, “Ah man, I'm sorry bud. I know how that feels.”

Meanwhile, I spouted, “Her mom is right, and I agree. You are too young to have a girlfriend.”

At least one of his parents offered some comfort.

I was Super-Soothing-Momma when the boys were little. Even my friends' kids knew they could count on Ms. Lynn for a Band-Aid, an ice pack, and pat on the shoulder. I am less compassionate these days.

And I think I've discovered a few reasons for the change:

- **Teenagers need to be equipped to care for themselves.** It won't be long before they are on their own. We won't be around to take care of them. And seriously, they know where the band-aids are. They can fill a bag of ice and take an Advil.
- **Teenagers need to take more personal responsibility.** They should know after spending their entire lives in Texas - sunscreen must be reapplied. They should know to wear shoes when they walk on hot pavement. They should certainly know by now if they eat an entire bag of Flaming Hot Cheetos they are going to get a bellyache.
- **Teenagers look a lot like grownups.** There's a part of me that wants to see them toughen them up a bit. The years fly by and soon they will need to step up to be the protector and comforter in their own home.
- **Teenagers need less physical comfort and more emotional comfort.** It's so easy to slap a Band-Aid on a scrape. But the wounds my boys experience now are deeper. Physical comfort is easy. But these heartbreaks require so much more of me. In order to provide emotional comfort, I need to be more present and more whole so I can truly offer what they need.

It helps to remember all Jesus has done for me. He healed me. He restored my soul. He comforts me.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

What has equipped you to offer emotional comfort to your teenagers?

Simple Solutions - The 10 Basics by Georganne Schuch

Making decisions is hard work. I can be decisive about a few things, like my dislike for celery or my love for coffee. However, as life gets complicated with kids and school and work and a thousand other things breathing down my neck, I tend to get less decisive. I over-analyze and second guess and ask for others' opinions and then sometimes still end up flipping a coin. Let's face it. God doesn't give us many neon signs. I would really love a few blinking arrows pointing to the right decision.

While many life-changing decisions need a lot of prayer and discernment, everyday decisions are the ones which really seem to overwhelm me. What I've come to realize is that many of these choices are not unique. I mean I have to choose *everyday* what I'm going to eat, how I'm going to dress, and how I'm going to spend my money. Therefore, I created a basic list of guiding principles. They are not inviolable like God's commandments, of course, but they have simplified my everyday life somewhat.

1. **I shall eat as little junk food as possible.** By keeping this command, I can pass whole aisles in the grocery store and save hundreds of dollars a month in unhealthy snacks, drinks, and drive-thru meals. I occasionally have to bend this command to feed my hungry hoard when we have a longer-than-usual day away from home, but knowing this is our usual rule keeps us all steady when we drive by the golden arches.
2. **I shall strive to spend my money first on what we need.** To honor this command, I don't make large purchases without consulting with my husband. It's our own version of checks and balances to provide for what we need and plan carefully for what we want.
3. **I shall honor my husband and children before the demands of the general populace.** When a member of my immediate family needs my attention or help, they have to be my priority, regardless of how much I want to have a coffee date with a friend or join a ladies Bible study. Friends are great, but family is forever.
4. **I shall treat the people around me with courtesy, even when I am frustrated.** Boy, this one is a hard one to keep sometimes, but regardless of how badly the guy at the store bagged my groceries, I can still show a little common courtesy.
5. **I shall dress with modesty and decorum.** I have a certain style that is comfortable. I don't want to look older than I am; neither do I want to look like I'm trying to relive my youth. It definitely restricts my clothing choices.
6. **I shall not dwell on what anyone else has or what they think.** I know that many of my choices are often influenced by what I see someone else doing or saying. Such decisions are invariably wrong.
7. **I shall not fudge, manipulate, or otherwise deceive.** Everyone finds themselves in awkward positions from time to time, and it's always tempting to talk your way out of it or shed the best light on it. When that happens to me, which seems like every other day, I lay out the pertinent facts and ask for forgiveness, mercy or grace, as the situation calls for it. More often than not, this action breeds trust because people know I will tell them when I'm wrong.
8. **I shall not deny my faith or beliefs.** Another hard one when any form of disagreement is tantamount to extremism and intolerance. I am neither extreme nor intolerant, but I

figure if someone wants to discuss something on which I have an opinion then it's hardly polite to not chip in my two cents. What I usually find is that few people really want a discussion. They just want to have their say and shout down anyone who disagrees.

9. **I shall think before I speak.** The heat of the moment slips away, and I regret fewer words. Alas, I often fail this one, as well.
10. **I shall seek to honor God in all that I do, say, see, and hear.** I don't want to act holier-than-thou, but if I'm going to be a Christian, I need to look and act different than the norm. I also am keenly aware that what I focus on, such as music or movies, shapes my attitude and mood. In that case, there is precious little that deserves my attention.

My list is not meant to be legalistic, but rather lines up standards that let me be more decisive in a fast-moving world. Knowing my basics simplifies my life.

A Night to Remember – The Father’s Love – by Marcy Lytle

Your kids need to know that they are connected to the Father, no matter how far they stray, or how alone they feel. His mercy always reaches out and brings us back to his heart because He loves us so very much. This devotional will demonstrate that connection of the Father to his children.

Preparation: You will need a large ball of yarn, a small toy figure, a dollar bill, an old ugly scrap of fabric, a little pig (from a barnyard set), a small nightlight bulb, another toy figure, a very nice scrap of fabric (velvet or nice color), a gold ring, and a Hershey’s kiss (with extra candy for everyone involved).

Start with the Hershey’s kiss and proceed backwards in the list above. Tie the candy to the yarn (you may have to put it in a baggie), then roll him it up in the yarn until it is no longer seen. Then tie the nice scrap of material into the yarn and roll it up in some more yarn. Continue tying and rolling each item, making sure you roll each item up in lots of yarn, until you have a huge ball of yarn with all the items rolled up inside. (The first item you unwind will be the first little toy person). As the story unfolds, you will unravel the yarn, revealing each item, thus showing how the prodigal son was connected to his father all the time and his father’s love and mercy was always extended to his son.

As you read the following story, begin to unwind the yarn and take out the items:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger son was always complaining to his father and asking for things he didn’t have (*unroll to reveal the first figure*). He said to his father,

“Father, give me my share of all your wealth. I want what is mine, right now.”

So his father divided up his wealth and gave the younger son what he asked for (*unroll to reveal the money*) Next, the younger son took his money and set off to a distant country where he spent all his wealth in wild living.

After he spent all he had, there was a severe famine in the land (*explain what a famine is*) and he began to be in need (*unroll the scrappy fabric and put it on the figure, to show his tattered clothing*). So he went out and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to the fields to feed pigs (*unroll to reveal the pig*). The son even wanted to fill his stomach with the food he was giving the pigs because he was so hungry, but no one gave him anything.

Finally, the young man came to his senses and thought to himself (*unroll to reveal the light bulb*),

“Even the men my father hires have extra food to eat, and here I am starving to death. I will go back home to my father and tell him I have sinned against heaven and against him. I will tell him I am not worthy to be his son, but I will be a worker for him.”

He then got up and went home to his father.

While the young man was still a long ways off, his father saw him (*unroll the second figure*) and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him (*the two figures hug*). The son said to his father,

“I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

But the father said to his servants,

“Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him” (*unroll nice piece of fabric and wrap around the son*). The servants quickly obeyed and brought out a beautiful robe made of the finest material. They took away his tattered clothes and threw them away, and replaced them with the beautiful robe. The father said,

“Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet” (*unroll the ring*)

The servants quickly obeyed again and found a ring made of gold with a bright jewel that shined, and placed it on the finger of the young son. “Bring a calf and kill it, and let’s have a feast and celebrate,” the father stated.

All the servants rolled out the tables full of fine food and drink, which was a feast fit for a king (*unroll the Hershey’s kiss and give one to each person to eat, while you read the rest of the story*).

The father was so happy, he said,

“This son of mine was dead and is alive again! He was lost and now he is found!”

Everyone began to celebrate and eat together, joyfully. The young son had strayed from his father’s house, but his father never quit loving him and waiting for him to return (*show how the son was “connected” to the father’s love at all times, symbolized by the yarn, and eventually found his way back home*).

This story is found in the Bible in [Luke 15](#). *Discuss the vast greatness of the father’s love and encourage your children to ask questions and comment.*

Give thanks for the Father’s love and pray for those you know who have wandered away from God, or those who have never known the love of a heavenly Father, and then reassure your own children of the Great LOVE of Father God.

The Family Practice – Across the Table – by Rachel Toalson

Even before we had children, mealtime was sacred time for my husband and me. Most evenings we'd walk in from work, chat about our days while cooking dinner and sit down to dream and plan over a hot meal.

Then children arrived.

These were days when I could barely sit at the table for more than a second, due to all the needs and wants and demands of my children. My husband and I cooked dinner and set the table and fixed the plates and poured the milk and popped right back out of our seats, as soon as someone (inevitably) accidentally spilled that milk and we realized we'd forgotten the napkins. Most nights it was easier for me to stand up and move back and forth like a mama waitress than it was to sit down and get up and sit down, and get back up again, on repeat, until the clock said dinner was over. When twins slipped into our world, the oldest of five had just turned 5, and there were too, too, too many needs.

In the middle of a dinner, when my chicken noodle soup sat cooling on a table with three boys already eating, and their daddy sat looking at me apologetically because two infants were crying hysterically for their food, I realized we'd been doing this all wrong.

I realized we had forgotten what family togetherness at mealtime meant.

It didn't mean one person missing, tending to all the needs and never having a chance to sit down at the table with her family. It didn't mean six people eating without the missing one just because they didn't want to eat their dinner cold, too. It didn't mean starting a single bite before the WHOLE family was seated and ready.

We had never been a family that sat in front of a television or inhabited our own worlds or ate in our separate spaces, but needs kept us separated all the same.

Here we were:

- Two parents scrambling to pour everyone's milk, when the 5-year-old had the physical capability of doing it himself.
- Two parents setting a table when a 3-year-old could find silverware and plates and count it into places.
- Two parents getting up for that missing napkin, when even the 20-month-old knew where the napkins lived – in the pantry.

Something had to be done to protect mealtime.

We started assigning the table-setting, and we taught them to pour their own milk, and we reminded them again and again that part of being a family is working together as a team to get all the needs met. We needed all of us working together to make sure that sit-down dinner happened.

And then we placed our boundaries around the dinnertime hour, since we knew that studies have found that children who eat with their parents are at a lower risk for developing weight problems, poor eating habits and alcohol and other substance

dependencies, have lower rates of teen pregnancy and depression, and have higher grade point averages and self-esteem.

It's not unusual in our fast-paced world for families to skip their meal times together, but my family has seen the beauty of sharing a table, all that laughter roaring from the stories of our days, all the words we speak to lift a sad heart toward joy, all the games we play to forge our love-bond. And these moments are irreplaceable; a beautiful glimpse into the life to come.

We break bread across a table, and we become united and connected in ways we could never have imagined, in ways that are unexpected and unbreakable and forever.

So this month, let's try these practices:

1. **Try to eat at least one meal a day together.** Some days this might look like dinner at 4:30 p.m. or 8:30 p.m. or a long breakfast at 6 a.m. It doesn't matter what meal. It just needs to be together.

2. **Play some dinner games.** If your kids are at all like mine, they will have trouble staying at the table. Some nights are better than others, but there are many nights when they take a bite and then race to flip over a couch and then come back to take another bite and then race to see what song just came on Pandora. Sometimes they fight, since a table is a small, crowded place for a family of seven. On those days, we play dinner games. For great game ideas, check out [games here](#).

3. **Divide the chores so everyone can sit down at the same time.** Young children have many needs, but we can include them in age-appropriate tasks. It's good for them to learn that just like their soccer team depends on them to kick a ball and run their hardest and play their best, their family team depends on them to count out forks and plates and arrange the napkins at every place and pour drinks for younger siblings. It's a good practice in serving, and they learn that they are needed, not just wanted.

Making time to eat together is not easy, but there may be no greater gift we give to our children, as some of our best memories are made across the table from one another.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - A Simple Equation – by Marcy Lytle

“The Bible doesn’t tell me what to do about my job.”

“I can’t find any direction in the Bible about what college to attend.”

“Why doesn’t God show me the choice I need to make? The Bible is so general.”

When we can’t find specific answers in God’s word, we get discouraged and stop reading, looking for signs in the sky and confirmation elsewhere.

There are so many decisions to make in life, usually starting for us with what college to attend. Next, it’s who to marry, what job to take, where to live, how many children to have, should we attend this church or that church, and so on it goes. And the majority of our prayer life is spent begging God to show us these things, part the waters, and tell us when to cross.

But at least in my life, God rarely gives answers in text or big genie-type “poof” and here-it-is type of miracles. **What happens more often than not is that when I quit begging, stop searching, and dry up the tears of feeling abandoned by him, and start worshiping and praising him, begin serving and doing what I already know to do...the answers come.**

It shouldn’t be that hard to grasp this concept. When we wake up in the morning, we don’t pray about whether or not to stand up or roll out of bed. We don’t usually ask God which pan to use for breakfast eggs, or what shoes to wear to go for our morning jog. What enables us to do these things is that we’ve eaten well, slept enough, and drank plenty of water. Therefore, our minds and bodies work and do what they’re supposed to do, all in good order and in an efficient manner. It’s just one of those things that we know.

Why should it be any different in our spiritual lives? If we eat and digest the Word daily, drink from the fountain of life as we worship and adore the Lord, then those decisions and paths we should follow and take will be evident, and all we have to do is walk forward. Sounds like the message in a familiar verse, doesn’t it?

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

What are “these things?” They are listed in this chapter in Matthew as the very things we worry about and spend time in our prayers pestering God about: the daily tasks of life. God said we are not to worry about these things, when we know we are seeking him first.

So next time you eat your three meals a day, drink your sodas and coffee, and enjoy your ice cream with a cherry on top, stop and realize how you do these things without thinking. And think about how your body and mind functions and performs in response to what you’ve just digested into your body. If you’ve eaten well, your stomach feels full, your mind is clear, and your legs just might feel like sprinting. If you’ve eaten poorly or skipped on meals, your stomach aches, your mind is dull, and your legs feel like lead.

After you think on that fact, regarding digestion and bodily response, think on whether or not you've digested the Word on any given day, when you're worried about all of the decisions you're facing. Are you seeking God for his purposes on the earth, in your prayer time? Perhaps you read a verse on God's love and he prompts you to pray for your neighbor who doesn't know that love. Perhaps you read about how God protected Daniel from the mouths of lions and God prompts you to praise him for the good God that he is. Perhaps you read about how it is better to give than to receive, so God prompts you give of your time to help out a friend. Or maybe you read a verse that convicts you of a harsh word you spoke to your husband, and you need to ask forgiveness.

Those things are seeking his kingdom and his righteousness, first.

When we're full of his word and living water, the things that concern us and dominate our thoughts and minds throughout the day will stretch out before us like a tightly coiled rose that responds to the sun by unfolding its petals in gorgeous color.

Worried about your life and all that looms before you in the future?

Sit down and eat...and drink...and rise and respond.

It really is that simple of an equation:

Seeking him + seeking his righteousness = needs met.

Under the Influence - Is Sight the Culprit? By Marcy Lytle

We who have sight cannot imagine what it would be like to lose it, because so much of our lives are experienced through what we see. I cannot even imagine not seeing the face of my child, the beauty of the sunset, or the colors of summer wildflowers in bloom. Sight is one of the five senses that we who have it often take for granted, pitying those who are without it.

However, sight is something that seems to be the gateway for some not-so-good things to enter our hearts...or is it? I sat thinking about our sight and realized that, as women, a lot of what stirs us up toward jealousy is what we see. We see another woman's beautiful home with rooms decorated like those we see in the magazines, and our heart skips a beat as we start to envy the beauty she has...that we don't. We become aware of our own shortcomings in our physical bodies because of what we see or don't see happening as we grow up, and we are jealous of our friends who are shaped perfectly, those who are tall and thin, or ones who seem to "have it all." We even fall into a pit of self-pity, depression, and disgust with our own things, our own looks, and even our own husbands because of what we "see" that we are missing.

I began to wonder if this precious gift of sight were to be taken from us, would jealousy also be gone? In other words, is this gift of sight really the culprit for stirring up jealousy in our hearts?

Three women who are without sight graciously allowed me an interview. These women are professionals whose names were given to me, when I contacted the School for the Blind here in my city. I asked them if they experience jealousy, and if so, what are they jealous of? Their answers blew me away, and I'd like to share them with you.

Marlena Faulkner is legally blind and also has Albinism (which is the cause of her vision loss) and as she puts it, "I look different and I see different." She believes jealousy is universal, with some being more apt to be jealous than others. "I think there is a distinction to be made between jealousy and being self-conscious or feeling 'less than,'" Marlena shares. She points out that others are often happy to point out her shortcomings when she's getting dressed, by stating she should dye her hair, her outfit isn't right for "this" occasion, or her shoes don't match. She states that even those who are blind have hopes and dreams, and experience insecurities. "If you are one to be jealous, that is not disability specific...**Insecurity does not discriminate, woman or man, blind or sighted, we all have it...it's how we choose to face it that makes the difference.**"

Nicole Robinson says jealousy is not a part of her personality. She shares that she went blind at an early age and had to accept "my entire self" including strengths and imperfections. "Maybe this is one of those few silver linings that has come out of being blind," says Nicole. Nicole says she does not compare herself to others like the "sighted woman" does and therefore "**inner beauty**" in others is what stands out to her.

Janice Moran has been blind all of her life, and she says she does not believe anyone has reason to be jealous of anyone else. "**We have our own attributes and life path of which to be proud,**" she states. She further explains, "I believe that **jealousy is an innate emotion,**

such as happiness, pride, sadness, fear, anger, joy, etc. I do not believe jealousy stems from sight.”

Janice says someone who is prone to jealousy might receive a call and hear about an event or a new item that makes that person jealous of the caller. A mental image may form from this news that has nothing to do with sight. People who are blind make mental images in their own way and experience any number of emotions, shares Janice.

I love the answers these women so candidly shared. Note a few words they used:

- Insecurity
- Inner beauty
- Innate emotion

Could it be that jealousy stems from the above, and not from what we see with our eyes?

If we are **insecure** about how we look, we are going to look to others to see what they have that makes them “appear” secure, and we will then copy them. If our **inner beauty** has been compromised through trauma, abuse, or neglect and as a result we’ve become bitter, unkind, and hateful, we will try to hide all of this ugliness with outside appearances. And if our **innate emotions** (those present from birth) are not nurtured and shaped and transformed into godly emotions, jealousy will surface and become that which motivates us to be like someone else, instead of what God intended us to be.

Was this the answer I expected? No, it wasn’t. I honestly thought jealousy stemmed from what we see with our eyes. But I’m rethinking now, and realizing that jealousy stems from sin...that thing we’re born with...that thing that needs to be cleansed from our hearts. And the only way that can happen is through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

All three of those things listed above are met in this one verse, the verse of all verses, John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

- There is security (in fact, eternal security) in knowing Him.
- There is inner beauty because of his love for us that transforms and heals that which is broken.
- There is the experience of being “born again” as we choose to believe, and when we are...our innate emotions become those that come from a renewed mind – joy, peace, and happiness.

Are you a jealous person? Consider meditating on this one verse today, and let Jesus help you to “see” how beautiful and accepted you are, so that you can see others and what they have, and rejoice with them, as you stand whole, complete, and uniquely you.

Losing sight sounds like a death sentence to me. But maybe when we lose something, we gain something much sweeter....

Healthy Habits - The Sweet Cycle – by Georganne Schuch

Sugar may be a term of affection in some areas of the country, but it is anything but affectionate in how much we eat and how badly it affects our health. One teaspoon of white sugar has 15 calories and 4 grams of carbs. That might not sound so bad, except that the average American consumes about three pounds of sugar a **week**, translating into an extra 1,440 calories and 384 carbs that have no nutritional value. That may seem impossible until you really stop and consider everything that includes some type of sweetener. Even the so-called healthi(er) alternatives aren't so healthy.

One 12 oz. can of soda has 39 grams of sugar (140 calories).

Healthier? One 16 oz. bottle of Minute Maid orange juice has 48 grams of sugar (192 calories).

A $\frac{3}{4}$ cup serving of Cap'n Crunch cereal has 12 grams of sugar (48 calories).

Healthier? A NutriGrain bar has 13 grams of sugar (52 calories).

A Starbucks 16 oz. Mocha Frappuccino has 47 grams of sugar (188 calories).

Healthier? A 16 oz. Jamba Juice Sunrise Banana Berry has 59 grams of sugar (236 calories)¹

Virtually every food that is processed has some amount of added sweetener, creating a dangerous situation for consumers. Most people simply don't realize how much sugar they are getting in their diet without ever adding a grain or drop of sweetener, themselves. While sugar tastes great, it does little else. Sugar does not contain any minerals, vitamins, or fiber. In fact, the only thing it does create is a craving for more. And, of course, almost anything you pick up to satisfy the craving only feeds the sweet cycle.

The body does use sugar in limited quantities for fuel, but it does not need anywhere near the amount of sugar the average person consumes in a day. An article in [Harvard Health Publications](#) estimates that one in ten people get 25% of their daily calories from sugar alone. The over-consumption of sugar, itself, and other sweeteners, such as high fructose corn syrup, causes serious [health issues](#), such as:

1. Heart disease
2. Obesity
3. Cancer
4. Liver damage
5. Cognitive function
6. Diabetes

Reducing sugar consumption is not easy, but it can be done very methodically.

¹ <http://www.sugarstacks.com/>

First, what do you drink? If you replace one soda a day with one glass of water, you save 140 calories. If you like a little coffee with your sugar, try gradually cutting it back by a half-teaspoon at a time.

Second, what do you eat for breakfast? Skip the cereal or breakfast bar and replace it with protein, such as an egg - scrambled, boiled or fried.

Third, what are your favorite snacks? Step away from the granola bar or the crackers. Opt for fresh fruit or vegetables. Grapes and carrot sticks both travel well.

Fourth, where do you eat and what kind of foods do you buy at the grocery store? Virtually everything that has been bagged, boxed or shrink-wrapped has sugar in it. Shop for food that has had as little contact with machinery as possible.

Last, how many desserts do you really need? Reserve sweets for the weekend or special occasions, and just remember that every day is not a special occasion.

Breaking the sugar addiction might take time and commitment. Your health will thank you for it.

Beauty for Ashes – Just Be Loved – by Pam Charro

In [Matthew 9:36](#), the Bible says that when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Years ago, when [Joyce Meyer](#) was about to write her first book, she was very excited and had many great ideas about its subject matter. She decided, however, that she had better run it past God first.

He responded with, "Tell them I love them."

She was shocked and said, "But, Father, I'm sure they already know that."

He said, "No, they don't. Tell them I love them."

She obeyed and that was the title of [her first book](#).

God knows how lost we feel when we don't know how loved we are, and he knows that even when we already have head knowledge of his love, we need constant reminders. So much in life can cause us to get distracted and forget. It is not enough that we have experienced God's love in the past, even if it has happened over and over again. All of us require constant, fresh revelations of our identity as the Father's beloved. Without it, every little inconvenience can cause us to feel agitated and oppressed, and eventually we get worn down.

This understanding doesn't just happen. Some of the hardest work I have ever done has been learning that I am loved by God. It isn't because it isn't freely and abundantly offered; it's just that I often have such difficulty receiving it! Even as I write this, I am recovering from being focused on everything except how much God loves me. I start looking at everything else in life and find myself discouraged, tired and fuzzy-minded, focusing on what is negative instead of the brilliant future God has in store for me. I waste so much time when I could otherwise be living such a powerful life. God knows that this is true about all of us, and that is part of the reason his message of love is repeated over and over in the Bible. He never gives up on us.

Serving God is so much more than reading the Bible, serving others, or talking about him to others. Yes, those things are all important, but there was a reason that Jesus said in [John 15](#) that without him we can do nothing. We cannot accurately reflect God's love to others if we don't first receive it for ourselves.

Please join me today in asking God for:

- A brand new experience of who he is and what it means for each of us as individuals.
- The ability to just be still before him and soak up the positive acceptance that is waiting for us to experience as his children.
- To have to do nothing more to do than simply be with him and enjoy his company as he enjoys ours.
- To just be loved.

Don't you just love those unplanned, unexpected moments that fly at you so fast they catch you off balance and steal your joy and peace? Vacations seem extremely vulnerable to those little zingers. You find yourself stung, not knowing which way to run. Our Chicago trip reminded me that memories are often formed, NOT by the activities themselves, but in HOW we approach the moments that we are handed in any journey.

Part One (in July issue archives) of "Navigating the Windy City" found us in Chicago on a 24-hour business trip. I sensed an adventure ahead as we flew into the city, but it was NOT the adventure we had imagined.

A Moment in THYME – Reimagined – by Debra Brown

I'm known by my family as "Mrs. Bags-Packed Brown," and I've learned over the years not to attach expectations to our trips. Well, let me say that differently. I know better than to anticipate a journey's outcome! Yes I do! But I can look back over the years, and our best memories have been made when we didn't *allow* those little trip aggravations to spoil our fun.

Previous trips to Chicago painted sweet memories of romance and fun for Jim and me. However, this time when we landed and stepped off the plane, little annoyances nipped at our heels. Delays, navigational mishaps, and road construction met us at every turn.

We didn't have time for these, I thought.

As I dropped my husband off at his business meeting a "touch" late, tenseness radiated thru the car. Amazingly, I dismissed anxiety and decided to have a smashing good time. I found my favorite boutique, and some great deals. *Yippee!* But navigating back to my husband brought more construction, disorientation, traffic congestion and frustration. *What is the deal here?* Give me a map, and I can *usually* drive anywhere.

Good question. *What is the deal here?*

This is where *PART TWO* of my story begins. God used Day One and all its navigational mishaps to pinpoint some areas of my life that were under construction. I had the option to focus on the problems or enjoy the ride and ignore the road bumps. The day ended well.

More opportunities to choose "happy" awaited us on Day Two. Downtown Chicago was booked with conventions that week, so we'd finally reserved rooms in a nearby suburb. Since we only had a few hours to make some memories before flying out, we headed back downtown to the Navy Pier bright and early, determined to avoid traffic delays, construction noise, and parking hassles.

Although we did notice some construction in the parking garage, we hurried outside anticipating a great view and the sound of rippling waves, seagulls, and muted city noises. *Yes, it was going to be a great morning together in a favorite place.*

Surprise! Navy Pier was under total reconstruction.

Okay Lord, I take it you have a construction theme going on here. You know how I love themes!

As we walked down the boardwalk, tall chain link fences covered with see-through blue tarps blocked all water views. The sounds of bulldozers and work crews filled the air. The entire boardwalk was under construction. Realizing that it was too late to change our plans, we decided to find a restaurant right on the water. Surely we'd find a beautiful view there. We located a fun looking, non-fast food restaurant and asked to sit outside.

So far so good! (Note to self: Remember to Google planned vacation spots before arrival. Pre-check all construction sites if possible.)

The chain link fence covered with blue tarps stood between our table and the pier expansion construction. Workers busily walked to and fro. Forklifts, backhoes, and jackhammers loudly filled the air. Like children looking thru the window of a toy store, we gazed through the blue tarp and beyond the construction at the glimmering water.

It was what it was. So be it...our construction themed getaway.

Laughing, we let our expectations fall with the settling dust, and sat down to do what we'd come to do – make a memory in a favorite place.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a large sign attached to the blue-tarped fence beside me that read:

THE REIMAGINED NAVY PIER

Reimagined. The word riveted through me. *Reimagined.*

The dirty, noisy construction had completely consumed my sight. It was the “now” in my life. I had not stopped to ponder the purposes of the construction. Instead, I just started complaining.

Reimagined. What a great word. The full impact of what the Lord was attempting to show me the last 24-hours hit me like a ton of bricks.

**“His purposes are higher than mine. His ways are higher than my ways.”
(Isaiah 55:9 paraphrased)**

God was asking me to embrace the areas of re-construction in my life. He was asking me to reimagine some of my dreams, and accept the truth that construction is not a bad thing, but a necessary part of growth and maturity, a necessary part of fulfilling my destiny.

Areas of ministry flooded my mind, areas that had become stale and lifeless. I now saw that God had marked those areas “UNDER CONSTRUCTION.” I could now look at those construction sites with new vision and excitement. I could start looking for His REIMAGINED signs.

As we made our way back to the car, we discovered THE REIMAGINED NAVY PIER signs everywhere, each depicting a different view of the future pier. What a beautiful place this was going to be!!

I can't wait to come back and experience this reimagined pier completely REIMAGED.

Lord, soften our hearts to the places in our lives that are marked UNDER CONSTRUCTION. Thank you for the grace to embrace your handiwork within us. Help us to endure the re-imaging and keep our eyes on the joys of becoming more like you! Thank you for the Chicago trip! Thank you for the gift of "REIMAGINE-ing."

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - Overcoming Gridlock – by Lynn Cherry

Has your life ever played out like this?

(Husband comes home from work, walks in the door) “Honey, I’m ho-ome! Hey, someone left the bread out. Why are there Nerf bullets everywhere? Whose jacket is this?”

(Sounds of children playing in the background.) Two boys tear into the scene, chasing each other with Nerf guns.

(Wife enters) “Welcome home,” she says with a quick kiss, while thinking to herself.

I can tell you are thrilled to be here. There are Nerf bullets everywhere because your children have been enjoying the day and you know that’s MY jacket.

(She turns to stir the pasta, knowing this scene will be regurgitated in future dialogue. It’s the argument they replay nearly every week.)

Do you keep arguing about the same issue with your spouse?

Does every disagreement circle around to a few major points of contention?

This can be exasperating and discouraging.

When we were newlyweds people told us, “Don’t let the sun go down on your wrath.” Sound Biblical advice for the young couple. I thought it meant we had to resolve each conflict and come to a tidy consensus before nightfall. But I don’t think that is what the Apostle Paul meant. Not to mention the Bible passages that indicate he was single and celibate!

We are reading [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) by Dr John Gottman and this month we learned that some problems in marriage are simply unsolvable. These issues stem from deeply rooted, conflicting dreams. No tidy consensus to be found. But **gridlocked issues don’t have to mean bitterness and wrath.**

One long-term area of gridlock in our marriage is *keeping things picked up*. David is neat, And sad but true, I am messy. We’ve gone numerous rounds over this issue. Dr Gottman’s approach to gridlock really helped us defuse this conflict. The most helpful step for us was discovering the underlying dreams or values of our differing sides.

David believes if we are really thankful for our home and cars we will take care of them. We won’t leave stuff lying around. He sees neatness as an expression of gratitude. As the provider in our home, he feels respected and appreciated when the house is picked up.

I grew up in a home that was nearly always perfect. We woke up early every Saturday to clean the house. In a way, I rebelled. I didn’t want my children to have the same Saturday morning memory. I think a home should be lived in and enjoyed. I don’t want our life to just *look* good, I want it to *be* good. It’s okay with me if that gets a little messy.

Knowing what is happening under the surface has helped us have grace with each other. David realizes I'm not leaving things lying around to annoy him. I learn to appreciate how keeping things picked up makes David feel honored in our home. This understanding prevents us from taking everything personally.

We've learned to compromise and not judge each other. We do our best to keep our living spaces tidy. And David tolerates the clutter in other spaces. We both understand that David is always going to want things neater than I do.

Think about an area of gridlock in your marriage and try Dr Gottman's approach:

- Discover the dream or differing values underneath the gridlock
- Define as few non-negotiables as possible
- Determine areas of flexibility
- Come up with a temporary compromise
- Recognize the ongoing nature of the conflict
- Keep the dialogue going

Compromise is not resignation. **Compromise means laying down your primary desire to meet your spouse somewhere in the center.** It's not easy, but couples who keep talking and searching for middle ground are better off than those who give up on the issue.

And as Dr Gottman calls it, making this choice is "yielding to win."

Date Night Fun – The Towel – by Marcy Lytle

It's August, it's hot, hopefully the cooler weather is coming soon...but it's not here yet! This month, we're offering you five ideas for date night fun that include the use of a towel! After all, we're taking more showers, jumping in the pool to cool off, and making some cool foods for our palate, so why not incorporate the towel into date night? Here's how:

The bath towel. Choose a couple of old bath towels, get out your bucket and sponges, and wash your cars together. This isn't about a perfect car wash, but rather about having fun with water and getting wet. After you've washed the cars, dry them down with your bath towels, spread them out on your driveway, and sit on them, sipping on this [agua fresca](#) together. Then clean up, wash the towels, and fold them together [three ways](#) – deciding together which way you prefer! End the evening going out for coffee and dessert.

The dish towel. Get in the kitchen for a fun date night in, as you prepare this [Chicken Valdostana](#) for two, including placemats, candlelight, and music. Pick out your favorite dish towels, one for each of you, to use as you prepare your meal.

The hand towel. Have you and your spouse ever given each other a [manicure](#)? Tonight's the night! Set up the station with hand towels spread out on a table, lotion, clippers, and nail polish. As you clip his nails, rub his cuticles with lotion, and massage his hands (and he does the same for you) use each finger to pray over your date like this: thumb (strength and stability), pointer (co-workers and friends), middle finger (those in authority over you), ring finger (family), and pinky (those who are ill or in need). If you trust his steady hand, ask him to paint your nails...or not...whatever you like! Now hold hands, and head out for a walk after dark!

The beach towel. Roll up two of these, place them in a bag with some fun snacks, ([trail mix](#), pretzels, popcorn, watermelon, veggies and hummus) and head to your favorite swimming spot...or try a brand new place. Be sure you roll out the towel for sitting and talking, prior to swimming. Then when you're both tired, lay out on the towels for rest and relaxing conversation to bookend your date with chats to remember. Don't like to swim? Put on your sprinkler in the backyard and lay your towels out there!

Throw in the towel. This is a phrase, or idiom, that means to admit failure and give up. It might be time to throw in the towel regarding a grudge or a match going on between you and your date. Prior to this date, purchase a couple of inexpensive white towels and you and your date use permanent Sharpies to write on the towel what it is you're going to give up. It might be your argument against his ghastly short shorts or his belly that hangs a bit too low, or even more substantial like your grudge against his mother for her too candid remarks last time you saw her. Think hard, and pray about what you can let go of, and surrender in prayer, choosing to love your sweetheart instead. Next, go out for appetizers and a long...walk, then settle down in a coffeehouse as you toss your towel to each other and [read these fun towel quotes](#). See if you don't feel lighter and more in love, as your date night comes to an end.

What other dates can you dream up that include a towel? There are endless possibilities when it comes to having fun with your date that includes all sorts of ordinary things that you can use to have an extraordinary time together! Date night is important – make it happen often!

After 30 Years - The Daily Choice by Marcy Lytle

What I have to say, what I want to do, and what concerns me and my emotions is so important to me, and I want my husband to listen. And it dawned on me one day that I had stereotyped him, in that I didn't think anything he had to say was really important, because it was "surface" stuff. So, in effect, it was all about me and my feelings, because I assumed he really had none – because he is a man.

I don't like to be pigeonholed into a certain persona because I'm a woman, but yet I was doing this to my husband. He's one-track minded, very visual, and so I dumped him into a heap where I laid to rest lots of men, and labeled the pile, "Simple." That's the only word that comes to mind, as I write. My thoughts and emotions were complex and were viable and needed attention, and his thoughts and emotions were few, so they were pretty much non-existent.

One day he told me that I valued my "lists" as being more important than his, and I started realizing it was true. After that, more truths began surfacing in my heart, and I saw myself placing more value on all that concerned me than on that which concerned him.

Here's how a given day might go:

At the breakfast table:

Me: What do you want to do this weekend? Let's get it all planned...

Him: I just read in the paper that USA Soccer team has advanced to the finals, because Portugal won their game.

I could care less who won the soccer game, so I tune him out, and give him a look of frustration because he won't set aside a few minutes to talk about the fun weekend ahead. However, what he's reading in the newspaper is interesting to him, it's current news, and he wants to share it with me.

- ✓ What our husbands have to share with us is of value to them, and we need to listen and respond with interest and a smile – not a "look."

In the car:

Me: When are you going to take care of that chore I asked you to do?

Him: I didn't know they put up a fence around that property, I wonder what's going on there?

I start thinking (a dangerous activity sometimes) when we're on a drive to a destination, and my mind becomes so full of my to-do list that I fail to see the sunset, the flowers blooming in the fields, or the beauty of my husband's profile when I look at him sideways with my hammering questions. He, however, sees every change in the scenery and comments on it.

- ✓ What our husbands see while driving is a reminder that we too need to turn off our minds, look out the window of the car, and observe the landscape – and leave the hammer at home.

Getting ready for bed:

Me: What are you thinking about?

Him: Nothing. I'm brushing my teeth.

I'm hoping for him to come up with a topic of discussion, perhaps a date he's planning for me, something he learned today that he can share with me, or even just something about the kids that he wants to pray with me about.

- ✓ When our husbands' minds are clear and they are thinking about nothing, we can choose to join them in that non-activity of the brain. Getting ready for bed at night can be the playing field for a boxing match if we're not careful, as our brains begin churning with expectations from our spouse that come back unfulfilled.

So just what am I saying, here? We aren't supposed to desire deep conversation with our husbands, remind them of unmet needs on our list, or hope for a romantic interlude that plays out in a surprise weekend away?

Not at all. But I am saying that badgering, rolling our eyes, and judgment, certainly do nothing to enhance our relationship. In fact, our husbands retreat.

We can stop and listen when they share what's important to them, and even share their interests. We can rely more on our prayers to a God who has a way of speaking to our husbands and getting their attention way better than we can. And we can learn and copy our husbands when their minds are free, and join them in the nothingness, so that we too can go to sleep without the whirring noises of worry, whining, and want.

And when we choose to look up and admire the one we love, instead of noting his differences and despising him for them, we become more pleasant to live with, and he responds...

I have to daily remind myself of these points, because they require a choice on my part. And I still fail more than I succeed. But now that I know what I need to do, I want to do it. And that's a good start...

What choice will you make?

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems - Trying Never Fails – By Kayley Ryan

I was discouraged before I even began to try. I thought the possibility of my receiving even an unpaid internship at any local newspaper was too ridiculously slim for me to apply for it. But if there is one thing I have learned about the word *initiative*, it is that *trying never fails*.

On one especially sleepy Monday morning in June, I was determined to research a few different local newspapers to which I could apply. But having just returned from a trip to Arkansas the week before, all I *really* wanted to do was sleep, eat junk food, and watch TV.

My mind was trapped in a seemingly unending circle of not feeling like doing anything and yet wanting to do everything. Believing that it was too late in the summer for me to apply to *any* local newspaper, I was almost about to give up.

But what began as merely wishful thinking on Monday morning turned into hard work on my resume and cover letter on Tuesday and my *actual* application to two local newspapers on Wednesday.

Of course, I received a ton of support: a beautiful design of my resume by my brother Collin and encouragement and advice from my mom and dad.

But in the end, I had to take the initiative to write a cover letter and resume, produce three samples to showcase my writing ability, and physically show up at two different local newspapers before my act of trying succeeded.

The day after I applied at a local newspaper, I called the editor to see if she had received my resume, cover letter, and writing samples. To my absolute shock and excitement, she called me back less than two hours later and set up an interview with me the following Tuesday.

Grateful for the chance to be interviewed for an internship, I believe I was visibly shaking as I entered the conference room and sat across from the editor.

Yet, instead of telling me that there were no open spots available for even an unpaid internship, she began asking questions such as, “What would you like to do here?” or, “What days would work best for you?”

I began to think, *Wait, is she actually considering offering me a job here?*

Much to my surprise, she offered me a paid internship that very day. While she said she normally did not give out internships to high school students, she was impressed by my resume and by my initiative. In addition, she told me that I had applied at just the right time, since one of the internship spots at the newspaper had just opened up.

Believe me, I have little journalism or work experience in comparison to other employees, yet my decision to apply anyway—even so late in the summer—turned out to be that much more impressive to the editor.

That is why it is so important to take initiative, no matter how young you are.

If you have some experience, passion, and initiative, then a potential employer will be impressed. And even if you don't succeed in landing a job, paid or unpaid, the experience of *trying* will build your character and will be worth the effort in the long run.

I can't help but think: *What if I had never applied for an internship at that newspaper? What if I had believed the misguided thought that it was too late for me to even try?*

Well, I'll answer my own question and say that I certainly would not have had the opportunity to intern at any newspaper, and I would have looked back with regret on my decision to *fail* before I had even begun to *try*.

So, what's stopping you?

Moving Forward – Don't Be Afraid – by Lynn Cherry

Every day I take time to write down a few things I am grateful for. Thanks to Ann Voskamp and her wonderful book [*One Thousand Gifts*](#), I've been counting blessings for over a year. It's a practice that helps me pay attention and it brings me sweet layers of joy:

- The first joy is in the very moment when I think – I have to add this to my thankful journal.
- The second joy is when I actually write it down.
- Multiple joys follow as I go back, reread and remember.

Just last week as I was listing thanks, it occurred to me – I don't feel like Job anymore. YES! I've been through some difficult months but this is a new season ripe with color, full of fruit.

Let me take you back. Much of the struggle hinged on my husband's work status. He wasn't unemployed but he was without a paycheck. That was hard. I watched him remain loyal, committed and even hopeful through this season. I wanted to shout, "How long are you going to give your time away?" But I didn't want him to make a decision with my voice echoing in his head.

Also during this season, our son needed a pricey medication, our mortgage made a significant increase, three out of the four of us ran out of contacts, and then my dear minivan died a premature death. *Seriously?*

I laid in bed one morning with questions swirling in my mind, sinking deep, and wrapping around my chest, tightening. *When? How? Why?*

In the early quiet I felt God whisper, "Don't Be Afraid."

I didn't argue. I took a deep breath.

Okay. I don't want to be wrought up with worry. I hate feeling this way. I hear you. Yes. My family, my husband's job and everything we need, I know you see it. I put my trust in you.

The season moved on – hot, dry and hard like west Texas clay baked in the relentless heat. But I held on to this phrase.

Don't be afraid.

I repeated it over and over in my mind. I made a choice...and another...and another.

Every time I felt the heat, I'd breathe in the cool comfort of my Father's instruction and my obedience.

I kept counting thanks:

792. Morning assurance, "Don't Be Afraid."

793. The courage to believe and obey a still small voice.

794. Exchanging anxiety for peace when nothing has changed.
795. Good conversation and cool evening breezes on the patio.

*“For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you,
Do not fear; I will help you.” Isaiah 41:13*

Tough Questions –Are Spiritual Friendships Worth the Effort? by April Karli

Over the years I've had many friends. Some are still part of my life, and some I don't see anymore because life has taken us in different directions. In fact, three good friends moved away this summer in three different directions. Friendship and loss have been on my mind these past weeks. Despite the loss, I've always had friends. There have been co-workers, acquaintances, and more recently what I call "mom friends" or the moms of my kids' friends. But the friendships that impacted me the most are those that I call spiritual friendships. These were friendships that transcended the surface and grew deep. Stories shared over meals, bottles of wine, or even in gym bleachers. Tears and laughter exchanged in equal measure. Hearts knitted together.

The Celtic tradition of spiritual friendship is called *aman cara* which simply means "soul friend." With your soul friend you can share your innermost self, your deepest fears, sins, longings, and dreams. This friendship is a kind of homecoming where you are understood and accepted as you are without pretension. [John O'Donohue](#) says this kind of friendship is an "act of recognition." Many people who pursue spiritual direction think of those relationships to be *aman cara* as their spiritual director helps them recognize God's voice and settle into the comfort of their true self - the self that God created them to be.

Soul friendship is a gift that I am grateful to say I've experienced. Through friendships with a few different women and men I've come to hear God's voice better and become more at home in my identity as God's beloved daughter.

One critical component of a spiritual friendship is confession.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,

"A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person."

It's hard to take off my mask and tell someone else how I'm struggling or admit I don't have it all together. But freedom and [healing](#) comes through confessing things I've kept pent up or held onto for too long. In fact, some of these friends are intuitive enough to see through my false self and call me out, when I'm faking it. Rather than embarrassing me, I am relieved they see the real me and still love me.

Another benefit of spiritual friendships is the knowledge that I'm not alone, or, as a friend said a few weeks ago, his purpose was to "help me feel normal." He and I struggle in some of the same areas. As we talked, I felt less alone -- more *normal*.

There's a perspective which comes when you talk with someone who understands what you're feeling. More than anything, what I glean from talking to someone who shares my struggles is

I'm not alone, and that it's going to be ok. This enables me to [be still](#) and trust God to do his work in my heart. I can “be normal” – just like my other “normal” friends.

I believe it is God who speaks to me through my soul friends. It is difficult to explain the depth of what happens when two souls connect. It's like describing a flavor or a sound. You must experience it to know it. But the value of spiritual friendships is priceless and worth the risks involved.

Even this summer as I've reflected on missing my friends, I believe friendships are worth the effort. Because of the friendships shared with the women who moved away, I am a more whole and healthy person. They, and others like them, showed me God's love in ways I cannot experience in isolation. I hope that God will send more like them into my life in the future, and I hope that I can be a safe soul friend to others as well.

Saddle UP – Cobwebs – by Melissa Critz

Music swimming in my head and sweat dripping from my brow, I hoisted my saddle off the rack and directed my steps towards my awaiting mount. I felt a funny tinkle on my right hand. No – could it be? Cobwebs? Ha! Indeed, it was.

I only have one horse (of the two) to exercise, as my medicine-hat paint foundered a few months ago. Being that I have two horses, I do have two saddles, since my oldest daughter and I used to run barrels and poles with our two equine family members. Even though I only have Elijah to exercise, I choose to alternate use of the saddles. To me, there was no reason for there to be cobwebs on my saddle. *Are you kidding me?* I ride two to three times a week and alternate between saddles. This cannot be!

I started to wipe away the cobwebs when the Lord spoke to me.

I regularly see glimpses of Him in my daily activities – many in the actual physical things of this world that He created – so I took a photo. There were not near as many cobwebs in the photo, as I had already wiped away most of them...but He goaded me on to think on this, as I rode that day. I knew it had only been a few days since I had used my saddle but it was collecting a webbing network along the back of the seat already – already! *How could this be?*

So He spoke to me...

Cobwebs can start gathering much too quickly, and I felt Him pressing me to think on the cobwebs that grow in our own lives – in our prayer life, in our daily seeking Him in His word, in sharing Jesus with others – all of this incorporated in our daily grind.

Prayer.

For me, this is truly spending time talking with the Lord whether it be praising Him for His goodness or sending Him petitions for needs of myself or others. If time is not spent in conversation with someone, what may happen? Do you grow in relationship if the communication is lacking? Cobwebs...can they form?

His Word.

The grandeur of the Bible is in spending time hearing or reading His Word. If this book sits too long, what may happen? What happens to our mind if it doesn't wrestle with the truths that seep from between the covers? Cobwebs...do they form here too?

Sharing.

When I think on sharing, this means more to me than just finding someone and speaking to them about the saving grace of Jesus. This comes also in the forms of building relationships with people and in our daily lives as we live and share time and space with others. What happens if we don't have opportunities to build relationships with other people? What if we just go day in and day out without sharing our purpose of being in this world? Cobwebs...can they be growing quicker than expected?

What then came to me was this:

Those cobwebs were quite easily wiped away, even though they grew so quickly.

The webs that spring up quickly to try to hide things or trap away things in our minds can be wiped away so quickly with Him. He is always there – He never leaves. We can talk to Him about anything and everything and at anytime! How freeing is that?

And guess what? Cobwebs...gone!

Grab His Word – read – grab a CD or .mp3 file and listen to the amazing truth He has – freedom! Seek Him to know opportunities to share and build and grow with others. Cobwebs gone! Enjoy Him and all He has for you – day in and out.

Isn't His creation amazing?! I love the pictures He gives to us daily. Wipe away those cobwebs and listen, talk, read, share, and grow!

Real Stories - Lessons in Trust – by Valorie Quesenberry
<http://www.theqscoop.blogspot.com/>

“Above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.” Ephesians 6:16

There was never any doubt in my mind that God exists. Raised by devout parents, I attended church more often than most as my father was a traveling evangelist during my childhood and a pastor during my teen years. My father and mother clearly communicated the truth of God’s love and the wonderful message of the Gospel with me and my two brothers. If ever there was a child catechized in the things of God, it was me.

Satan, though, often uses our greatest blessing against us. It’s a tactic of spiritual warfare that surprises us with its appalling audacity. The thing we think we’ve got in our back pocket is the very front on which he launches his vicious plan. **Faith in the goodness of God, in His integrity and purpose, is something I never should have doubted. But I did.**

I went to Bible college, majored in music, married a ministerial student; we graduated and moved to a southern state to begin ministry and start our own family. Life wasn’t always easy, but it wasn’t bad either. God blessed us with four healthy children, and we were just trucking along, doing our best to follow the ministry template that both of us knew so well from our own raising.

An unexpected phone call on a Friday night in 2001 dented the wall of security for me. It was my father calling; my youngest brother had been in a serious accident on his motorcycle in another state. He was being life-lined by helicopter to a trauma unit. We packed up the three children we had at the time and began a midnight trek to Indianapolis. Early Saturday morning we found my stunned parents keeping watch in an ICU waiting room while a few feet away my brother lay unconscious, battered and bloodied, hooked to a respirator and lots of other tubing, fighting a broken pelvis and traumatic brain injury.

I think it might have rained that day. It was dark for all of us. We cried, prayed and took turns by his bed. The news slowly filtered out (these were the days before widespread cell phone use and there was no Facebook or Twitter), and we began to feel the strength of family and friends who called and came by. My parents were emotionally devastated by this horror, but unshaken in their faith in God. I clung to Him too, desperately praying for my brother’s complete healing, knowing that He could do it if it was His will. The days turned into weeks as Danny fought rising intracranial pressure and the possibility of infections and all sorts of medical problems. I remember sobbing and screaming by my bed, telling God that I wouldn’t give up praying, that I was believing for his complete healing, that he would return entirely back to his former self.

And God did perform a miracle on Danny’s behalf. He was able to leave rehab early; he was able to speak, walk and play the piano in a matter of weeks. Thanksgiving that year for our family was a feast of gratefulness. We still had our son and brother, nephew and cousin.

Not everything was back to normal with him, but I was once again busy with being a wife and mommy and doing ministry, and I accepted that the further progress would be slow. Besides, I was also fighting my own battle at this time, a condition called Crohn’s disease.

Diagnosed at the age of nineteen, I had become accustomed to the inconveniences and discomforts of the condition. But after my third child was born, I entered into a phase of active disease that was unlike anything I had experienced before. I lost forty pounds, became severely anemic, was in constant pain and had no energy. I didn't want to go anywhere, didn't want to do anything. **My eyes had no shine, my clothes began to hang on me and I remember wondering if I would die. I felt like I might.** I prayed, pleading with God to help me so I could take care of my children and fill my role in the parsonage and be the wife my husband needed. But my body continued to revolt, my immune system trying to stave off an enemy that wasn't really there and depleting my own reserves in the process.

Those days are kind of hazy in my memory, anemia does that, but as I look back on them now, I remember a special kind of strength that carried me through some terrible times. I can sense in retrospect how very near my Father was, how He shared my pain and comforted me with His grace. I made it through the season because He sheltered me and then with the unexpected blessing of a new pregnancy, my body began to right itself. Slowly my energy came back, and I regained my enthusiasm for life.

We made a couple ministry-related moves, welcomed our last baby girl and God opened up to me some opportunities in writing. My husband was excited to be a full-time pastor and was going full steam in all his responsibilities. Our children were doing well, and our family was finally getting on solid financial footing.

Then, an abrupt and painful change in our ministry threw everything into chaos. The following years would bring further assaults to our foundation, in some ways more vicious than what we had previously faced. My husband struggled with purpose and confidence and peace. Our children tried to adapt to home-schooling and new friends. I faced new houses, lots of boxes and the subconscious burden of making things "right" for the family, trying to create that aura of "home" while feeling devastated myself. And the resulting financial strain that overtook our family became the new monster at the door.

We had always believed that God would supply all our needs "according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19) We still believed it. But there were things we very definitely needed in our opinion that He wasn't supplying. **It felt like God had abandoned us. I couldn't figure it out. We had committed our lives to ministry, were trying to raise our children to serve Him, and it seemed we were "circling the drain."** I had moments of doubt. I wondered if God is really good after all. I know that in a broken world like ours motorcycle accidents and disease happen, but it seemed so easy to me for God to rescue us from this financial disaster. After all, He owns the "cattle on a thousand hills." (Psalm 50:10) He said to "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33)

Of course, Satan is quick to point out all the others around who seem to be prospering, to let us hear of others whom God is blessing, to feed our doubts on the goodness of the Father. He did that with Eve, and it worked. He hasn't changed his basic strategy. He still tries to incite distrust of the One from whom everything good flows.

But I am learning that our God usually works in process. He redeems us in that moment of salvation; instantaneously we are justified and adopted into His family. But the process of growing in grace, of becoming Christ-like, is a journey of following and suffering and obeying.

Faith must be tested that it may be proved solid. If we had all the answers or the solution came as soon as we prayed, we would never have to exercise our faith; we would never learn to trust.

God inspired the apostle Peter to write these words, “. . . may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have **suffered a while**, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.” [1 Peter 5:10, emphasis mine]

Elisabeth Elliot says that suffering is simply “having something you don’t want or wanting something you don’t have.” I don’t know why suffering is part of His process in us, but if Christ had to suffer, we should not be surprised that we must as well.

God was faithful; He took care of us. There were times He supplied gas for our van in unexpected ways or prompted friends to bring food. Once, a \$200 check arrived in the mail just before I went grocery shopping. Another time, a relative paid off our children’s school bill. As we look back on it, we see His presence in ways we didn’t at the time. And I am learning to trust that He best knows what I need and when I need it.

Not everything is perfect now; this is no fairytale - my brother still has residual issues from his accident, I still have Crohn’s disease (though in remission) and our family still deals with lingering emotional and financial challenges. But we have a God who stands with us in our trials; He gives peace in the storm. He is at work in our lives, and He has promised to complete that work (Philippians 1:6) He promises a perfect eternity when this life is past; He gave His Son to make it possible, and that proves beyond any doubt that He loves us. Satan has no fiery dart of doubt that can obliterate the Cross.

The God of heaven does have a purpose for us; He never abandons us. And the grace that He gives is sufficient; I’m staking the rest of my life on that promise.

Valorie began writing at a young age and is the editor for [The Ladies Companion](#), a newsletter for Christian women. She also writes women’s study books, addressing topics that help women understand God’s design of femininity. Valorie is a pastor’s wife, has four children, and loves life’s routines, especially visiting a bookstore or library and enjoying a cup of gourmet coffee! She has [her own blog](#), and is on Facebook and Twitter, as well! (@valerieq).

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Countenance over Contour by Marcy Lytle

This article just might make you laugh...or cry...depending on what mood you're in when you read it, but I'm going to share beauty/aging tips. I'm in my late 50's and I can't even believe it. When I turned 40 I was told I was entering menopause, and yet my youngest was only six years old! The body, the face, the arms, the legs, and oh – the stomach – soon started to reflect in the mirror that which I was not prepared to see, let alone accept!

So here's what I've found to help a girl out, as she passes from young adult age into the middle ages...and beyond...

1. **Pull them up.** Saggy boobs add pounds. Sports bras just make one big uni-boob and that's not attractive. However you can manage, tighten those straps, stand up tall, and get "them" back up to where they belong in your shirts – between your elbows and shoulders – not at your waist. You girls with small boobs, give thanks.
2. **Moisturizer is your friend.** Dry skin never looks or feels good, anywhere on the body. The face gets drier with age. I love [Oil of Olay Beauty Fluid](#) for daytime and the nighttime version for just before hitting my pillow. I keep peppermint foot lotion by my bed, and I moisturize my body with Nivea Sun-Kissed Radiance (it blends and gives your skin an even pigment color). And...I love [BB cream](#) by Physicians Formula for my face. I've found that less foundation on the face is better, because too much just makes your face crack and sweat (at least here in Texas) - not pretty.
3. **Body shapers are gold.** I'm advising you to visit the [Sears lingerie department](#) and find a body briefer/shaper that fits you well, and buy four of them. Wear them everywhere, and every day. You will have to get used to them, but once you do, you'll never turn back. They lift, they eliminate the bra indentation around your middle, and they pull in the stomach. What more could you want?
4. **Change your clothing.** This is so important! If your cute round butt has now become flat, and that roundness has shifted to the front of your stomach, then learn to camouflage it! Sure, exercise is awesome, but honestly – you're getting "older" – and you're not going to have the same shape you had in your 20's. Accept it! Wear shorts and capris with stretch in the fabric (NOT elastic in the waist), and a loose fitting top (NOT with a band around the bottom), with maybe a tight fitting tank hanging out from underneath...or a cute cardigan on top. [New York & Company](#) is my favorite clothing store for jeans and pants! Anything you can wear to elongate your torso, not accentuate your rolls, and not cut you in half at the middle, is a plus! You don't have to dress like you're 90, if you're not. Add a bit of whimsy or trend to your otherwise tailored outfit, and you're good to go!
5. **Drink water.** Eliminate sodas and other caffeinated drinks, and learn to make water your drink of choice. It took me a full year to quit craving other drinks, but I now prefer water with a squeeze of lemon. I lost a lot of weight when I made this change, and I feel it has helped my skin retain some fullness without completely falling from the bone. You only want that event to happen when you're cooking chicken.
6. **Bitterness is not your friend.** I learned a few years ago that frowning, pursing my lips, harboring bitterness and anger – it all showed on my face and in my body. If you're

bitter and hardened, and you feel yourself worsening with time, get help. Do it now. Learn to forgive, make the choice, and leap for joy. Train yourself to [go to sleep smiling](#). The results will be evident when you awake, as if you'd slept with the best mask on your face all night!

7. **Exercise to worship.** This is my latest lifesaver. I get up in the morning, turn on [praise music](#), and I dance to five songs in a row. I leap. I raise my arms (I've been healed of frozen shoulder and I can't help but rejoice). I bend. I sway. I skip. And I pray and lift my spirit to Him while I'm doing it. I feel my heart beat faster, and I sweat harder than I did when I exercised to any workout video. Worship exercise invigorates me physically and spiritually, daily. And that's a good thing for me...and for those around me.

I'm not by any means skinny...at all. And I'm sick of our culture promoting a waif-like structure for women. I'm trying to learn to be comfortable in my own skin, and work with what I've got, but learn to love how I look with all of my imperfections. Those imperfections used to be all I saw in the mirror, but I'm trying to look past them at my countenance more than my contour. After all, pretty women can be so "ugly" and "ugly" women can be so beautiful – once you get to know them. I want to be one of the beautiful ones because I reflect Him in my life, inside and out...like the lady in our photo – 100 years young and seeing the ocean for the first time!

FRESH THYME – Entitlement by Marcy Lytle

As I sit working, my mind is thinking a dozen other thoughts, mostly wondering this morning...

Do Christians really experience more peace than those who don't believe?

If Christian marriages fail as often as non-Christian marriages, and if Christians get cancer and die at the same rate as those who don't believe do, then what are the advantages to being a Christian? Is it really that we have peace that passes all understanding, hope in the worst of times, or joy that bubbles up like a fountain?

I have friends who are believers, and those who are not, and sometimes it's hard for me to tell the difference in their character, their actions, or their demeanor. In fact, on some days I fail to see all of the "benefits" showing up in my own life, any more than the lady standing next to me in the grocery store, who clearly must be a non-believer because she just cursed on the phone (*funny how we think...*)

So, just what is it that would make a friend on the street that I meet want to become "saved" when they don't see much difference in the way we Christians react to bad news, to political chaos, to our husbands, or to each other?

In fact, why am I a Christian? Is it just something I've chosen to believe so that I won't go to hell? **I mean, shouldn't there be other perks, bonuses, and advantages that come with wearing the label of Jesus-follower?**

These are questions to think about, as we who say we believe walk in Christ on a daily basis.

Are we really that different from anyone else?

It's then I realize that my thinking is skewed all wrong (an event I have to correct daily).

It's not all about my bonuses (although there are some), my perks (yes I've experienced these), and advantages (heaven is certainly one of them).

It's all about Jesus.

Some days I start focusing on the "what if's" of life, like what if the tragedy I just heard about on the news befalls my family? What if the death of that loved one becomes the death of my loved one? What if the cushy life I now live somehow gets exchanged for a meager existence? On these days, I spiral downward quickly into a pit of despair where snakes of doubt literally start biting my legs until I'm barely able to stand by the end of the day.

What's the bonus in knowing Jesus? It's having my sins blotted out – shame lifted – and that should bring enough joy to last a lifetime.

What are the perks that come from serving Him? Hopefully, I get to bring others out of their own darkness into the light of His love, and experience the peace that comes from knowing their sins too are covered by the blood.

What are the advantages I have from walking with Christ? I have an open doorway to his throne, where I can pour out my heart (even in writing this very story confessing my doubts and fears), and he receives me, loves me, and blesses me abundantly in ways I will never even see or understand.

When I look for the bonuses, the pluses, and the advantages in things that are tangible, they're there...but they might be gone tomorrow. When I look for the blessings in having fellowship and relationship with others...it's there, but I can't stabilize another's heart (or even my own). And when I look for the advantage I have over the person sitting next to me, I've become haughty and proud, looking down on my neighbor, instead of finding pleasure in sitting beside her.

Do I feel shame for these thoughts that encircled my head this morning? I do.

But I have the pleasure of having that shame wiped away, and having my heart restored once again to worship the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the one who is my glory...and the lifter of my head.

And I have the assurance that he really does see, hear, and care for me and all that concerns me. And what concerns Him is that I become like Him, and that is what should concern me...

Not whether or not I'm getting all I'm entitled to get...because I'm a believer.

The 7 Steps of the Cynic

If we're not careful, a wound or disappointment will leave a gaping hole in our hearts and cynicism will come along like wet concrete to fill that hole, leaving a hard gray platform where there once was lush green grass. And if we live on that platform of concrete, life becomes a cruel joke with no punch line and no laughter at all.

In society, cynics distrust and disbelieve the goodness of human motives and actions. This usually results from high expectations concerning authorities that are unfulfilled. But we are born with this appetite for trust, a desire to believe in the good of something, and the God-given seed of faith. So when cynicism replaces that trust we become frustrated, disillusioned and unable to trust anyone, anywhere.

In the Church, cynics are present, as well. They are the friends who once were full of faith, someone we admired for their stamina and good nature, but then they were wronged...or hurt...by the actions or words of another. Often, these folks are the ones who expected the Church to meet all of their needs, or believed they were entitled to a certain style of life because of their good standing with God. Tragedy strikes, loss occurs, words are heard, and that hole is dug. The trust they had in others is gone, as well as their faith in God. And they turn away from the Church frustrated, disillusioned and cynical.

How does one know if they're standing on this circle of concrete that's been poured in their gaping wounds, and are now a cynic? Believe it or not, [wikiHow](#) has a list of steps toward becoming a cynic – someone who “has doubts and expects the worst of people.” And, oh! Skeptics and cynics are often good friends, because skeptics become cynics after hanging out together for very long.

Here is a brief list of how you can know if you've become cruelly cynical, in regards to your faith in others...and ultimately God.

1. You hang out with, converse with, and listen to others like you. In other words, you thrive by feeding on and licking the wounds of others who have been hurt just like you have.
2. You lack much emotion at all. You rarely cry because you've detached yourself from that emotion, deeming it a sign of weakness. You almost never laugh, because there's really nothing to laugh about...in your opinion. You see God as lacking emotion, as well, except perhaps anger.
3. You are critical of every player in life, muttering under your breath when others speak, judging their motives, their words, and their worth as a human. You even roll your eyes at the Word.
4. On the rare occasion that you do laugh, it's at the expense of others. Or you give a “Ha!” when someone states how God blessed them in an area where you've been robbed.
5. “Scathing remarks and retorts come to you in seconds.” And if others are offended, you consider them green and naïve. However, you hold your tongue with God, just in case he's still in control.

6. Your reply in a social setting when others speak is often, “Yeah, whatever.” It’s the same when you faintly hear God whisper your name in love.
7. You are suspicious of everyone...including God. He’s probably out to harm you, too.

I myself can lean towards the skeptical and cynical at times. And I’ve sat on a hard place, wishing I could feel the grass between my bare feet once again, but instead despised those who weren’t sitting on the hard place with me. It’s not healthy to be cynical. In fact, when we are cynical as a Christian, we become sarcastic which often leads to blasphemy.

Here are seven countermeasures to avoid cynicism, ones that will enable you to tell the concrete truck to turn around. The pour is not happening at your place, today!

1. Recognize your wounds and seek healing. Hang out with those who have been healed, not those that are still bleeding.
2. Release your emotions through tears...and laughter. If these emotions are both dried up, do whatever you need to do to remove the rust that keeps the handle stuck, that holds back the flow. Think on the truth – the goodness of God – and dwell on it. Give thanks.
3. Repent of the eye roll. Seriously, even if you hide it from others seeing it, it’s there inside your heart rolling back and forth at “stupid” things others say, and even in response to the verses you read. Ask God for forgiveness for the lack of honor you’ve given his people and his Word, and begin to listen and respond to the hope that’s in Jesus...not the disappointments of life.
4. Physically turn your lips upward, and make yourself laugh. Laugh out loud. Not a laugh of scoffing, but a laughter at the absurdity of a life lived as a cynic, instead of life lived as a lover of God. Laughter, after all, is medicine for whatever ails you.
5. Use your tongue to agree with the Word of God concerning your life. Stop offending those you despise. Start praising the One who loves you, and confess your love for Him once again.
6. When you hear God whisper your name, reply with “Yes, Lord!” Allow Him to replace your cynicism toward others with joy in their worth and value to you...and to Him.
7. Realize through the re-training of your mind that God is for you...not against you. Lay aside suspicion in favor of surrender.

The longer we wait to step out of the hole, cover it with fresh dirt, and watch the green grass spread once again, the bigger the hole becomes, the deeper the concrete is poured, and vastness of the hard places under our feet is so wide we lose sight of anything but gray.

Are you a cynic? Are you skeptical of everything and everyone around you?

There’s not much worse than living a life full of cynicism, instead of realizing and experiencing the reality of God’s love for you...and for others...as we all fail and disappoint. After all, that’s the plight of the human race. But it’s the plan of God to bring salvation to all. And therein lies our hope...One that does not disappoint.

Are you going to flow with the plight...or the plan?

Fresh THYME - Top Ten Time Wasters for Busy Moms – by Marcy Lytle

Time is the same for all of us. We have 24 hours a day, we spend maybe a fourth of it sleeping (if we're lucky), and the rest seems to be full of taking care of others. Too often, there's very little time left over ourselves, and when we do find five minutes, our minds are too full to relax. However, below is list of 10 ways we can change our days into being productive...yet pleasant...because we've eliminated those wasted minutes...

1. **Worrying about our kids.** This wastes precious brain cells and drains us of energy. We could better spend our time giving thanks and praising Him for all of his blessings. And somehow when we do this, the worries mysteriously fade.
2. **Chats and comparisons.** This is when we meet with other moms and start chatting about our kids and their achievements and start comparing our kids with “those” kids. This is dangerous, unfruitful, and downright damaging. It's a great waste of a nice visit with a friend.
3. **A Perfect House.** It's important to be neat and organized, but it's a waste to spend every breath yelling at every family member to make sure every corner is free from clutter. No one wants to live and breathe in a perfect house. A perfect house only belongs on the pages of a magazine.
4. **Being a Martyr.** Enlist the help of your children...of all ages. If you're a stay at home mom, it's not punishment and it's not horrible for you to train your kids to pick up, clean up, and straighten up. If you work outside the home, use some of your hard-earned money to hire help if that's an option. Free up your clean time for some play time. You can't feel like a martyr if you don't ask for help.
5. **Too Many Activities.** If each child has three places to be each night of the week, you're wasting fabulous family time...and most likely your money. It's okay and healthy, and your kids will be just fine, if they only choose one thing to do outside the home. Don't let our fast-paced culture dictate your family's health.
6. **Gourmet Chef-ing It.** Cooking shows are awesome, and creating atmosphere is fun, and healthy meals are a must...but you don't have to perform every night of the week! When you shop for groceries, include a few nights of easy meals, paper plates, and everything simple. You'll thank yourself, come the weekend.
7. **Saying “Yes” to Every Question.** Don't waste your time agreeing to help and attend every function, just because you'll feel guilty if you don't. Guilt is a waste of time. Don't go there! It's okay to say no to that shower, her jewelry party, and other kids' birthday parties. Life will go on, friends will understand (or if they don't...well...they're wasting their time being angry), and you will have less headaches when you learn to say “No” once in a while.
8. **Texting and Talking.** I know, you need adult time with your friends, and the phone gives you that. And you want to be available to a friend in need, to fix her problems. But talking and texting in every spare moment, when your kids are napping or eating, is a waste of time, if it dominates your day. Be selective and wise, when entering into someone else's troubles...
9. **Depression.** It's easy to get depressed with the mundane chores of motherhood, the tiredness in your body, the lack of affirmation for a job well done, and the lack of feeling

“pretty” because of post-baby bodies. Don’t waste your emotions by sinking so low, before you ask for help. Seek help through the Word, prayer, and a good friend who will pray – or a counselor – before you sink.

10. **Barking up the Wrong Tree.** I don’t like to admit it, but sometimes I bark at my husband hoping he’ll do everything on my list...for me. And honestly, it’s a waste of time to bark up that tree, because no one likes to be barked at. Instead, we can spend our precious time pouring out our requests to the Lord, praying for our husbands, and asking them politely for what we need...and leaving it at that. It’s hard to do, but so much more effective.

These are just 10 ways we waste our time, that precious commodity we seem to run out of daily. Stop and think, and even take note, of how you spend the hours in your day. If you’ve eliminated all time wasters and you’re still at a loss for time to breathe, ask for help from a friend who perhaps is waiting for an opportunity to give. Receiving is not a time waster, and there’s no shame in it, either.

A BUNDLE OF

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September 2014

FEATURE STORY

The ABC's of Back-to-School

It's that time of year again, when our schedules shift back to busy mornings getting everyone out the door, harried evenings shuffling kids here and there, and frustrating late night projects with our kids who just want to play. The summer is over, but our longing for picnics on blankets, a good read by the lake, or a relaxing evening watching the sunset, is far from over. How are families supposed to balance all of the demands of school, work, and play? These simple ABC's might serve as reminders that will encourage you each day. In fact, you might want to print them out and adhere to your refrigerator door for all to see!

Awesome is a word you should say to your children daily, just because they belong to you.

Bedtime stories, baths, prayers, and family time bring about peaceful sleep.

Clothes matter to teens, so have conversations, state the rules, and shop together.

Driving to and from school is a great time for conversations with kids.

Exercise together as a family, not just as individuals. Walks and hikes are invigorating for all!

Family comes first, above extracurricular activities.

Grades are important, but they're not the most important.

Hoarding is not allowed; have your kids clean their notebooks, backpacks, and rooms often.

Initiate conversations with your kids and listen, before you speak or instruct.

Juggling schedules is an art; don't panic if you drop a "ball."

Know your kids' teachers, the school rules, and the coaches for whom they play.

Lunches can be prepared ahead of time; enlist help.

Mealtime is sacred; make it happen at the table.

No is still acceptable as an answer to a request made by your child.

Omnipresent does not describe humans. Set schedules that are easy and doable.

Prayer is a key ingredient to your family's success for a good year; pray together often.

Quit comparing your kids' grades and performances to others.

Reach out to families in need, as a family, and give of your time and possessions.

Supermom is not your title, nor should it be your title goal.

Teachers need prayer, affirmation, and help. Give all three.

Understanding is free. Give it to your kids when you can, before you discipline.

Victory isn't when we stomp the opponent; it's when we celebrate the little things in life.

Wisdom is better than knowledge; so leave time in your schedule to gain it.

X-rays might be necessary after a game; but broken bones do heal.

You need to take care of yourself, mom, so communicate that need and ask for help.

Zoos make us smile at animal antics; learn to smile at those of your kids, sometimes, too.

You can make your own list of ABC's as reminders. In fact, that might be a fun weekend activity to do with your family one night! Whatever you do, remind yourself to breathe, enjoy your family, and only do what feels right for you and yours – not for them and theirs.

TIPS

The Dressing – Fall Forecast

I love to see the fall runway fashions, colors, and styles...but most of them are way out of my price range. However, those same sweet looks can be found with just a little bit of searching, which we've done for you! Just add a few pieces to your closet, mix and match with what you already have, and you'll create several new looks in no time! Have fun shopping...

Plaid – [Plaid shirts](#) aren't just for wearing on the farm, or simply with jeans. They're in for fall, and there are so many new ways to wear them! Try this one with a black skirt and a belt, or underneath a graphic sweatshirt, or leave it open to reveal a cute t-shirt underneath. Check out these [10 ways to wear a plaid shirt!](#)

Front back earrings – These are so cute and they come in so many different styles, from whimsical animals, to pretty, to sophisticated. They have a front and a back that both show on the ear! Check out these from [Chum Love](#).

T-strap Pumps – There are so many choices of these on the [Modcloth](#) website, from super high heels to flats! You choose your favorite. We really like this t-strap sandal, and the heel, because it's a comfortable heel to wear. And yes, you can pair these summer colors for fall, with your jeans and pastel chunky sweaters!

Standout Bag – This “Dignified” bag from [Just Fab](#) comes in three colors, and it's just right for your fall wardrobe. It's pretty roomy, too! Very affordable – try the one in camel or the berry color!

Jumpsuit – I have one of these and it feels so good when I wear it! This black [jumpsuit from Zara](#) is great for fall. There are many varieties out there, and yes, you have to shed the entire outfit to visit the bathroom, but it's so easy to slip back up! Try one!

Lounge pants – I actually tried these on and they are super comfortable and aren't too snug in all the wrong places! Even the tight ankles make a great fit and show off your cute tennis shoes – or whatever you choose to wear! You'll need [these pants](#) for cozy, lazy weekends...

Swing or shift dress – This cute dress from [Cotton On](#) can be worn with a denim jacket, belted or loose, or over skinny jeans – your choice. Or...wear your favorite button down shirt as a jacket over the dress or under it!

It's so fun to see the “fall forecast” when it comes to clothes. In a weather forecast, we might head out because we read it's going to be sunny and warm, only to be caught in a rainstorm without an umbrella! However, this clothing forecast is a sure thing – if YOU make it happen! Enjoy the cool breezes as they start to blow...

Seven 4 You - The Family Picnic

Our family loves picnics, or at least I do. I think they're an important part of raising a family. There's something about preparing and packing a dinner, loading up the car, and spreading out a blanket on a grassy hillside near a small body of water that encourages each member to stop, notice the beauty, savor each bite, and enjoy the company. Here are seven ingredients for a perfect picnic:

The setting. A picnic can happen on the floor at home, in the backyard, down the street at your neighborhood park, or as far away as a national park. My favorite is on a [blanket](#), rather than at a table. It's fun to pull out a favorite quilt, if there's an heirloom in the family, or to purchase a couple of big picnic blankets that roll up so that they can be carried easily. If you can find a small pond or lake, with a few shade trees for blocking the sun, you're set. Nature really provides all you need for the backdrop for a good time.

The basket. Picnic baskets come in all sizes, shapes, and colors. I don't prefer the ones that come pre-packed with plates, flatware and wine glasses that take up the entire basket. I favor the old-fashioned [tin basket](#) like these at World Market, or even a nice tiered wicker basket, or a huge basket that resembles a large suitcase. It's so fun to scour discount stores for cute plates, cloth napkins, and flatware for different holidays and seasons, to store in bins until time to use. Sometimes we opt for carry-out boxes that we find in the Dollar Store. They're fun to pack individually, so that the picnic meal is complete. Be sure to tuck a trash bag inside your basket, for easy clean-up.

The food. Cold fried chicken is my picnic favorite. It can be made ahead of time. Cubes of cheddar cheese, and dill pickle spears, along with [fresh-baked potato bread](#), are good accompaniments. Include a big bowl of fruit in bite-sized pieces that can be eaten with toothpicks. Pack a fun drink in a thermos or large carafe for sharing, as you pour into plastic cups, or bring individual mason jars with paper straws, if space allows. Round out your picnic fare with chocolate brownies, strawberries, and whipped cream. You'll be full and ready to lay back and find pictures in the clouds, when your stomachs are full!

The conversation. Picnics are not the place to criticize your children for their last test score, or to pick at your husband for eating too much. This is the optimal time to converse, get to know each other better, and laugh until your sides hurt. It's fun to read jokes from a book or fill out [Mad Libs](#) and read aloud. There are lots of verbal games to play. *I Spy* is always a fun game for the outdoors, as well as going through the alphabet naming animals, one by one. Ask questions that everyone has to answer, like "What's your favorite color?" or "What country or state would you like to visit, and why?" You might be surprised to find out that your son really wants to make a trip to the Civil War battlefield area, and you can plan together your next vacation!

The ants. No picnic is complete without a visit from the local ants, so be sure to pack some [ant spray](#) and scout out the lay of the land before spreading your blanket. Nothing is more disheartening than to have your spread laid out, only to see these little black pests come

marching up over your blanket onto your legs to have their picnic feast biting at your ankles! Don't forget this most important picnic item!

The games. Family games are a must at picnics. Find your beach bag or the largest tote you have and fill it with Frisbees, kites, a few balls, and any other [lawn games](#) you might have. In fact, keep this bag packed at all times for an easy grab when your family picnic day arrives. Don't pack games with cards or pieces that can blow away with a high wind. This is the time to enjoy your food, then get up and move!

The hike. Once the picnic is over, clean up, load up, and start out. Find a path to walk together, as a family. Perhaps it's around a few blocks in your neighborhood, or through a forest of trees behind the park where you picnicked. Be sure to carry your phone to capture some great snapshots of beautiful foliage or wildlife. And it doesn't hurt to spray everyone with tick spray, or mosquito repellent, depending on where you hike.

When the picnic is over and you're headed home, have everyone share their favorite part. Make sure when you arrive home, you head straight to the calendar and pencil in the next family picnic, so there's always one to look forward to, when the fun is over.

Picnics are pure pleasure, if the whole family is involved with their own contribution. Don't make this an effort that only mom puts forth, or mom will fall asleep on the blanket before the fun begins!

Wash the blanket and napkins, as well as your dishes, [store everything away in its place](#), and get back to the routine of life. But now you have images of ducks swimming atop the water, sounds of birds chirping in the trees, crunchy chicken piled high on a plate, checkered napkins folded neatly beneath the shiny aluminum plates you found at a flea market last week – all resting in your minds as you drift off to sleep – well rested and satisfied with smiles on your faces.

Selah's Style - Back to School Fashion – by Selah Irwin

Summer is over,
School is near.
I thought you could use some cheer!
Here are some fashions
which are all very fun.
I hope you enjoy them one by one!

I call this look “cowgirl cuteness.” I picked a plaid button down shirt and tied it at the waist. I picked out cowboy high heels, too. Don't I look ready for the Wild West or just a wild day at school?

This is my funny friend, Lillian. She makes me laugh all the time and she sparkles like a dime. I dressed her in an everyday awesome look. I started with a cute cheetah skirt then added an adorable blue shirt that says "Once upon a time." I layered it with a fuzzy fur vest and cute blue leggings. Next, I topped it off with a hat, really fashionable shoes, and a pink purse. Doesn't she look ready for kindergarten? Cha ching \$\$!

This is my friend, Lydia. She is fun to do make up with and bake with. Her favorite thing to wear is skinny jeans, so for her look I gave her a pair of black, acid washed jeans and a tank top. (You can still wear tank tops on the fall. You never know.....the sun could grow!) I put this cream tank top under a peach perfection, sheer lace top. I added a black backpack and a scarf with a design to really make it shimmer! She is ready for High School!

I call this look.... *My mom made me do it.* My mom liked this plaid dress and black leather jacket so I put it on just to make her happy. (This is just between you and me...I did it to get some extra points at the end of the day.) I do love the shoes!

These outfits are the bell of the ball, the cat's pajamas. (It would not be very nice to take some poor kitty's pajamas.)

I hope you have a great first day back at school!

Fearless Kitchen - Semi-Homemade by Christina Vetter

No matter how much of a devoted chef I am, there are days that I admit, I just want to whip up something for dinner that requires minimal effort. Some days I don't want to mess with caramelizing, tourneeing, or any other fancy cooking processes out of my culinary textbooks. I just want to be able to grab a couple things at the store, throw them together, and relax with my family. I know I'm not the only person out there who feels this way.

Take a look at Hamburger Helper's yearly profits if you need some convincing. While I willingly admit to purchasing convenience when it comes to food, I still have to stand my ground when it comes to the "meal in a box" ideas. If you see me buying a box of *fill in the meat* Helper, Stouffer's Frozen Lasagna, or anything from Lean Cuisine, call my husband because something has gone terribly wrong. It is possible to serve a decent meal with mostly store bought items, but the "all in one" meals will have your wallet sweating with only a microscopic amount of food to show for it. That is why this month I'll be sharing some of my favorite "semi-homemade" dinner recipes.

Yes, there are store bought sauces, frozen pie crusts, and other culinary unmentionables, but let's be honest, in the real world these can be lifesavers when toddlers or the office have run you down past the point of exhaustion. Some of the food purists who read this may scoff, but I am not ashamed to share my cheater's chicken pot pie, penny pinching Pad Thai, and easy lettuce wraps. As simple as these recipes are, they have earned a spot on our family favorites list because of the low effort and low cost required to crank out a tasty dinner. I hope you and your family will enjoy these recipes as much as we have.

Do you have any semi homemade recipes to share? Write them in the "Comments" section below, I'd love to give them a try!

Chicken Pot Pie

Serves 4

Difficulty:



This is the easiest chicken pot pie I've ever made. Funny enough, people in my family have said it's the best chicken pot pie they've ever had, despite all the store bought ingredients. It's a cinch to make and tastes fantastic. What else can you want from a recipe?

Ingredients:

- 2 small cans cream of mushroom
- 3 chicken breasts, diced small
- 1 (16oz) bag frozen mixed vegetables
- 2 deep dish frozen pie crusts
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- 1 tsp onion powder

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 425F, and set pie crusts on counter to thaw.
- In a large saute pan, over medium heat, cook chicken thoroughly.
- Add cream of mushroom, vegetables, and garlic and onion powder and stir until combined.
- Pour contents of pan into one of the thawed pie shells and spread evenly.
- Place the other pie shell on top and flatten down to cover the bottom filled shell.
- Pinch around the entire edge of the pie to seal, and trim away any excess crust with a knife.
- Cut a slit in the shape of an X on top of the pie to allow the steam to escape.
- Place pie on a baking sheet and bake for 45 minutes or until crust is golden brown.
- Allow to cool for 10-15 minutes, and slice into quarters.

Lettuce Wraps

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

Lettuce wraps are one of my favorite go-to meals. They're easy, taste great, and are fun to eat. Tip: Iceberg lettuce is the best for this recipe. Romaine or any other flavorful lettuce actually takes away from the flavor of the wraps. Served with steamed rice on the side, this meal is great for busy weeknights.

Ingredients:

- 3 boneless skinless chicken breasts
- 1/3 C diced carrots
- 1 (7oz) can diced water chestnuts, drained
- 1 ½ C stir fry sauce of choice (I use Kung Pao to add a little kick)
- ½ head iceberg lettuce

Directions:

- Cook chicken and carrots in a large skillet until cooked thoroughly.
- Add water chestnuts and sauce of choice and mix together.
- Heat, stirring occasionally, until sauce is bubbling. Transfer to serving bowl.
- Tear iceberg leaves into manageable sizes (approximately 4" x 4")
- Serve chicken mixture in lettuce and wrap.

Pad Thai

Serves 3

Difficulty: 

This is not a culinary masterpiece by any stretch of the imagination, but this recipe has gotten us through some of the tightest penny pinching days of our married life. It's perfect for the college students or anyone else that needs to make a dollar stretch in quite a few directions. Not only is it cheap, but it's actually very yummy. A win, win situation for everyone!

Ingredients:

4 pkgs "oriental" flavored Top Ramen
1 Tbsp crunchy peanut butter
2 tsp Sriracha chili sauce
2 tsp soy sauce
2 lime's juice
¼ C thinly sliced green onions
¼ C minced cilantro
*Optional: ½ C diced cooked chicken

Directions:

- Cook ramen noodles according to package directions.
- Meanwhile, in a small bowl, mix peanut butter, chili sauce, soy sauce, and lime juice together.
- Drain ramen noodles from water, reserving ¼ C of cooking water.
- Mix oriental seasoning packets into noodles until thoroughly combined.
- Add peanut butter mixture to noodles and mix well.
- Gently turn in green onions and cilantro (and chicken if using).
- Serve immediately.

Tried and True - The Laundry Monster

You've all seen it, been frightened by it, and it's followed you throughout your house. It starts as a small pile of dirty clothes that you know need to be washed. But you're busy, your kids demand your time, and the next night you notice the monster has grown. And somewhat like the Blob, over a few days at a time, the laundry monster is in every room casting shadows across your walls at night that are bigger than Godzilla. You scream inside and you want to cry, but you must face it...and slay it.

Have you been a character in that movie?

In our house, we're just down to two people because our kids are grown, but I still see the laundry monster sitting on my floor in my room, when the clean clothes are piled up, waiting to be put away! What are we do to, to tame this monster, so that the light only casts a shadow against the flicker of our candle that we have time to sit down, smell, and enjoy?

Here are a few tips from others who are learning to tame the monster...

Pam Charro says as soon as her kids are old enough to run the machines, they do laundry. She's had them take turns doing collective kids' laundry by placing magnets on their dresser, setting a timer, or some other method of remembering to move laundry from the washer to the dryer, and out of the dryer. One of her children uses his phone. She says, "As long as a method works, I will allow them to use whichever they prefer, but if it's not working, I make them use my method."

Lynn Cherry says she remembers having piles of clean clothes waiting to be folded alongside piles of dirty clothes waiting to be washed and having to do a smell-check to see which was which. She and her husband enlisted the boys as laundry helpers as a means of survival. First, as preschoolers they carried their pile of folded clothes to their rooms and put them away. Then, in elementary school they learned to fold their own clothes. "I literally dumped a pile of clean clothes on the living room floor and called the boys in to separate, fold, and put away their own items. I told myself often that 'done poorly' is better than not done at all!" When they graduated to helping sort their dirty clothes, Lynn put post-it notes on the wall with descriptions for piles: jeans and pants, dark clothes, light clothes and towels. Now that her boys are teenagers, they are working toward complete laundry independence. Lynn says, "Keep the Shout handy, pause and thank God you are not a pioneer woman, and just keep washing!"

Marcy Lytle says make laundry fit your schedule. If you're a stay-at-home mom, perhaps a routine of one load a day might be workable better than five loads in one day. Making it a part of everyday chores can work. Otherwise, choose two specific days a week for laundry. Make sure it's a day when you're home a good chunk of the day so that multiple loads can be washed and dried. Marcy loves ironing, so she even sets aside early Sunday mornings for quiet worshipful time before church, while she irons wrinkles away for the coming week. She says, "Wear jeans more than once, share towels, do whatever you can to lessen your load...and by all means train your kids to wear one outfit a day...not a dozen."

Georganne Schuch has five tall garbage cans that she uses for sorting clothes: darks, lights, whites, towels, and reds. She says, "This makes it easy for her kids to sort clothes and an obvious reminder that a load needs to be done when it won't all fit in the container!"

Melissa Critz uses a three pocket mesh basket to keep whites, darks, and jeans separate. When one pocket gets full, she does the wash. The kids have their own mesh baskets and do it themselves. She says, "Now if i could find a munchkin to fold it all..."

Christina Vetter does laundry just about once a week. "What has made me keep up with it is actually having less clothes in my closet than I used to. You don't really have the luxury of putting off laundry when someone in your family is out of *unders!*" Christina says her sister has a sign in her laundry room that she loves..."Laundry today, or naked tomorrow." And that pretty much sums up her laundry motivation.

A few other ideas to consider:

Make your closet neat and organized. An inviting closet is more fun to spend some time inside, hanging and sorting, than one that is chaotic and a mess.

Keep baskets in each room, not just for dirty clothes, but for clean ones. Sort and deliver each kid's clothing to their respective rooms. Unless the basket is empty, with clothes put away, there's no TV or play. (Hey, that rhymes!)

Keep a stain stick on the washer and ask family members to treat the stain immediately when they change clothes, place the item atop the washer with a clothespin attached (keep a cup of them available). This way, you've saved yourself at least one step!

Don't be so orderly that you can't adjust a few rules in favor of more time with your family! Socks, underwear, and pj's don't have to be creased and folded into neat stacks – if you've got a drawer for each. Just toss them in there!

Keep your laundry baskets off the floor. This way, little hands, little sticky hands, and little hands that scatter, stay away from the clothes and grant you one less headache of clothes being strewn across the house.

If you want a little chuckle, now that you're finding time to sit and read, one of our writers wrote her own letter, addressed to "Laundry." Enjoy it below:

Dear Laundry,

I know, I know. You think I haven't noticed how you've been waiting 10 days in that smelly basket, spilling over onto the floor so little boys trample you on their way to bedrooms, how you're crumpled up in bathrooms and twisted across couches and even left in the cold car all night, how all you really want is someone to care.

I assure you, I've noticed. I wish I could say I'm sorry for not washing you sooner, like you wanted, but I'm not. Because I was playing, skipping through the city zoo and riding on a

carousel, teaching kickball to my boys in a big field of green, making little dolls out of clothespins and yarn and fabric, and it was beautiful and invigorating and fun.

I just can't say the same about you, Laundry.

Maybe I used to feel differently about you, back when Husband and I walked you to the Laundromat and put you in three washers and sat holding hands while we talked and wrote songs and read marriage books for the 45 minutes it took you to wash and then doing it again while we watched you tumble dry low for another 45. But you have gotten out of hand, Laundry. You have invaded where you were not wanted. You have rewarded my hours of care with next to nothing, trading scattered cotton smelling like feet for stacked cotton smelling like lavender and eucalyptus, and maybe I should be grateful for even that, but it's just not enough anymore.

So I have some things to say to you.

You're too needy. You must be done every single week, so many loads of you, or you start taking over our whole house, emptying our closets so we have to wear the same pair of pants three days straight—which I never do, of course—climbing out of the dirty hamper so you carpet the hallway floor, treating the whole upstairs to your wet-dog smell, and I'm just...

I'm just tired of you.

You steal time, Laundry. You're like a black hole, sucking those seconds and minutes and hours into a giant time warp so I hardly know where my whole day has gone because of your intruding buzzer that screams, "Finish me."

Finish yourself, Laundry.

And if all that weren't enough, you're never, ever done. That last load spills out of the dryer, and there are still the clothes we're wearing today. Are you never satisfied? Is there never an end to your demands? Do you think this is a healthy relationship?

I need a break from you, Laundry. It's not me, it's you. You can't keep clinging to me. You can't keep stealing my bed in your mountainous piles. You can't keep cluttering our banister, whining about how no one ever puts you away in your proper place.

My little boys want to play cars, and I'm sorting you, dark and light and white and towels and blankets, eight loads a week. My little boys want to go on a nature walk, and I'm waiting for one-eighth of you to finish washing so I can put you in the dryer and start the next one-eighth of you before we leave. I just want to go to bed, and there you are, commandeering my sleeping space like an unwanted blanket.

You have some things to learn before we can move on, Laundry. Autonomy. Self-discipline. Moderation.

But I have a feeling you won't even make an effort, because you're selfish and self-centered and spiteful.

So I'm really sorry, but I'm going to have to do it. I'm going to have to break it off. I'm going to have to say those words no one ever wants to hear: It's over, Laundry. Go find a new home to haunt. You're no longer wanted here.

Your never-ever-loved-you partner,

Me

(Rachel Toalson – writer of “The Family Practice” on the HOME page)

REVIEWS

The Equalizer

I never saw the TV show of the same name, but I was told this movie is pretty much the same story. An ex-FBI agent who's now living a "normal" life cannot stop his innate sense of justice, as he meets people who are being treated unfairly. However, in this movie, Denzel Washington's character ends up in a tangle of corrupt activity that is larger than life. [The Equalizer](#) is certainly suspenseful, although it starts off a bit slow. In true Denzel Washington fashion, he's a "superhero" of sorts who doesn't wear a costume, but shows up in the shadows to save the day. It's rated R for violence, which makes it hard to watch in some spots. If you liked the TV show, and you like Denzel Washington, this movie won't disappoint. – Marcy Lytle

The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby

Yes, she's named after the Beatles' song. This young woman is married, and she and her husband have just suffered a terrible loss that has rocked their world. Jessica Chastain and James McAvoy are husband and wife in this sad, depressing tale of a couple with no support from parental figures, no hope from friends, and no ability to rebuild...after a devastating blow. We are drawn in from the onset of the movie to these characters, and we really want them to be okay. But how can they be? The acting is great, hope rises and falls, and when the movie ends...it doesn't really. [The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby](#) movie is part of three series, called Her, Him and Them. And this movie is just interesting enough to make me want to see the other two parts. – Marcy Lytle

The Maze Runner

This is another movie about young people left to find their way in a devastated world, without the aid of adults, while they're being attacked on all sides. The number of movies with this same sort of theme these days seems to be relaying some sort of message from the next generation to those of our generation, and it's a bit unnerving. [The Maze Runner](#) is the story of a group of young men (and one girl who later joins them) who find themselves in the "glade" – which is in the center of a maze which these guys cannot find their way out of. However, one particular young man is determined to fight off the adversary and lead the group to freedom. It's quite a suspenseful movie, with an interesting story (although a bit long), and includes an ending that leaves one wanting more...and wondering, "What?" – Marcy Lytle

My Old Lady

Kevin Kline, Maggie Smith, and Kristin Scott Thomas do a phenomenal job in this story of a man in his 50's arriving in France to claim his inheritance of an apartment left to him by his estranged father. However, upon arrival he discovers an older lady and her daughter live in the apartment, and he's in for one of the biggest surprises of his sad, mundane life. [My Old Lady](#) does an awesome job of portraying the struggles people go through when their parents have indiscretions that are never addressed. One never quite gets over the trauma of parental wounds, and the parents who wound never quite admit their parental sins. – Marcy Lytle

The Drop

James Gandolfini (from the Sopranos) and Tom Hardy are amazing actors, and show their stuff in this crime drama. Hardy and Gandolfini are cousins who run a bar that also serves a drop for money laundering. When a battered puppy is discovered in a trash can by Hardy's character, he befriends the woman who owns the trash can. This is a true detective whodunit show of sorts, but it's full of suspense and surprises, as well as language and gore. An investigation takes place that involves probing by a detective into the lives of those who frequent and work in Cousin Marv's Bar. If you like shows like this, you won't be disappointed in the script or the people who act it out in [The Drop](#) – splendid. And if you like Tom Hardy, watch the movie [Locke](#). – Marcy Lytle

God Help the Girl

This movie is film not show in the major theaters. But sometimes, these can be the best (or the worst) movies to watch – if you want to take the risk. The story of this movie is about three young people who are drawn, or perhaps thrown, together through music. One girl is in rehab for a disorder, one girl is seeking to learn how to write music, and the guy is a guitar player/lifeguard/tutor with a heart of gold. The movie includes lots of songs sung by the main character, Emily Browning, an Australian actress. In [God Help the Girl](#) I enjoyed the quirkiness of the story, the voices, and the lyrics (just about real, daily life) and the scenery – all of which combined to make an enjoyable film experience. – Marcy Lytle

Mom's Night Out

This weekend I watched [Mom's Night Out](#). I had heard many good things about it from my mom friends, and they were right! It was hilarious – a great picture of what it means to be a mom while managing to make me laugh with every scene. My husband, my mother-in-law, and I watched it together and all loved it! It was not only just a funny movie; it actually made me shed a tear, because it managed to encourage me so well. This movie is definitely on my list to buy! – Christina Vetter

Guardians of the Galaxy

We waited to see this movie until now, because the previews with the talking raccoon weren't appealing. However, it was a rainy night and this was the only movie available, AND we saw it in 3D – another non-appealing experience. The storyline is all about an orb, retrieving it and delivering it. The characters were varied from hum-ees (humans) to a creature made of roots (Groot – and actually he was the best visual), to yes – this talking raccoon (who was the funniest of them all). [Guardians of the Galaxy](#), in my opinion, tried too hard to mix a variety of old pop music, with literal lines (like those in the old movie *Airplane*), with graphics, and Star-Wars-like characters, all of which made a messy mix. There were a few bad words and an obscene gesture, in this otherwise Marvel Action comic flick that felt more like a flop. The audience laughed, and I suppose it was semi-entertaining for those who like these type movies, but I don't. – Marcy Lytle

The Identical

Did you know Elvis had a twin that was stillborn? I didn't. This story is just a what-if tale of what if that twin had lived? Sounds like a silly premise, but a real life Elvis impersonator plays the main character of Dexter Ryan. Ryan was born in the Great Depression to parents who couldn't afford to feed both Dexter and his twin brother, so in a tent revival where the dad heard there was a greater blessing in giving than receiving, the couple gives one of their baby boys away to the preacher and his wife. If you can get past this outrageous beginning, the rest of the movie isn't half-bad. Blake Rayne does an awesome job of looking and singing like Elvis. He tries to fit into his preacher dad's expectations, while searching for himself through his talent for music...while his twin brother is out there making a huge name for himself. Will their lives ever intersect? [The Identical](#) is an *okay* end-of-the summer movie – and it's only rated PG – Marcy Lytle

A Summer's Tale

A G-rated romantic comedy, I couldn't believe it. This is an independent film in French, with English subtitles. If you're still interested...read on. A young man goes on holiday to a place where his maybe girlfriend is supposed to meet him, only she doesn't show up. He meet a new girl and they connect as simply friends, because of course she has a boyfriend who's far away. She then connects the young man with a third girl, and the rest of [A Summer's Tale](#) is dialogue between the guy and these different girls as they walk along the beach, mostly. The story only gets interesting in the last quarter of the film when the original girlfriend shows up, and the young man has to decide what to do with the three women who are now interested in him. Yeah, it's hard to explain...even when the credits roll... - Marcy Lytle

The Last of Robin Hood

Errol Flynn was a legendary Hollywood actor who played Robin Hood. In this movie, Kevin Kline bears a striking resemblance to Flynn, and presents a compelling story about this man who led a sad life of too much drink, and an infatuation with a young aspiring actress (played by Dakota Fanning). Susan Sarandon is really the star of the show, in my opinion, as she plays a forceful, doting mother who pushes her daughter into stardom, only because her own hopes of being famous were crushed at young age. The movie is disturbing and sad, and yet one feels compassion for all three of these characters, as they each seem to be a victim of the hurts inflicted upon them by others. I can't say I "enjoyed" [The Last of Robin Hood](#), but I was thoroughly impressed with the acting. – Marcy Lytle

And So It Goes

I waited until this movie went to the dollar theater because I wasn't sure if I wanted to see it. It turns out that the story in [And So It Goes](#) was really heartwarming and charming. Michael Douglas plays a bitter, mean widower, and Diane Keaton plays a sweet, charming widow. After a granddaughter (he didn't know he had) shows up at his door, Douglas is confronted with the past and has a decision to make. Keaton and Douglas are funny, sweet, and sharp, and their story is cute to watch it play out. But... there's a lot of potty/sex humor in the movie that only

detracts from the story. It was cute, sort of like a cuddly puppy that's just walked through a muddy puddle. You enjoy the sweetness, but don't want to pick him up. – Marcy Lytle

November Man

This movie stars Pierce Brosnan in yet another movie full of action, suspense, and drama. This time he's training a young man in the ways of a CIA operative, only to later find himself pitted against his pupil, in a race to see who can get the bad guy, and save the girl, first. The movie is full of blood, sex, and some very hard-to-watch scenes, so I'm not giving it a nod, for that reason. It's a thriller, for sure, and one with twists and turns. However, I think if you're a fan of Brosnan and his kind of movies, I'd wait until [November Man](#) comes out on DVD later, so you can fast forward through some of the grime. Or, just skip this one altogether. – Marcy Lytle

My Five Star Life

This movie is an Italian film with subtitles, so it's not in the main theaters...you'll have to look for this one where independent films are shown. It's about a lady whose job is to critique 5-star hotels in different cities (Just experiencing with her the hotels, scenery, and details of her job is worth the price of admission.) She's a middle-aged single woman with an old boyfriend who shows up from time to time, she has a sister that's married and has two kids, and she's content to live her unique yet ordinary life...until she meets up with a lady with a message and a tragedy...and this changes things. [My Five Star Life](#) is a delightful movie and an interesting parallel between the main character's journeys to different hotels and our journey through life. – Marcy Lytle

Wish I Was Here

I don't get up and walk out of very many movies. In fact, I can count on one hand the times I've done so. But this is one of them. An actor dad is out of a job, his wife is played by Kate Hudson, and they have two adorable kids who attend a Jewish school. They are in deep financial trouble. However, within the first 15 minutes, there were way too many words and images and sexual acts that were offensive, and yet it appeared to be a "family" movie. [Wish I Was Here](#) made me sick to my stomach. So...we left. Maybe it got better, but I'll never know. Below is the movie we watched instead! – Marcy Lytle

Code Black

This is a documentary on the ER in a super busy community hospital in Los Angeles. Several medical students are filmed and interviewed over the course of a few years, as they go from working in a crowded "family-like" environment of face-to-face interaction with their patients...to a new facility where everything is streamlined, each patient has to be documented on multiple forms, and the interaction with patients is minimal. [Code Black](#) is a close-up view of the heart-wrenching experiences these young doctors face; and their emotions are raw and charged, as they share their hearts and their viewpoints. It's interesting...if you like documentaries and the medical field...and some medical procedures were hard to watch. - Marcy Lytle

HOME

Practical Parenting – Decision Making Basics – by Georganne Schuch

Decisions, decisions, decisions. Every day is filled with decisions, from the mundane (like to snooze or not to snooze,) to the important (like which shoes to wear with what outfit.) This can truly be a day changer in Texas where the temperatures can vary by 40 degrees within three hours. Beyond the everyday decisions, we also face life-changing decisions. What school to attend, what subjects to study, what jobs to seek and which ones to take, and where to live.

For the teen, these decisions are often overwhelming and frightening. While a teen might play a good game of knowing her own mind and controlling his own destiny, in truth he or she is bluffing and doesn't have a clue. After a series of difficult decisions our family made recently, my oldest daughter asked me how we knew what to do. I laughed because, in fact, we didn't know if we were making all the right decisions. No one does, and even a right decision doesn't mean all the pieces fall into place with no rough edges. So, I told her that, in my experience, **there are usually three main ways to arrive at a decision that is not clearly indicated.**

1. **You pick the best choice.** When all the choices are good, like the stars have aligned over just you, then you can pick the one that you most desire. Don't hold your breath for this. It doesn't happen often.
2. **You pick the least worst choice.** This is far more common and involves decisions like voting for political offices and what to cook for dinner.
3. **There aren't any choices, and you just go through the only door available.** I actually pray for this more often than not. I figure if I don't have any other choices, then this is where I'm supposed to be.

In real life, few decisions are one-time, all-or-nothing. Who to marry falls in this category. Most others, like what school to attend, can always be adjusted later, though maybe at a high price. In these cases, my advice to my teenage daughter was to remember a few basics about making decisions.

1. **You make a lot of small decisions to get to a big decision,** so it's nice to know what you want in the first place. Just like you don't take a plane for South America if you want to go to Europe, and you don't get a medical degree if you want to be a chef. Both are great choices, but they're pretty opposite in terms of training. The teen years are the perfect time for a child to start thinking about what they like to do and investing time and energy in preparing for that.
2. **Know your beliefs and make decisions based on them.** A strong belief system is like a compass, always pointing in the right direction. I have had to undo some pretty messed up decisions that were made without thought for how they fit into my overall beliefs. If you know you believe that gambling is wrong, then a job offer from a gambling company is a no-brainer. This is just an example. Don't get hopped up on whether gambling is the ultimate sin.
3. **Sometimes the best decision is no decision.** God has a way of working things out without any action on your part. I rely on this technique when there doesn't seem to be a clear reason to make a change at all. It's not unusual to get tired of the status quo and look for a change just for the sake of shaking things up. It's rarely a good reason to do something. So, when things are fine, just leave them be. Life will take care of throwing something different your direction before long.
4. **Don't make stupid decisions.** A stupid decision is not the same as a wrong or uninformed decision. A stupid decision is one that you knew was bad and made anyway. Kind of like turning the wrong way on a one way street. They usually have serious consequences and are very hard to undo.
5. **Never be afraid of making an unpopular decision.** The easy path is smooth and wide because everyone is on it, not because it's going the right way. The path that leads where you want to go might involve a lot of climbing and scraped knees because not many people want to

put the effort into doing the hard stuff.

I wish I could give my daughter an easy formula for always making the right decision, but in reality the only way she can learn is by making wrong choices. You make enough wrong decisions, and you get a feel for the difference between a good and bad choice. My biggest admonishment for her is to admit when she's wrong and fix it. The only thing that makes a bad decision worse is to refuse to change or to learn from the mistake.

The teen years should be a safe time to start learning decision making skills. Good or bad, there's still plenty of time and leeway to make adjustments, learn from mistakes, and try something different. Most importantly, the experience in smaller decisions takes the scariness out of bigger decisions that really have consequences.

Train Them - Helping Kids Hear God by April Karli

This summer my daughter has been reading out loud to our pet parakeet, Luna. Every day she takes Luna into her bedroom, sets the bird on a perch, and reads stories. She's read a little of everything to our literary bird -- *Skippyjon Jones*, *Ready Freddy*, *Harry Potter*. One day, I overheard her reading the [Jesus Storybook Bible](#) for birdy storytime.

Later, she told me, "When I read what God says I use an English accent because I'm pretty sure God speaks British."

After she said that, I spent a few moments gloating to myself for winning at parenting. Because, of course, "God speaks British." Duh! Clearly, I'm doing something right with the faith formation of my children. When I was done congratulating myself, I realized that my daughter had just said something revealing that she believed herself capable of knowing what God's voice sounds like.

Frequently in conversations with me, people express the desire to hear God speak to them. They say they wish they knew how to hear God, or share frustration that God is silent. Although it is true that there are dark nights of the soul, deserts where it feels God is far away or silent, I believe God is always speaking to us, perhaps even in the silence.

Kids are generally more open to hearing God's voice than the adults around them. They more easily trust their ability to hear God speak to them, and they don't think it's silly that God would want to speak to them. This makes them especially unhindered and free when it comes to hearing God.

How can you help your kids learn to discern God's voice when he speaks to them?

Through Scripture

First, it's important that kids become familiar with Scripture. It's through the Bible that we all learn reliably what God's voice is like. Good places to start with kids are [1 Kings 19](#) when God speaks to Elijah in the "still small voice," or in [John 10](#) when Jesus compares himself to a shepherd and his followers to sheep. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." God's voice is quiet and caring, like that of a shepherd.

Through Sacred Reading

In our house church we've used Lectio Divina with the kids. Lectio Divina is an ancient practice. It's from Latin meaning "sacred reading," and is the practice of slowly digesting a short piece of Scripture, pondering and meditating on the words, for the purpose of having it transform us. Virtually every time we've used Lectio Divina during the kid's time, the children have shared something they took away from the verses read that I found especially profound. They ask questions to clarify words or phrases they don't understand, express new ideas I haven't heard elsewhere but ring true to my experience of God, and their spirits settle into knowing how deeply they are loved by their Heavenly Father. I am certain the Holy Spirit is at work in their hearts, speaking to them, and helping them hear and know God's voice. Renovare has [this helpful](#)

[guide](#) available for using Lectio Divina with children making it simple and easy to do at home or with a small group of children.

Through Imaginative Prayer

Another way children are open to listening to God is through imaginative prayer. Kids' imaginations are limitless! Through prayer they can encounter God and have conversations with him about anything. [Greg Boyd](#), pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, MN, describes imaginative prayer like this: "This is simply thinking about God in concrete and vivid ways. It's rooted in the biblical tradition." Children can imagine God talking to them about a problem, something they're scared of, or God expressing his affirmation and love for them. You can guide kids through simple imaginative prayer exercises. Here's an example from a scenario familiar in our home where a child might be having trouble falling asleep as one way to use imaginative prayer:

"Close your eyes. Imagine God/Jesus is sitting next to your bed. What expression is on his face?"

Allow the child to answer. If it's negative, take time to explore that. Then, move on:

"Tell God about how you are having trouble falling asleep and what you are feeling."

Allow your child to pray either out loud or in their head. Next say something like this:

"Imagine God's response. Does he say or do something? What is God doing in your imagination?"

Go on like this until the issues seem resolved and the child believes they have heard something from God. Usually, the child will have seen or heard God bring comfort through words or touch. There is no right or wrong way to do this.

Through Soaking

One last way to help kids hear God's voice is through soaking. Again, this is something we've used in our house church with varying degrees of success. It's simple. Have everyone find a comfortable spot to sit or lie down and play a quiet worship song. Encourage the kids to listen for what God might want to say to them. After the song plays, take time to hear the kids share what they think God said. It might have been words, a picture, or just a feeling. Often the kids in our group have seen pictures like rainbows, green meadows, or happy people smiling. They have also told of feeling loved, warm, and free.

Hearing God's voice doesn't always have to be profound. It is more often the quiet, still, small voice that brings assurance of our belonging to God's family. A sense of God's peace, or shalom, is how you can be sure God was speaking. Practicing listening to God together gets kids used to the idea that God wants to talk to them and that he, in fact, does talk to them. The earlier they can learn God's voice, the more familiar they will be with it as they grow up.

I Don't Do Teenagers - The Need for Provision by Lynn Cherry

My teenagers spend a lot of time staring into the refrigerator. It's like their bodies are frozen in time, with only their eyes moving, glancing over the foggy shelves waiting for something to pop open and cry out, "EAT ME." The funny thing is, I remember my brother doing the exact same thing when he was in high school.

The [Living as Conquerors](#) model defines provision as having adequate food, clothing and shelter – the most basic human needs.

Shelter

Gratefully, my children do not know what it's like to wonder about having a roof over their heads. They have always had a warm (or cool) bed to sleep in. It's something they never questioned until we began serving with [Thomas Wright Ministries](#) in downtown Austin. Volunteering once a month has provided great perspective on the provision my boys take for granted every day.

Clothing

We have been so blessed with friends who pass on gently used clothing and we joyfully pass on our outgrown items to other families. Generous grandparents have provided many back-to-school wardrobes over the years. Thanks to Macklemore's crazy Thrift Shop song, we've had some very successful shopping trips to Salvation Army!

Clothing has never been a big issue in our house. Until recently. More than ever, our teenagers are becoming interested in what they wear. We've had some great discussions about brands that bring perceived value, and brands that actually have more value because they are crafted of better materials.

The reality is my boys tend to pick one or two favorite items they'd like to wear every day. I can't keep up with it. Meeting this need well means teaching teenagers to do their own laundry, and I love it because it keeps my hands out of stinky socks. I keep a laundry guide posted right above the washing machine if they need a reminder of washing instructions.

Food

The most critical daily need in the eyes of my two teenage boys is FOOD. (Tell me parents of teenage girls – do they lean toward clothing over food? Just a guess.)

Maybe you've heard the near panic in your teenager's voice, "Maaaoom, there's nothing to eat!"

I've found the best way to meet this need for my teenagers is to stock the fridge and pantry with food they can prepare themselves. Along with having food on hand comes the responsibility of teaching kitchen safety. And everyone with a gas stove nods their heads in agreement. My younger son is great in the kitchen. He comes up with yummy creations and even enjoys preparing food for the rest of the family.

One of the best tools we've discovered for making sure everyone has the food they need is the Shopper App for iPhone. My husband and I are able to share the same grocery list on both our

phones. It makes it easy to add items and then whoever happens to swing by the grocery store has the combined list. The boys know how to access the app and add their requests as well. When my husband and I see Jalapeño chips and popsicles on the list we know the boys have had our phones.

When I think about the need for provision, my heart is filled with gratitude. God has faithfully provided everything we need in every season. This season of life finds us feeding other people's perpetually hungry boys. During a recent financial crunch, one of our biggest challenges was wondering if we would have the resources to feed the extra mouths who find their way to our home. Just in time, a friend called us over. Their freezer was overflowing and so they filled ours.

Our boys saw firsthand how God provides for our family so we can provide for them and their friends too!

And my God will meet all your needs
according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19

Simple Solutions - Food Storage Wars – How to End Them by Georganne Schuch

Every so often, as in about once a month, I look in my refrigerator and wonder what happened to all my space. Inevitably, there are one or two dishes containing what could have been an entire meal, another bag or two of forgotten ingredients, and an overturned jar that is leaking down the back. I shed a few tears at the waste, beat myself up over my irresponsibility, and pledge to do better the next month. Truth be told, I do reasonably well most of the time but just get behind the rest of the time. It's not the end of the world.

In order to better manage my budget and keep my sanity, I devised a system for food storage. I have two small refrigerators. This might not work for everyone else, but it's an idea of where to start for your particular situation.

1. All the long-term storage items, such as condiments, go in the doors. Jellies, sauces, dressings, and marinades are usually in slender bottles and fit nicely in the door. We make a lot of our dressings, so they go in half-pint canning jars and can even stack in a door rack. Delegating door space to these items avoids three half-used bottles of mustard.
2. One of our refrigerators has a cheese drawer, and guess what? We put cheese in it, as well as lunch meat and other small packages of fresh sandwich fixings. No single slices of cheese melded to the bottom of the milk jug, this way.
3. The other refrigerator has three drawers that I use to contain most of our vegetables and fruit. Bulkier items, such as lettuce or cabbage might go on a nearby shelf. Fewer bags of moldy cucumbers, wilted lettuce, and stinky broccoli end up in the garbage. When the drawers are empty, we need food. How easy is that?
4. Fresh meat goes on the shelf above one of the vegetable drawers. It is imperative to group all the fresh meat together and use it early in the meal plan. I won't tell you the number of nights we've had cereal because the chicken was a few days too old.
5. In each refrigerator, I have two shelves set with plenty of room for large items, such as milk jugs, tea and water pitchers, and large containers with grated cheese or salads. They take up a lot of room, so there is no way around this.
6. Now, leftovers are truly the thorn in my side. Some meals are made for leftovers. My kids could eat them for days, though there is rarely that much of anything left over. Other meal leftovers are conveniently forgotten. So, instead of letting them be pushed to the back, the key is to keep them front and center and serve them for lunch (or send them in your husband's lunch) the very next day. Bad leftovers don't get any better with age. Use them up early.
7. A whiteboard on the refrigerator keeps a running tab of what food is left over and what needs to be replaced. It's always easier to write it down during cleanup than remember it a day or two later.

The problem with any system is that not everyone knows it or follows it. When my kids are putting up the food from a meal, they tend to open the door and throw it in, then slam the door before anything falls out. To prevent this slipshod clean-up, I spend time every few weeks reminding them where things go. I'm not talking about an hour, just a few minutes of having them rearrange things like they should be. They're not perfect at it, but then neither am I.

One day, though, when they have their own children who shove food in every nook and cranny with total disregard for its intended use, they will remember my system and realize how wise I am. I, on the other hand, will laugh evilly at their just reward.

A Night to Remember - Waver...Wobble...Whoops! By Marcy Lytle

To waver is to be unsure, unsteady, indecisive, or unable to make up one's mind.

Do you ever waver in your faith? When you pray are you sure that God hears you? Are you confident in God's love for you? Do you know that your sins are forgiven? All of these questions may arise at some time in your life.

Preparation: *You will need a broom, a bulb that is not tightly screwed into a lamp, a book on the edge of a counter about to fall off, and a dark room. Finally, have several boxes or a couple of tall items for someone to carry that would pile up in their arms above their eyes. Also, think of a hard question from the Bible that you think no one knows how to answer.*

Have you ever had a friend who was nice one day and mean the next? That kind of friend is fickle. This means you can't count on them to be the same every day...they are moody and their friendship changes and wavers, depending on their mood. Wavering makes one feel afraid to trust, and sometimes wavering can be downright dangerous!

Pretend you come to a river you have to cross and the only way across is on a narrow log. (*Lay out the broom on the floor*). You have to cross this river or you'll be left behind, but you cannot make it across by yourself. You waver! What do you do? (*Have someone try to walk on the broom handle, pretending to cross a river. Solicit answers about what do to in order to make it across.*)

Sometimes we come to a river in our life, maybe an illness, maybe a huge disappointment, etc. and we feel stuck and unable to move past this huge obstacle. Our feet feel unsure and we're afraid of what might happen to us. We might begin to waver in our faith. This is when we need the help of others and the help of the word, so that our feet are secure and we can make it across to the other side. (*Have someone take the arm of the person crossing and help them along.*)

You walk into a dark room and turn on a lamp. (*Adult switches on the lamp with the loose bulb.*) The light flickers. Something's not right. Ahhh, you see that the bulb is not tightly secure in the socket, so you use your strong arm and securely twist the bulb until the light burns steadily without wavering.

Sometimes a person wants to walk in "the light" but they aren't fully connected to a strong source of power. They need a friend like you to plug them in to a group of other kids at your church who will love them, hold their hand and make sure they feel secure so they can burn brightly for God. (*Secure the bulb and see the light shine brightly.*)

Remember the friend situation mentioned above? One day you are best friends with someone (*Have two people sit close and put their arms around each other's shoulders*). The next day your "friend" has found another person to hang out with and they don't even look your way. (*One person scoots across to another person.*)

Some people think God is like these fickle friends. They think he likes them one day, if they are good that day, and the next day he doesn't like them, if they've been bad. The Bible says God loves us at all times. We don't have to wobble with worry that he might one day leave us. He has promised to never leave us or forsake us.

You're in a hurry, you lay something down and don't realize you've barely placed the object on the edge of a table. (*Lay the book on the edge, barely on the table.*) Someone comes along behind you and bumps the object and it falls to the floor. (*Bump the book so that it falls.*) What if it were breakable? It would be in pieces!

Did you know that some people are "breakable" because they are so fragile and have no support to hold them secure? Sometimes people are wounded or hurt from things that have happened to them in life and they're always on the "edge" of tears or fear or loneliness, etc. They just need someone to come along and nudge them closer to Jesus, so that they are fully supported and not tottering on the edge all the time. (*Place the book back in the center of the table.*)

Suppose you are asked to carry several items all at once and the items are stacked up so high you cannot even see where you're going! (*Pile the items in the arms up past their eyes and watch the person waver.*) Why would you even try? You would have to lay down some of the items and only carry a little at a time. (*Have the person lay down some of the items so they can see.*)

Sometimes carrying too much in your heart can make your faith waver. Maybe you are hurt, you are sad, you are tired, you are lonely, you are angry, etc. and all these things weigh your heart down until you feel like you are carrying a huge load! Did you know you can lay your burdens down at the feet of Jesus?

Suppose you are on a game show and the final question is being asked. If you get it right, you win a million dollars! If you get it wrong, you win nothing! What pressure that would be if you thought you knew the right answer, but you weren't quite sure! (*Ask someone a hard question from the bible.*)

One day a final question will be asked of us, and we do know the right answer! It's Jesus! He is the answer to every need we have. We don't have to be afraid of not knowing the answers, because he knows everything we need, everything that's in our future, everything that bothers us, and he is all we need to know! Isn't that cool? We can be sure of our relationship with him.

Let's look again at the reasons we waver, wobble and whoops!!!...we fall! –

- Feet are not secure
- Not fully connected to the source
- Lack of trust
- Not fully supported
- Carrying too heavy of a load
- No knowledge of the word

Read Romans 4:18-22 – Abraham did not waver through unbelief. Why? He was fully persuaded God could do what he promised.

The Family Practice - September Stress – by Rachel Toalson

Back to school.

Back to craziness.

Back to 5 a.m. mornings if I want just an hour to myself.

Back to fights about schedules (eat first or brush teeth and dress first?), and walks down the road to school, and folders to sign, and excruciating practice with guided reading. And this year there are two rising early and strapping backpacks, and searching for shoes.

September brings with it a promise of stress.

It's because nothing new is ever easy, not really. All those days of summer, we relaxed into a loose schedule where they could stay up later, as long as they didn't bother us and weren't too loud and didn't destroy anything. In those mornings, they slept as long as they wanted, because a mama wasn't about to wake sleeping babies, no way.

The oldest, 7 years old, knows what to expect, and the next in line, 5 years old, doesn't know what to expect, but they are both filled with the same anxiety they can't speak. I only feel it in the pull-away of their embraces, too soon; in the wide of their eyes; in the harshness of their words aimed at those little brothers: *Just leave me alone.*

Life always has these seasons, where stress pokes its head from hiding, surprising us in the way we speak to our children, in the way we clench our teeth all through the night so we wake with a jaw tight and ear aching, in the way we fall apart at the slightest provocation.

It rises at the start of every school year and then falls as we settle in, and then it rises again as we start that second semester and falls again as we step into spring break, and then it rises higher than ever in the mad rush to count down days toward summer break.

It's not their fault, and it's not our fault, and it's not the world's fault, it's just that stress and anxiety are facts of life.

But it matters how we deal with them.

We can stuff them down deep, pretend they don't really exist, and we can wear those emotions wound tight, so that an explosion is bound to happen.

Or we can manage them.

It was in the middle of a rough spring semester, where an appendix landed me in a hospital for emergency surgery and a boy was tardy two days that week, and four other boys waited at home for a hug and a kiss and some snuggles, that I discovered the **miracle of mindfulness.**

Mindfulness.

Just being aware.

Waking up.

Noticing.

It is naming those emotions when we feel them coming and breathing through them so they don't get the better of us, and then releasing them all on the altar of acceptance. Accepting a day for how it goes, and accepting a season for the stress and anxiety that come with it. Accepting a person for who he is.

Mindfulness can douse the flame of stress and then water the garden of calm.

My boys know this, and since those days last spring, we have added a mindfulness practice to the tail end of our prayer time, one that centers our minds, one that calms all the voices that say we didn't do enough and we weren't enough, one that goes like this:

Breathe in: *My day is done.*

Breathe out: *Now I can rest.*

We take our time, and in that space of practice, mindfulness realigns our world and softens the chokehold of stress and walks us back to gratitude, for a day lived well and full.

We breathe, and we learn to live free.

Here are some of the mindfulness practices we engage with our children.

1. Mindful breathing or mindful listening (good for calming down, like around mealtime or bedtime).

- Sit in a comfortable position with the spine straight or lie on your back.
- For mindful breathing, focus on the breath (it helps kids to imagine something, like a flame in their belly that brightens and fades as they breathe in and out).
- For mindful listening, listen for the sounds around you (cars passing, dogs barking, birds singing).
- Let kids choose how long they will breathe or listen (3-5 minutes for young ones, 10-15 minutes for older ones).

2. Visualization (good for emotion-charged, high-anxiety or nervous moments).

- Visualize a safe or pleasant and calming place (mine is a hammock suspended between some large trees, where I can virtually curl up with a book).
- Try to imagine the environment in detail, and then try to feel it.

3. Body scan (good for relaxation).

- Lie down, close your eyes and breathe deeply, in and out through the mouth.

- Then breathe through the nose.
- Then breathe through the imagination, pretending to take a deep breath through the feet, and the belly and the heart, neck/throat, nose and top of the head.

(Ideas adapted from *Mindful Parenting*, by Kristen Race.)

YOU

Strengthening Your Core – That’s Life - by Marcy Lytle

He started packing his things in boxes, and the day came, just a few weeks before the wedding, when he moved out. He was my youngest, and now the house was really empty. We now had two bedrooms (he had taken over his sister’s bedroom when she moved out five years prior) without furniture, a bathroom with empty drawers, and a silence that filled the house with a depressing cloud that hung over me, rained on me, and even pressed on my heart to where I could barely breathe...

All I knew was how to be a mom to my children, and now that phase of my life was over. It happened so quickly, and it was final. A done deal. There would be no more children in the house that required my cooking, cleaning, and pampering. It was just me and their dad left alone, like we were at the beginning of our marriage. Only now, we had decades of memories that were joyful...yet painful...and we now controlled the remote. Only we didn’t really feel like watching television...

What a bleak picture I’ve painted!

I think I’ll add some more dark paint to this artwork: my thoughts and questions! Here’s a list of some of them:

Where did all the years go?

What am I supposed to do now that they don’t “need” me anymore?

Will this deafening silence ever go away?

Is my heart going to stop aching for the chatter of their voices?

How did I get to be so old?

What will bring me joy, now?

Should we become more involved in church?

Will their rooms ever be occupied or used?

God, what does the future hold for “me?”

It’s been over a year now since he moved out, and I cried buckets of tears after he left, trying hard to fill all of the void places in the house with new things, new décor, and new furniture. That worked for a bit and cheered me up. But honestly, I’ve had to retrain my mind, rethink my priorities, and refurnish the rooms in my heart that had previously been full to overflowing with children.

The truth is that my kids still need me. I’m not their #1 but I’m not supposed to be. Their spouse has now taken that spot, and that’s a good thing. They call, they ask for help, and now they have kids that need extra love, which we are so happy to supply. What? I’m a *grandparent*? I can barely type the word.

The truth is that I'm not that old. And even when I join the ranks of the old people, it just means I'm gaining momentum toward the finish line, and I plan to run a little harder and breathe a little deeper as I make those hurdles at the end. But I'm not there yet. I've got lots of life to live.

The truth is that my husband is a lot of fun, when I stop to realize he needs me. And I need him. We can watch what we want to on television, or not. Our bills are lower, our time to travel is more often, and there are lots of good things about discovering one another again. We don't look the same as we did when we first met, but we have aged together and acquired an admiration for each other that runs deep. And that water tastes pretty good...

The truth is my future is just as firm, exciting, and full as it was when I was 20 – before children. God has plans for me that include being a woman who hears and obeys and does what he tells me to do, enjoying time with my kids and their kids in a role that allows me to go home and sleep all night (while *they* get up with the kids). Growing old in wisdom and grace as I now know, and seeing the faithfulness of God in my life through all the worrisome times when I thought we'd never have enough, settles my soul like a boat that's found an anchor.

That dark painting that I described above was smeared, didn't have defined edges, and was really out of focus and not pretty to look at for a while. But over the past year, God has inserted his paintbrush into the mix and started adding a bit of color back into the picture, a few textures, and some clear pictures that are continuing a masterpiece he started before I was ever born.

I still have days when my heart aches, I long for my children to be near me, and I cry for a moment as I miss them. But as a close friend and family member once shared, when I begin to thank God for all of the years, the blessings, the fun, and the hardships that he's taken me and mine through, my heart quits aching. It starts pumping with excitement and it starts to burst forth with joy.

My son is now packing boxes once again to move to a new place, with his awesome bride, as they start another phase of graduate school for her. They're leaving their first apartment home already. My daughter has two babies (and one on the way!), and she and her husband are super busy raising them in a way that makes my heart glad. Their lives have already changed in just a few short years.

I know there are more changes on the horizon, because *that's life*.

But I'm not going to live under the pressure, the rain, and the emptiness, because I'm moving on with all of the moms and dads who are in my same shoes, watching their kids leave their homes. It's an exodus that takes place in every home full of children as they grow up and become adults. And it's necessary, good, and part of His plan.

I can live with that. In fact, I can wake up in the morning, turn on my worship music loudly, and dance in my living room in my pj's, because no one is there to see me...except Him...the one who fills every room in my heart...and in my home...with thanksgiving and praise.

Under the Influence - I Don't Like Eggs by Marcy Lytle

I've never liked them, and I don't really recall my mom forcing me to eat them, and I'm pretty sure I won't like them in the future, either. There's one big reason I don't care for breakfast out – because most of the menu items have some kind of egg!

As I was thinking about this for the umpteenth time (because people I meet still can't believe I don't like eggs,) I thought about my kids when they were little and their eating habits. I also thought about parents I see now, as they try and maneuver through the aisles of the store, the pages of recipe books, and then the shelves of their own pantry, trying to find healthy food they can *make* their kids eat.

I had one picky eater, and one who tried everything. And I remember being pressed and stressed because I had thoughts that perhaps I wasn't a "good" parent because I couldn't get my son to eat vegetables (other than mashed potatoes).

There were other things I noticed around me that made me feel like a not-so-good parent either, as I observed moms and their kids. That girl said, "Yes, ma'am," and my kids were praised if we got a "yes" instead of a "yeah." Her son sat still at the table, while mine disappeared under it. Her children said their ABC's at age two, and we were still playing with Play Dough with our kids.

The point I'm making is that I'm not so sure that parenting by peer pressure is such a good thing. My kids grew up just fine, well-rounded, smart, healthy, polite...even with all the "mistakes" I thought I had made.

So, for all you young moms out there, here are a few things that might ease up your shoulders, relax your back, and erase your headache, if you remember...

1. **A few French fries, and a few times of making your son his own "special" plate won't ruin him.** In fact, he'll smile and hug you, and you'll be his hero. It's okay if every meal isn't balanced and nutritious. Sometimes you enjoy a cookie too, don't you?
2. **Bedtime doesn't have to be a routine of fighting and screaming.** If you're tired and she's tired, and you don't feel like giving her a bath – let her fall asleep with dirt under her nails. She'll be fine, and the roof won't cave in.
3. **Your kids don't have to be kindergarten-ready at age two.** It doesn't matter if that's the "norm" nowadays. Let your family and your standards be the norm for you, and stick to your own norm.
4. **Every kid is rude, sometimes.** Having children should make you keenly aware of sin and how we're just born with that inclination, no matter how many times we teach our kids to say, "Please," and "Thank You." Just because your friend's kid politely thanked you today and your kid grabbed and ran, doesn't mean your friend's kid won't kick you next time you pass by. Training takes years, and years do produce results...
5. **Consistency is a key component of parenting. But it's not the only key** on the ring, nor does that key fit every lock! There are times when we just might let him remove his shoes at the table. Maybe his feet really do hurt. Learn to discuss and reason with your

child, as soon as he is able to understand that sometimes you can bend the rules, since you're the rule maker.

6. **You're human.** Did you forget this one? There will be days when your schedule, your list, and your expectations will fly out the window. In fact, these days will happen often. Invite laughter to be your friend. Laughter will relieve more stress than any pill you might pop.
7. **Your children are all different, and that's a good thing.** Just because she is studious, keeps her room clean, and verbalizes her emotions does not mean she's "better" than her sister who'd rather paint, leave her clothes on the floor, and sit quietly listening to music. Release your kids and encourage them to be who they are.
8. **Your husband is not your child.** As soon as you figure out this one, you will be happier, your husband will be more inclined to assist and help you, and your family will be settled. If he puts her dress on backwards, barely combs her hair, and forgets which shoes match – so what? Thank him for the help. Don't criticize his every move. You're wasting good energy when you do that!
9. **Kids are fun.** This may sound silly and obvious, but sometimes we moms can get so uptight about not performing or keeping up with what we feel is expected of us and our children that we go days, weeks, and months without ever cracking a smile at the wonder and beauty in our children's eyes. Be silly with them, lay perfection aside, and roll on the floor. Don't let dad have all the fun.
10. **If you don't like eggs, then you can bet there will be something your kids don't like as well.** And they may never like it. She may never enjoy shopping like you do. He might not ever like dressing up in a button-down shirt like you think he'd look so nice wearing. Outward appearances, taste buds, and food preferences aren't battles in which you have to engage – so lay down your swords.

Being a parent isn't easy, it's not very rewarding at first, and it's downright exhausting. But sometimes we make this task super hard on ourselves because we think we're "supposed" to be like everyone else, or our kids are "supposed" to be this way or that.

At least in the above 10 areas, find a few that you can absorb and make some changes...for the better of your own health and that of your family.

You can hug yourself, now. You deserve it.

And I still don't like eggs.

Healthy Habits - The Drug Epidemic by Georganne Scuch

I read an article this week that startled me with its directness on the dangers of prescription drugs. While I was aware of the deaths of famous people from drug overdoses, I was completely ignorant of how many otherwise normal people are caught in addictions to prescription drugs. Not drugs they bought with cash on a street corner from a shady guy, but drugs they bought with a credit card from their pharmacy with a signed slip from a physician.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#) (CDC), the number of women who died from accidental prescription painkiller overdose rose 400% from 1999 to 2010. Male deaths also increased by 265%. That's an astonishing number of deaths that could have been avoided.

It's understandable to take an occasional painkiller for specific incidents, such as a surgery, but to continue to take prescriptions over a long period of time puts a person at risk of developing a dependency, a dependency that ruins lives and families. The blame for addiction, in my opinion, can be shared by the physicians who prescribe the drugs and the people who take them without questioning.

Doctors go to school for a long time and endure years of training to help people who are sick and injured, but they seem to have stopped treating the illness and turned to relieving the symptom far more than necessary. The average patient, likewise, looks to her doctor to help and has been conditioned, to a certain degree, to blindly accept a diagnosis. Both have contributed to a situation where 70% of Americans are on prescription drugs.

I personally know several families who have been affected by this tragedy. The long-term consequences from a necessary prescription for a legitimate injury have caused untold heartbreak. In many cases, the tragedy could have been avoided with a mixture of preventive care, lifestyle changes, and less addictive medications. There is no question that the patient should have requested a second opinion or sought additional treatment, but hindsight doesn't fix the problem.

As a result of this experience, I have refused prescriptions for hydrocodone to handle the severe pain I experience with recurring kidney stones. One time, my doctor told me to take one pill every 6 hours for three days prior to a surgery, to remove a lodged stone. I was not in excruciating pain (the major pain of a kidney stone comes during movement as it tears the ureter), so why should I take it so often? Honestly, I have made several trips to the emergency room for uncontrolled pain, and I'm happy for a one-time dose. But I carefully consider how often and how much I need a painkiller. It's a very small step from occasional use to chronic use.

With that in mind, I have researched and experimented with several medical alternatives to help me avoid painkillers. Everyone's needs are different, but I encourage anyone faced with a chronic condition requiring some kind of pain management to do their own research.

First, overall nutrition should be evaluated. Eating a standard American diet results in numerous chronic illnesses. I changed my diet to avoid sugar, gluten, and processed foods. I added fresh vegetables and fruit and food-based vitamins to help build my immune system and lower my body's inflammatory response that caused a lot of joint pain.

Second, exercise can be a natural painkiller. Even mild exercise releases endorphins that help the body feel better, in addition to promoting flexibility and strength. I found that much of my back pain was caused by tight muscles and spasms from inactivity. I follow a low-impact workout (light weights, stretching, walking, core exercise) at least three times a week, and my energy and back pains have improved. Water aerobics is wonderful for people who suffer from joint problems.

Third, consider natural pain management techniques. Acupuncture, chiropractic care, and soft tissue therapy helped reduce scar tissue and realign my spine to release pressure in certain areas. They can also be used for a number of other conditions, such as sprains, muscle tears, and migraines.

Fourth, research natural painkillers. Chinese medicines have several types of painkillers that are not dangerous or habit forming. Essential oils are another great natural remedy for many medical challenges. I add lemon essential oil to my water to boost my kidney function and peppermint or rosemary oil to my bathwater for achy muscles. I also found that apple cider vinegar helps with kidney pain. A tablespoon followed by a glass of water relieves the dull ache and even the sharper pains associated with the beginning of a stone passing. So far, I haven't had to use a prescription painkiller for any recent attacks. Keeping my fingers and toes crossed on this.

The U.S. faces a drug epidemic unlike anything it has seen before, and the main enablers are the doctors who are sworn to do no harm. Additionally, as patients, people are responsible for understanding and researching their conditions and treatments. A new mindset must be cultivated to avoid the dangers of addiction and treat the very real health problems people face. To do so takes courage and dedication, but it will save lives and families.

Articles used for reference came from [USA Today](#), [CBS News](#), [PBS](#), and [CDC](#).

Beauty for Ashes - Hung up on Hang-ups by Pam Charro

One of my biggest frustrations in my walk with God has been staring at my hang-ups. It is bad enough when I become aware of something, but then I have this tendency to obsess about these hang-ups and try to figure out what I need to do about them.

I have been praying about this for years. Why is this still such an issue?

Why doesn't this advice or that advice work for me?

What is it going to take for freedom to get through my thick skull?

It doesn't take long before I feel completely hopeless about the huge mess that I am. Will I never be "fixed"? I am amazed that I have survived all of the negative thoughts that I constantly attack myself with, and usually I am not even aware of how poisonous my thinking is.

This became very real to me just last week.

I am part of an online support group of people who are trying to get into better physical shape. A young woman posted that she was about to have a romantic getaway with her husband, but she was so stressed out about eating badly that she got up extra early to pack her customary healthy food. Because she was this way, she claimed she had an "eating disorder." I could totally relate to her anxiety, since I get the same way during unstructured times and it tends to ruin my vacations. I got into my usual thinking of how impossible my situation is and wondering why I am not getting anywhere in this department, and then a lovely young woman wrote the following:

"Why worry about whether or not this need you have is technically right or wrong? Everyone has hang-ups: Mine is clothes left lying on the floor. I literally have to go outside and cool off when I see them. Do what is right for you and don't worry about what others think or say is *normal* or a *disorder*."

I cannot tell you how this blessed me!

Don't get me wrong, I know that God has some standards that are purely right or wrong, and we are not to excuse sinful behavior. **But this huge gray area also exists, and many of us will find our hang-ups there, where we are not yet sure what to do and God hasn't answered us yet.** Our hang-ups are not a surprise to Him. He accepts us with our self-perceived idiosyncrasies and peculiarities and knows exactly what He will do about them at the proper time as we faithfully walk with Him.

Keep praying, absolutely!

Desire to be like Christ, constantly!

These are good things.

But one of the greatest freedoms that we have been given is the right to be right where we are, right now.

And it's okay.

*Here I am again, reimagining. I thought my August article was quite sufficient regarding this topic, until I received my daughter's email. I love having daughters – true bliss. **BUT**, daughters don't let us get away with anything. In fact, I find the tables turning on me. They are now doing what I have done so often with them. They're pressing me higher...deeper.*

AUTHENTICITY

“Amazing article, mom. Again! I wonder what it would look like if you were a little more detailed in the issues of what God is doing like you are with the physical descriptions of where you are? I find myself wanting to know the specifics versus global expressions or thoughts when you talk about your prayers. What are you reimagining? What are the life ways He is showing that are higher? They could be simple sentences that don't require explanation or uncovering. Even if the audience doesn't share the same specific examples, it does allow for an authenticity that all generations long for. Just a thought!” (Amanda's email)

An authenticity? I thought. I turned off my computer.

I don't have time to think about this. I'll think about it later.

Weeks later, as we were driving to my hometown to celebrate my mother's 82nd birthday, I casually read Amanda's email to my husband and my oldest daughter, Cami. “See Mother, I'm the good daughter,” Cami said, winking at Jim and laughing, “I would never say anything so disrespectful.” It was a conspiracy. I ignored them and re-read the August article, complete with its “global expressions” of prayer.

“Lord, soften our hearts to the places in our lives that are marked *under-construction*.” Thank you for the grace to embrace Your handiwork within us. Help us endure the re-imagining and keep our eyes on the joys of becoming more like You! Thank you for the Chicago trip! Thank you for the gift of *REIMAGINE-ing* .”

Help me be honest, Lord. Help me explain what You are doing in my heart.

Our short business trip to Chicago described last month was wrought with navigational mishaps, stress between Jim and me, and “under construction” signs at every turn. By the end of the first day all the signs pointed heavenward – there were just too many to ignore!

With just a few hours to relax before we caught our plane home, we headed for the Navy Pier hoping for some peaceful water scenes. And yes, even the pier was “UNDER CONSTRUCTION.” So, when I saw THE **REIMAGINED** NAVY PIER sign, a cracking sound reverberated through the shell covering my heart. I didn't totally understand it that day, but I knew somehow that sign and the word REIMAGINE was MINE. It came straight from the throne room of heaven.

Tired of my driving in circles? Can I be more specific? Yes, it is time for authenticity!

“This looks like our life - **DETOURED**.” I'd told Jim in Chicago.

In our family, we're all in some phase of major transition, all facing issues regarding relocating, work, career, finances, marriage, church, loss of a loved one, health, and/or aging – just ordinary life issues.

Not until Amanda's email challenged me to re-read my "global" prayer did I realize that my heart had moved into self-preservation overload, like a tortoise. I'd pulled my heart into a shell, turning inward rather than upward. No wonder I was experiencing spiritual navigational problems.

THE REIMAGINED NAVY PIER sign was a text message from God with a picture attached. He gave me a glimpse of my future, and it was beautiful. Like the energy surge after drinking a green drink, I felt invigorated. **Construction sites don't bother the Lord.** His eyes are on the finished product!

Part of my favorite verse hummed in my ears.

"Now **stay focused on Jesus**, who designed and perfected our faith. He endured the cross and ignored the shame of that death **because He focused on the joy that was set before Him**; and now He is seated beside God on the throne, a place of honor. Consider the life of the One who endured such personal attacks and hostility from sinners **so that** you will not grow weary or lose heart." (Hebrews 12:2-3; The Voice)

Yes, my daughter, it was a global Hebrews 12 prayer I wrote that day. Yet, even in the writing, my spirit knew my heart desperately needed softening, grace, and endurance. REIMAGINE became my favorite word, but months after the trip I found myself unable to turn that key God had given me and open the door to joy.

Cami's laughter and sarcasm drove me deeper; she inadvertently kicked the shell and it went spinning across my consciousness. I could no longer hide from myself.

I miss you, Lord. I miss your presence.

I had been holding my breath, and God whispered, "BREATHE." And with the breath, His loving kindness touched my heart.

"I am my Beloved's and His desire is for me." (Song of Solomon 7:10, NASB)

What's my REIMAGINED game plan?

- Stop and breathe, deeply.
- Read love letters.
- Learn how to be authentic with God.

I long to share my heart with the Lord once again. I need to come into His presence daily. I must begin journaling again. *So for me*, I'll be enjoying writing Him daily love letters, and I'll be looking for His to me!

I think Chicago was a very special place. I'm so thankful I took the time to read last month's article again...thanks to my precious daughters!

(REIMAGINED Part TWO can be found in the AUGUST Issue archives)

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road: Create Shared Meaning by Lynn Cherry

Every marriage has irreconcilable differences, but conflict doesn't have to be a deal breaker. We are reading [*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*](#) by Dr John Gottman and we've gained some great skills for solving our solvable problems. We've also learned how to manage the gridlock that comes with perpetual problems. This month we discover that a rewarding marriage is more than managing conflict, it's about creating a meaningful life together.

In this final principle, Dr Gottman presents four categories that form the basis of shared meaning:

- Family Rituals
- Your Roles in Life
- Personal Goals
- Shared Symbols

Over the years, we have worked to establish family rituals. We love our summer vacations with the boys. We remember each trip by choosing a summer vacation theme song. Last year our theme song was "Chicken Fried" by Zac Brown Band. We cranked it up and sang along every time we piled in the van. It was the first vacation where our boys invited a friend, and we take great pride in knowing we introduced one of them to the wonderful world of country music. There is a line in the song that says "Funny how it's the little things in life that mean the most..." It's so true. These little things, simple rituals, help create a family culture that is unique to us.

One of our treasured family rituals is the bedtime routine. Every night when the boys were little we had bath time, story time, snuggle time, and prayer time. Some nights we were exhausted. We wanted to skip it all and just get them to bed, but we stuck with the routine. Our boys are 14 and 17 now and we still have this habit of connecting with them at bedtime. Only now, they tuck us in!

Sharing similar views about your roles as parents or your roles as husband and wife will help to create a sense of solidarity in your marriage. Dr. Gottman says, "One of the basic tasks of a marriage is to establish a sense of "we-ness" between husband and wife." It reminds me of Genesis 2:24. From the beginning of time, we see the importance of we-ness. *"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."*

Sharing our goals in life, especially our deep spiritual goals, will create intimacy in marriage. The exercises in this book have helped David and me define our personal goals and created the opportunity for us to share them with each other. Working together to achieve a shared goal or supporting your spouse as they pursue a personal goal strengthens the bond you share.

Symbols are a great way to create shared meaning. The rings we exchange on our wedding day are important symbols. It's terribly obvious, but cherries are an important symbol for us. I started collecting cherry home décor soon after David and I got married. It was a way for me to embrace my new identity as Mrs. David Cherry. It communicated value to David and was a tangible way for me to say I belong with you.

Marriage can be so daily – paying bills, cleaning the house, washing clothes and dishes. There is an endless list of boring stuff that has to be done. Pile on the demands of work and raising children and it's easy to neglect your marriage. It's easy to take it for granted. We have.

This book is a powerful marriage building tool. It reminds us to honor our marriage as the central relationship in the family. Jobs will change. Children eventually leave home. The effort you make today to invest in your marriage will ensure a satisfying life together long after the last project has been managed and the kids have moved on.

What rituals, roles, goals and symbols help define your life together?

Date Night Fun – Park Avenue – Marcy Lytle

There used to be a television show that played a song with one line that said, “Darling, I love you, but give me Park Avenue.” It was the old show, [Green Acres](#). He wanted to live in the country, and she preferred the city. Park Avenue symbolized the glitz and glam of the big city and all it has to offer. So this September, we are offering big city dates ideas!

Try to find a weekend this month where you can drive to the big city (if you live in a small town or in the country), or enjoy a night on the town (if you already live in a big city). These dates might require a bit of dressing up, if you are so inclined. Enjoy the city lights, the hint of fall in the air, and ladies...put on your heels! And if you can't make it to the big city, bring the big city into your home for date night in!

A Broadway show – These can be costly, so start saving ahead of time. Try exchanging with another couple, so you can save on sitter fees. And purchase a [Groupon](#) for dinner, to save on food. You could opt for a small town theater where the prices are less, but the night out is still grand! Set the mood for the entire night's experience with a clean car, [a fresh scent](#), and a packed basket with dessert and drink for enjoying under the moonlight when the show is over!

Tapas with Friends – Tapas are appetizers or snacks. Sometimes, in downtown areas there are tapas bars that serve up snacks on small plates, stacked up on towers, and these are so fun to share with friends! If that's not available, spend a bit of time scouring the internet for restaurants with good appetizers, and plan to stop at a couple. Purchase a set of [question cards](#) for table talk, dress up for a good time, and end the night with small desserts, as well, atop a large hotel where the view is spectacular!

Get Artsy. Check out your local art museums and shows for hours the exhibits are open, and plan your date accordingly. Expand your horizons by studying glass, paintings, sculptures, etc. – whatever you can find where you're going! In my city, there's an awesome [sculpture garden](#) in a beautiful setting, with walkways and flowers. Then see if you can create your own art pieces with a sketch book and charcoal. This would be a great afternoon date, since that's when museums are mostly open for show...

Moonlight and Water. Find the prettiest water features in the big city and plan your date around them. Perhaps it's a fountain downtown, a pond in a subdivision, or a pretty lake in the center of town. Plan at least three stops. Take photos by the water, stop in at local eateries in between stops, and sit in the moonlight with a thermos of coffee in one hand, and [homemade biscotti](#) in the other, as you look at the sky and wonder...

Dinner Event. If you're in the big city, find the most romantic of places downtown and make reservations ahead of time. You might want to check out [Open Table](#). Make date night revolve around the dinner. Dress up. Enjoy a three or four course meal. Take your time and savor each bite. And only converse about pleasantries and gratefulness for each other. When the dinner's over, hit the lobby of a downtown hotel and people watch, until it's time to head home.

Park Avenue is not where most of us live, but once in a while it's fun to save up, dress up, and show up for a super charged night on the town – downtown. It doesn't have to be often, but

when we purposefully prepare for something more than the ordinary, it can be a wonderful night to remember! Try it, and share with us what you did!

After 30 Years - The Scales that Tipped by Marcy Lytle

He was a server, ready to help.

I was a listener, full of mercy.

These are two of the characteristics that defined us, early on in our marriage. What a blessing to have a husband as a server, right? And listening to others seemed like an asset, since we were youth leaders at our church, and there were so many needs.

However, it didn't take long for both of us to realize that the scales tipped way too heavily in the area of our "gifts;" in fact, so much that we just about toppled over.

He was the last one to leave the church after every service, because he loved locking up, closing up, and cleaning up after the last person was gone. This was okay, except sometimes I wanted to leave early and get home, because we both had to work the next day and I had not been able to spend any time with my husband at all. But he felt it was his "job" to do this. He volunteered to help at every opportunity, including one particular weekend that got him into a heap of trouble.

A huge prop needed to be built for a program that was going to take place, and he had promised to take on the project all by himself. He didn't plan well, and ended up with 24 hours left to complete a project that needed a week's timeframe for completion. We already had plans on this one Saturday, all of which had to be scrapped because of his need to serve, and the deadline that had to be met.

Needless to say, we were at odds with one another over his gifts that now had turned my husband into a *servaholic*.

What about my gifts?

I had every girl in the youth group, most of whom were newlyweds, calling me day and night to ask for prayer for their marriages. At first, it made me feel good to know I was needed. But after listening, and trying to fix every problem, I realized these calls were becoming something I dreaded and something that weighed me down.

Needless to say, we were at odds with one another over my gifts that now had become something that turned me into a burned out grump.

He found himself lacking wisdom when asked to serve, and I found myself wanting to hang up before the phone ever started ringing.

What happened to us?

We had not learned the balance between gifts governing our wisdom, rather than wisdom governing our gifts.

Take time to look and see where you both thrive and do well, and then ask yourselves these questions:

1. Does your gift get in the way of your time with your spouse or family?
2. Does your gift dominate your thoughts so much that you are now weary in doing well?
3. Is your gift something you're just about ready to give back?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above three questions, you might consider this wisdom:

1. Ask your kids and spouse to forgive you for putting your “identity” ahead of “intimacy.”
2. Learn to pray before you say “yes” or pick up the phone, or whatever it is that you do well.
3. Seek wise counsel on how to bring back to balance the tipping scales.

Here’s a bit of wisdom that we have gained over the years of being married.

The Lord gives us gifts to bless him and others, but we are not a blessing if we are burned out. Time spent with the Lord and with our family first will result in a healthy balance, so that our gifts are not poured out and emptied on others, to where we have nothing left for those for whom God has granted us the responsibility to honor and love. And when we honor and love God and our family first, he will guide us and guard us on when to say yes, or when to say no.

We have learned to ask the other before we say “yes” to anything. And if we are not in agreement, the answer is “no.” And sometimes that two-letter word contains more wisdom than all the hours we can spend, and all of the words that we can offer, helping someone in need. Jesus often withdrew from the crowds, spent time alone with his Father, and took out time to fish with his friends. He knew the necessity of learning wisdom as he matured and grew in what his Father had sent him to do.

God has great things for you and your spouse to do for his kingdom. Growing distant from each other, losing your mind because you’re too busy, and burning out until your flame is extinguished is not on his list. Joy, peace, and love should accompany all that you do, and if it doesn’t – something’s got to be removed from the scales.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: Surviving the School Year by Kayley Ryan

You know it's that hectic time of year when your books are piled high, your mind is mush from trying to do too many things at once, and you catch yourself falling asleep at your desk—until Mom comes in and you pretend you've been studying the entire time.

School seems to be so much of a *chore*, doesn't it? We find ourselves stuck in this mundane routine of reading, writing, and arithmetic without avidly seeking to actually *learn something*.

It's hard to believe that while we privileged students with internet access and educational opportunities stick up our noses at the school year snaking its way back into our lives, there are children in other countries who would just love to be able to *read*.

Now, I know we can't always be expected to look at school with an intense longing and understanding of how it's going to make us educated, dedicated, and responsible citizens. There will always be days when the piles of unfinished reading, unsolved problems, and unwritten essays compel us to finish the job as quickly as possible—even if we forget everything we learn just a couple weeks later.

But wouldn't it be amazing if we were to wake up each morning with a renewed attitude:

"I'm going to pay attention in class so I can actually *learn* something today. Instead of daydreaming about what I will do this weekend, I will actively seek to be interested in the classes I sit through."

Okay, so I know you clicked on this column so you could learn some secret tips to *survive* the school year, not to *enjoy* it.

But here's what each of us needs to really get:

The best way to survive the school year is to attempt to enjoy it and to actively seek to learn. We need to shift our attitudes toward *learning* and not just toward making the grade.

When I began my freshman year at Classical Christian Institute (a homeschool co-op), I was so excited to begin the school year. I would jump at the chance to analyze a classical piece of literature such as *Pride and Prejudice*, to write haiku poetry, or to present a memorized historical speech in front of my classmates.

But as the years went by, I noticed my eagerness for learning slipping away. What was I doing differently? Why couldn't I seem to stick with it?

My freshman year was the most exciting for me because everything was new. Each Monday at CCI or each weekday studying at home was a fresh and exciting experience. After that year, I tried too much to *fit in*. Instead of raising my hand the instant I knew the answer, I preferred that someone else would be labeled the "teacher's pet."

I had lost my childlike curiosity, and instead of calling learning an adventure, I was calling it drudgery.

I'm sure each of you has had a similar experience. You begin kindergarten with crayons in hand and a huge grin on your face, ready to take on the day with energy and an eager attitude to *learn*. But by the end of your senior year, all you want to do is get the whole process over with as quickly as possible.

What changes?

I am reminded of a passage in the Bible where little children gather next to Jesus, wanting to learn from Him and be with Him. Meanwhile, the disciples are trying to shoo them away. After all, they're little kids. They might tear at Jesus' robe, interrupt His teaching, or take too much time out of His day.

Yet, Jesus says to His disciples in Matthew 19:14, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

We get so caught up in our daily routines that we don't see the big picture. Yet, somehow, those little children seemed to really *get* what it was all about. They took the time to stop what they were doing and to learn what Jesus had to offer them.

Those children had something that many of us are missing today: a childlike curiosity and a joy of learning.

Sure, it's easy to apply the joy of learning to something you love doing. I *love* theater, and so learning about theater is not a problem for me. But when I have to solve mathematical equations, the entire process of learning becomes drudgery.

We enjoy doing one subject more than another because we're wired differently. God has created me as more of a theater, writing, and reading person. But that doesn't mean I can't approach math or science with the same eagerness to learn that I do with my other subjects.

As my mom explained to me,

"The more we understand a subject, the more we do enjoy it. So if we seek to understand, we may find the joy."

While preparing for the math section of the SAT during this past year, I struggled with my own confidence issues. I told myself that I wasn't good at math. As it turns out, *that* was my problem: not that I wasn't an expert at math or couldn't solve higher math equations yet, but that I *told* myself I couldn't.

I know there will be days when I just have to force myself to work at those problems until I get the answer, but as I ask God to help me in my insufficiencies and approach learning—even learning math—with a childlike confidence and an eagerness to learn, He will work in me that joy.

2 Corinthians 12:9

“And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

Moving Forward - Four Little Words by Lynn Cherry

Why do I think I'll accomplish more during the summer? Like where did that faulty thought process originate? Summer is a blur of unscheduled chaos. It's all I can do to keep up with added burden of pool/lake towels in the laundry.

School has already started and I feel the frustration of days that have slipped by like sand running through my fingers. And I wonder.

*Did I really connect with my boys?
Did I enjoy the time away with my husband?
Did I finish a single chapter of my book?*

Is it even possible to balance marriage, motherhood, and my own personal goals? Some days I consider throwing my dreams out the window. I think I would be more content without them piling on my desk and taunting me like all the books I've started to read but never finished. I don't really want to let go of my dreams, but sometimes it just feels so hard.

Lately, I've been trying to relax and recover the simple joy of creativity through writing daily pages of free flowing words. I ignore punctuation I disregard spelling I don't backspace I just write (demonstration)

It's not easy to turn off my inner editor but I'm getting the hang of it. Today, as I write, I'm wrestling with the disappearance of summer, coupled with the demands of fall, and I'm wondering if I'm ever going to accomplish anything meaningful in my life. My typing turns into praying. I pour out my heart, close the laptop, and reach for my Bible. I'm reading *The Message* translation and I find this precious gift:

***Where you are right now is God's place for you.
Live and obey and love and believe right there. 1 Corinthians 7:17 MSG***

I know this is God speaking to me, answering the prayer I prayed with my fingers just minutes ago. This awkward place, with its grieving, longing, and wondering is God's place for me. And even as my goals for the year are vying for my attention I know I must grab onto these four new goals. Care to join me?

Live, Obey, Love, Believe

Live - Enjoy each moment. Be present. Pay attention. Smile wide. Laugh more. Listen better. Unplug. Play!

Obey - Say yes. Do what the Father tells you to do when he tells you to do it. But don't be afraid to take a break from all you're doing. Remember, rest is obedience.

Love - Give freely. Love in words AND action - husband, children, family, friends old and new. And while you're at it, be kind to yourself too.

Believe - Stay hopeful. Trust God with your dreams and goals. Create. Use your imagination to see yourself being the best possible version of you.

It's become my new life mantra - Live, Obey, Love, Believe. In these four words I'm finding purpose, perspective, passion and permission to keep dreaming.

What word from the list above stands out to you?

Tough Questions – Unity in Disagreement – by April Karli

It's been a rough summer. The stories coming out of our news outlets have been grim, depressing, and even frightening. A couple of months ago I wrote about how our outrage spills over into social media, and that rather than being angry at the injustice, poverty, and evils we see in the world we often turn on one another. I see Christians lobbing accusations and even calling each other's salvation into question over minor disagreements.

One Saturday morning as I scrolled through my newsfeed reading, I recoiled at what I saw and became deeply discouraged. "If being a Christian means having all the answers, being angry, self-righteous, and telling everyone else what they have to think all the time, I'm out," I told someone.

Of course, my faith is not dependent on the opinions of the people I interact with on social media. But, they do represent much of the Christian response to what's going on in the world. I saw anger, accusations, and division. I wished to have seen dialogue, empathy, humility, and open hearts. I wanted to see Jesus. It didn't feel safe to express my opinions out of fear I'd be attacked or told maybe I wasn't really "saved" because my political or theological beliefs don't line up with the evangelical status quo.

I was not feeling unity and acceptance from my fellow Jesus-followers that Saturday morning.

It seems the worse the news gets, the more convinced we become that we know how to fix the world's problems. We treat anyone who disagrees with us as the enemy. This behavior stems from anxiety. Things are not as they "should be," and we freak out. Anxiety tells us we must quell the chaos and put things back in order.

In [Ephesians](#) Paul says: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the ***unity of the Spirit*** through the bond of peace."

We must be careful not to confuse uniformity with unity. Uniformity means we all think the same way about everything and ostracize those who don't fit the mold. Unity means we respectfully remain connected to one another regardless of our disagreements. The zinnias in the picture above display unity - they're all zinnias, planted in the same field, but they're different colors and heights and sizes.

Unity is harder. I admit, I'd rather hang out only with people who think just like me. But it is unity, not uniformity, which leads to spiritual growth and maturity and should be the goal of every follower of Christ.

In Ephesians, Paul was not calling the church to uniformity. He wasn't telling everyone to be exactly the same. The truth is that we followers of Christ are not going to agree about everything. From minor things like which ice cream flavor is best (Dos Amigos from Blue Bell) to big things like politics and theology, we will not see eye-to-eye.

[Jesus told](#) his disciples the last night he was with them, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you **love one another.**”

Love one another.

It does not look like love to argue and get into fights on social media. And it does not look like love to spew opinionated self-righteous rants online at whoever happens to read it. That behavior sows division, not unity.

Jesus told his followers to love one another.

- We must love one another when we are in the same room, singing hymns of worship to God.
- We must love one another as we partake of the bread and wine at the Table.
- We must love one another when we disagree about Israel and Palestine, how to handle the Central American child refugees at our borders, or the SCOTUS decision about Hobby Lobby.
- We must love one another when we read and interpret Scripture differently from someone in our congregation, small group, or Facebook friends list.
- We must love one another when we don't understand how that person could possibly think or believe what they say they think or believe.
- We must love one another when our fellow believers are behaving abysmally online or in person, because our time will come to need to be loved through our own abysmal behavior.

We must love one another.

It's not easy. Because what I want, honestly, is to let everyone else know why I'm right and they are wrong.

Loving each other can sound like asking questions instead of blaring your opinion. It can look like holding your tongue when you really, *really* have something to say. It can feel like offering a hug or handshake to that person who slighted you and won't admit they're wrong.

As often as I've been discouraged by my brothers and sisters in Christ on social media, I've been encouraged by friends who respond to argumentative comments with humility and love. Many of my friends express disagreement and questions on my own posts in respectful ways. I am thankful for those friends.

I think we all grow together through open, safe dialogue. We sharpen each other and draw closer to each other and closer to Jesus. It's vulnerable to admit you might be wrong. It's scary to say, "I'm sorry for coming across too harshly." But, in the end it leads to greater unity.

Saddle Up – Those Conversations – by Melissa Critz

Donning my blue Padre Island ball cap and grabbing a couple of carrots, I head out to begin the job of sweltering in the Texas summer heat while exercising one of my horses. Not as many flies buzzing around – probably due to the good amount of freezes we had this past winter. But the thickness of the air hangs unseen, wrapping itself around all that dare to leave the pleasant indoors.

I recall how my older daughter and I shared this experience regularly in years past. For many years, Kirstin was a competitive barrel racer. We bought one horse in the beginning and then two more as she became better, and out rode the horses we had. Since I grew up under saddle, English, not Western (but I don't discriminate,) I rode with her to help get the horses exercised.

Oh, those times. Nothing, NOTHING, can take away how precious those times were for me with my oldest child.

We exercised the horses and then took them in the pasture for cool-down time and walked them for quite a long time. THIS is when the conversations happened. We talked about school, barrel racing, movies, funny stories, books, music, and basically... life. Our talks usually turned to friends, relationships, boys, church, family, future plans, and anything and everything about Jesus. *What a treasure this is to my heart even today!*

My other three children did not grab the horse *bug* like Kirstin did but they had their own passions. I was able to have one on one time with them too – baseball and football, gymnastics and volleyball – many hours spent in the car or at the field or gym. **Those hours can be viewed as wasted time as a taxi driver or as precious listening/talking time with the treasures that have been loaned to us for a brief time period.**

It doesn't have to be just special times set aside. Remember:

- When your child is with you, turn off the radio or put away the cell phone.
- Don't say a word. Let them start.
- Make yourself available.
- Use that car ride as more than just being a taxi driver. Ride *with* your child.
- Walk with your child.
- Be there with ears that are open to hear.

AND I highly encourage you, if you have more than one child, to make sure you have one on one time with each child. It's imperative.

[Deuteronomy 6:6-7](#) speaks of teaching your children diligently throughout the day. This doesn't mean a lecture day in and day out. To me, this means teaching in not just words, but in actions, and by listening. And if you don't know the answer, then pray and seek Him. Look up the question and seek for answers, and then come back together and talk about it some more.

If you're a young mom, be there for your child in each moment. Grasp the moments as you would a branch to save you from the quicksand of the busyness of life. Use those moments to get to know the core of your kids, on an individual basis.

I still have two kids at home year round – both in high school – but I still get to be with them as we go places. My older two are in college now and slowly spreading their wings to leave this cozy nest that my husband and I have made. More to come on that later...

Riding now is a bit lonely at times. With one horse recovering from an illness, I cannot have a companion. And well, my former companion is now finding her own life beyond our walls. It sure tears at my gut when I recall those precious times with my oldest and all those times of riding and talking. I still miss them.

But I do hear from a special friend now more and more, while I ride in the quiet.

The Lord is my saddle partner. And, truly, I am never alone.

Real Stories - Hazardous Moments by Tammy Kuykendall Morrison

The sound of the lawnmower sputtered once; then died completely. My husband and I instantly heard our son shriek, "IT HURTS! IT HURTS!" He began running toward us, reaching out for us. As he got closer, we realized—to our horror—that a 3" piece of wire hanger had impaled him just below his eyebrow.

Right about now maybe you're making a judgment and saying to yourself, "Hmmp! He should've walked the yard to make sure it was clear for mowing." Let me assure you, both he and his dad walked the yard to check for debris—and they did it carefully—making sure the path for mowing was good to go.

Aren't we sometimes rash in our judgments, not knowing all the details or circumstances others face? Consider this amazing parallel in our own lives: We're going along our journey of life, fulfilling the mission set before us— and BAM!—out of seemingly nowhere we are utterly bowled over. Ironically enough, even when we've "walked the yard" to ensure all is clear and no danger lurks ahead, the truth of the matter is that we all experience hazardous moments that bring us to our knees.

In these times of great peril, it is essential to remember you are not alone! Our Heavenly Father is attentive to the cry of your heart. Consider, if you will, the company of those who also cried out to God in their times of distress. Think about their situations and how—in essence—they were saying to God, "It hurts! It hurts!"

Scripture is filled with accounts of the psalmist David desperately seeking the touch of the Great Shepherd. From a young shepherd boy to a great king, he never outgrew his desire to remain in tune with God.

Hannah ached for a child. Esther longed for her people to be rescued from bondage. Job lost it all. Ruth's husband died, and she encountered bigotry and racism. Peter denied Jesus. John the Baptist questioned if Jesus was "the One."

Think you're alone? Think about Jesus. Even He cried in agony to His Heavenly Father "It hurts! It hurts!" when He prayed in the garden, and again when He declared, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" He understands your pain like no one else. He *knows* your pain.

The Word of God is filled with people who realized their source of deliverance was God. They knew to call out to Him for help. "It hurts, God! It hurts! I can't do this on my own. I *need* you to come to my rescue. I don't know what to do. I can't face this anymore. Help me! Deliver me from my trouble!"

In the years since the wire hanger catastrophe, my husband and I have determined that our son's cry for help that day was one of the most gut-wrenching, heart-staggering sounds we have ever encountered. Instinctively, we were on intense alert to that desperate cry.

With unlimited supply, God's heart is turned toward us, and He is even more attentive to our appeals than we are as earthly parents to our children. Matthew 7:11 tells us "...how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him." Why do we forget the precious promises God makes to us? How can we forget about His love and mercy? Time and time again, He assures us of His great love and compassion.

There was absolutely no doubt in our son's mind that day that we would immediately respond to his urgent cry. He *knew* we would take action—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Likewise, when hazardous moments weigh us down, we should cry out to God, "It hurts! It hurts!" and instantly run to Him. Rest assured, Abba Father will deliver you.

"Help, God—the bottom has fallen out of my life! Master, hear my cry for help! Listen hard!

Open your ears! Listen to my cries for mercy."

Psalms 130:1-2 (The Message).

Tammy enjoys writing inspirational stories that help others through tough times in life. She has her Master's degree in education and works as a school counselor. Tammy is happily married to her best friend Cory and has four grown kids and four grandkids. She is an avid reader and loves to try new restaurants and playing Speed Scrabble. One of her greatest desires in life is to make a positive difference by pouring into others and helping them realize their worth.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - His Thoughts – by Marcy Lytle

Most of the time, I don't want anyone to know what I'm thinking about, because my thoughts are my private sanctuary...and boxing ring. I sometimes think thoughts that are positive, uplifting, and worshipful. But other times my thoughts cause this war to break out in my mind, where I feel like I'm boxing and hitting my opponent that's try to rip me apart.

I recently posted on Facebook some of my thoughts one Monday afternoon while I was working, such as "Semisweet chocolate chips are addicting," and "I should be eating an apple." That's an example of the two contrasting thoughts that rise up often, to start this match to see who's going to win. But I also shared that I was thinking things like, "I love my kids," and "Is it fall yet?" which indicate gratitude and longing, which I don't mind sharing with others.

Several people commented on my post, and I really enjoyed reading what they too were thinking as they sat working on a Monday afternoon. It gave me insight into their hearts, actually, that made me feel a connection – all because they were sharing their thoughts with me. One person shared, "I wonder if God loves me." And still others shared funny thoughts that made me laugh out loud. It was somewhat cathartic for me to just type out my thoughts as they appeared in the tickertape of my mind, at the moment they came, and then left... And it seemed to be so for those who commented, as well.

Of course, this sharing of thoughts gave birth to more thoughts, and then this one particular thought,

God's thoughts...what are they like?

I Chronicles 28 says, "...for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts."

Psalm 40 says, "Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders which You have done, And Your thoughts toward us; There is none to compare with You. If I would declare and speak of them, they would be too numerous to count."

Psalm 94 says, "When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, your consolations delight my soul."

And my favorite in Isaiah 55: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts."

First of all, God understands our thoughts. That's a huge comfort. He gets it when we're tired, lonely, disillusioned, sad, confused, and overwrought. He knows where these thoughts come from, and why they surface in our minds.

Secondly, his thoughts toward us are more than we can count, and they're all loving, kind, comforting, good, joyful, and peaceful. In other words, for every thought that brings us down, he has innumerable ones to bring us up.

Thirdly, when we are overcome with anxiety, and our thoughts “multiply” (Isn’t that the way they do – one thought brings about two more, which bring about four more, until we’ve got a headache!), God consoles us and this delights our soul. Amazing...

Finally, the very fact that God’s ways are higher than ours gives us assurance that He’s in control. He’s up *there* where he can see the big picture.

A few verses later, in Isaiah 55, it says this: “So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”

Our carnal thoughts are empty, accomplish nothing, and bring us down to a level where we feel heavy with every step. But God’s thoughts are so high (because he’s God) that every thought (his words to us) that he voices (in his word to us) is never empty; it always accomplishes his desires, and it succeeds every time.

If we can grab hold of this truth, that God’s word is actually a minute part of his thoughts toward us, and that because he’s spoken them and shared them with us (much like I shared with my friends on Facebook), we can grab hold of his thoughts and replace our thoughts with his.

Most of the time when my thoughts build up and produce anxiety in my mind, I have not been reading and remembering His thoughts about me.

Try writing down your thoughts at a given moment in any day, and share (or not) them with a friend. Then share them with God. Think about what his word, the written thoughts from his heart, says. And visually exchange your thoughts for his.

Fresh THYME – Honor – by Marcy Lytle

We recently attended a party where we were asked to arrive early to help with the set up. The party was in an events center, and a room was reserved, full of tables and chairs. As we were laying out the tablecloths and making things look pretty, the lady in charge gave us votive candles to add to each table, stating, "These will look so nice when lit." However, when it came time to light them, none of us had a striker. When I asked the events personnel for matches, they replied, "Oh, candles are not allowed here at the center."

What does that short story have to do with honor? Let me continue...

I went back to the room and relayed the message that we weren't allowed to light the candles, when one person made this comment to me, "Well, we could light the candles anyway and not tell them."

To honor someone is to regard with great respect or to fulfill an agreement. Yes, we could have lit the candles anyway, and perhaps the lady sitting outside in the lobby booth would never have known. We would have had ambience, the decorator would have been happy, and perhaps even some of the guests might have commented on the pretty flickers. And no one would know about the no-candle rule, except me. But once I knew, I had a decision to make. Obey the events center rules...or disregard them in favor of my own wishes.

Honor is something we try to teach our children as they grow up, but honestly what they watch us do teaches them more than anything we could ever say to them. When they start to drive, if we teach them the traffic laws, but then we disregard them when we're in a hurry or when we think that sign is "stupid," they're going to follow suit and ignore that sign, as well. If we teach them to respect the space and belongings of others, but they see us check out at a store, knowing the cashier overlooked an item that was bagged, our children will see...and notice.

Honor is really an attitude of the heart, just like many other things we try to learn throughout life and then pass on to our children. For one split second, I thought of lighting those candles anyway. After all, each one had a cover around the votive, and the flicker would be ever so subtle. I could have thought to myself, "How silly that we can't burn small votives protected in a glass cylinders." I could have lit them, thinking my needs were greater than some stupid instruction from a lady who'd never know what we were doing in the room. And finally, I could have lit the candles, the lady could have walked by and seen them, and instructed us to blow them out, and that would be that.

Or would it?

There are a dozen times a day where we are tempted to dishonor others, their wishes, their instructions, or just their being. At work, we take our lunch "hour" and arrive 20 minutes late because our boss is out of town. A friend asks us politely to keep her prayer need in confidence, but we think it's okay to call a couple of people to ask, "Have you heard...?" Maybe we are in line with our kids at an amusement park and we see a quick way to sneak in, under a rope, where the sign clearly says to stay out.

I'm not talking about being perfect. We all make mistakes. **But when we on-purpose, willfully, and stubbornly, decide that someone else's reasonable ideas and requests are invalid – and we take it upon ourselves to do the opposite – we are dishonoring.** And it doesn't matter if anyone sees us or not.

At the party, I did decide to tell the decorator that no candles were allowed, and so there was no flicker on each table, the lights were never turned down low to enjoy the ambience, and no one noticed and commented on the beauty of the flame. However, the guy who mentioned "doing it anyway" saw that we obeyed the rules, the events center hopefully will allow us the use of their place again, and I went to bed knowing I'd done the right thing.

Honor. It's not just about offering your seat to an elderly person. That's nice. It's not just about clapping and giving accolades for a job well done. That's great. It's not just about placing your hand over your heart and removing your cap when *The National Anthem* is being sung. That's respectful. Honor is about making those small decisions that no one else knows about but you, when you choose to obey, or disobey, the instructions or wishes of another when you are able to do so...whether or not you think those instructions are valid.

Romans 12:10 says,

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor...”

Honor just might be one of the greatest witnesses we can offer those who don't know Christ. And just one honorable act can speak volumes to a person that's been shamed, abandoned, or disillusioned. Giving honor just might be the one thing that draws that person in...to His love.

FRESH THYME It's Just a Movie by Marcy Lytle

Even the movie industry provides parental ratings on movies, because it's a known fact that what we watch affects our emotions, our moods, and our minds. So it stands to reason that what our kids watch is even more important, because children lack the logic and ability to weed out the bad and only digest the good, when it comes to what they watch with their eyes. It's up to the parents to guard their children's eyes when sending them off to the movies.

Just because our kids turn 13 doesn't mean they're ready for all PG-13 movies, and even older teens don't need to be sitting for two hours watching sex, hearing constant foul language, and observing dishonorable behavior among peers or in relationships with the opposite sex. There's nothing good that comes from sending our kids to *just another movie* on a Saturday night, just so that we can get a break and have a night to ourselves.

So what's a parent to do? Banning kids from all movies isn't a good answer, because this just makes them want to see what it is they're missing. But **we can be the parents, when our kids are too young to make wise choices, and train our kids in wisdom, when they're old enough to choose.**

Here are some guidelines for movie watching. This isn't a list of where to find parental guidelines, because there are plenty to be found and read. Below are just common-sense and spiritual helps so that our kids are not affected adversely because we were too lazy and too uninformed to say, "No," and offer them an alternative form of entertainment. Some of these suggestions may seem like a no-brainer, but sometimes we as parents don't use our brains. So we need reminders.

DON'T JUST GO BY THE RATING. Sometimes, R rated movies have a lot less offensive material than the PG-13. If it's a war movie-related theme, it's going to be rated R for violence and blood, but some PG-13 movies have sexual innuendos and talk that even makes me uncomfortable, as an adult. Take time to read reviews, synopses, and content information on movies.

DON'T TAKE YOUNG CHILDREN WITH YOU TO SEE ADULT MOVIES. I get it. You want a night out with your husband and you've got nowhere to leave your kids. Make friends with another couple and trade off movie nights with each other, watching one another's kids. Or make movie night at home a fun event, AFTER the little ones go to sleep. Plan tasty snacks and drinks, and cuddle up on the sofa, without little ears and eyes nearby taking it all in.

DO FIND WEBSITE INFO ON MOVIES, AND TRAIN YOUR TEENS TO READ IT. Insist that they read the rating and why it's rated PG-13 or R. Oftentimes, their conscience will bother them just from reading the text, and they will opt out. Train your kids to stand up for their own good, and offer them other types of fun besides going to the movies, if there's nothing good on the big screen. Open your home to your teens and their friends for food, fun, and games.

DON'T WATCH FILTHY TELEVISION SHOWS IN FRONT OF YOUR KIDS. If they see you watching perversion and dirt, they will follow suit. Search. Take the time to look, and find good films and shows that are family-friendly. If you can't find any, pull out games, and enjoy each

other's company with a night of friendly competition. Take the family to the park. Turn off the television and read together. Pile up everyone in the car with flashlights and go for a night walk, or lie on blankets and gaze at the stars.

DO BE DILIGENT TO KNOW YOUR KIDS AND THEIR TEMPERAMENTS. Maybe your 16 year old son can watch a war movie and the gore will not affect him, but his twin brother is traumatized by the violence. Perhaps your 10-year old understands that the monsters and apes in the movies are not real, but your 7-year old still doesn't get it. Don't force your kids to watch something where they flinch, cover their eyes, or scream. Why do we do that?

DON'T IGNORE THE SIGNS. If your toddlers are copying attitudes and actions seen on a movie, such as calling names, throwing tantrums, etc. it's time to reconsider what they're watching. If your tweens are super charged with disrespect for you and the opposite sex, consider what movies they've been seeing. If your older teens desire to attend movies that are full of witchcraft, or sexual scenes, and you send them off, you as a parent are allowing an open door to all sorts of junk that will be hard to handle...because you think, *It's just a movie.*

[Matthew 6](#) says the eye is the lamp of the body. It's the gateway for what we allow our minds to think upon, and our emotions to feel.

We all know how addicting and damaging porn is for adults. It affects relationships and ruins lives. It's no different for our kids. If they watch that which scares them, those things that arouse them, and observe rude actions that get a laugh from the audience, they will copy and mimic what they see, and it will affect them in ways that can be downright dangerous for their growth as a healthy, wise, and holy young adult...set apart for Him.

FRESH THYME - Knowledge is Essential by Marcy Lytle

I had a teacher friend who was “accused” of being snobby, because she used to walk down the hallways at the school where we taught; and when other teachers waved at her, she never waved back. However, it wasn’t long before we all found out that she arrived without her contacts or glasses on each morning, and she couldn’t see anyone waving at her! Once we had this knowledge, we all thought better of her. Knowledge was essential!

There are so many times we judge, or think poorly of a person, because of their action...or reaction. Perhaps a friend “ignores” our email or invitation, and we assume she’s not interested in being a friend, so we write her off and never talk to her again. Maybe another friend talks incessantly when in a group of women and drives us crazy, so we avoid her at all cost. And what about a friend who brags too much about her own accomplishments and the accomplishments of her kids? We consider her to be obnoxious! We’ve all known friends who fit into one of these categories, and I dare say that we fit into some category others have placed us in, as well!

But what if...

That friend who ignores our emails or invitations is really just a super busy mom with too many things on her plate, and she rarely has time to sit down and view emails or respond to people? Maybe she’s exhausted and too tired to think or care. *That knowledge would be essential.*

That friend who talks too much is really suffering from loneliness because she’s home with tiny tots who can’t talk back to her, her husband is gone because he works double shifts, and she’s desperately needing an outlet to feel like she’s heard and validated, but there’s no one around most of the time to do this? *That knowledge would be essential.*

That friend who brags and toots her own horn never received accolades growing up. In fact, her parents constantly told her how fat she was, that she was worthless, and they wished she’d never been born. She made a vow that she would tell her child of his worth, and in doing so, she would value herself, as well. *That knowledge would be essential.*

So if we had the knowledge about the folks we avoid, and that knowledge became an essential part of our lives, what would we do with it? I think we’d be a little less judgmental, perhaps a bit more accepting, and I’m sure it would prompt us to pray for those who seem to be annoying or aloof.

There’s really no way we can obtain all of this knowledge about people unless we get to know each and every one of them at a deeper level of intimacy, and we pry into their private lives. That’s not healthy or practical.

The best we can do without the knowledge behind the actions is to remember to tell ourselves the title of this article: **Knowledge is essential.**

And without the knowledge of the whys behind the actions or reactions of those we encounter every day, we have no basis on which to judge them.

Unless we know why that lady glared at us, that man in church didn't comb his hair this morning, or that kid ran past us crying and screaming in the restaurant, we really cannot point a finger and dismiss that person from having any value.

Finally, if we do obtain knowledge about those whom we've judged, the best thing we can do with that which is essential, is pray for them.

Knowledge is essential. But it's the knowledge that we are all created in God's image and all are of great value to the one who made us, our Creator and Lord. We all have experiences and suffer hardships in life that affect our behavior later on, as we interact with others.

We can't change people and make them be socially attractive, friendly in a crowd, or a best friend that we need. But we can love them, accept them, and pray for them, knowing that God can change and heal a broken heart.

That knowledge is essential.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

October 2014

TIPS

The Dressing - 1-2-3 Done!

Sometimes, we can shop our closet and realize that we only need a few inexpensive pieces to pull an outfit together with a whole new look! If we have a good collection of shirts/blouses, a few cardigans or sweaters, and some cool accessories and shoes, it's as easy as 1-2-3 for an outfit we will love to wear!

Try these ideas for a combo of 1-2-3 that perhaps you've never thought of before!

A denim shirt, fun booties, statement earrings – Lauren likes how easy these are to wear, and yet how instantly they present a more fashionable look that can be worn almost anywhere! Her boots are from [Aldo – on line!](#)

White shirt, pullover sweater, scarf – Take your white button-down shirt and find a sweater in your closet – any color at all. Then sift through your scarves and find one to tie the outfit all together or...add a new scarf to your wardrobe! This scarf was on a summer clearance sale at [World Market](#), but it works well for fall! (marcy in pullover)

A cami, sweater, chunky earrings – Leyanne says you cannot go wrong with black. Pull out one of your black camis, add a black sweater, and then pop the outfit with chunky earrings. The earrings Leyanne are wearing are from [Kendra Scott](#).

Khaki jacket, bold necklace, cami – Using that same black cami, Leyanne says to pair it with a khaki jacket and then a bold necklace. Here, she's added yellow, which looks great against the backdrop of the jacket and cami. Experiment with your jackets and camis and necklaces!

A tribal print sweater jacket, a blouse in the same color but a different print, a contrasting necklace – Look through your closet and find two pieces in the same color scheme but with different patterns. See if they look good together and then add a necklace of a whole different color for a pop! This necklace was found at [Styles for Less](#) for under 10 bucks! (marcy in gray outfit)

Leggings, long shirt, colorful scarf – Charissa says to pull out a “good ole pair of leggings” in a black or gray color, and add a long cozy shirt. Then dress up the outfit with a colorful scarf and your go-to boots. “It's the most comfortable outfit and I look forward to it every fall,” she says. She likes leggings and scarves from [Anthropologie](#).

A sweater/jacket with a graphic tee and some great earrings – This jacket comes from [Tilly's](#) and notice the muted gray/black color that can be worn over virtually any graphic tee! Once you choose this duo; then add pretty earrings in silver or gold, and you're good to go!

Denim jacket, tank top or blouse, and a belt – Rashedelle looks great in a solid colored top cinched at the waist with a fashionable belt. She tops it with a denim jacket. This look is great for work and/or play!

Sometimes shopping in your closet with this 1-2-3 method is the most fun of all! You might find two pieces that go together, and all you need is a third that you can easily buy next time you're

out! Hang your 1-2-3 combos together on hangers and prepare your outfits for the week – it's great fun!

Seven 4 You – A Happy Halloween

A lot of parents don't like to celebrate Halloween, either because of its origin, due to the scary costumes, or just because they feel uncomfortable doing so. We always celebrated Halloween with our kids as they were growing up, but we left the evil part out of it. After all, the season of fall and pumpkins, and even dressing up in costumes, is such a fun part of childhood memories, and we didn't want them to miss out. Since Halloween is this month, we thought we'd share with you seven ideas of family fun you can have without being afraid of the dark...

1. **Pumpkin carving/decorating.** Our family has a tradition that we still enjoy, even now that our kids are grown. We get several large pumpkins and we decorate or carve them on the picnic table in the backyard, we have a fun dinner, then we display our pumpkins on the porch just as it gets dark. Don't forget to [roast the pumpkin seeds](#), too! They're delicious! One fun way to decorate pumpkins without the mess is to collect pipe cleaners, stickers, and markers from the Dollar Store and let the creativity flow! Lots of good conversation and laughter occurs when the weather is cool, the pumpkins are glowing, and the seeds are roasting.
2. **Leaves, leaves and leaves.** Find a big pile of leaves and jump in them – everyone! Then collect leaves into a large trash can and begin building a [family scarecrow](#) together. You'll need a broom handle or long wooden rod, a burlap bag for the head, old jeans, shirt and gloves. Just pin the legs of the jeans closed and start stuffing with the leaves you have gathered. As you stuff the burlap bag for the head, then be creative with the face, topping him off with a straw hat. Place him in the garden or in your front flower bed with pumpkins at his feet. Make him a happy guy!
3. **Candy corn, popcorn, and a movie.** *Woman's Day Magazine* has a cute idea for making a [candy corn wreath](#)! So as you enjoy a bag together, create something for your home! After hanging your wreath, pop some corn and [make kettle corn](#) together, before you settle in for a family movie. [October Sky](#) is a good movie to watch, if you can find it.
4. **Outdoor movie night.** Set up the laptop, or your television, outside in the backyard and invite another family over for movie night outdoors. If you have a fire pit, light it up, and provide snacks for everyone. Lay out the blankets, and provide more for warmth, if the night air is chilly. Some cool snacks to make are an orange cookie pie, and buggy brownies. For the pie, just rollout refrigerated sugar cookie dough into a 10 inch circle and place on a round baking sheet, baking at 350 degrees for 15-20 min until just brown, let it cool. Frost it with orange frosting, and place pecan halves along the edges to form the "crust." Slice and serve with whipped cream. For the buggy brownies, make your favorite brownie recipe and cut into squares. Place a bug stencil on top and using a fine sieve, sprinkle with confectioners' sugar, remove the stencil and serve!
5. **Door to door, and more.** Trick or treating doesn't have to be a night where we hide in our houses, fearful of the evil in our neighborhoods. It can be a fun night to go door to door to neighbors and take treats to them, instead of taking treats from them! What a cool idea! Let your kids dress up in their favorite costumes and fill their bags with treats to give away. One fun idea is to collect small rocks of all shapes and have the family paint them or decorate them in fall colors with stickers, with a verse or a word of HOPE,

FAITH, LOVE, etc. Give one to each neighbor for their fall garden! If the neighbors want to hand your kids a treat, then receive it!

6. **Caramel apples and card tables.** Have an evening where you invite a few friends over and ask each one to bring an apple of their choice and a card table. Set up your kitchen with toppings like chopped nuts, coconut, mini chocolate chips, pretzels, etc. and a pot of melted caramel ([Check out this cool buffet idea.](#)) Let each one take turns dipping and decorating. Next, set out board games on card tables in your backyard, and divide up in groups of four, playing each game for 20 minutes each, then moving to the next station. Enjoy your apples while you play!
7. **Hay rides and marshmallows.** When's the last time you took the kids for a hay ride? If your kids are small, just pile some hay in a small wagon, place tiny marshmallows and pretzels in baggies, and take the kids out for a walk. If your kids are older, scour the internet for small towns near you with fall festivals and see if you can find one that includes a hayride for kids! When you're back home, consider making homemade s'mores with this cute [s'mores maker!](#)

However you choose to celebrate fall, include your kids in all of the colors, scents, and tastes of the season as you enjoy this time of year together!

Selah's Style – 4 Ways to Wear Jeans – by Selah Irwin

Everyone has jeans.

At least, *most* everyone has jeans.

But, everyone may not know that they can style them so many ways! Do you know that?

I call this the sporty look. If I was to go watch a soccer game, I would wear something like this! You can roll your jeans to be capris. You never know. It could get cold in a blink of an eye. Luckily, you can roll jeans down to make you warmer.

I started with a cute exercise shirt that my friend Gigi gave me. I borrowed my brother's hat and threw on my tennis shoes to put the sporty look together. I just grabbed a ball for dramatic effect.

Do you know you that can wear your jeans to be fancy? I had an idea to use a white tank top over one of my mom's dressy shirts. I put my hair in a sideways bun and added a beautiful flower. I grabbed a clutch bag and posed professionally. It is comfortable outfit, but dressy enough to wear to a Quinceanera. I love going to quinces!

We all know you can wear jeans to school, but it takes some flare to pull off this style! A sweater vest and a green long-sleeve shirt, my glasses, and a book make this look fabulous!

You can even layer your jeans under dresses to add warmth during the chilly *fallness*! I took my favorite dress from the store [Naartje](#), (which you might find in your local mall), whipped it over my jeans, and flashed on my tennis shoes. That is my tip of the month!

It's really fun to be creative. Let's see how many ways you can come up with to wear your jeans!

The Fearless Kitchen - Ode to Pumpkin – by Christina Vetter

I can't believe it's already October. Only two months until a new year! Where did this year go? And where was I? Oh that's right... I have a two year old. Regardless, as quickly as this time of year has come upon me, you will not hear any complaints from my end. I just love the fall season! I love the cooler weather, the Halloween and Thanksgiving decorations, and of course, the obsession with everything pumpkin. I love the frantic dash for a Pumpkin Spiced Latte, both smiling and snarling jack-o-lanterns spread throughout the neighborhoods, and the pumpkin flavored treats pouring out from endless kitchens. Even my fall decorations are obsessed with the fruit. (Yes, pumpkin is technically a fruit). From October 1st to the weekend after Thanksgiving you will find a sea of pumpkins, both large and small, sprinkled throughout my living room. Glittery pumpkins, burlap pumpkins, plastic and fresh pumpkins of all shapes and sizes seem to fill every corner of my small country house. They're so festive and beautiful; I can't get enough of them.

As much as I love decorating with pumpkins, cooking with them is even better! They are so wonderful in breads, cookies, soups, pastas, and even drinks. This month, I'm happy to share some great pumpkin inspired recipes: Homemade Pumpkin Spiced Lattes, Soft Pumpkin Cookies, Roasted Pumpkin Soup, and Classic Pumpkin Pie. The decadent smell will fill your house as these are cooking, and the taste will not disappoint. Any of these recipes will make a great addition to an afternoon of crunching through piles of leaves or carving pumpkins. Happy eating and happy fall!

Homemade Pumpkin Spice Lattes

Makes 1 serving

Difficulty:



Ever since their debut, fall just isn't fall without a Pumpkin Spice Latte. Only problem? I'm not a fan of Starbuck's coffee! Feel free to gasp, I just can't help it! Not only does it cost an arm and a leg for one simple cup of Joe, the espresso they use simply isn't tasty. Not a fan. But, I LOVE the idea of holiday flavored coffee drinks...what's a girl to do? Hence the need for homemade version. The great thing about these, other than the fraction of cost, is that they can be adjusted to your own personal sweet tooth. I like a little added flavor in my coffee, but if you're like my husband and like a little coffee in your flavoring, feel free to adjust as needed!

Ingredients:

2 shots espresso (or $\frac{3}{4}$ C very strong coffee)

$\frac{3}{4}$ C warm milk

$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp vanilla extract

2 tsp sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp pumpkin pie spice

Optional: whipped cream to garnish

Directions:

- Steam and foam milk with a cappuccino machine if possible.
- Mix remaining ingredients together and stir to dissolve. Pour into mug, add milk.
- Add whipped cream if desired.

Libby's Traditional Pumpkin Pie

Serves 8

Recipe courtesy of Libby's Pumpkin

Difficulty: 

Okay, first of all, I'm not wild about pumpkin pie. The taste is wonderful, but I just can't crave it for some reason. That being said, I do enjoy this recipe. No, this isn't my personally created recipe, but you can't go wrong with a classic!

Ingredients:

- ¾ C sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ tsp ground ginger
- ¼ tsp ground cloves
- 2 eggs
- 1 (15 oz) can Libby's pure pumpkin
- 1 (12 oz) can evaporated milk
- 1 unbaked 9 inch deep dish pie shell
- Whipped cream, optional

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 425 F.
- Mix sugar, cinnamon, salt, ginger, and cloves in small bowl.
- Beat eggs in large bowl. Mix in pumpkin, sugar-spice mixture, and evaporated milk.
- Pour into pie shell and bake for 15 minutes. Reduce temperature to 350 F and bake for 40-50 minutes or until knife inserted near center comes out clean.
- Cool on wire rack for two hours. Serve or refrigerate. Top with whipped cream if desired.

Roasted Pumpkin Soup

Serves 12

Recipe Courtesy of *Martha Steward Living*

Difficulty: 

Pumpkin doesn't ONLY belong in sweet dishes. This soup is a great example of pumpkin's versatility in the kitchen. Please note: this makes a large batch of soup, but feel free to freeze and reheat uneaten leftovers.

Ingredients:

- 7 ½ lb pumpkin, cut into 2 inch pieces

3 onions, peeled and quartered
6 shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and cleaned
3 garlic cloves, peeled
Olive oil
Salt and black pepper
3 quarts plus 3 C vegetable stock
Sour cream (optional)
Toasted pumpkin seeds (optional)

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 450 F.
- Combine pumpkin, onion, mushrooms, and garlic on two baking sheets. Generously drizzle with olive oil and salt. Toss to coat, and spread in a single layer.
- Roast until pumpkin is tender when pierced with the tip of a sharp knife, about 30 minutes, rotating pans and tossing vegetables halfway through.
- Let cool until it can be handled, and remove skins.
- Transfer vegetables to a large stock pot, and heat over medium heat. Pour in 6 cups of stock.
- Puree with an immersion blender (or carefully blend in a standup blender in batches) until smooth. With blender running, slowly add remaining 9 cups of stock, and puree until smooth.
- Bring soup to a simmer, and season to taste with salt and pepper.
- Serve with toasted pumpkin seeds and sour cream, if desired.

Soft Pumpkin Cookies

Makes approx 2 dozen

Difficulty: 

These cookies are a cross between the chewiest cookie in the world and pumpkin bread. Feel free to even add a glaze for added sweetness. They are so unbelievably soft; I can't get enough of them. I even unashamedly eat them along side a cup of hot tea for breakfast when I have them around the house. They are a great way to ring in the fall season and will make your house smell divine!

Ingredients:

2 ½ C flour
1 tsp baking powder
1 tsp cinnamon
½ tsp nutmeg
½ tsp salt
1 ½ C sugar
½ C softened butter
1 C pumpkin puree
1 egg
1 tsp vanilla extract

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 350 F. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper to avoid sticking.
- In a medium bowl, combine flour, baking soda, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt.
- Separately, in a large bowl, cream softened butter and sugar together. Beat in pumpkin, egg, and vanilla.
- Gradually mix in dry ingredients with wet until fully incorporated.
- Drop 1 Tbsp sized dough balls onto sheets and bake for 15 minutes.
- Allow to cool completely before serving.

TRIED AND TRUE - Manners Revisited

I enjoy reading etiquette books. I once checked out Emily Post's Book of Etiquette (one of the first editions) from the library, a book about two inches thick! I loved the tip about removing sheets, folding them and leaving them by the door, when you're a guest at someone's home. And it was so cool to imagine living in a time where it was proper to leave a small notepad and pen on an entry table for visitors to leave a message if they came calling and you were too busy to answer the door. I just recently got a book for Christmas last year called [Modern Manners](#). I'm enjoying it as well, but find myself laughing out loud at some of the "rules" that no one I know really follows!

I thought it would be fun to list some manners that maybe we don't push so much, but ones that might be nice to see again...revisited.

At the table in a restaurant:

Napkins go in the lap – not on the table next to your friend's plate where she can see what you just chewed.

Forks are for eating food – not for waving in the air as you tell your interesting story.

Cell phones not allowed – unless it's an emergency. If you get a call, step outside the building to talk. Don't interrupt the entire room with your loud voice.

Kids stay put – they're hard to tame, but train them early, and don't let them wander.

Leave a tip – don't skip out on the group, leaving the last person at the table to make up your thoughtlessness.

On the road:

Texting is insane – so don't do it ever. Place your phone in the back seat where you can't reach it, if this is a temptation you cannot resist.

Turn it down – loud music makes it impossible to hear emergency sirens or a honking horn – and turning down the tunes just might save lives.

Use your blinker – it's courteous to let the person behind you know ahead of time what you're doing. You learned this in driving school, so remember it now.

Consider your passengers – ask them if they're hot or cold. Don't just adjust the temperature for yourself.

Trash it – not the car, but your garbage. Floorboards full of food wrappers, water bottles, leaves are not pleasant for anyone in the car, even for you!

In the Store:

Softly converse – If your phone rings and you decide to gossip to a friend, the whole store doesn't need to hear it. Remind yourself that you're being heard.

Move aside – Don't block the entire aisle with your cart because you're so engrossed in reading the ingredient label on that box of cereal you're about to purchase. Be aware and look up at the people around you.

Express means express – If you've got a cart full, be courteous to those with a handful.

Put it back – Don't like the shoes you just tried on? Put them back on the rack or shelf. Your kids will see you leave them there and they'll try that tactic when they get home.

Watch your kids – Bring a snack or a toy, or buckle them in the cart. Kids loose in the toy department, rolling balls down the aisles, is not safe or cute.

Visiting Friends:

Ask Ahead – Don't just show up with a dish you weren't asked to bring, or even a decoration you insist on placing on the table. Your host prepares ahead and has a plan, so please ask before you go.

Watch your kids – This is the same mannerly advice given for the store, but it applies in the homes of your friends, too. Want to remain friends? Watch your kids.

Watch the clock – Maybe you drank six cups of coffee and are ready to chat until midnight, but maybe their kids were up all night and they're longing for their pillow. Kindly excuse yourself at a decent hour.

Offer Help – Some people want to clean up themselves, after the guests are gone. But it certainly doesn't hurt to ask, and at the very least take your dishes to the kitchen. Seems like a given, but often it's not done.

Compliment – This is a lost art. Take notice of how cute that lamp is, the awesome color scheme, or the artwork on the wall. Friends will invite you back if you notice and love their home.

I'm glad we don't live in an age where manners were next to godliness and we get whacked if we step out of line. That's not fun. But it's also not pleasant to live in a society devoid of manners altogether, which is how it seems at times in some places. Manners just require a humble heart, an alertness to those around us, and a kindness to put others and their space ahead of our own.

REVIEWS

The Equalizer

I never saw the TV show of the same name, but I was told this movie is pretty much the same story. An ex-FBI agent who's now living a "normal" life cannot stop his innate sense of justice, as he meets people who are being treated unfairly. However, in this movie, Denzel Washington's character ends up in a tangle of corrupt activity that is larger than life. [The Equalizer](#) is certainly suspenseful, although it starts off a bit slow. In true Denzel Washington fashion, he's a "superhero" of sorts who doesn't wear a costume, but shows up in the shadows to save the day. It's rated R for violence, which makes it hard to watch in some spots. If you liked the TV show, and you like Denzel Washington, this movie won't disappoint. – Marcy Lytle

The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby

Yes, she's named after the Beatles' song. This young woman is married, and she and her husband have just suffered a terrible loss that has rocked their world. Jessica Chastain and James McAvoy are husband and wife in this sad, depressing tale of a couple with no support from parental figures, no hope from friends, and no ability to rebuild...after a devastating blow. We are drawn in from the onset of the movie to these characters, and we really want them to be okay. But how can they be? The acting is great, hope rises and falls, and when the movie ends...it doesn't really. [The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby](#) movie is part of three series, called Her, Him and Them. And this movie is just interesting enough to make me want to see the other two parts. – Marcy Lytle

The Maze Runner

This is another movie about young people left to find their way in a devastated world, without the aid of adults, while they're being attacked on all sides. The number of movies with this same sort of theme these days seems to be relaying some sort of message from the next generation to those of our generation, and it's a bit unnerving. [The Maze Runner](#) is the story of a group of young men (and one girl who later joins them) who find themselves in the "glade" – which is in the center of a maze which these guys cannot find their way out of. However, one particular young man is determined to fight off the adversary and lead the group to freedom. It's quite a suspenseful movie, with an interesting story (although a bit long), and includes an ending that leaves one wanting more...and wondering, "What?" – Marcy Lytle

My Old Lady

Kevin Kline, Maggie Smith, and Kristin Scott Thomas do a phenomenal job in this story of a man in his 50's arriving in France to claim his inheritance of an apartment left to him by his estranged father. However, upon arrival he discovers an older lady and her daughter live in the apartment, and he's in for one of the biggest surprises of his sad, mundane life. [My Old Lady](#) does an awesome job of portraying the struggles people go through when their parents have indiscretions that are never addressed. One never quite gets over the trauma of parental wounds, and the parents who wound never quite admit their parental sins. – Marcy Lytle

The Drop

James Gandolfini (from the Sopranos) and Tom Hardy are amazing actors, and show their stuff in this crime drama. Hardy and Gandolfini are cousins who run a bar that also serves a drop for money laundering. When a battered puppy is discovered in a trash can by Hardy's character, he befriends the woman who owns the trash can. This is a true detective whodunit show of sorts, but it's full of suspense and surprises, as well as language and gore. An investigation takes place that involves probing by a detective into the lives of those who frequent and work in Cousin Marv's Bar. If you like shows like this, you won't be disappointed in the script or the people who act it out in [The Drop](#) – splendid. And if you like Tom Hardy, watch the movie [Locke](#). – Marcy Lytle

God Help the Girl

This movie is film not show in the major theaters. But sometimes, these can be the best (or the worst) movies to watch – if you want to take the risk. The story of this movie is about three young people who are drawn, or perhaps thrown, together through music. One girl is in rehab for a disorder, one girl is seeking to learn how to write music, and the guy is a guitar player/lifeguard/tutor with a heart of gold. The movie includes lots of songs sung by the main character, Emily Browning, an Australian actress. In [God Help the Girl](#) I enjoyed the quirkiness of the story, the voices, and the lyrics (just about real, daily life) and the scenery – all of which combined to make an enjoyable film experience. – Marcy Lytle

Mom's Night Out

This weekend I watched [Mom's Night Out](#). I had heard many good things about it from my mom friends, and they were right! It was hilarious – a great picture of what it means to be a mom while managing to make me laugh with every scene. My husband, my mother-in-law, and I watched it together and all loved it! It was not only just a funny movie; it actually made me shed a tear, because it managed to encourage me so well. This movie is definitely on my list to buy! – Christina Vetter

Guardians of the Galaxy

We waited to see this movie until now, because the previews with the talking raccoon weren't appealing. However, it was a rainy night and this was the only movie available, AND we saw it in 3D – another non-appealing experience. The storyline is all about an orb, retrieving it and delivering it. The characters were varied from hum-ees (humans) to a creature made of roots (Groot – and actually he was the best visual), to yes – this talking raccoon (who was the funniest of them all). [Guardians of the Galaxy](#), in my opinion, tried too hard to mix a variety of old pop music, with literal lines (like those in the old movie *Airplane*), with graphics, and Star-Wars-like characters, all of which made a messy mix. There were a few bad words and an obscene gesture, in this otherwise Marvel Action comic flick that felt more like a flop. The audience laughed, and I suppose it was semi-entertaining for those who like these type movies, but I don't. – Marcy Lytle

The Identical

Did you know Elvis had a twin that was stillborn? I didn't. This story is just a what-if tale of what if that twin had lived? Sounds like a silly premise, but a real life Elvis impersonator plays the main character of Dexter Ryan. Ryan was born in the Great Depression to parents who couldn't afford to feed both Dexter and his twin brother, so in a tent revival where the dad heard there was a greater blessing in giving than receiving, the couple gives one of their baby boys away to the preacher and his wife. If you can get past this outrageous beginning, the rest of the movie isn't half-bad. Blake Rayne does an awesome job of looking and singing like Elvis. He tries to fit into his preacher dad's expectations, while searching for himself through his talent for music...while his twin brother is out there making a huge name for himself. Will their lives ever intersect? [The Identical](#) is an *okay* end-of-the summer movie – and it's only rated PG – Marcy Lytle

A Summer's Tale

A G-rated romantic comedy, I couldn't believe it. This is an independent film in French, with English subtitles. If you're still interested...read on. A young man goes on holiday to a place where his maybe girlfriend is supposed to meet him, only she doesn't show up. He meet a new girl and they connect as simply friends, because of course she has a boyfriend who's far away. She then connects the young man with a third girl, and the rest of [A Summer's Tale](#) is dialogue between the guy and these different girls as they walk along the beach, mostly. The story only gets interesting in the last quarter of the film when the original girlfriend shows up, and the young man has to decide what to do with the three women who are now interested in him. Yeah, it's hard to explain...even when the credits roll... - Marcy Lytle

The Last of Robin Hood

Errol Flynn was a legendary Hollywood actor who played Robin Hood. In this movie, Kevin Kline bears a striking resemblance to Flynn, and presents a compelling story about this man who led a sad life of too much drink, and an infatuation with a young aspiring actress (played by Dakota Fanning). Susan Sarandon is really the star of the show, in my opinion, as she plays a forceful, doting mother who pushes her daughter into stardom, only because her own hopes of being famous were crushed at young age. The movie is disturbing and sad, and yet one feels compassion for all three of these characters, as they each seem to be a victim of the hurts inflicted upon them by others. I can't say I "enjoyed" [The Last of Robin Hood](#), but I was thoroughly impressed with the acting. – Marcy Lytle

And So It Goes

I waited until this movie went to the dollar theater because I wasn't sure if I wanted to see it. It turns out that the story in [And So It Goes](#) was really heartwarming and charming. Michael Douglas plays a bitter, mean widower, and Diane Keaton plays a sweet, charming widow. After a granddaughter (he didn't know he had) shows up at his door, Douglas is confronted with the past and has a decision to make. Keaton and Douglas are funny, sweet, and sharp, and their story is cute to watch it play out. But... there's a lot of potty/sex humor in the movie that only

detracts from the story. It was cute, sort of like a cuddly puppy that's just walked through a muddy puddle. You enjoy the sweetness, but don't want to pick him up. – Marcy Lytle

November Man

This movie stars Pierce Brosnan in yet another movie full of action, suspense, and drama. This time he's training a young man in the ways of a CIA operative, only to later find himself pitted against his pupil, in a race to see who can get the bad guy, and save the girl, first. The movie is full of blood, sex, and some very hard-to-watch scenes, so I'm not giving it a nod, for that reason. It's a thriller, for sure, and one with twists and turns. However, I think if you're a fan of Brosnan and his kind of movies, I'd wait until [November Man](#) comes out on DVD later, so you can fast forward through some of the grime. Or, just skip this one altogether. – Marcy Lytle

My Five Star Life

This movie is an Italian film with subtitles, so it's not in the main theaters...you'll have to look for this one where independent films are shown. It's about a lady whose job is to critique 5-star hotels in different cities (Just experiencing with her the hotels, scenery, and details of her job is worth the price of admission.) She's a middle-aged single woman with an old boyfriend who shows up from time to time, she has a sister that's married and has two kids, and she's content to live her unique yet ordinary life...until she meets up with a lady with a message and a tragedy...and this changes things. [My Five Star Life](#) is a delightful movie and an interesting parallel between the main character's journeys to different hotels and our journey through life. – Marcy Lytle

Wish I Was Here

I don't get up and walk out of very many movies. In fact, I can count on one hand the times I've done so. But this is one of them. An actor dad is out of a job, his wife is played by Kate Hudson, and they have two adorable kids who attend a Jewish school. They are in deep financial trouble. However, within the first 15 minutes, there were way too many words and images and sexual acts that were offensive, and yet it appeared to be a "family" movie. [Wish I Was Here](#) made me sick to my stomach. So...we left. Maybe it got better, but I'll never know. Below is the movie we watched instead! – Marcy Lytle

Code Black

This is a documentary on the ER in a super busy community hospital in Los Angeles. Several medical students are filmed and interviewed over the course of a few years, as they go from working in a crowded "family-like" environment of face-to-face interaction with their patients...to a new facility where everything is streamlined, each patient has to be documented on multiple forms, and the interaction with patients is minimal. [Code Black](#) is a close-up view of the heart-wrenching experiences these young doctors face; and their emotions are raw and charged, as they share their hearts and their viewpoints. It's interesting...if you like documentaries and the medical field...and some medical procedures were hard to watch. - Marcy Lytle

HOME

Practical Parenting – 10 – That Nice Round Number – by Georganne Schuch

Every parent wishes there was a handy manual that would tell us how to raise our children. There are certainly enough theories on child-rearing, but if we want a true standard that has stood the test of time we don't have to go any further than the Ten Commandments. God summed it pretty nicely there and in such a way that even young children can grasp.

1. First, God is God. Not us. Not anything on television that looks pretty and shiny. Not the next political candidate running on a slick campaign promise. God is our hope and security. He deserves our respect and reverence simply because He is God. Not because of anything He has done or might do for us. ***Do we put anything else before God?***
2. Commandment two's graven image can be taken many ways, but if we understand that most, if not all, the nations in the time of the Old Testament worshiped man-made statutes (and by worship, I mean sacrificed humans in the worst possible way), then we can see that this command builds on the first. Not only is God the only God, but we can't worship our own picture or image of who we want God to be. We don't get to make the rules or set the standards or decide how He looks or what He thinks. We can only rely on the Bible to tell us that. ***Does our mind's picture of God match who God says He is in the Bible?***
3. The next commandment further identifies how we are to relate to God. Don't take His name in vain. That means more than the R-rated version of His name, which are fairly obvious off-limit vocabulary words. ***Do we in any way talk about God or who He is in a disparaging way?***
4. The fourth commandment finalizes our relationship with God by remembering the Sabbath. Many cultures and denominations have different ideas about when the Sabbath day is and what are appropriate activities for the Sabbath. I'll be honest and say we don't have any hard and fast rule here. We go to church. We spend the day with family. We thank God for our blessings. We don't let anything interfere with these activities that we consider to be important to keep on the Sabbath. Whether we're near our church or if we're home sick, we observe a time of Bible study and prayer. ***Do we set apart a day and time to fully focus our hearts and minds on God?***
5. After establishing how we should relate to God, He shows us how to relate to each other. The very first relationship that all children experience is with their parents. Sadly, too many do not relate well to their parents, even in Christian homes. Yet, God takes no excuses for how bad a parent is. Our culture's dysfunctional family model is nothing new to Him. We do not allow our children to talk to either of us in a rude or disrespectful tone or with argumentative words. We can disagree without being disagreeable, and if they don't learn how at home, they will have little preparation for working through conflict when it comes later. When our children approach us with a disagreement, we discuss why a decision or action has been made. Their attitude sets the tone for how well this discussion goes, and a good attitude, more often than not, results in a resolution they can live with. ***Do we relate to our parents with respect even when we don't see eye-to-eye or when they have wronged us?***
6. The next four commandments seem to be a little of a no-brainer for most people, particularly young children, but they really go beyond just the physical actions of killing, cheating, stealing, and lying. Does a child lash out in anger to a sibling with a hateful remark? That heart attitude lays the basis of murder, and we make sure they understand how dangerous that feeling is. After an apology, the child must not only affirm their love for their sibling but also seal it with a hug. Older children perform an action of service to restore the relationship, such as doing extra chores or letting them borrow a prized possession. ***Do we love others even in anger?***

7. Adultery is a very adult action, but a child should learn about loyalty beyond the marriage relationship. We weigh decisions and actions based on how they affect our family. We have sometimes declined or changed activities and relationships because they did not integrate well with our priorities. They might have created some kind of disruption that would have eventually altered our overall bond. By showing our children that our first priority is to our family, we model loyalty that will set the basis for their own marriages and families one day. ***Are we loyal to our family and make it a priority at all times?***

8. Children rarely have a good concept of ownership. Sure, in a home most stuff is commonly held, like cups, washcloths, food, but somewhere along the line a child needs to begin to see and respect the boundaries of other people's things. Money, for instance, isn't up for grabs just because it's laying on the counter, or even the floor. Ask around to see who lost it. Likewise, if I get to the car after checking out of the grocery store and find something that I missed paying for, like the candy bar wrapper in the toddler's hands, we turn around and go back to pay for it. Our rule when shopping is "hands in the cart at all times." ***Is it yours? Don't touch it if it's not.***

9. Ahh, false witness is another train-from-the-highchair commandment. I still remember when my 3-year old blamed her infant sister for eating the cookies. Really. The 8-month-old who couldn't even stand up yet. I'm sure it made sense in her mind. Of course, in a large family there are ample opportunities to find things to blame on a sibling, but no one is convicted based on one "eye-witness" account. Since the law allows an accused to face her accuser, we include the eye-witness during investigation and if any doubt is thrown on her testimony, she shares the punishment, which usually involves some time spent together learning to get along. ***Are you sure you saw what you say you saw, and exactly why does anyone else need to know?***

10. Finally, the crux of most disputes lies in simple covetousness. From the time Eve saw the shiny apple, the human race has never deviated far from wanting what someone else has. Not only wanting, but planning to rip it from their hands at the first possible opportunity. The best defense for covetousness is a good offense of gratefulness. During our prayer times, we list the blessings for which we are grateful. We try not to duplicate each other's list because truly we have many more blessings than we can begin to count. And when one sister gets a gadget or toy that another sister has wanted for "forever," we remind the poor downtrodden soul that God is not broke. Someone's blessing is not your bankruptcy. Give thanks in all circumstances and be satisfied with what you have. ***Can you be happy for someone's blessing without being envious?***

I'm glad God didn't get long-winded with His commandments. Ten is a nice round number, and they cover what every parent faces on a daily basis. When we teach our children who God is and how big He is, we ingrain a sense of trust and security. Never underestimate how important this basic understanding of God is to how our children's faith develops.

Life As We Know It – The Beginning – by Erica Simmons

Wow, my first Life as We Know It column. When approached with this great opportunity to write for THYME, one of the things to be decided was the name of the column. After much consideration and final approval, Life as We Know It was chosen. The inspiration for this choice was [the movie](#) with the same title. The movie is about two single people being made guardians of a married couple's toddler daughter after their tragic deaths. This movie epitomizes the state of being parents when children suddenly enter the picture, and "life as we know it" changes dramatically. Dealing with the day to day joys and challenges of raising children is a rewarding, yet at times difficult, task, even with two parents. This column will look at these joys and challenges through the life of a single parent – me. So join me as I share my life as I know it moments of single parenthood. Along the way I hope to share things that make you smile, laugh, shed a tear and hopefully strengthen and inspire you as they have me.

What better way to launch my first article than by sharing the moment life as I knew it ceased.

As a child, I was a huge daydreamer. It was amazing I was ever able to get anything done. As with most young girls, I spent a lot of time planning and thinking about my life and what it would be like when I grew up. So, it should come as no surprise that I had an amazingly clear vision of my life as a wife and a mother. **When those dreams were still unfulfilled at the ripe old age of 23, I began to wonder if my dreams were ever going to come true.** With hindsight many generations and mistakes later, my vision is still 20 – 20.

It was with this misguided patience that I started dating a young man named James. June 26th 1994 is a day that I will forever remember. It wasn't long before I was faced with the decision of whether or not to stay in a relationship that I can now freely say was doomed from the start. Needless to say, I stayed. I had those dreams that needed a husband in order to come true, and remember – I was already years behind my timeline for a start date.

Fast Forward

Six years and a lifetime of heartache and turmoil later, I once again stood at the crossroads of foolishly fighting for a dream that had turned into a nightmare, or walking away and starting life a single parent. This time I made the right decision and I walked away and on February 1, 2000. I became the mother of twin boys and my life was forever changed. Life as I knew it changed and daily life with my boys continues to be re-defined.

The great thing is that my children were not the only thing birthed that day. On that day, a strength I never imagined I could have was also given life. Because of my boys, I had the strength to walk away from a situation that was not only unhealthy but dangerous. Because of them, **I have accomplished more than any dream I ever had as young girl.** Because of them, I know there is not anything I cannot do, if I set my mind to do it. Because of them... I could go on forever.

I know many people look at single parent lives and oftentimes only focus on the struggle that they face. I would be lying if I said that is has not been a struggle, but I don't focus on the

struggles. I look at who my boys are now at age 14 and know the struggles will never be more than the reward.

This was the beginning of my story as a single parent. Your story may have a different beginning, but it is not how it begins that matters. Know that even though you may find yourself facing times when you feel so lonely, you truly are never alone. There are times when you may wonder if you can take another step, wash another load, or mediate one more fight. **Remember the promises of God – when we are weak He is strong.**

I am in a good place now, but I did not get here alone. I have been blessed to have found a church family that has been more than willing to love, support, admonish and teach me how to truly live a life with Christ as the center. This has lead me to being a better mother than I could ever have been even if my girlhood dreams had come true.

Not focusing on the struggles of single parenthood does not negate the fact that being a single parent is hard work. No one can do it alone, and having a good network of family and friends is key. A huge part of my network is my church family. Being the recipient of such Christian love and support, I realized a way to pay it forward. With the full support of my church, the Helping Hands Ministry was started. The current focus and goal of this ministry to help single parents and widows, who may need a helping hand with minor car repairs and yard work. This ministry is made up entirely of volunteers who give of their resources to others in time of need.

Please [visit our website](#) and check out what God is doing in the lives of single parents and widows and help spread the word.

I Don't do Teenagers – The Need for Support – by Lynn Cherry

Here we go again – job searching with my very shy, somewhat apprehensive teenager. Honestly, I feel like he ought to be able to do this without me, but he disagrees. So I'm along for the ride again.

The [Living as Conquerors](#) model defines support as having someone gently help me with a problem or struggle, while giving appropriate assistance. This job hunt has been the perfect case study for offering support to my son.

Side by side – He wanted me standing right beside him when we went to fill out his very first application at the donut shop. I waited with him to shake the manager's hand and whispered in his ear, "Stand up tall, shoulders back, eye contact, firm handshake." He rolled his eyes.

I sat next to him when he filled out his first online application for the grocery store. I could be to blame for the fact that he failed the psychological evaluation. I may have over thought some of those questions.

From a distance – I drove along but stayed in the car when he went in to meet the restaurant manager, car wash owner and, golf course staff. "Stand up tall, shoulders back, eye contact....."

"I know Mom. You don't have to tell me again."

He filled out the next online application on his own and only called me over when he got stuck. Rather than tangle up his thoughts with my analysis of each question, I tried to keep my ideas of what the employer was looking for to myself and I only asked questions that helped him figure out what *he* believed.

"So, what would you do if you think you saw someone stealing?"

"Well, I wouldn't go screaming in their face about it."

"Why not? What would you do? Is there a response that would be helpful for that person *and* the store?"

On his own – He did a phone interview with the retail store while I was at work. He drove over for the face-to-face follow up without me in tow, and he finally landed his first job.

Hooray! Our teenager is gainfully employed!

Either he needed less support as the journey went along, or he eventually got annoyed with my job coaching efforts...or both.

I realized that I use a similar process when I am training people at work:

1. We sit side by side and I show them how I do the task.
2. We trade seats and I patiently talk them through doing the task.
3. They do the task and I am nearby if they need prompting.
4. They go back to their own work station and call me when they have a question.

5. I graciously answer their call for help.

As teenagers take on more responsibility, it may be helpful to put on a trainer hat. Be as patient with your kids as you would a coworker. Don't expect them to already know what to do. Stay close at the beginning and be intentional about offering instructions. Be patient with their questions and apprehensions. Expect them to get stuck every now and then and need your hands-on support to make it through. Don't be surprised if they roll their eyes even when they are the one asking for your assistance!

Where do your teenagers most often need support?

For more insight into your own family's top relational needs. Visit [The Living as Conqueror's website](#), look for Free Resource Downloads and print a Relational Needs Assessment for each member of your family.

Simple Solutions - It's YOUR Journey – by Georganne Schuch

Every time I hear someone say or see someone comment, “Anyone can do it,” I want to remind them of the old saying, “...unless you walk a mile in my shoes.”

I know there are innumerable excuses people use to get out of doing what they don't want to do. But to boil down a complex problem to a simple solution shows a basic lack of understanding.

Let's think of some sage words of old that proved to be not only untrue, but a pile of dog poop.

- Less Calories + More Exercise = Weight Loss
 - Except for those with adrenal fatigue, thyroid disease, autoimmune disorder, degenerative joint problems, etc.
- More Work + Less Sleep = Productivity
 - Never mind that sleep deprivation causes the same lag in response time as a drunk driver.
- More Money + More Possessions = Happiness
 - Who is happy cleaning, organizing, and storing all that stuff? Only the storage facility you pay to keep it and never see it.

There are lots more formulas I'm sure we could think of, but you get the picture. **Everyone can't do everything.** And because one person can do something one way doesn't mean everyone else can do it the same way. Sure there are basic principles, but for every sure-fire success, there are a hundred minor details that derail it.

I often see testimonials for people who lose weight using a certain diet or technique or surgical procedure. I have used quite a few, myself. Finally, I had to realize that eating 1,000 calories and walking a mile a day wasn't going to cut it for me. I didn't lose weight, and I felt horrible. Instead, I quit counting calories and made sure WHAT I ate was healthy, instead of just low calorie. I continued to exercise 30-60 minutes a day and I slept if I was tired. I haven't lost 50 pounds in a month, but my energy and overall health is improving.

One of my favorite business coaches often tells the story of how he began building a business while he was still working a full time job in the corporate world. *If he can do it, I can, too.* Except he had a wife to cook his dinner when he got home from work, wash his clothes and have them ready in the morning for him to wear, and take their children to school and activities. I am the wife. My husband does a phenomenal job of helping all the time, but he's not a wife. I once was in a meeting, and one of the managers had just returned from some time off while his wife recuperated from surgery. He began the meeting with a confession, “I want to rise up and call my wife blessed.” He got a real-life lesson in all she did on a daily basis and was man enough to know she deserved some extra appreciation.

In the interest of keeping a balance, everyone who wants to change or do something more needs to take stock of what affects their current status and potential success. It goes without saying that some things will need to change if you plan to improve your health or change your career or follow another dream. **But you can't use anyone else's success and strategy to map your journey.**

Likewise, don't become discouraged and depressed because you think your own goals are so far out of reach.

1. Find one thing to do or change toward a goal.
2. Think beyond yourself and your present circumstances.
3. Begin defining your focus.

Obviously, you can't throw your preschool kids into college in a week, thus freeing up your time to take up world travel. Maybe you can't hitchhike through Europe, but if it's just the activity of hitchhiking you want, find some trails close to home you can experience. Too often, we want to do something far away, when similar activities are in our own backyard.

I still find it fascinating to read other people's stories of triumph and change, whether I ever take the drastic steps they did. Instead, I glean a little here and a little there to personalize the journey to my goals. I see where a particular diet helped someone with similar health problems to mine, so I experiment to see if it will help me, too. I read business articles and listen to podcasts about improving my career, and I take what I need for the current time, rather than becoming overwhelmed with the numerous things everyone else seems to be doing. It's *my* career or goal or adventure. It can't be replicated by a 10-step process, patented by a person living a totally different life.

Remember,

You are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, not in the image of the Facebook friend who posted a status you dream about.

A Night to Remember – Wisdom in the Maze – Marcy Lytle

We all need wisdom, because wisdom causes us to make wise choices. And wise choices lead to blessings in our lives. Just reading the Word and knowing it does not make us a wise person. It's when we obey it and do what it says. That makes us wise. And since life is full of twists and turns, ups and downs, we must have wisdom to guide us along the way.

Preparation: You will need a shoe box with a lid. Cut the lid into sections in the shape of L's and glue them to the inside of the bottom of the box, creating a maze. Then cut an opening at each end of the box for an "enter" and "exit" to the maze. You will also need a marble, a leaf, a long stick, a blown up balloon (small), a cloth napkin, and a little figure of a person (a kid's play figure or you can cut out a person from a magazine).

This maze represents our lives, full of walls, obstacles and choices. As we read each paragraph in the study, we will use the different objects to represent what it is like to go through life apart from wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Proverbs 1:7) *(Place the person at the entrance of the maze).* Knowing God and having him be our guide through life is the first wise choice that needs to be made.

Do not follow after sinners, but follow after God's commands. (Proverbs 1:10-15). *(Place the leaf in the maze and blow it).* When we follow after sin, we are blown around like this leaf, by whatever "wind" comes our way. *(Blow the leaf again).* The leaf ends up all over the place, not on a solid path.

Trust in God with all your heart and he will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5, 6). *(Place the stick in the maze).* When we try to make our own way through life without trusting God, we are hard and stiff like a stick, trying to make it on our own, not allowing God to guide us and keep us. *(Try to move the stick around corners of the maze and find that it gets stuck and won't bend).* Trusting God is just praying and leaving it up to him to guide and lead us through the unknown parts of life. *(Move the person down a straight corridor of the maze).*

Honor God with all your wealth (Proverbs 3:9, 10 and 27, 28). Holding on to our blessings and not giving them to bless God and others will weigh us down and push us in wrong directions. *(Place the marble in the maze).* A marble is heavy, like blessings that we hold and keep instead of sharing. When life is rocky *(tilt the box)*, the marble will push us into a corner, or take us on a fast ride.

Don't carry around all your blessings, keeping them for yourself, but give them away and walk free of burdens. You will see that you are more blessed when you give away your wealth, than if you hold onto it and it weighs you down. *(Move the person as if he's skipping, around the next bend of the maze, but let him get stuck in a corner, as we sometimes do).*

Respond to God's discipline, because he loves you. (Proverbs 3:11, 12). When God disciplines us, it is because he loves us and wants us to make wise choices. *(Place the balloon in the maze and see how it doesn't even fit, and if it were a helium balloon it wouldn't even stay in the maze).*

Don't be like the balloon, full of hot air and anger, or you might just fly away right out of the very place you're supposed to be! *(Move the person along the maze out of the corner, gently pushing him, as the Lord gently disciplines us when we get off the right path).*

Keep your heart and your conversation clean and pure (Proverbs 4:23, 24). Don't talk bad about others and don't hold grudges in your heart, this will only make your way dark and hide your light from others. *(Cover the maze with the napkin, showing how it blocks out the light).* Ask forgiveness for any impure thoughts or words that have come from your heart and let the light of God illuminate your *path* *(Uncover the maze and move the person closer to the exit).*

Finally, keep your eyes on Jesus, all the way through your life. Never take your eyes off of him (Proverbs 4:25, 26 and 5:21). Jesus will hold your hand and guide you around every wall, every corner, over every obstacle, bringing you safely home to him. Jesus can see ahead of every place you walk, and he walks along before you. *(Move the person through the exit, safely making it through the maze of life.)*

Read Proverbs 8:32-35. Jesus will hold our hand through every "maze" in life that we encounter, leading us through the exit door, into his arms of eternal life.

The Family Practice - Crayons, Colors & Canvas – by Rachel Toalson

Kids.

Practically every bone in their bodies is a creative one.

They want to sit down with crayons and draw on every scrap of paper they can find, even that bill we accidentally left on the counter within their reach, and their brother's homework still sitting on the table, and the shorts they're wearing.

It is no secret how children hold creativity like it is something essential and significant and true.

We can hear it in their made-up songs, leaking from the doorway of the bathroom, where they are taking a bath and washing, when they see a bubble escape from their soap pump. And when they're singing about bubbles floating up to the sky where the sun and the planets and the moon see them and feel *happy, happy, happy*.

We can see it in the masterpieces they scribble on walls and floors and faces when we stop looking for just one minute – that minute when they decide they want to be a cat for the day.

We can feel it in those constant requests for crayons and colored pencils and the computer paper we refilled a week ago that's already been cut in half by artist hands. (My boys have journals and journals full of drawings and stories I will probably keep forever.)

But a few years ago, when the oldest started school, he didn't have as much time to draw those elaborate pictures and make his own music and practice dancing where no one else could see. My husband and I realized we didn't want our children to trade their natural bend toward creativity for the kind of intelligence our society values more than paintings and stories and songs. We didn't want our boys to begin believing that once they started school, once they started growing up, that was it for the creative pursuits.

So we looked for ways to practice creativity in our family life.

In the time wedge between dinner and bath time, about four times a week, we create together. Sometimes we dance to someone else's music in the middle of our living room. Sometimes we make our own music. Sometimes we write or perform plays we've written or paint masterpieces onto a canvas.

When we join with our children in creating, they realize that art and music and writing and acting and dancing are not just something to do for a while and then put away for the chase of greater things. They see that creativity is a lifelong pursuit.

It was hard, at the beginning, when we hung those canvases on an easel, to not control the way the 4-year-old immediately mixed all the colors in his palette on white so they all went black except for a small piece he called a person. And it was hard, when we sat down to compose that song together and the 5-year-old kept inserting silly lines and crazy melodic turns, not to tell him it wasn't going to work his way, because music has

rules. And it was hard, when we joined around the table writing our first short film script, not to discount the 7-year-old's random insertions of superheroes with weird super powers, because we had our own idea about the way the script should go.

But the truth is, children have a lot to teach us about creativity, if we just humble ourselves enough to listen.

So maybe all that paint did mix together and the whole canvas is more black than color, but that doesn't make it any less a masterpiece than our orderly ocean deep with holy words. So maybe that song has its twists and turns that don't always make sense, but it is uniquely ours, and that makes it beautiful. So maybe that short film turned out a little silly and random, but they will roll with laughter when they watch it, and so will we.

The best way to create with children? Let them lead.

Why? Because the rich beauty of their contributions will surely take us by surprise.

Here are some regular creative activities we do together.

1. **Painting night.** Buy everyone a canvas and brushes and paints (No kid supplies! A wise woman once told me that if we want our kids to value their art, we must provide them with good materials). Paint something that makes you feel happy, and then marvel at your different creations.

2. **Dance party.** Crank up the Pandora, clear the furniture and dance the day's frustrations away. Dancing is great exercise, and you don't ever have to worry about how you look busting a move, since kids don't care – *at all*.

3. **Write a story together.** One of our favorite ways to do this: Someone begins creating a story and continues for a few sentences. Then it passes to the next person, who continues right where the other left off. On and on around the table until the story reaches its end. (For even more fun creating stories, check out [Rory's Story Cubes](#).)

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - Flying a Kite by Marcy Lytle

We recently took our grandson to the park to fly a kite. He was not even 3 years old, so we had to hold the kite and run with it. He was too little. As my husband flew the kite, Gideon ran after him with delight as the kite flew into the sky way above his little head. Of course, I was on the sidelines videotaping the whole event on my phone. It was hot, the wind wasn't really very strong, and the kite "show" ended pretty quickly. However, I was thrilled I caught on camera Gideon's happy feet running across the green lawn with Mister (my husband) running, as well.

A few days later, we watched the video and we noticed the birds singing. They were loud, and their voices rose above the height of the kite in the sky, so much that my husband and I both were amazed that we never heard the birds singing when we were actually flying the kite. Watch the video here:

(use video on phone here)

Why did we not hear those birds, when we were flying the kite?

We were too preoccupied with the task at hand – catching the wind, keeping the kite off the ground, holding tight so we didn't lose the kite - and watching Gideon to see if he liked what was happening.

In other words, it was all about our efforts to achieve what we had set out to do.

There's a spiritual connection here, somewhere. I had to sit and write, when I heard the birds singing is I later watched the video, in the confines of an air-conditioned house, phone in hand, lying back on the sofa, sharing it with Gideon.

I've missed the birds singing multiple times a day, I'm sure. Haven't you?

I'm rushing out the door on my way to an appointment, and I'm running late, so all I hear is the door slamming behind me and my car's motor starting as I turn the key.

I'm standing outside a restaurant, awaiting the arrival of our guests, wondering where they are, and all I hear is the din of folks talking nonsense at their patio tables, the cars backing out of their spaces and others taking their places, and listening for the buzz of the square box I hold in my hand.

I'm even on a picnic, blanket spread, food packed nicely and neatly, but all I hear is the buzz of the bees that hover around nearby, the noise inside my head of my own self checking off each item packed, making sure I've forgotten nothing.

So you see, it doesn't matter if the setting is right, we're outside where the birds are, or if we've even made it a point to be outdoors. If we aren't listening for the song, we don't hear it.

Look at these three verses:

Psalm 32: 7 says, *You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance.*

Psalm 119 says, *Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.*

Zephaniah 3:17 says, *The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.*

What amazing promises we have from Him!

Songs of deliverance. What do these songs sound like? When we are pressed on all sides, discouraged, disappointed, and disillusioned, he comes to us with songs of how his mighty arm is strong to save, he is for us and not against us, and he is a refuge in the middle of the storm. Can you hear him?

Songs of statutes. What do these songs sound like? These are laws stated by a sovereign God. They have lyrics about his ways are perfect and higher than ours, he is worthy of our trust and praise, and we have a bright future ahead of us – one full of hope. Are you listening?

Songs of rejoicing. What do these songs sound like? These are beautiful melodies with a rhythm that make our feet want to dance because of his attributes, like he is good, he is faithful, he is everlasting, he is just, he is kind, he is loving, and he is ours. All of those words encourage us to realize his delight over his children. Do you sense the music?

When we don't hear these songs above the din of the day, it just means that we've become steeped in things that are around us, instead of those things above us. The birds were above the kite, in the trees, singing loudly. Their songs were steady, even with the rise and fall of the kite, and even when the kite hit the ground hard and Gideon was disappointed at the fall.

If you're out today in the middle of the noise, take time to lay down your kite and look up. Or maybe your kite has already fallen to pieces or become stuck in the branches of a tree. Listen for his song of deliverance, a song of his statutes, or a song of rejoicing – or all three. They're always being sung by the Maker of Melodies, to the hearts of those he loves.

Under the Influence - French Envy – by Marcy Lytle

Have you seen the movie [The Hundred Foot Journey](#)? If you haven't, you should. As I sat next to my friend and watched the movie, set in the lovely country of France, with a sweet young girl as a central character, we both leaned over to each other several times and whispered things like, "Doesn't she make you want to ride a bike?" Another time I cupped my hand near my friend's ear and said, "I want her cute dresses."

Somehow, when we escape for a couple of hours by watching a visually inspiring movie, or even when we have time to thumb through the pages of a fun magazine full of ideas and creativity, we allow ourselves to dream for a moment that we are the women in that scene, experiencing that thrill, or wearing that awesome hat. I like to call it "French Envy," because somehow we women in America are fascinated by the French culture portrayed on the big screen. In fact, we're drawn to any character that appears to have it all...at least all that we don't have.

So I thought...why not address each visual that had me, along with many other women in the theater, drooling for what my life "could be" if only....I lived in France! And as I look at each visual, I'll offer a takeaway to ease that envy...

Frocks – Look at the cute frock this character wears in the movie! She wears several different styles of these dresses that are simple, fitted, and sweet! I'm pretty sure if I saw this dress on a hanger, I might buy it...or not. But seeing her with the whole scenery around her made the dress stand out as something of value, something that made her look so pretty!

The clothes we wear as women can make or break our mood and our day. This is why we stand in our closets and put on and throw off a dozen outfits before we decide on "the one." We need to know and be confident that our beauty on the outside is fun to flirt with, but it's the beauty on the inside that stays with us as we age. Wear that pretty dress – even if you're only wearing it to buy groceries or to the park.

Bikes – I love the "thought" of riding a bike, but the reality of riding it in the heat, up inclines, with a helmet on, and arriving tired and wet from head to toe with perspiration, is not appealing one bit. However, in this movie, riding a bike through a little village with the wind blowing through her hair, this character evokes envy. But it's not really the bike that we envy.

The carefree riding as though the whole world is at ease and all is well is really what we envy. After all, we have long to-do lists, we have to be careful for traffic, and who has time to ride a bike for fun? We need to know that it's okay to take 30 minutes to rest and relax and do whatever it is that we enjoy doing...without a care in the world. And we don't need to feel guilty one minute while we do it.

Baskets – Take a look at her bike. It has a basket on the front! This visual really made me lean in hard as I whispered, "She has a basket!" Of course, the basket is for collecting flowers and fruit at the market before she heads home! (Notice this other cute frock she's wearing, too!). The basket made the bike elevate from a piece of exercise equipment to that of a leisure ride with a cherry on top!

Baskets on bikes just might remind us of our childhood, when most little girls had pink bikes with white wicker baskets – back when our lives were really carefree – and we had time to play dress up, pick flowers, and ride our bikes to our friend’s house to play with dolls. But those memories are now replaced with keeping our kids in our own yards for safety, getting them to and from practices, and if we have extra grocery money – sticking a bouquet of flowers in our cart to plop in a vase when we arrive home. We just might need to slow down a bit, buy a basket, and walk in a field of fall leaves and gather...just gather...until our baskets are full.

Flats – There she is, window wide open, in her cute apartment above the city, looking out below to see the young man who’s smitten with her. And we long for a cute flat of our own in a foreign village, decorated in style, simplicity, and full of windows that can be left open for the cool breezes to blow while we are serenaded below...

Our homes and the upkeep required are sometimes the death of us. So we long for a simpler – yet gorgeous – life in a place far away. I believe we are made to love to take care of our homes, as mentioned in Proverbs 31. So if it takes adding fresh flowers, a scented candle, and an open window – do it! The happier you are in your home, the more pleasant you will be to those who love you.

Stands – This might be the thing I personally envied the MOST – shopping with basket on arm – at a vegetable stand. I LOVE going to the Farmer’s Market. And look at her cute coat! One time a neighbor and I decided we were going to grow vegetables and “shop” in each other’s yard and share – only our plans didn’t work so well. A vegetable stand on every corner, in our neighborhoods all day long, not just on Saturday mornings. Wouldn’t that be awesome?

Homegrown, natural food is all the rage these days. And there’s something so satisfying when you visit a Farmer’s Market for your produce. However, if you showed up in a cute coat with a basket on your arm, you might stand out in the crowd. But why not do it? If you haven’t tried fresh produce on a regular basis, you’re missing out on loads of satisfaction...and fun in slicing, roasting, and eating!

Next time you sit in a dark theater, enjoying your bag of popcorn, watching a romantic movie with a character and setting that evokes envy, do something about that envy you feel. If you’re stressed and you’re envious of the carefree lifestyle, let something go so you can enjoy the breezes. If you’re feely frumpy and ugly on the outside, change your wardrobe and don’t forget to work on the inside beauty, as well. And if you’re just longing to be whisked away to the countryside to get away from the busyness of life, why not do it? Sometimes, the best thing we can do for our health is to rest, relax, and breathe....and wear a cute frock while we do it.

Healthy Habits - Lotions and Potions – by Georganne Schuch (and recipes below!)

The average woman probably doesn't spend quite as much time or effort getting ready as Esther, who took close to a year preparing for her first date with the king. She was soaked, buffed, coiffed, powdered, and basically gussied up to a level you and I will likely never achieve. But that doesn't stop the mainstream cosmetic and personal care companies from trying to sell us a million dollars of lotions and potions.

I've tried my fair share of skincare products. At best, they didn't do much. At worst, some caused a strong allergic reaction, which wasn't necessarily resolved by just discontinuing the product. As I began to choose healthier food for my family, I also considered our skincare products. I tried to make sure I bought products that contained fewer chemicals, but it was hard. Even the so-called natural lotions contained foreign sounding things like parabens and phthalates. Of equal concern to a budget conscious person like myself was the amount of water in many of the products. Why am I forking out a serious chunk of change for a bottle half filled with water?

But then one of my daughters developed a severe case of eczema that covered 90% of her body at one point. The pediatrician prescribed a steroid-based cream to use on the worst of the areas around her ankles and behind her knees. A few applications improved it some, but the rash never went completely away. When the rash spread to her face, we were left without any serious alternatives. Steroid-based creams are too harsh for facial skin, and an experimental cream wasn't covered by our insurance, thus costing hundreds of dollars per tube. You read that right. Experimental. PER tube. No guarantee. I decided there had to be something else we could do.

I won't go into the extreme things we did to try to find what was causing the eczema. Eliminating something from her diet might work for a week or two, but then the rash would flare up again, worse each time. She had open sores, and I finally resorted to just keeping her as itch-free as possible. It was really the best I could do.

That time of searching and experimenting led me away from all the expensive and natural skincare products. I quickly realized fragrances were a major culprit for allergic reactions. Next were the chemical and petroleum-based products. I was so desperate for anything to help, that I finally began making my own lotions and scrubs and bath potions. While her skin didn't immediately clear up, we noticed that she gradually scratched less. The weeping sores crusted over. We began to see clear skin here and there, first in tiny patches, then in nickel-sized areas. Now, 15 months later, she does not have an active rash anywhere on her body. Occasionally, she gets an itchy spot, but I cover it with extra homemade lotion until it clears up.

I'm not claiming any miraculous properties with the lotions and balms I made. Instead, I believe it was a combination of eliminating bad ingredients, such as chemicals, and replacing them with natural ingredients, like coconut oil. These homemade lotions contained things that nourished the skin and could be absorbed without causing an allergic reaction. Besides that, they are easy to make and so much less expensive than store-bought products! You can get the individual ingredients at a health food store or online.

Our favorite recipe is a thick balm made with cocoa butter and various oils, like jojoba and coconut. I add vitamin E to help with scarring. I store the finished product in half-pint glass jars, which can be washed and reused.

We also love our lip balm, which costs about 50 cents to make! Why buy an expensive lip balm, when you make five or ten tubes in 15 minutes for the cost of one store-bought tube?

A whipped coconut oil lotion feels like silk on the skin. We only make it during cooler months because coconut oil melts so easily, losing the whipped consistency.

Since homemade products avoid chemicals, their shelf-life is shorter than a store-bought lotion might be. So, it's important to make them in batches that will be used within a few months. Between me and my girls, we go through one recipe of the balm in about a month. I use it as a face cream at night and any day when I'm not wearing makeup. It doesn't leave a greasy feeling, even on oily skin.

There are many websites and e-books with instructions on making your own skincare. Your skin needs and preferences are most likely different than mine, so it pays to experiment. In fact, it's fun! You probably won't waste ingredients because many oils can be substituted in various recipes. For instance, if I'm out of apricot oil, I can use avocado oil. You might even get adventurous enough to make your own recipe.

My recipe for body butter:

¼ cup Coconut oil
2 tbsp Beeswax
1 cup Cocoa Butter
2 tbsp sesame oil
2 tbsp jojoba oil
2 tbsp Apricot Kernel and/or avocado oil
2 capsules Liquid Vitamin E capsules, snip end off and squeeze into mixture once almost cool

Melt all oils and butters in stainless pan or large measuring cup over very low heat. Stir to completely melt and mix. Let cool slightly, add Vitamin E, stir again, and then pour into storage jars.

Once the mixture hardens, you can heat the jar in the microwave for 20 seconds or so to soften it enough to spread easier.

We use glass half-pint canning jars because they can be sterilized and reused. All oils can be found at health food stores or [online here](#).

Spicy Mask (<http://empoweredsustenance.com/7-secrets-to-cure-acne-without-chemicals/>)

1 tbsp honey
1 tsp cinnamon
½ tsp nutmeg

Mix together and spread over face. Leave on 10 minutes or so, longer if acne is bad.

Peppermint & Honey Homemade Facial Toner (<http://www.mommyotamus.com/peppermint-and-honey-facial-toner/>)

1 tablespoon honey
1/3 cup warm water
1/4 cup apple cider vinegar
1 cup water
5 drops peppermint essential oils

Heat a bit of water first (1/3 cup) and then combine it with your honey, stirring until it's dissolved. The

less heat your honey is exposed to the better. After the honey is dissolved, stir in the remainder of the water and the ACV and add your essential oil (or oils) of choice.

Honey Lip Balm (<http://www.livingonadime.com/homemade-lip-balm-recipe/>)

2 tsp. beeswax
7 tsp. sweet almond oil
1 tsp. honey
5 drops flavoring (optional)
1 capsule Vitamin E

Heat beeswax and oil just until melted. Add the rest of the ingredients. Mix well. Use a dropper to place in tubes or small jars.

Lavender Coconut Oil Lotion (*The Holistic Mama's Guide to Homemade Skin Care*, Roxanne King)

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup coconut oil
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup distilled water
2 tbsp beeswax
20 drops lavender essential oil
5 drops tea tree oil

Heat water in a double boiler and add beeswax to melt. Let sit for 2 minutes. Pour into bowl and start mixer. Slowly pour oil into the bowl with mixer running. Once incorporated, stir in oils. Transfer to jars.

If you have skin issues or just want to avoid the chemicals in today's personal care products, check out these websites for ideas.

<http://www.thecrunchymamas.com/>

affiliate program that I'll send a separate email about

<http://wellnessmama.com/category/beauty/>

mountainroseherbs.com

Beauty for Ashes - Crossed Wires by Pam Charro

I am always so amazed at how many different ways humans can miscommunicate. Just when I start to think that most people make sense to me, something happens in my interactions with others that throws me for a loop. That is usually when I find myself in a tailspin of hurt, anger and insecurity.

Why would she have said that?

Obviously, that person doesn't like me.

What does this mean, God?

Is this something I should take to heart or does it have nothing to do with me?

Every emotional wound that has ever been inflicted on me seems to start throbbing again.

I have had so many crossed wires with people lately that I'm pretty sure it's an area God wants me to pay some attention to. When it happened recently, I was torn between feeling justifiably annoyed, hurt, and wanting to avoid addressing the situation with the other person. I knew I was lacking wisdom and I didn't want to react, so I asked God, "Please help me to give tons of grace here, even though I don't understand what's going on, because I am obviously missing some information and I don't want to make the situation worse."

I am so glad that I got the time to pray that before seeing my friend because God really blessed it! My friend felt horribly and was trying so very hard to explain; obviously my feelings were very important and both of us did not want any walls between us. I am grateful that I did not react negatively and say something hurtful that I would have regretted before I got more information.

I came away from that encounter trying to understand what I could apply to my relationships in the future. It is important that I not always expect answers because sometimes I won't get any. People will probably always mystify me to some degree. But I think I did find a few constants that I would like to hold onto:

1. Pray and ask for help in controlling my emotions first. I do not have to hurry and react; in fact, it's much better if I don't. If a quick answer is requested, I have the right to say that I don't have one yet.
2. Ask God for wisdom and/or more information so that I better understand the situation. When I am angry or hurt, it's often because there are at least one or two things I am not aware of.
3. Remember that I never really want to hurt anyone back, no matter how hurt or angry I feel. Those emotions will pass and I don't want them replaced by regret.
4. Realize that my value is not in question here. In fact, the root problem is probably very small. No situation can take away what I am worth in God's eyes, and that is all that really matters.

In short, I want to be sure and keep my own dignity no matter what else is going on. I'm sure I will get plenty of practice with crossed wires, and I am looking forward to the growth and to becoming more like Christ in my relationships.

A MOMENT IN THYME – Radically Relentless – by Debra Brown

It's hard to be authentic. I find myself trying to relate the deeper meanings of my heart to you, but mere words seem stale and impotent. (Do I dare use that word?) But it's true. My heart longs to impart the Lord's deep love for you. I pray that you will become intimately acquainted with His heart, His ways, and His purposes for you. In that hope, I continue to share my moments.

Have you ever had a song stuck in your mind? It's one of those "awful - wonderful" experiences. It's as if I've pushed the repeat button and one phrase from Jesus Culture's song, "You Won't Relent," rolls through my brain over and over and over and over. Even my family is beginning to grumble at my incessant humming of the same song, over and over...

"You won't relent until You have it all - my heart is Yours.
You won't relent until You have it all - my heart is Yours.
You won't relent until You have it all - my heart is Yours."

Webster defines relent as becoming less intense, rigid, or strict. Jesus won't relent. He won't concede, yield, give in, or give up until He has ALL of my heart, for it is His.

As surely as I know that autumn will do its work to prepare nature for winter, I know that Jesus will do His work.

He will be RADICALLY RELENTLESS!

Relief floods my soul. Once again, I realize that it's not about me, but all about Him. The Holy Spirit is NOT singing this song over and over to highlight *my inability* to be totally His. No, absolutely not! The song emphasizes *his ability* and the price JESUS PAID for me to *be His*. It's His love song over me.

"He won't relent until He has it ALL!"

All? Yes, until I become like Him. Until I fully step into the woman He created me to be.

Philippians 1:6 states, "I am confident that the Creator, who has begun such a great work among you, will not stop in mid-design but will keep perfecting you until the day Jesus the Anointed, our Liberating King, returns to redeem the world." (THE VOICE)

"He WILL NOT stop in mid-design."

I can trust Him. My heart is His, and He beckons me to join him in His RADICAL RELENTLESSNESS.

Join Him?

Become relentless?

Yes, join the song.

“My heart is Yours.”

I won't concede, yield, give in, or give up until He has ALL of my heart. I will continue to sing relentlessly, *even through the failures.*

My heart is His.

The song continues with a refrain from Song of Solomon 8:6: “Put me as a seal upon Your heart, for there is love that is as strong as death, jealousy demanding as a grave, and many waters cannot quench this love. Come be the fire inside of me. Come be the flame upon my heart until You and I are one.”

The young bride is describing a radically relentless love – Christ's love for His Bride. According to the book, *A Song for Lovers* by S. Craig Glickman, a seal was often a figurative reference in the Old Testament “to something of great value and hence something from which one would never part.”

This wonderful song has NOT been persistently running through my heart by mere coincidence. I fervently pray that you join Him in the song!

It is our love song straight from Him.

It is our love song straight back to Him.

He won't relent until He has it all, and we won't relent until we yield it all.

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - Poop, Ears & Antics by Marcy Lytle

“Travis pooped in the potty today.”

“How are Amy’s ears?”

“You won’t believe what Matthew did today.”

If your conversations with your spouse are only about poop, ear infections, and the antics of your kids, you might be married...with children.

There’s nothing wrong with those conversations, but when they dominate the one date night out a month that you might get, it’s time to reconnect.

This month, we’re offering you a few tips of how to reconnect with the one you love over dinner, without bodily excretions being mentioned, worries about the kids’ health overshadowing, and back and forth stories about crazy behaviors dominating. Save those for later. Time alone with your spouse should include other topics and activities, like these:

1. **Really look at each other.** When’s the last time you looked into his eyes, noticed how nice he smells, or how his smile is so attractive? Take time to look at each other and then voice a compliment, to start your dinner conversation.
2. **Hold hands.** Hopefully, you had a shower before your night out and your hands are clean from stickiness of kids. Grab his hand across the table, or better yet...sit next to him so that you can hold hands easily.
3. **Put away your phone.** Yes, the sitter might need to call you, but you can lay it aside and stay off Facebook, Twitter, or email for the two hours you have for dinner prepared by someone else.
4. **Stay away from controversy.** Your dinner date is NOT the time to discuss your list of “to-do’s” that he’s not doing. It’s not the time to berate him over his mother’s last comment to you. And it’s not the place to bring up how disappointed you are with the menu. Train your mind to think pleasant thoughts....before you speak.
5. **Eat slowly.** You might be used to holding one child, feeding another, and hurriedly downing your food before it’s time to get up and clean up. Tonight, no one is at the table but you and your best friend (remember he’s your friend?). Take your time and order an appetizer, savoring each bite. Put your fork down between bites. Take a drink. Make this meal and experience last...

Now that you’ve set the mood, what in the world do you talk about? If it’s not the kids then what? Is there anything else? Yes, there is...

1. **Ask interesting questions.** This means ask questions about your spouse to where he knows you’re interested in him, his feelings, his dreams. Steer away from work-related questions at dinner.
2. **Talk about current events that are fun** – like what movies are showing that you might want to see or rent; a new park or activity you’d like to try outside, or a funny story you read on the internet.

3. **Share insights.** Did you read a good book and were inspired to try something new? Have you heard a great song and the lyrics spoke to you? What about a verse from the Bible? Spend time encouraging each other over the candlelight in the center of your table.
4. **Imagine.** Look at the other people in the restaurant. Imagine what kind of jobs they might have by the way they're dressed or the way they look. Think about the future and where you might like to go on your next vacation.
5. **Give thanks.** Spend time gloating over the last thing your husband did for you, the way he spent time with the kids so you could rest, or just what a great guy he is and how you love so many things about him.

If you purposely try some of these suggestions, it might be true that your night out turns out so lovely...instead of so lacking.

Date Night Fun – The Colors of Fall – by Marcy Lytle

Fall is beautiful, isn't it? So is date night with the one you love! The oranges, browns, reds, yellows and purples make for breathtaking scenery that we enjoy looking at this time of year. So as we look at the colors of fall, it might be fun to take each individual color and incorporate it into our night out, for beautiful pictures and memories!

1. **Orange** – When I think of orange, the sunset comes to mind. So why not plan a date around the sun going down? Find a restaurant with a patio (and heaters if necessary) and plan your meal to enjoy as you watch the sun set. Check the menu and find a place that offers pumpkin pie for dessert. And while you're out, purposefully complement each other using the letters in the word o-r-a-n-g-e. And when the evening's over, stop by the store to buy a few oranges and lots of whole cloves. Sit in the car inserting [cloves into the oranges](#) in designs, to place in a bowl for the scent of fall, when you arrive back home.

2. **Brown** – Brown is not very pretty by itself, but against the backdrop of the other fall colors, brown can be amazing. Brown is the color of the tree branches, so make your date an afternoon in the park. Find a huge tree with low hanging branches for picture taking, and for sitting underneath. Pack a lunch of foods that include the color brown: [peanut butter sandwiches](#), pretzels, chocolate chip cookies, and caramel colored sodas. Pack these in brown paper bags. After you've eaten your goodies, go for a hike in the woods or on the trails of the park and gather sticks for kindling, for your fire pit back home. End the evening by the fire, roasting marshmallows and making s'mores with brown graham crackers, and chocolate brown candy bars.

3. **Red** – If you live in a hot, dry climate like I do, there may not be much red color to be seen in the fall. However, it's one of the richest colors of the season, when the leaves start turning this lovely natural shade. It's almost like a rusty-red, which stirs up visions of barnyards, bricks, and old tools. Take a road trip to a small town where antique stores, old homes, and barns abound. Look for something old to purchase and take home – like an antique tool for his collection, or a vintage tin for yours. Take a walking tour of the downtown square, purposefully looking for hues of red and pointing them out to each other. And finally, find a picturesque barn and stop alongside the road for snapshots. Try out a diner in one of these small towns, and order up some onion rings to be dipped in red catsup, along with your favorite home-cooked meal from the menu.

4. **Yellow** – I love the richness of the yellows we see in the fall season. And since bananas are yellow, let's go bananas for each other! Make some banana bread ahead of time and pack it up, along with a thermos of hot apple cider, which is a golden yellowish color as well. Invite another couple on this date, and share with each other what first made you go bananas for the other one – say out loud what crazy things you love about each other. Consider purchasing this fun game [Banagrams](#) from Target and play it, as you enjoy your snack at a roadside park.

5. **Purple** – Grapes and blueberries – purple fruit! And breakfast is when these are most enjoyed! Make it a date. Reserve a weekend morning for a date for the two of you, or I suppose you could make this breakfast late at night as well! Try this recipe for [honey roasted grapes](#)

[with peanut butter granola.](#) Alongside that delight, mix up some blueberry pancakes, and enjoy breakfast in bed, or breakfast on the patio, or breakfast at the kitchen table. Create ambience with purple candles burning, and then...in your pajamas...play "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" as you move and groove, setting a rich sweet tone for your day!

Don't let the fall season go by or get so busy that you both don't notice the rich colors present around you. Take time to enjoy each color and celebrate them all, as you also celebrate the richness you each bring to your relationship.

After 30 Years - Stomping on Jewels by Marcy Lytle

What if you were given an expensive set of jewelry, full of uncut diamonds, ones that were handpicked just for you? Would you take them and put them in a safe place, take them out and wear them, or stomp on them and destroy them?

Of course, the answer is not the last choice. Yet, that's what we do with those we love, over and over again.

When we are serving God and following him, and we pray for a spouse, and we marry wisely – that man or woman is a jewel. In fact, the Bible says an excellent wife is worth far above jewels (Proverbs 31). Women are told to lean in towards their husbands, as to the Lord (Ephesians 5) – so that means he's pretty valuable! However, it doesn't take more than a few months of living with another person to quickly realize that person has flaws, much like an uncut diamond.

We then have a choice. We can stomp on our jewels we've been given, hoping that our stomping will somehow form them to become something "pretty enough" to wear, or we can ignore them and stash them away from our hearts so as to hope one day they'll shine bright enough to be brought out to the light. But neither of those is a good choice.

What does "stomping on jewels" mean?

When a man marries, he is to lead his wife into a deeper relationship with himself...and with Christ. He is to take her out and wear her with pride, for the beauty she inherently has, not for the show he wants others to see. He is to cherish her, polish her, ever so gently and sweetly, and desire and pray for ways to make her shine even brighter...for Him. Neglecting and abusing this beautiful jewel is akin to stomping on it and destroying it.

When a woman marries, she is to place her trust in her husband...as unto the Lord...the perfect jewel. The Lord is her standard and her refuge, when her husband fails, which he will do. It is the wife's tendency, inclination, and willful stubbornness to speak up, point the finger, and criticize. We all do it. But if I've learned anything over time, I've learned that a critical spirit only drives him further away. In other words, criticizing is like stomping...and it destroys.

It's not easy taking care of jewels. They require safekeeping, so that they are not stolen by thieves. Women who are neglected, taken for granted, and not led well, are women vulnerable to being stolen by depression, self-sufficiency, and bitterness. When the drawer is left open, the jewels are uncovered, and the house is unlocked...it's an easy steal. Men who are beaten up, degraded, and judged as being worthless, useless, and wimpy, are vulnerable to being stolen by those self-fulfilling words we've placed on them, and they actually become what we've stated they are...and they are destroyed.

What are we supposed to do?

I can only speak to what I've learned over time, and by the grace of God, in my own marriage. But here's some of what I wished I'd understood early on, as well as things my husband has learned as well.

Women need to feel secure. If that takes reading the scripture, planning a date night out, or working hard to meet financial needs – then do it. A secure woman is pleasant and loving, and shines brightly in the home. Women won't be so demanding of "things" if they are given "treasure" by loving them as Christ loves the church.

Men need our prayers more than our pessimism. It doesn't work to mother our husbands. No matter how right we are, how legitimate our need, or how necessary a change is needed. We can state our cause in a pleasant manner, and then we have to lean into Jesus and pray for the outcome HE desires. Sometimes, God speaks and grabs his attention, and other times he grabs ours by working on our own hearts and motives.

Marriage is bliss, for a few months after the "I-do's." But when vacation is over, the dress is hanging in a plastic bag, and the gifts have stopped arriving, real married life begins.

Married life doesn't have to be a stomping ground, like a vineyard where grapes are stomped into wine. Remember, the stomping doesn't make the wine. Aging does. And in a marriage, we are not called upon to do the stomping. It's the keeper of the vineyard who knows when to stomp, how hard to mash, and how tight to squeeze, so just the right amount of juice flows freely.

Ladies, pray for your husbands, lean into Him, and let God do the work. No, you don't have to wag your finger in order to change him. Trust me. God knows what he needs more than you do. And his methods are life-changing.

Men, cherish your wives, because she is the perfect jewel chosen for you, and she will only shine brighter when she feels loved, led, and....well yeah...well fed. She's not an animal you've hunted and now own the horns for display. She's valuable and worthy of your hand in hers.

And couples, you can trust God in all things. There's always room for counseling, advice, wisdom from others, as we grow together as a couple. And there are times when betrayal and severe abuse enter our homes. That's when we need intervention.

But for those of us who know we're loved, and that we love the one we're with, we can avoid some of those deep pits that are dark and scary. We can stop stomping our jewels, in favor of treasuring them, and realizing they belong to him – the safe keeper, the wine maker, and – the one who answers prayer.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: Are You Awake? by Kayley Ryan

My alarm clock kindly announces its presence at 6 a.m. *Oh my goodness, how am I going to even think about moving? Thank God for coffee.*

Usually when I awaken on Monday mornings, all I want to do is go back to bed. But ever since reading Gregory Boyd's book, *Present Perfect: Finding God in the Now*, I have had a new perception of the glorious opportunity that mornings can be. "Are you awake?" is the question Boyd continues to ask throughout this devotional. He even places sticky-note images with the words, "Are you awake?" written on them throughout his book.

What is all this about being awake? Boyd isn't talking about being physically awake. He's describing what he calls the "single most important aspect of reality—*God is present.*"

He is not God-of-the-past or God-of-the-future because everything that is past has already happened and everything in the future is yet to come. God did not say to Moses, "Tell them 'I Was' sent you." He declared, "I AM." (Exodus 3:14)

That is why the most important thing we can do in this present moment is invite God into our day to partner with us in whatever we do whether we are working, playing, studying, or eating.

Imagine for a moment what that kind of behavior would look like: giving over your entire life to God and not just a part of it.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to forget about God because *life gets in the way*. This homework assignment or project, that test you have to cram for, errands and chores you have to complete, your job, and even family and friends can occupy so much of your time and attention that you go an entire day without once thanking God for his abundant mercies or for the seemingly simple yet incredible fact that you have breath in your lungs because of him.

I have gone entire weeks, full speed ahead with my busy schedule, never once taking a mere 15 minutes out of my day to ask God to be with me and guide me according to his will. This kind of behavior had worsened so much when I was younger that my mom had to buy me illustrated and game-filled devotionals to *entertain* me — just so that I would start my day off right with God.

I would read the devotionals because I felt obligated to and not because I wanted to. In fact, I still do. Sitting down for even 10 minutes to focus on God and nothing else is difficult for me. Since I love talking, I can't seem to shut my mouth and allow *God* to speak to me. I would rather blast my favorite artist in the car to hear the "beat" than I would pause for a second to focus on him.

As I have been reading *Present Perfect: Finding God in the Now* by Boyd, God has awakened in me a new desire: **a desire to be with him, to stop treating him like he is some hobby I practice on Sunday and instead realize that "in him [I] live and move and have [my] being." (Acts 17:28, NIV)**

But how on earth can we realistically dedicate every moment of our lives to God? We're not monks; we're teenagers. We have lives outside of the church, right?

Amazingly though, putting your focus on God does not take away any time that you need to do other things. In fact, it multiplies your time.

Frank Laubach, a 20th century missionary to the Philippines, asked this same question, **“Can we have that contact with God all the time? All the time awake, fall asleep in his arms, and awaken in his presence?”**

In truth, we cannot be perfect about this, but we can strive to *partner* with God in everything we do. This doesn't mean that we should neglect our duties, but it does mean that we should ask God to partner with us to complete our homework, take out the trash, work out, write a paper, drive, and play. God doesn't want to be excluded from our lives. He desires that we will stop putting him in the box that he is only a “church” event and realize that we can do *everything* with him.

I recently discovered just how beneficial partnering with God is when I was writing a research paper for my history class at Classical Christian Institute. Though the paper had been assigned three weeks before, I did not start the actual writing process until a few days before it was due.

On Thursday night, I finally had to face this monumental challenge. I had already conducted some research and had begun to write my introduction paragraph, but the thought of finishing an entire paper in one night was horrifying. Unable to continue staring at this stack of work I had to conquer, I left my bedroom and talked with my dad about the *Present Perfect* book I had been reading, hoping for *any* conversation that would get my mind off this seemingly impossible task.

That's when it hit me. Why talk about practicing the presence of God when I'm not willing to apply it in real life? With a mumbled, “Excuse me,” I ran back into my room and furiously began writing. To my shock and delight, I finished all but one paragraph that night.

I had just experienced the reality of practicing the presence of God.

The truly incredible idea behind all of this is that God can turn mundane or complicated tasks into important and easy ones. He can transform a house full of rotting dishes and smelly clothes into an opportunity to worship and glorify him. He can even turn my dreaded homework into a glimpse of just how incredible partnering with God can be.

I encourage you today to remind yourself that God is *always* with you, just waiting for you to recognize his presence. He doesn't ask for much. He just wants to be a part of your life in *this present moment*.

Colossians 3:17:

“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”

Moving Forward - Releasing Regret – by Marcy Lytle

I used to fish with my dad when I was a kid, and I loved it. There was something very rewarding about baiting my own hook with a minnow, casting out my fishing line into deep water, and reeling in a fish all by myself. However, there were many times when I cast in the wrong direction, or into waters that had hidden seaweed underneath, and I got all tangled up. It was those times that my dad had to break my line and stop from what he was doing, to tie another hook so I could fish again. Oh, how I wished I had cast in the right direction!

By definition, regret is feeling sadness or disappointment over something that has happened. And when we live with regret for years, it's like having our fish hook tangled up in seaweed, without a father to come alongside and snap it loose. There no joy in life, no reward, and just constant frustration because we're stuck...in a "sea" of regret.

All of us experience little regrets, like wishing we hadn't eaten that second brownie, or feeling sad that we didn't buy those shoes...and now they're gone. But the big regrets are harder to release. There's a list of 25 regrets found on [Forbes online site](#), and they're an interesting read. I wonder if your regrets are listed there?

Regret brings with it a sense of hopelessness, feeling stuck, and great disappointment that sometimes is so heavy we cannot bear it. And living for years with regret is literally a death sentence.

II Corinthians 7 says this,

Godly sorry brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorry brings death. See what this godly sorry has produced in you; what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done...

Did you know that God repented over making man, when he destroyed the earth by flood? He saw that sin had become rampant and so he rid the earth of the filth...due to righteous and holy indignation...and he had a plan to send his Son. In fact, we never read that God repented over sending his Son to save the world. God demonstrated godly sorrow that lead to salvation and not regret. He is God and he has the power to right wrongs in his creation, because after all...we are his creation.

In the verse above, it says that if we experience worldly sorrow and regret – the kind that tangles us up in hopelessness – this brings death. And this is where a lot of people hang out for years, and sometimes the rest of their lives, in a death camp that's full of stink. They can't go back and undo what they perceive they did wrong and so they punish themselves with their thoughts for making such poor choices.

But, wait! That's NOT where we have to live! God is sitting on the river bank with us, just waiting for us to ask him to release that hook that's been stuck for so long. It just requires a simple thing called repentance.

Repentance is not just saying, "God, I'm so sorry for the decisions I made or didn't make." Repentance is godly sorrow – the kind that erases and then produces life once again. Repentance is stating the problem. Okay, so you cast your fishing line over there where you knew there was seaweed. Or maybe you didn't even know, and you just got tangled up due to ignorance. It doesn't matter. Just state the problem. Earnestly and eagerly ask God to forgive you or help you forgive yourself, and then experience the release.

When my dad released my fishing line for me, I was a happy girl. What a cool dad that would do that for me! He never chided me and sent me back to the car, telling me I could never fish again. He did instruct me where to cast my line and how to cast it, so that the tangled mess happened less and less, as I grew more adept at fishing. But sometimes, my hook just got stuck because I couldn't see deep enough in the water. It was okay! I didn't have to remain there alone, afraid, and unable to fish.

Are you living with regret? Imagine yourself fishing with God and just ask him to release the hook for you. He's a loving father whose purpose for you is to set you free from all that holds you back, to release you into his loving, saving arms and set you back on your feet again, dancing, and enjoying life. And yes, you might even go fishing again.

Bush Bean Blessings – The Cultivated Life—by Tammy Morrison

Bush Bean Blessings is my new monthly column featuring stories that deal with real life. I will share about facing difficult circumstances and how to not just survive, but thrive! Just as a bush bean plant requires care and cultivation to flourish, every area of your life – emotional, physical, and spiritual – must receive purposeful tending in order to remain alive and thrive. When we take care of these interconnected matters, we can become the blessings God intends...experiencing life at its fullest.

...Not only does Jesus desire for me to sprout, He longs to see me flourish...

Not too long ago, I experienced spring Open House at an elementary school. Oh, the sights and sounds! Attending this event and hearing the boisterous echoes of students eager to share their displays brought back a flood of memories from when my own children were small. The air crackled with excitement as boys and girls proudly showed their works to their even more proud parents.

In the midst of the excitement, I was transported to the past. It seemed like only yesterday. (Ever notice the older we get, the more we say that phrase?) I know those of you with grown children will agree: My very first encounter with Open House was an experience all its own and will forever be engraved in my heart and mind. For weeks, I had heard about the bean my daughter had planted in a cup – that same elementary ritual we have all been tasked to do. Reflecting back on my own amazement and wonder when such a phenomenon took place (once upon a time by my own small hands), I encouraged my little girl to give me a daily report on her bean's progress. She faithfully updated me but could barely wait to show me how her hard work had paid off.

After days of eager anticipation, Open House finally arrived. As I walked through my daughter's classroom door, she darted excitedly ahead of me to her table, the whole time bouncing up and down, waving her hands around her bean plant and exclaiming, "Here it is! This is it, this is it! See, it's grown!" In her excited little girl voice, she read to me the daily "journal" she had kept as each progression of the bean plant came to light. With pride, honor, and as much dignity as a 7-year old could muster, she had planted, cultivated, and tended to her plant – this treasure she couldn't help but beam about.

Frankly, I was as amazed by her enthusiasm and commitment as I was by her flourishing bean plant.

In the days that followed, I couldn't help but think of my precious little girl and her faithfulness to her assignment. After observing her dedication day in and day out, it didn't take long for me to see the parallel of Jesus: the Master Planter, the Caretaker of all things. I began to ponder how much my life is like a delicate bean planted in the soil. I considered the way His gentle hands so lovingly nurture and tend to me, how He cultivates me and makes every attempt to keep the weeds out in order for me to develop to my full potential. It hit me that not only does He desire for me to sprout, He longs to see me flourish, just as my daughter longed to see her plant thrive! I can't help but think about how my life's "journal" must at times reveal that progress is made (ouch!); while at other times, only He may be aware of the growth taking place, unseen by the human eye. (Really ouch!)

I realized that just as my daughter so proudly displayed her treasured plant to me, so must Jesus present me to the Heavenly Father with pleasure and declare that I am a beautiful consequence of His care. He has planted me, and I am now blooming. Every time I see a thriving, flourishing bush bean plant, I can't help but think about this fruit of labor and love. In every sense of the word, it really is a bush bean blessing!

***"They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my
splendor"***

(Isaiah 60:21, NIV).





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Saddle Up - Nose to the Barrel by Melissa Critz

To be outdoors in Texas in the month of August is brutal to say the least, especially if water is not the main source of the activity. Nevertheless, outside I went, and saddling up commenced.

After some tedious grooming and rigging with the needed equipment, Elijah and I head to the round pen to get some exercise (which can be rather monotonous) – circle after circle of walking, trotting, bucking, and loping – until he shows signs of a more collected, calm response while I stand by the barrel in the middle and encourage him on with the lunge whip. When the brown-colored coat starts to glisten and the soft muzzle flares over and over, welcoming the life-giving breaths, the halter comes off, the bit goes in, and I swing up onto the saddle. This continues, minus the bucking, with me in seat and clucking with my mouth, urging with my leg muscles, and guiding with my hands until it's time to for Elijah to slow and recover.

During this time, I get the itch to work the barrel. Elijah, my older daughter's semi-retired barrel horse, knows his job and performed well in his days with Kirstin. I know the commands and am comfortable with this sport, as I rode and taught, as well. As we approach the barrel, hands soft and guiding with sensitivity and legs pressing and releasing at the right time, Elijah falls right into pattern and puts his nose to the barrel in just the right place as he turns and spins around it.

Light bulb!

Even while riding, my thoughts are on the latest stage of life for my husband and myself as our two adult children are preening their wings to leave our cozy, stable nest. My *saddle partner* was showing me yet another life picture in his creation.

Horses, trained well with patience and firm but calm guidance, learn to truly trust their rider no matter what. They will respond immediately to the subtlest movement in the hand, leg, seat, or voice command. The tools are available like the bit and bridle, hackamore, saddle, crop, spur, along with others but the guide must use them at the right time and with the utmost care:

“...able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.” James 3: 2b-3.

The Lord showed me two pictures: one of parents for their children and then one of the Lord guiding each of his children.

In regards to the first picture, parents are given the task to raise up gifts that are ours, for just a time. We have tools such as ones you can touch: Bible, disciplinary items, books for help, etc. These are available for us to use to help nudge along our children through the growth and learning years. Then adulthood happens, when the reins transition completely to another – our Father. Of course, He guides each of His children, I believe, all the time. However, He becomes the sole source of guidance at that magic age of adulthood.

As a parent at this stage, it is NOT easy to let that grasp on the reins be released. BUT, *should it be difficult?* Shouldn't we trust the Director of the leather straps just like the horse listens and responds without question to his trusted rider?

OH, if it was just that easy.

But recall:

"...for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."
Deuteronomy 31:6b.

As for the second picture, since the Lord is our Father and our guide, shouldn't we desire to be just as responsive and trusting, willing to go as the Lord guides without question or pause?

Trusting and listening, from the stage of letting go and allowing my adult children to move from mine and my husband's nudges and goading, to Him leading and directing, and them being trained to hear, listen and respond to Him.

To be so trusting to just walk the direction that we know He asks us to; to release those reins completely into our Father's hand and let Him guide; to let our adult children listen and respond and own their relationship with Him.

This change...it's not easy! And I cannot say that I will be able to just drop those reins without wondering and still wanting to pick them back up. BUT the word the Lord gave me was to *EMBRACE this time*.

I encourage each of you reading this to meditate on the Word for the season you are in now. Time passes, seasons come and go, change happens, childhood ends, adulthood begins, marriage enters, children are born, and age happens. **EMBRACE your season.**

Keep your nose to the barrel, and let our amazing Poppa guide you with those well-used reins.

REAL STORIES - BREAKING THROUGH by Lucy Calliccino

Webster's dictionary defines the word *breakthrough* as a sudden increase in knowledge, understanding; an important discovery that happens after trying for a long time to understand or explain something.

The life of Jesus Christ was an absolute failure from every standpoint except God's. But what seemed to be failure from man's standpoint was a triumph from God's standpoint, because God's purpose is never the same as man's purpose. (Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest.)

You might say that I have been living in the state of breaking through. You might say prior to this breakthrough, I never knew what was ahead of me to overcome.

When I was a young girl, I always wanted what every young girl dreams of: to get married to her Prince Charming, to live happily ever after. It's amazing that as little girls we tend to live in the innocence of a fairy book land where there are castles, princes on white horses, and not a care in the world! Somehow my fairy book turned into becoming a single mom at the age of thirty-one and living a life very different than My Fairy Book.

It went a little something like this.

Raised in Long Island, New York I was a good Catholic girl, from a very strict Catholic family that only went to church on holidays and well, you know that story. I loved my grandpa because he went to church every week. He never shared Jesus but always displayed how important God was in his life. I married very young, thinking, *I can conquer the world!* Boy, was I in for a shocker. Sometimes things just don't turn out the way you plan them to be but **I know that throughout my life, even when I had no knowledge of Jesus, God was getting his message across to me, somehow.**

Growing up, my mom was my hero. I know, usually it's your dad, but in my case God had a different plan. I was very close to my mom. We did everything together. She told me what all good moms tell their little girls, "Be good to everyone, love always, have mercy on others, and marry wealthy." My mom's heart was just to make sure that I was always taken care of and provided for. I knew her heart deep down inside. Of course in her plan, I shouldn't have married so young but I did what many young women do. I defied my mother and of course followed my heart. Jeremiah 17:9 reminds us that the heart is deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?

And here the journey began.

I was married and blissfully happy, or at least I thought so. During this time of turmoil, my mom became very ill and was told she had a very short time to live. Cancer. No one told me the news, in fear of how I would take it. After all, we were so close. She was my hero. A fighter to the end. I had no relationship with God, but one day in a very quiet room in the hospital I yelled out and said, "I hate you God for taking my mom." *What kind of a God would do that?* She was my hero. She was my best friend.

From that point on, I knew my life was about to change. I kept it as a pinnacle moment in time. Fear started crippling me on every turn. My son Daniel was conceived that year and when he was born, I called him my angel baby sent by my mom. Life was good, or at least I thought it was. Trouble brewed further, relationship slipping away, another baby on the way, my sweet, sweet Emily girl. No hope. No changes. *Where is this God?* Then I was divorced – a single mom with two kids.

I guess, here it is, my fairytale life. Not quite what I expected.

But God still had a plan.

I met a man at my job that changed my life and the lives of my children forever. He became my big brother. Through him, my children and I received Christ as our Lord and Savior. God used this man mightily. I felt like a new creation! But sadly, tragedy struck yet another time and my best friend was taken to heaven by God. His time was short here on earth. Then tragedy struck again and took my very close friend who loved Jesus with all her heart. *What is going on now?* I started questioning my faith. *I must stay strong, I have to overcome. I will break through this.*

At this moment, while I was questioning my faith, God was showing me snippets of movie clips of my life. He showed me moments in time with special people and in each clip where **He** was. *Wow.* God is full of love, grace and mercy. **Even when I didn't know Him, He was there alongside me all the way, seeing me through. Breaking through.**

What a God He is!!

He took away all the hurts of the past and made me brand new! He brought me to freedom. I once was held captive but now I am free!!

Fast forward to today. Not feeling well, I headed to the doctor's office - not my most favorite place to be. He checked my blood pressure and it was through the roof! The only time my pressure was high was when my mom passed and I was walking through a divorce. Now I hit another bump in the road. *Just another thing to overcome.*

Gaining weight, feeling stressed, I wondered, "Is this cause for another *breakthrough?*"

I became a very proud grandma and despite health issues, life was good. Still not feeling well, I continued on the journey to good health and fitness and sought out natural alternatives. A friend told me about a product because it works (It Works is actually the name of the company!). I did my own research to check out the ingredients and benefits of the product. *This is just what I need!*

After I got such results for myself, I felt God wanted me to share my testimony.

Throughout this year, all I have heard is how many of my friends have been stricken with cancer and many other diseases that are being inflicted on the lives of people I know. My own life testimony is full of breakthroughs, from darkness to light. And this last breakthrough is just another one of the ways God has brought provision to me, especially concerning health matters.

Ladies, we are given this one life here on earth. I want to make awareness possible to every young woman on how vitally important it is to take care of you, first. By doing that, you are taking care of your family as well. I dare you to break through!

*Lucy is passionate about Jesus and desires to see young woman come to the knowledge and fulfillment in Him and the purpose and plan He set out for their lives. She loves her two children, one daughter-in-law (who writes for A Bundle of THYME), her new grandbaby and another one on the way! She loves reading, writing, dancing, chocolate and creating relationships over a cup of Joe! **Check out her ad in THYME for her GREENS, for more information on the natural products that helped Lucy break through.***

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Kids in Church

I'm not surprised that when our teens hit adulthood they're not interested in sitting in a church service. From the time they're about six weeks old, they're placed in the nursery, then they graduate to the toddler room, on to the kids' classes, youth group, and so on... I'm all for classes for kids, rooms where they can hang together and not disturb, and places where they can be taught on their level, with words and pictures they understand.

However, there are a few things kids miss out on, when they never sit in church with their parents. Here they are:

- Worshiping together as a family.
- Learning to sit still and listen, attentively and respectfully, to a speaker.
- Giving of offerings.
- Watching and observing older people.
- Receiving the benefits of corporate prayer.
- Experiencing corporate worship.
- Hearing testimonies of God's faithfulness.

Today, there are so many forms of "church," from house churches, to small home groups, to congregations that meet in standard church buildings, to large groups that meet in schools or shopping centers. The location isn't the issue. But never attending a service, fellowship, or worship (whatever you call it) together with adults does our kids a disservice.

Here are the why's and the how's of each of the above:

Worshipping together as a family. If this never happens at your church, then at least find time to do so at home. This allows parents to see how their children worship most comfortably (loudly, quietly, on their knees, in dance, etc.) and it allows children to observe their parents as they praise God and give him thanks. This is totally necessary in a child's spiritual growth.

Learning to sit still attentively and respectfully listen to a speaker. It can be boring at times, but our children need to once-in-a-while listen to old people talk. There's wisdom in hearing what they have to say, and there's great value in learning the art of listening to those who are different than we are. In a church service is the perfect place to teach this.

Giving offerings. There's nothing more satisfying and fulfilling in family life than saving together, working together, and giving together. When children are a part of giving an offering that took time to earn, the entire family experiences the joy of giving together. Priceless!

Watching and observing older people. Kids hanging with kids – that's a good thing. But kids hanging with older people – that's a good thing, too. It's affirming for our children to receive a hug from an elder, to be complimented by a young adult on their choice of shoes, or to be prayed for during quiet time at the end of the service by another parent. This trains our kids that there is value in gaining wisdom and kudos from those older than we are.

Receiving the benefits of corporate prayer. If your church prays aloud for needs presented to the body, your kids need to see that prayer in action. They need to hear oral prayers, be aware of the needs of a single mom or a person in the hospital, and they need to feel the power that comes when a large group of people pray in faith. This strengthens their own faith and builds hope.

Experiencing corporate worship. Singing kids' songs and dancing around to music is all great, back in the "children's church." But every so often, kids need to stay in the "big church" for worship with the masses. Even if they just sit in wonder as others lift their hands, or they become curious why tears are flowing down the cheeks of the lady across the aisle, they need to soak in the presence of God as worship erupts...in silence...or in joyful noise. Corporate worship can encourage our children in their own worshipful expressions, and stimulate them to pray and praise.

Hearing testimonies of God's faithfulness. Do your children ever hear of how Mr. Smith got a job, when he was out of work for six months? What about Mrs. Price's need for healing in her back and how she is now able to bend and sit without pain? When adults share their testimonies of healing, salvation, provision, etc., our kids will sit up straight and listen. They will learn of God's loving care extended to his children, and it will remind them that God cares and answers prayer.

Is there anything wrong with kids' programs and classes? Of course, not. They're super valuable and necessary. But just like at school, kids go to different classes and they all come together in masses for assemblies and programs, church needs to be a well-rounded experience as well.

Otherwise, when our kids enter the real world of church with adults, they're missing so many key pieces that make them appreciate and love the body of Christ as a whole.

Fresh THYME - A Christian Nation? – by Christina Vetter

“Jesus Is Lord”...“He Is Risen”...“God Loves Everyone”

“Coexist”... “Anti- Religion, Pro Reality”...“Godless and Happy”

I wasn't sitting in a church service. I wasn't sitting in a religion class or part of a religious debate. I wasn't even feeling particularly “spiritual” that day. I was simply driving and running errands on a hot Texas afternoon as I started to notice these words blanketing our town. Every two or three minutes I would see another quote on a billboard, a church's marquee, a business' window decal, or someone's bumper sticker. I started to notice the sea of similar sayings around town, and it got me thinking,

With all this debate, is America still considered a ‘Christian nation?’”

In recent years, there has been so much going on in our country that has caused many Christians to denounce the United States as a godly nation. And honestly, I can't completely disagree with them. While there have always been terrible and immoral things across the world since Adam and Eve's fall, it seems as if our country is enduring some particularly difficult things lately. Between all the school and other random shooting sprees, horrific child abuse and neglect, increased crime rates, and other various thorns, it makes one wonder if a nation can still be considered a Christian nation with such terrible things happening right within its borders. Even on a more specific note, can we be a Christian nation with prayer prohibited in schools or a Christian's freedom of speech limited in the work place or college campus? Do the majority of American citizens even believe in Jesus?

As I pondered on the typical American Christian's complaints, I started to think about some of the other countries across the world. I started thinking about the Christians being slaughtered in the Middle East. I imagined the Christians in China who literally fear for their lives as they meet in a basement to have secret church or the hundreds and thousands of people having to smuggle Bibles in fear of execution. I thought about the 50-plus countries where Christians will be thrown in jail or killed simply for claiming to follow Jesus. What amazingly difficult trials these Christians face on a day to day basis. That is such a foreign threat to me. I've had the privilege of living in the United States my whole life, and I've never once feared for my life because of my faith. Yes, I've been disrespected, talked down to, and made fun of for it, but my life threatened? Not once.

As I learn about the way Christians in other countries are being treated, it gives me a new appreciation for living here. It angers me to see some of the things that are happening within our country, and I know things are far from perfect. I know many people disagree with various government leaders and/or activist groups, and laws are being made that seem to only add to the frustration. But, I also know that even in what seems to be the least Christian-friendly time in our country's history, our physical lives aren't in danger for our faith. Is America still considered a “Christian Nation?” I truthfully don't know. However, I do know that I am thankful to live in a

nation where it's at least legal to be one. Even with all the frustrations, I am so thankful to live in a country where I am free to follow Jesus if I chose to do so.

We are not perfect.

But we are free.

And that is something for which we can be truly thankful.

FRESH THYME - Minimalized Living – by Marcy Lytle

It's all the rage now, isn't it? Small compact homes that present the picture of minimalized living are popping up everywhere, yet some of those homes cost a maximum amount! However, it's a good thing...this trend back towards living frugally, eating homegrown food, and scaling back on spending. I don't consider myself a minimalist by any means, but because of financial woes several decades ago I was forced to minimalize. And now that I look back on it, I remember thinking there were things I just couldn't live without, and wishing and envying those who had things I did not. Neither of those thought processes were beneficial, but living through the minimalized years, I came up with some things I didn't have...and why I was super okay without them.

Cable – All of our friends were getting cable TV and with hundreds of channels to choose from, and our kids thought we “had” to have it! However, it was an extra monthly expense we couldn't afford, and because we only had a few channels to choose from – we did other things as a family besides watch television! Who knew that playing games and going to the park could be so much fun?

Manis and pedis – I've never had any interest in either of these, but I hear many of my friends talk about getting them. For me, I love clothes, so if I have an extra \$25 or \$50 I'd rather spend it on fashion. Manis and pedis, I know, are relaxing and pampering. But if you can't afford them – get together with a few friends and paint and decorate your own hands and feet together.

Designer clothes – There's pressure among some to wear only brand-name clothing, because somehow we think the name means better quality. I'm not convinced that it does. Once you learn to read fabric labels, look at how clothes sit on a hanger, and check patterns and stitching, you can find great bargains at discount stores. And if wearing designer clothes makes you feel better about yourself because others will see the name and burn with envy, you might need to hear that you are beautiful in whatever you wear – name brand or not! *You are beautiful.*

A playroom – During the worst of our financial times, I stood beside a mom while we were waiting for our kids to exit the school building and I heard her say, “We've just got to get a bigger house with a playroom for our boys.” (She had two.) I obscurely rolled my eyes, because we were downsizing to a smaller home with tiny bedrooms and NO playroom. Honestly, I wanted a playroom for years when my kids were little. We ended up clearing out half of the garage, adding neon lights, a sofa, a game table, and more – for our playroom. It worked just fine.

A maid – There are good reasons to hire a maid – if you're super busy with work and have no time to clean, or if you're incapacitated for a while due to illness or injury. Otherwise, why? My mom has a maid clean her house (of course she's old and has earned this service!) but my mom cleans before the maid comes so that her house is clean for the maid. *What?* I enjoy cleaning my own house, it's therapeutic, satisfying, and it's good exercise for the arms, legs, and heart – if you learn to sprint, skip, and jump as you clean!

A landscaper – Same reasons above apply, to justify this luxury. If you have more money than time, go for it. Hire a yard person. But if you don't have the extra money, put the family to work and take care of your own yard. Kids can water plants, older teens can mow or bag leaves, and mom or dad can trim with the edger or weed eater. Working in the yard is something we often dread, but once we get up and get out and get moving, it's like painting a masterpiece in a few hours – you've got a freshly manicured lawn that's picture perfect!

A gym – I don't understand this one, at all. Gyms are expensive, you have to get dressed to go there, it takes time to drive there, and if you have small children, it requires daycare. Obviously, gyms are great for those being rehabilitated or those with physical ailments that need trainers' attention, or for those who have the luxury of money and time. I knew a lady who worked all week, away from her children, and left them on the weekend to spend hours at the gym, as well. It takes discipline to exercise daily, but include a friend who can hold you accountable. Make it part of your daily routine to walk after dinner, dance to music for 20 minutes before you shower in the morning, or play tennis as a family or a couple, two nights a week. *(And if you've cleaned your own house and mowed your own lawn – that's great exercise as well!)*

Lessons/Sports – These are extracurricular activities that our kids beg to participate in and ones that we think our kids "must" have in order to keep up with their peers. Not so! *Can you hear me screaming?* These clubs and private lessons are super expensive, and your kids and your family will suffer from crammed living, going here and there every night of the week, missing important down time eating around the table as a family. Minimalize in this area, if you don't do anything else listed above!

These are just a few things I've noticed that I didn't have, and I didn't miss.

Some people rid their house of extra furniture and knick-knacks to simplify their living space. Others minimalize trips to the grocery store by planting their own gardens, using their kids and teaching them as they plant.

What things and activities take up your space and time? What have you already laid aside?

There's no shame in living minimally, when it comes to stuff and busyness. In fact, there's great wisdom in laying aside things that encumber us so that we can run and not grow weary...in well doing.

FRESH THYME – What If – by Marcy Lytle

What if I could live one day free of guilt about what I ate, what I did, or what I didn't do?

What if I could live one day without second guessing what I said. Was it enough, and am I pleasing Him?

What if I could live one day without wondering about tomorrow, worrying about today?

What if I could live that way?

Recently, I was in the car with my husband and I turned to him and said, "I wish I could live one day without feeling guilty about something."

He very peacefully said back to me, "I wish I could have one day where I felt guilty about something," as he smiled and winked.

Oh I how I envy his peace, his resolve, and his clear mind.

I'm not sure how women gain all of these pounds of guilt, worry, and wonder over the years, but it seems most of us do. We get married and have children, and they become a huge source of worry. Will they be healthy? Will they follow Christ when they grow up? Can we protect them from evil and tragedy? Also, we begin to fret over what we eat, and if we should indulge, and if so – when and how much? And besides all of that angst, we carry around with us the heavy load of trying to get through another day, another task, another week, all while preparing our entire family for the future – which is so bleak and scary – according to the television news reporters.

But what if we could live just one day without all of that?

I've found that unless I set my mind on the right track from the moment I open my eyes in the morning, it's hard to steer back throughout the day as twists and turns take their place on the landscape. I have to wake up, give thanks, remember his goodness, and recall his faithfulness.

I've noticed that unless the Word is my news source, my greatest reference book, and my cure-all for what ails me, I will go to every other source my eyes see throughout the day. And I'll be exhausted by dinnertime.

I've realized that my mind is my worst enemy, and that all of those weights and pounds that I carry around up there are just thoughts – not reality. Sure, there is evil in the world and great loss and scary things happen, but they don't have to govern my day by blanketing my mind. If I lasso the thoughts into one big bundle, toss them in a paper bag, and lay them at His feet, I then have room to think on things that are true, of good report, pure, and lovely.

I've decided that living free of guilt one day at a time is a choice I have to make. I've even at times felt guilty for not feeling guilty. That's crazy thinking.

God doesn't want us to live in guilt and fear, and worry constantly. It ages us prematurely and it causes our heads to hang down so that we miss the beauty of the sunrise; and it closes each day with hopelessness and dread at the prospect of another day just like this one.

I'll admit. It's hard to do this. But we have to:

- We have to rise up as women who know who we are (daughters of a Father who loves us).
- We have to clothes ourselves in strength and dignity (because we belong to the King of Kings),
- We have to realize that we are blessed (because He knows us and loves us.)

I have trouble with this sometimes, and I have to ask for help. I ask my husband to pray with me. I share with a friend who always has a kind word for me. And I run to the Word where there are pages and pages of the good things God has in store for me and mine.

It's still early in the day as I write this, and I already began down the wrong path this morning with the "what if" line of thinking. But as I write, I resolve to change my direction this morning back on the path that is lit with his Word.

Will you join me?

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

November 2014

TIPS

The Dressing – How to Wear Gray

Gray is the color of winter and it gets a bad rap, doesn't it? Gray skies, rainy days, cold and gloomy, heavy and dreary. No way! Gray is a great color for fall, and there are ways to wear it that make you feel vibrant, happy, and full of energy because you look fabulous! There are so many shades of gray, too! And with each of those shades, there are complimenting colors that make the gray shine like real silver...here's how:

1. **Gray boots** – We love booties – those short boots that only come up to your ankles. And these gray booties from [Zappos](#) have the heel that is comfortable to wear all day! What's great about booties is that they look good peeking out from your jeans or with your fall skirts. Pair these with denim jeans or a dress in gray of a different shade, and a cranberry necklace!
2. **Gray coat** – You cannot go wrong with a classic peacoat; and this one from [New York & Company](#) includes a hood, *and* it's a great price! Gray coats go with any outfit, but especially look great over a crisp, white shirt, tucked into your jeans!
3. **Gray cardigan** – Have you tried this cocoon cardigan from [Target?](#) Gray can be paired with the pastels from the summer to bring them into winter with you. Pale pink looks great under any shade of gray. And the cocoon cardi is a great layer for those days when the temps start out cold and warm up in the afternoon.
4. **Gray dress** – Love, love this midi gray dress from [Lulu's](#) with the side zippers. This simple gray dress can be dressed up with a scarf and a jacket, with boots, or worn with leggings and a vest for the weekend. Pair this dress with black, or a pop of color in your accessories – like the yellow hue of mustard!
5. **Gray necklace** – This bib necklace in silver/gray looks good against a gray top, or under the color of a button down shirt, or around your neck against your solid fall sweaters, or even with your sweatshirts to dress them up if you're going out! This one pictured is from [Urban Outfitters](#).
6. **Gray bag** – This crossbody bag from [The Buckle](#) has a removable strap if you want to carry the bag, for a dressier occasion. But wearing it crossbody is a must for your Christmas shopping! The gray color will be a staple for your fall wardrobe and can be worn with any color at all! It would look especially cute paired with your gray booties!
7. **Gray scarf** – I love scarves for winter! This square oversized scarf (that comes in multiple colors – not just gray!) is great for winter wear. It can be found at [Nordstroms](#). Square scarves can be worn [lots of ways!](#) Gray scarves can be worn over your striped or patterned tops if they have a trace of gray in them, or atop any solid colored sweaters you might wear this fall! If you get too warm, tie your scarf on the handle of your purse!

Look through your closet and pull out your bright colors, and pair them with your gray purchases. And choose lots of shades of gray (maybe, not 50) to bring your dreary season into clouds with silvery, shining linings!

Seven for You - A Girl and Her Purse by Marcy Lytle

Next to her family, I think a girl's purse is her most prized possession. It holds all of the things she finds necessary to carry with her every day, everywhere. It holds all of those things she cannot live without, along with a few treats that make her feel special. And losing a purse is heartbreaking, she feels violated, and she panics, trying to recall all of her losses.

About a year ago, we were leaving a movie theater on the night before our vacation and I realized my wallet wasn't in my purse. We had just been to the bank so I had extra cash for the trip. My heart sank, and of course I panicked, because the wallet was nowhere. It was a true miracle how the manager of the theater discovered it right before we left, way across the theater where we were NOT sitting. Apparently, I had thrown it into my backpack purse, then slung the pack over my shoulder, and out the wallet flew. Whew, a disaster and devastation was averted thanks to the keen eye of a man who cared.

I often think of that true miracle about my purse, and give thanks. I also think of how a girl and her purse are connected in so many ways, naturally and spiritually. How so? Read below, and enjoy the links too, if you'd like to shop while you read...(all items are from Target.)

The purse needs a latch. When we place our personals inside our purse, it has to be closed and latched, if we don't want the contents to spill. We must keep the things we hold dear to our hearts covered and protected from theft – like lies that steal our joy. That latch is the seal of the Holy Spirit. If we carry open bags, we have to guard them more closely with our eyes, so that we're not an easy prey for wandering hands. The Spirit places a seal upon our hearts so that NO ONE can snatch us from His hands.

The wallet needs wisdom. The wallet represents our wealth and ability to spend. We have to daily remind ourselves that all we have belongs to Him, and we are to use our funds wisely. I think that part of our DNA is to spend, because we have a household to care for. So instead of feeling guilty about spending, we just need a bit of wisdom. Don't have this? Get with a friend who does...and glean. Find ways to save money, spend wisely, and enjoy a splurge now and then.

The lipstick is luxurious. I don't wear lipstick that often, but when I do I feel like I've taken my look up a notch. Even just a tint of color of a shiny lip gloss makes me feel like smiling. I think keeping a tube of gloss or lipstick in our purses is a good reminder to watch what comes out of our mouths – is it blessing someone or cursing someone? Maybe when we cover our lips, we can say a little prayer that we cover our mouths more often, as well. And when we do, we will feel like a million dollars!

The handle has to feel right. Some women like clutches to hold under their arm, others like a little handle to swing by their side, and others like a long strap so their purse can be worn cross-body. I prefer the last option, as I enjoy having my hands free. However, when I dress up, I prefer a purse that I actually hold. There are times when we need our hands to be free – to give, to serve, to just wave, or to bless. It's those times we need to don the sweats, the old jeans, and sling that purse across our bodies, so that both hands are free! There's nothing

wrong with dressing up and enjoying a night out, clutch in arm – in fact – it's necessary and fun! But mostly hands free – it needs to be!

Keys inside are necessary for a ride. Isn't it the most alarming feeling to make it out to your car after a long day of shopping, only to realize your keys are missing, and you suddenly remember where you left them? I suppose the only greater panic would be to realize you left your wallet there, as well! Keys in our purse make us feel secure, knowing that we can leave where we are whenever we're ready. They unlock our private getaway – our car – where we can sing loudly, cry if we want to, or roll down the window and let the breezes blow. We need these keys, daily! We need the keys of acceptance, loving ourselves, and being who we were created to be – without the worry of what others are thinking. Have you left these keys somewhere back in your childhood? Seek help from a mentor or counselor, and place those keys back in your purse, where they belong!

Is there a pocket for your phone? I've noticed that some purses include this pocket right by the edge of the top of the purse, which is so unsafe! I feel if I place my phone there, lay my purse down, the phone will fly out. However, our purses need a pocket somewhere to hold our phone – our dearest possession of all! Otherwise, when it rings, we're rummaging around in a sea of odds and ends and that phone becomes an elusive treasure we cannot locate at all! Our phone represents our connection with those we love – especially our family. We moms LOVE our phones, because we can hear from our kids wherever they are. Did you know your Father enjoys that connection, as well? Keep your line of communication front and center at all times, all day, so that you hear his voice and know that he hears yours. That only requires acknowledging him before you step out the door with a comment like, "Lord here I am, send me."

Without your glasses, you're lost. Maybe you don't wear reading glasses...yet. But one day you will. Or maybe the sun makes your eyes hurt, so sunglasses are a must. I need both. In fact, I can't function behind the wheel without my sunglasses, and I can't see a darn thing without my reading glasses. These two things are the last two items I check before I leave the house and lock the door. Are they in my purse? There's no use in stepping outside in the world unless we can see clearly those around us, with His eyes, so that we can respond with His heart. A small prayer to this effect is akin to throwing our glasses into our purses, before we head into town.

What other things are important to you in your purse, or how you choose a particular purse to carry? It's fun to look at things in the natural and think of things in the spiritual, because we are both! And natural reminders often stir up spiritual desires and wonders, even if it's just a girl like you and me walking out the door with our purse in hand to enjoy a day of shopping, while listening for his voice of how much he loves us or those we see today on the street!

Selah's Style – Christmas Crafts

The holidays are nearly here!!!! Here are a few craft ideas that I thought would be fun to make and give as Christmas gifts to your family and friends. Some of them take some time, so I thought you could get started now!

My mom, dad, brother and I decided we would make these candle holders a couple of years ago. Here is how we did it! We got a piece of wood and sawed it into little chunks. We drilled holes the size of tea light candles. Next, we sanded them till they were as smooth as a baby's bottom. Then we used a [Dremel](#) to make them look old. The last step was putting on a stain to make them blue-ish. Everyone enjoyed them.

I love to sew so, me and my mom decided to make embroidered dish towels. We bought iron-on patterns at Michaels. I traced the pattern with neat stitches. We added colorful strips of cloth to the bottom. These were so fun for me to do!

Here is a great gift idea to give to men! It's a magnetic bottle opener and we got the idea here, [on line](#). We gave these to my uncles and my cousins, and they thought they were cool!

Here is a quick cool project. We bought plastic ornaments from [Michaels](#), filled them with Christmas-colored pom poms, glued our picture to the front, and added a ribbon to hang it! Super simple and creative!

If you don't have craft supply stores at home, [Petroglyph](#) is a great idea! Any age can paint pottery! I did this one when I was one and a half! My brother paints a mug for my grandpa every year!

I hope you have fun making Christmas gifts and the people you give them to love them.

It's never too early to get a head start!

The Fearless Kitchen - Winner, Winner, Turkey Dinner by Christina Vetter

What a wonderful month it is. A cool breeze is blowing through my open windows allowing the smell of fall to seep into every corner of the house, my favorite mug of hot Earl Grey tea is always within arm's reach, and something wonderful is happening at the local grocery store. Turkeys are *cheap*. Not just normal cheap, insanely cheap. I'm talking \$0.25 per pound cheap. Maybe it's the penny pincher inside of me talking, but in my opinion, meat at this price is cause for celebration of epic proportions. Consequently, every year when prices drop this low, I stock my freezer full. Typically, Thanksgiving meal at our house is for four to six people, tops. But, that doesn't stop me from sorting through the turkey bin for as many of the largest possible birds I can get my hands on (budget permitting, of course.) If it were possible for me to come away with ten 45lb birds, I would buy them proudly. However, since I've never seen a 45lb turkey, and my beloved HEB has recently placed a buying limit to five turkeys per person, I do the best I can.

As you can imagine with this abundance of poultry, I have *plenty* of extra turkey around Thanksgiving. It's actually become a fun, post-Thanksgiving dinner tradition for everyone in my family to sit around the table and pull every remaining inch of meat off the bone and package them into bags. Sometimes I make multiple birds on Thanksgiving Day and knock it all out at once, other times I repeat the process throughout the month. Regardless, during the month of November and many months to come, one will find my freezer piled high with gallon sized Ziplocks full with turkey.

What's a girl to do with all these pounds and pounds of turkey? Absolutely anything! One of the greatest things about turkey is its versatility in the kitchen. Turkey is a great substitute for almost any chicken dish, and when ground with a meat grinder, any ground beef dish.

Given the amazing prices and seemingly endless cooking options, this month I'll be sharing some recipes for all that leftover poultry. This list is by no means a stopping point. Once you've cooked your way through these recipes, get creative with your family favorites and see how turkey can be substituted into your culinary equation.

I hope everyone has a very Happy Thanksgiving, and as always, happy eating!

Turkey Chili
Serves 4-6

Difficulty:



I just love a good, hearty chili in the fall or winter time, and this recipe hits the spot. Packed with flavor, it is even better the next day! I recommend using ground turkey in this recipe, but shredded turkey can be used as well.

Ingredients:

¼ C oil

1 lb ground turkey

½ large onion, small diced
3 cloves garlic, minced
2 (16 oz) cans kidney beans, drained
1 (16 oz) can diced tomatoes
2 Tbsp chili powder
½ tsp paprika
½ tsp cayenne pepper
1 tsp cumin
Salt and black pepper as needed
Optional: shredded cheddar cheese and/or sour cream to garnish

Directions:

- In a large pot over medium high heat, heat oil and cook turkey thoroughly.
- Add onion and garlic and stir frequently until onions are translucent.
- Add beans, diced tomatoes, and seasonings, and simmer on medium low heat for about 20 minutes.
- Pour into bowls and garnish with cheese and sour cream if desired.

Jambalaya
Serves 10-12

Difficulty: 

This jambalaya is an out of the box way to use up leftover turkey. It takes some time to make, but it's totally worth it. Tip: this is a LARGE batch. You will need at least an 8 Qt. pot or dutch oven for this dish.

Ingredients:

½ C oil
1 lb smoked sausage, sliced
3 lb turkey breast, diced
1 large onion, small diced
2 green bell peppers, small diced
2 stalks celery, small diced
5 cloves garlic, minced
1 Tbsp fresh parsley, minced
1 (28oz) can diced tomatoes
1 (6oz) can tomato paste
2 Tbsp Cajun seasoning (I like Tony Chacheres)
5 C rice
10 C chicken broth
Salt and black pepper as needed

Directions:

- Heat oil over medium high heat in dutch oven or pot.
- Add turkey and sausage in batches and brown on all sides.
- Add onion, bell pepper, celery, garlic, parsley, and both tomato cans and stir frequently over medium heat until veggies are soft and onions are translucent.
- Turn heat to low and add Cajun seasoning, rice, and chicken broth and simmer covered for about 45 minutes or until rice is cooked, stirring and recovering every 5 minutes.
- Remove from heat and allow jambalaya to rest covered for about 20 minutes.
- Add salt and black pepper to taste, stir, and serve.

Turkey Pot Pie
Serves 4

Difficulty: 

You may recognize this recipe from September's Chicken Pot Pie. You would be correct. It's practically the same recipe except for the turkey substitution and a couple of added ingredients. Even with the added ingredients, it's equally as easy and equally as yummy.

Ingredients:

- 2 small cans cream of mushroom
- 2 cups shredded dark or light turkey meat
- 1 (16oz) bag frozen mixed vegetables
- 2 deep dish frozen pie crusts
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- 1 tsp onion powder
- ½ tsp dried oregano
- ½ tsp dried basil
- ¼ tsp dried sage
- ½ tsp dried basil

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 425F, and set pie crusts on counter to thaw.
- In a large saute pan, warm turkey thoroughly.
- Add cream of mushroom, vegetables, and remaining spices and stir until combined and heated thoroughly.
- Pour contents of pan into one of the thawed pie shells and spread evenly.
- Place the other thawed pie shell on top and flatten down to cover the bottom filled shell.
- Pinch around the entire edge of the pie to seal, and trim away any excess crust with a knife.
- Cut a slit in the shape of an X on top of the pie to allow the steam to escape.
- Place pie on a baking sheet and bake for 45 minutes or until crust is golden brown.
- Allow to cool for 10-15 minutes, and slice into quarters.

Tried and True - At the Movies – by Marcy Lytle

I LOVE going to the movies. However, it's expensive, it's oftentimes cold, the food is also costly, and of course one can always wait until the movie streams on NetFlix. But who wants to do that? Not me! Getting away for a couple of hours, out of the house and away from chores staring me in the face, is worth a few dollars. And with some fun tips I've gathered over the years, and from observing my friends, I'm sharing them with you, to make your movie nights a little more interesting...and fun!

1. **Keep a sweater (and leggings) in the car at all times.** I have a friend who carries leggings in her purse because her legs get cold during the show! I always have a sweater on hand, because there's nothing worse than shivering for two hours instead of feeling cozy and warm! So don't get caught going to an impromptu movie without being covered.
2. **Put your sweater on backwards.** Slip your arms into the sweater/coat and just cover the front of you, pulling it up snugly under your neck. This works great, because it keeps those falling kernels of popcorn from going down your blouse (and ending up on the floor when you get home!)
3. **Carry a large purse or bag,** including some of your own snacks. Theaters don't like you bringing in your own food, but we try to buy at least one food item (the popcorn, of course!) and we bring in our candy and bottled waters. This saves lots of money. Be sure to carry out your trash when the movie is over. I have a specific "movie purse" hanging near my front door!
4. **Purchase a club card.** We frequent one brand of theaters so often that we signed up for their club card (free). About every fourth or fifth movie we see, we receive a coupon for a free drink, free popcorn, or a free movie ticket! I hear Costco also sells movie tickets at a discount.
5. **Go to the movies on a weeknight.** Weekends attract loud teenagers, and the lines are long for new releases. However, mid-week viewings are quiet and you have your pick of seats, and you don't have to arrive early! If you do choose the weekend, opt for a matinee for fewer crowds and cheaper prices.
6. **Be smart and read reviews** BEFORE you go to the movie. Don't show up and be surprised at the filth or lame story and have to walk out. A good site is [Plugged In](#). Or catch your local newspaper reviews. Read more than one. Be informed before you go, so you don't have to get up and leave the show. (That rhymes!)
7. **Be adventurous.** Try out the artsy theater where independent films are shown. If you read the synopses, these can sometimes be the best movies out there! Sometimes a documentary, a foreign film (with subtitles), or a unique camera lens angle makes for a movie going experience that will stir up conversation for hours, after the credits roll!
8. **Don't eat dinner out AND go to the movies.** That will really break the bank! If you're going to the movies, make it your dinner as well. Decide beforehand what you're going to eat during the movie (nothing smelly or noisy), pack up, and head out with your big purse in tow, and then make your purchases to add to your stash. For example, take a trail mix and grapes, to eat alongside your theater popcorn. You'll be full AND have a few dollars for coffee later.

9. **Watch where you sit**, and make it a point to sit in the same area for each movie. This helps your date or friends find you, if they have to arrive in the dark. Don't sit in front of little kids, don't kick the chairs in front of you, and if you're a frequent bathroom visitor, sit by the aisle. This will keep you, and those around you, happy.
10. **Don't do it.** This final tip is a given, but don't whisper, don't talk, don't cough and sneeze, and don't moan during movies. I once sat by a man who muttered, "Hmmm," every few minutes. I've sat by two women who giggled at every scene, and I've been near those who should have stayed home in bed. (Remember the movie *Outbreak*?) Nothing stirs up anger in fellow moviegoers like a noisy person disrupting the show.

I know some opt out of movies altogether, because of the cost and the content of lots of movies these days. I get that. But for me, going to the movies is my treat to myself to relax, enjoy the whole experience of the dark theater and large screen, and escape to another world for a couple of hours...while enjoying popcorn and Goobers (yes, that's my favorite candy)...and leaving the busyness of the day behind.

Enjoy!

HOME

I Don't Do Teens – The Need for Security by Lynn Cherry

“What were you thinking?”

“Were you even thinking at all?”

“You do have a brain in there, don't you?”

I let my son have it. I was furious about the decision he had made and embarrassed by how incompetent it made me look as a parent.

Anger and embarrassment are simultaneous emotions in the teen parenting years. Reining them in is like holding back a race horse. They are quick and powerful and they want to run. The problem is I didn't pull back the reins; I spurred them on, crop clenched in my barred teeth.

I let them run wild until I caught a glimpse of the fear in my son's eyes.

I realized in that moment, he didn't feel safe.

I blew an opportunity to meet one of the most basic needs in my son's life.

The [Living as Conquerors](#) model defines security as feeling safe in a relationship: physically and emotionally, and feeling safe in my environment.

Adolescents are facing major upheaval on many fronts. Their bodies are changing dramatically as tyrannical hormones flood their veins. Curiosity often leads to unmonitored and unlimited access to all kinds of information. They have to live with other teenagers who are in the same boat and they must navigate it all with their still developing brain.

When my son was in sixth grade he endured regular bullying. School was not a safe place for him. What helped him make it through that year was having other environments where he did feel safe. He felt safe at church. He felt safe with his close friends. He felt safe at home, most of the time.

Sad to say, my pride has been an environmental hazard to my teenagers. When I saw my son look at me in fear, it wrecked me. I want our home to be a safe place to grow.

Teenage mistakes, although embarrassing for parents, can be wonderful tools for growth. A secure environment is one where we can learn from our mistakes, where we are loved and accepted in spite of our failings and where forgiveness and reconciliation overtake the two-headed monster of anger and embarrassment.

For more insight into your own family's top relational needs. Visit [The Living as Conqueror's website](#), look for Free Resource Downloads and print a Relational Needs Assessment for each member of your family.

Practical Parenting – Taming the Mess – by Georganne Schuch

Messes. We are a family of big messes. There are lots of us to make messes. Everyone scores their highest potential in mess-making. I do love my big mess-making family, but they try my religion sometimes.

Occasionally, I get pretty uptight about our messes, and I go all Sgt. Carter from *Gomer Pyle*, demanding everyone clean up every speck in sight. They scramble around, and *Shazam!* The house looks like people might live here for a little while. But only for as long as it takes a certain preschooler to walk from one room to the next. It's a good thing she's so cute and sweet. *Sigh.*

To avoid the whole drill sergeant routine, I generally assign everyone daily chores. It's so much easier to keep the house in order as we go than to plow through a week's worth of discarded clothes, dropped toys, sticky counter tops, and overflowing trash cans. I'm telling you, it's hard to believe only seven people live in this house.

Besides the most obvious benefit of keeping the house reasonably clean, chores prepare children for life:

- **Responsibility.** All five of my children have areas of responsibility. One keeps their bathroom clean. Another is in charge of laundry. A third keeps shoes rounded up. A sibling might be called on to help or even take over the task on occasion, but at the end of the day, if the laundry hasn't been sorted I call the laundry queen for a reason why. And she is never short of reasons.
- **Organization skills.** It might be fine to do worksheets about how to alphabetize letters or pack a box in the most efficient way, but actually lining up the spice bottles and grouping them by size is real world kind of stuff.
- **Cleaning skills.** Hobbies may come and go, but cleaning never goes out of style. Not everyone will grow up to have a maid at their disposal. Might as well know how to scrub the toilet early.
- **Team Work.** Like I said, everyone pitches in to clean the house. They realize their chore helps someone else accomplish a bigger task. Everyone plays a part in the final result.
- **Value.** Seeing the tasks finished is a reward in itself, but I also often arrange a quick break for fun snacks or a game when we're done. Children (and adults) appreciate being appreciated.
- **Habits.** I tease one of my children about inheriting my mother's recessive cleaning gene. It seems like some people are just more tuned in, or out, to messes and cleaning. But really, cleaning is a habit. Teach it and practice it for a lifetime of less mess.

We have a general daily routine for cleaning, a more in-depth weekly routine, and a few things we perform every month or so. Everyone's priorities and needs are a little different, but here are our daily tasks.

1. **Pick up:** toys, shoes, clothes, trash
We have a goblin that scatters torn pieces of paper and toy stuffing all over the house.
2. **Wipe down:** kitchen counters, dining table, bathroom counters, sinks, microwave
Oh my word, these surfaces get nasty.
3. **Sort:** clothes, in particular, but also food, school books, DVDs
I say sort instead of put away, because one means returning to a place where it belongs while the other means stuffing it out of sight.
4. **Wash:** dishes, clothes (every other day)
We would not have to wash clothes every other day if SOME children wouldn't change clothes four times a day or dump clean clothes in the laundry basket when their dresser drawer is full.

Then our weekly chores, which usually have to be repeated more than once throughout the week, are:

1. **Vacuum.** We have more carpeted areas than we would like, and they require concentrated vacuuming at least twice a week. We time this to coincide with a daily pick up.
2. **Sweep.** Living in the country means we track in a lot of dirt and mud. The areas in front of the outside doors also have to be swept multiple times a week, as well as have the inevitable shoes arranged out of the way.
3. **Mop.** After sweeping, mopping is always good...unless it's raining, and then it's an exercise in futility.
4. **Scrub.** The counters and sinks need a little extra elbow grease applied every few days.
5. **Bag.** Trash and recycling. Lots and lots of trash and recycling.

Finally, our monthly chores tend to be the little, or sometimes big, projects that don't quite fit in the daily or weekly chore list. A few of our favorites are:

1. **Straightening up the pantry** and cabinets so we can reach all the regular stuff we use regularly.
2. **Dusting ceiling fans** and other obscure surfaces no one looks at until, "Oh my gosh, I can write my name in the dust!"
3. **Sweeping between the appliances** to get all the dropped items no one wanted to bother with when they dropped them.
4. **Vacuuming the couches** and chairs to find the missing pieces of puzzles, doll accessories, and dried fruit.
5. **Organizing the drawers and closets** so the things that belong in drawers and closets can actually fit in them.

When two or more are gathered together, a mess will occur. It's straight out of the Bible. But a little daily TLC (timely, learned, chores) help tame the mess.

Life as We Know It - It's About Time - by Erica Simmons

Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today.

That should be the single parent's creed.

I am even more convinced of this as I sit here at my computer writing this article at 5:30 a.m. on the day that my article is due. I am only able to sit now, because I have finished cleaning my room and the kitchen, waiting on the next round of laundry. You see I had *planned* to do all this *yesterday*, but there were so many good football games on television. I got caught up in them and before I knew it, I was too lazy and it was too late. So off to bed I went, only to awake time and time again with worry and stress about getting everything I needed to get done today.

Finally, at 4:00 am I got up and got my day started.

Oh, wait, my story is supposed to be inspiring and uplifting...*right?*

But my story is also about truth, and this month's truth is that **time is a resource that cannot be renewed**. There is only a finite amount of time in each day, and determining how we use it as a single parent is critical, and learning how to use it is an ever changing process.

I remember the first time I realized I had to change how I was spending my time.

I have always been an avid reader, as reading gave me fuel for my daydreams, which I was having when I could not read. I read so much that my mother actually grounded me from reading when I was a young girl because when I got caught up in a book, all I wanted to do was finish it. When engrossed in a book, my hearing decreased significantly and my mom got angry when I did not listen, which led to my grounding. My favorite books when I was a girl were *Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys*, and as I got older my favorites became romance novels. This continued even after my boys were born and too much of my time was spent reading. This would soon change.

The funny thing is I can't remember the exact details of the inciting incident, but I can clearly remember this amazing lesson. One of the boys had gotten into something or another, and I had to deal with it. I remember being frustrated and feeling self-pity, wondering why they could not do what I expected them to do. I was so tired after working and just wanted to relax and read.

Suddenly, I had a huge revelation. The boys continued dalliances into trouble was not because of them, as they were kids and "boys will be boys." That was mom's catchall advice to me when I called her, frustrated about their behavior. My revelation was that I was the problem. It was me! I was too busy or too tired, or too this or that, to consistently discipline the boys when they misbehaved. I am not talking about harsh or severe discipline, just consistent discipline – always taking the time to deal with the issue no matter how I was feeling or what I was doing. This had to become more important than my reading.

It was not an easy transition to my newfound knowledge. I soon learned it required me to let go of things and ideas I had held onto for so long, but I did it, and life has been easier. Once again, life as I knew it changed and changed and changed.

You see, every new season God brings us into requires us to adjust how we spend our time. And many seasons have come and gone since He taught me this valuable lesson.

As I sit here writing, looking back over the many seasons, I realize I have moved into another one. This one is more time consuming than any other before it, and the time management has just hit a whole other level.

It began this morning, long before I finally got out of my bed.

As I reflect, it was not that I could not sleep. It was God beckoning me, drawing me to Him.

People often say they don't know how I do it, or they ask how I do it, especially with twins. I used to say, "It's because it is all I have ever known." I now know to answer, "It's because I have never been in it alone."

Deuteronomy 31:6 (NIV)

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

For me, "them" in this verse is anything I face as not only a child of God, but as a single mom. I mentioned earlier that time cannot be renewed, but our strength can be (Isaiah 40:31).

Although I had to get up at 4:00 a.m. this morning, I know my Father will give me more than enough strength to get through this day. When I put my head on my pillow tonight I will have a smile on my face, as I always do when I have accomplished all that I planned. And although time cannot be renewed, His resources are new every morning.

Simple Solutions - Kids in the Kitchen – by Georganne Schuch

When I read recipes that estimate a quick 30 minute meal to the table, I always wonder if anyone actually tries this in real life, because a 30 minute prep and cook in a controlled environment, like a test kitchen, is not the same as a mom's kitchen with dirty dishes in the sink, little kids running through screaming, and a television or radio blaring in the background. Now, that kind of reality show might actually approach real life.

Fixing dinner is a messy proposition, any way you look at it. Sure, I have the rescue recipes that only take a few dumped cans of ingredients, but since I cook mostly from scratch, the majority of my meals require a little more prep. How do I do that amidst a busy life and hungry children at 6 p.m.?

First I make sure someone has finally cleared the kitchen from lunch. Since I have older children, cleanup is their responsibility. I generally require wiped counters and at least one side of the sink free of dirty dishes. If I need a certain pot or skillet that is in the dirty pile, I ask them to wash it for me. I believe in getting my children involved in all facets of meal prep.

Being a family means working as a team.

While I do most of the cooking, they must pitch in to help clean.

Next, when I have a multi-step prep going on, I employ child labor to help, as well. My 5 and 9 year olds pull ingredients from the pantry and refrigerator. My 5 and 4 year olds like to help wash and peel vegetables. They do a pretty decent job, and no fingers are at risk of being amputated with a good vegetable peeler. My 12 and 15 year olds are good at browning meat, opening cans and packages, mixing ingredients, and starting water to boil for pasta, tea, etc.

Side dishes, in particular, are great training projects for children to help prepare. Simple salads, baked beans, roasted veggies, shish-kabobs. They know the drill after just a few lessons. Younger children measure the dry ingredients, while slightly older children measure the wet ingredients. Fixing dinner might be messy, but I like it to be as controlled a mess as possible.

After years of helping, my 15 year old can cook an entire meal with a well-explained recipe when I need her to do so. My 12 year old is a very efficient helper with just a few cues. My 9 year old is working into a sous chef position, slowly, as she is probably the least interested in being in the kitchen. She does like to eat, so she realizes the need for keeping her place at the table. The 4 and 5 year olds are still mostly underfoot, but they are so eager to help that I can't turn them down. I start the prep time with a few things for them to do, then I shoo them out to play. Our kitchen just isn't big enough to have everyone in it at the same time.

Investing a little time and patience early with children develops them into competent helpers later and assures their ability to feed themselves when they leave home.

My girls might eat an entire jar of Nutella one day in protest to my never letting them do it while they lived at home, but they won't have to live on Ramen noodles and Hamburger Helper.

I imagine their apartment might be the most popular hang-out place at dinner time.

A Night to Remember - What's in Your Hand? By Marcy Lytle

Thanksgiving is a great holiday, especially if we live in a family that provides a feast of food, cozy desserts by the fire, and love for all. Teaching our children to be thankful is important, and a necessary part of training them to be unselfish adults. But in addition to being thankful for what we've been given, it's good to train our kids to be giving with that which for which we are thankful. In other words, we bow our hands and give thanks for all that we have, but then we rise from the table to give what we have because we are thankful!

Preparation: *Assign parts, as you would for a play, with the following 8 characters (some may have to play two parts): mom, dad, grandma, twins, brother, sister, and a dog (the dog can be your real dog if you have one!) As one of you reads the story below, ask each person to act out their part when they hear it read aloud. You'll also need to lay out these items on a table for props: bible, a sketch pad, and a couple of written jokes or a joke book.*

A family of eight, mom and dad, grandma, four kids and a dog, were sitting around the den one evening, all doing their own thing.

Dad had received a new Bible for his birthday last week, and he was thumbing through the pages noticing how nice they felt between his fingers as he turned each page (*Dad takes the bible and looks through it.*)

The youngest children were twins, and the two of them were practicing their "talents" for a show coming up at school. No one was paying any particular attention to them, but one twin was standing in the corner telling jokes. The jokes were really funny and the twin was great at telling them, as he practiced aloud (*Ask one twin to tell a joke*). The other twin was a very talented artist, particularly in drawing faces. She was sketching her older brother's face as he pored over his school books, really catching the expression of frustration on his brow as he worked (*The other twin pretends to sketch.*)

Mom had received a phone call and was quite disturbed, as a good friend of hers was struggling in her marriage and had called to ask for prayer (*Mom looks sad.*) The dog was lying at the older brother's feet, licking his toes, hoping for just a pat on the head. Grandma was scurrying around the kitchen. She had come to live with the rest of the family for a while, because her husband had recently passed away. She was quite sad and missing him today, while she busied herself in the kitchen preparing an evening meal (*Grandma scurries around, crying.*)

Finally, the oldest sister, who never said no to anyone or anything, was frantically checking off her to-do list. She had promised to bring something of value from home to a school auction, as a giveaway for a needy family, and she couldn't think of what to take (*Sister pretends to look at a list and taps her chin to think.*)

The whole family was occupied.

Each one doing their own thing.

Unaware of the other.

The atmosphere began to change, little by little.

Dad looked up from his new Bible and saw a tear rolling down mom's cheek. He had just read an encouraging verse and walked over to mom to read it aloud (*Dad reads 1 Peter 5:7*).

The youngest twin noticed grandma's face looked a bit sad. He went into the kitchen and said, "Grandma, want to hear my two latest jokes?" Grandma stopped what she was doing, sat down to listen (*twin tells the two jokes*) and she began to laugh. She laughed so much, the rest of the family stopped what they were doing and laughed too, not at the joke, but at Grandma laughing (*entire family laughs out loud*.)

The brother who had been studying put down his fingers and stretched. When he moved, his loving dog jumped into his lap. It felt good to pet his dog and be loved by him, and yes, he patted him on the head several times. The dog stopped whimpering. (*Brother pets dog*.)

Finally, the sister with the list asked aloud, "Does anyone have something of value to them they would like to give at an auction at school?" Having just finished his sketch, the little twin walked over to his sister and handed her the picture. "Can you use this?" (*Twin hands sketch pad to sister*.) The sister looked at the sketch and it was good. "This is perfect!" she exclaimed.

Each member had something in their hand to help another member of the family. At first they didn't see it or realize it, because each one was doing his or her own thing. But when they took notice, they shared what they had in their hands, and it blessed everyone.

And by the way, the sketch drawn by the twin brought \$50.00 at the auction, the largest sale for the day.

What do you have in your hand that could bless a family member or a friend?

Discuss with the family the blessings you all experience, the talents you have, and how you can give thanks this season by sharing them with others – even if it's just a simple glass of water to someone who is thirsty.

The Family Practice – *Thankfuls* – by Rachel Toalson

All around our table, every night, we speak our thanks.

It wasn't always this way, but there came a day, years ago, when attitudes and words and reactions told a different story than who we really were, and we knew something had to change.

So we started this tradition, naming our *thankfuls*, before our boys even knew what thankful could mean. And now, every night, we wait to hear this piece of life from all the members of our family.

We wait to see into their heart.

Our gratitude, what we name in those moments we're all sitting around a table together, mirrors the color of our heart.

It's not easy to teach our children gratitude, because we live in a culture that tells us, everywhere we turn, that more is better, that we need this one thing and then that other thing and then those thousands of things to even be happy.

Our world teaches its people that possessions reflect our inherent worth. So how do we even begin this work of choosing thankfulness for all we have and the rest we don't have?

Sometimes the most difficult concepts to teach are the ones we most need to learn.

So maybe we begin by working on ourselves.

Because there are some days that tear us clean apart in their disappointment, and there are weeks when we feel on edge with that anxiety, and there are whole months when it feels like we're just groping through the dark, bracing ourselves for the blow that comes next.

It matters what we do next, because our children are always watching.

So the day we lose our job and can still name a roof over our heads and good food on our table and a new opportunity for a career pursuit as our *thankfuls* is the day our son learns he can get back up after a knock-down from a bully, and he can name that punch and the brave it took to stand up again as his *thankful*. It's the day our daughter learns she can show up anyway, even though the entire drama class laughed at the way he botched Jo March's lines in *Little Women*, and she can name that laughter and the brave it took to show up again as her *thankful*.

The places where we look for that gratitude and pull it from the weeds are places that can seem black with impossibility, but the moment we name that gratitude is the same moment our children learn they can do it, too.

So this is what we do around a dinner table every night. We find the flowers among the weeds. We find the stars behind the clouds. We find the treasure in a seems-empty chest.

It's take a while for thanks-giving to turn into thanks-living, because children will begin by naming those figurines they played with when they got out of school, and one will point to his mama and daddy just like he did last night and the night before last and every single night, and another will say his thankful is the same as his brother.

But then, one day, you will open the gratitude journal you keep as a family, and you will see that page-long list of thankfals he penned when you weren't looking, numbered all the way to thirty-two, and you will read those lines filled with "rocks to collect in the yard" and "a peach for a snack" and "science everywhere," and you will know.

Here is exactly where thanks-living begins.

Suggestions for practicing gratitude:

1. Keep a family gratitude journal, where kids can record their random *thankfals*. (If they're too young to write, try asking them at various points during the day.) When you feel your own self turning toward frustration or anger or becoming emotionally flooded, stop, take a breath, and record a gratitude for that moment right there.
2. Begin a gratitude practice around the dinner table. Help young children name different *thankfals* than the ones they named last night (you might need to ask questions.) When they become practiced at naming one thankful for the day, increase it to two and then three. This is not only a gratitude practice; it's a mindfulness practice. In order to name our *thankfals*, we must live life mindfully—fully awakened and alive.
3. Start a birthday tradition, where close family (or just immediate family) lists *thankfals* that correspond with the birthday person's age. This month my oldest turns 8, so we will gather around a table spread with his favorite meal, and each of us will list eight reasons we're thankful for his presence in our lives. This communicates to children just how remarkably they impact our lives, and it also helps them want to communicate the same to others, because they know how great it feels to be appreciated.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - Stepping Stones by Marcy Lytle

I once heard a joke about a group of preachers in a boat who were boasting to each other about their faith. I think the joke went something like this: One of the men got out of the boat and walked across the water to the shore. One of the other men wanted to demonstrate that he too had equal faith, so he stepped out and started to walk – only he sank! One of the men in the boat looked at the other men and said, “I guess he didn’t know where the stones were.”

I thought of that story this morning and how it relates to faith.

I’m convinced that faith is a work that God perfects in our lives as we grow in Him. We start out as kids walking on the stepping stones of faith of others. Maybe we have a parent whose faith is incredible, so we rest on that story. Perhaps a teacher demonstrates great faith and perspective, so we lean on her stone of faith. But eventually, **when we become an adult and are out on our own to get a job, manage a home, and raise children, the stepping stones of others won’t hold up when we need a water rescue, so to speak.**

I have stepping stones in my backyard from my patio to the grass so that when it rains, the gravel/dirt area won’t get my feet muddy as I walk back towards the house and go inside. These stepping stones are placed strategically for walking, but they are easily moved. I can just pick up one and move it to a different location, if I choose to do so.

However, the stepping stones we need in this life are the ones of faith that we build over time, as we walk with God. In fact, these stepping stones need roots that go way down deep into the ground and become immovable as our faith grows.

Faith doesn’t grow without exercise. We lose that first job and we’re devastated. We choose to stand on the Word that says God is our provider, and we’ve placed that first stone. We pray earnestly for a spouse and yet time goes by and that answer is not seen, so we choose to place another stone of faith in his word that says he has a future and a hope for us – one that is good and not evil ([Jeremiah 29:11](#)). Each struggle and each hurdle is another chance to place a stone, stomp it down, and make it secure.

The man in the story above wanted to walk on water because he’d seen the other guy do it. He also wanted to show off to his friends that he was full of faith, as well. And yes, faith played a part in the first man’s ability to walk on water to shore. But it wasn’t a shaky faith or a blind faith. That man knew there were stones beneath the water that were firm, and he knew that when he placed his feet on them, he wouldn’t fall. In fact, those stones that lurked beneath the dark waters were his firm foundation to help him make it safely to shore.

There will be times of great discouragement in our lives. And there will be questions we have for God that may go unanswered. It’s right in the middle of those times that we must exercise our faith by stating the truth and believing it.

When we do this, we are placing stones in the water, so that when our family and friends are in the boat with us, way out to sea, and the storms start to look ominous – we have a way of safe return.

God doesn't ask you to have faith that you can jump out of a boat and walk across water so that you can say, "Look at me and what I've done." He doesn't ask you to dive into dark waters and swim your way out, gulping and gasping for air while he looks on from the shore saying, "Come on, you can make it," while you swim in fear of drowning.

He does give you opportunities to place stones in those dark waters, and as you do, he holds out his hand to come – knowing that those stones of faith are beneath your feet – and you won't be afraid or sink.

Are your stepping stones loose and easily washed away by strong rains? Reposition them, stomp on them, and keep stepping on them until they are solidly planted. The word of God is true, and it's your foundation of faith upon which you **MUST** stand if you want to walk on water.

Under the Influence - Are You Guilty? By Marcy Lytle

We just watched an old re-run of a CSI Investigation show, and the storyline was fascinating, with the conclusion being thought-provoking!

A man died on an airplane flight, and when the investigators began their work they saw all sorts of things that led them to believe that everyone in the first-class section was involved in a scuffle with this man. The man had a fever and a headache, he constantly kicked the seat in front of him, he got up and pushed people, etc. and every person in the cabin fought back, because they assumed this man was crazy and trying to take them all down. Not one person tried to figure out what was wrong with the man; but instead they all gang-killed the poor man who – it was found out later – had severe encephalitis. That was the cause of his erratic behavior. And so he died at the hands of his fellow airplane passengers because they all freaked out that he was a danger to them all. However, not one conviction was made, and all of the passengers were let go because they all said they were acting in “defense” of a threat on their lives.

One of the investigators at the end of the show said no one took the time to look the guy in the eye and ask what was wrong with him. Instead, they all “assumed” he was evil.

My husband and I looked at each other as the credits rolled and our eyes said to each other, “Wow, that was good.”

I’ve been thinking about that show, now a good 12 hours later. I think that’s the mark of a good show! And I realized that I’ve been guilty of participating in “gang-killings,” as well. Have you?

I witnessed a young man in a concert (who clearly had Downs Syndrome) lose his cool and hit people, as his poor mother stood terrified when it took four grown men to stop this guy from hurting others. I watched and shook my head, feeling sorry for the mom, but left without offering her a word of kindness. In fact, many people that night were annoyed at the poor guy who disrupted our time of “worship” with his crazy antics. But were we really *worshipping*...or just *wondering*?

We’ve all been guilty of either apathy or rising up to defend our space when we are threatened by someone who in word or deed is offending us and ours. It’s a natural response, I suppose, and I’m not sure I wouldn’t have been a participant in the gang-killing as well, had I been on that airplane. In fact, the adrenaline was running so high in some who were convinced the man was evil, that they kicked him repeatedly after he was already dead!

It’s been said in some circles that Christians shoot the wounded more than those who don’t believe. I think it might be because we get this mindset that *evil* people are our enemy. Those who think differently than we do, act in ways that are unseemly, or participate in sinful acts, are to be shunned and ridiculed and dismissed.

However, that’s not true. Jesus said he came to save us all. His grace in our lives is the only thing that separates us from those without it. His grace does not elevate us to a position to look down on these people, but rather it humbles us to a position to look up and see their faces, their souls, and their hearts.

It doesn't help in our society that the news is full of threats upon our U.S. soil, stories of school shootings where we send our precious children or clips of slander in political ads. These sorts of productions fill our minds with the attitude that there are so many evil people out there that we need to shut our doors and lock them, and stay inside.

Of course, we need to protect our families. But when we shake our heads instead of bowing them, when we raise a fist instead of offering a hand, and when we turn away instead of seeing their eyes, we are in effect stabbing these people with a knife that cuts to the very center of their hearts.

I'm not sure how that show is going to affect my actions today, but I hope at the very least I look at the eyes of those that stand beside me in the grocery line, sit beside me in the theater, and work beside me in the office. And if they're feeling bad, I hope I ask what I can do to help, before I run for shelter. If they look different than I do, I hope I nod and say "Hello," as I pass them by. And if they seemingly pose a threat to my space and time, I hope I react with dignity and grace to see if kindness and love won't thwart their evil scheme.

And should, God forbid, we all experience a blow or a violation from someone who is evil out there, in our face, or just extremely distressed and ill, I hope God gives us the strength to face that experience with His hope, His love, and His forgiveness to heal those who just don't know...yet...then One we call our Friend & Savior.

Healthy Habits - The Snack Challenge – by Georganne Schuch

I don't remember taking snacks everywhere I went as a kid, but these days snack time is big business for food companies. We have everything from cheese crackers, to individual serving size baggies of grapes. Why someone can't bag their own grapes is a great mystery. But of more serious consideration is the epidemic of food allergies that threaten so many children. Taking a simple snack has become anything but simple.

Foods processed in a facility with allergens can contaminate almost anything. Peanut allergies are so dangerous, for instance. Recently, [a teenage girl with a peanut allergy](#) died after eating a marshmallow treat while at a camp. Emergency medical attention was not able to revive her. People with severe peanut allergies can even react to airborne particles. On a flight in Europe, another young girl died after a man on the flight opened a packet of peanuts. He *just opened* them!

Why life-threatening allergies are on the rise (including [1 in 13 children](#)) is a subject of great debate, but while everyone stands around pointing fingers, more people are affected by allergic reactions to a widening array of things: dairy, wheat, tree nuts, eggs, fish, chemicals, latex, and perfumes. Not all allergies are life-threatening, but so many are far more dangerous than a runny nose and itchy eyes.

As a precaution, we generally do not take anything to group activities that might cause problems. Boy, this makes packing snacks and taking dishes a real challenge.

First, we steer clear of packaged and processed food. If we don't make it, we don't trust it, even if the package declares it allergen free. I've read stories of parents who have read all the labels of everything they buy and still slip up with something that has some kind of cross-contamination. I know far less of what to look for, so I'd rather be safe than sorry.

Second, if we prepare a snack or dish ourselves, we make sure we clean and wipe down everything we use before we start cooking and never even get out something during preparation that could be a problem. For instance, we won't use peanut butter or other nuts on Thursdays before we go to a group activity on Friday where a boy has peanut allergies.

Third, we often opt for fresh foods, such as fruit and veggies for snacks. We wash them well, too, because even the residue from the hand of the person bagging the groceries can linger for a while.

Fourth, if we know someone has allergies, we ask for recommendations of what is safe to bring or perhaps contribute money toward providing a safe food. Allergy-safe foods don't usually come cheap. Have you ever priced gluten-free bread, for instance? *Wow*.

Finally, we sometimes just opt out on snacks or common meals. We have a few food aversions, nothing dangerous, but some ingredients just stir up trouble. So, we don't partake. We're not being food snobs, and we certainly cave in to our share of less-than-perfect food choices from time to time, but it truly is easier to not eat than to spend half the night with a child throwing up. Thankfully, that's the worst we have to consider.

Next time you are signed up to bring food for a group activity, especially for children, check to see if anyone has allergies. Ask for recommendations on what to bring, and make sure you don't cut corners. If your child is the one with allergies, educate parents of friends, teachers, and anyone else who might give your child a treat.

Precautions and preventions are better than allergic reactions.

Beauty for Ashes - The Gift of Becoming Grateful – by Pam Charro

I have heard it said, "It is not the happy who are grateful, but the grateful who are happy."

I used to think it would be good to be more thankful, but I considered it a *should*, something that was a nice idea, but just not realistic. I wasn't sure how to go about it and I honestly didn't put much thought or work into it.

Then I started meeting people who seemed genuinely thankful, and I noticed they had something really rare and beautiful about them that I wanted. A lightness and cheerfulness that was just so attractive, and it didn't seem to depend on their circumstances at all. In fact, many of them had suffered greatly throughout their lives, yet they were still so incredibly happy. It puzzled me. I wanted to be around them all of the time so I could somehow absorb their secret.

It has taken some time, but I now realize the truth about what it means to be grateful: Far from being *ashould*, gratefulness is an amazing gift that sets me free to enjoy my life as God intended.

In the beginning, at least, it was difficult for me to learn how to think about how good I have it instead of focusing on what seems to be lacking and the things I was afraid of. I have to confess that I am one of those people who has felt burdened most of my life instead of privileged. When I look back on the various phases that I have been through, it astounds me that I have survived this long. But so much of that was because, even with the hardships, I was not appreciating how blessed I am. **I realized that my life was going by and I was still waiting for it to start!** That terrified me because I knew that this is not a trial run, this is IT. *Was I going to appreciate it while I was still alive?*

Something in me knew that the choice was mine, but I didn't know what to do. I decided that the only thing I could do was make up my mind and ask for help.

I sat with God one morning and I made the following request:

Father, please help me to remember to give you praise, no matter what is going on. I know that only You can change my perspective and open my eyes to the beautiful gift that my life is.

At the time that I prayed, I knew I would be given many opportunities, and I was not wrong. My difficult circumstances did not instantly disappear, but I did begin to see beauty where I had not appreciated it before, and something inside of ME started to change. I softened, I smiled more, I started saying, "Thank You," to God without even realizing it.

It has taken time and I am still transforming, but I am happier now than I have ever been. I know it is because God is patiently teaching me that life is not the heavy burden I have always imagined it to be. Sure, I still tell Him what I don't like sometimes. But even that part of my prayer life is different now because what I don't like is not really the big picture. I am honest but then I move on and tell Him everything that I love. When things look bad, I know now that I am just missing information, but I have decided to trust that God is still up to something good.

And speaking that truth - that God is good and I am blessed - has set me free.

A Moment in THYME – Access Granted – by Debra Brown

I LOVE the changing of the seasons. I'm always so "THANKFUL" for fall, especially Texas Novembers. It's that crisp fresh air that meets me in the mornings and reminds me that Thanksgiving is on the way. And every year I tell myself that this is the year that I'll not allow the holidays to dictate my stress level. Yes, 2014, it's a good year to make the main thing the MAIN THING.

“Enter His gates with THANKSGIVING, and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him; bless His name for the Lord is good; His loving-kindness is everlasting, and His faithfulness to all generations.” PSALM 100:4-5 NASB

God's word is exhilarating. Like riding a rollercoaster, it can be thrilling! It's those "AHA!" moments that shoot much needed energy through my soul.

Psalms 100 usually has that effect on me. It's like an invitation to visit sent straight from Father God, **complete with the gate code!**

What a thought! I carry the key to open the Lord's "gates!" **I have access to his property, to the place he resides!**

Do you freely give out your gate code? I don't.

Yet, the creator of the universe has printed our names on His list of invited guests.

We must simply come to the gate and enter the code.

Access Granted!

I often tell my grandchildren, "It's YOUR choice...."

So I hear The Father say, "Debra, it's your choice. Enter! I've given you the key."

I ponder a favorite psalm, Psalm 16:11a :

You will make known to me the path of life:
In Your presence is fullness of joy... (NASB)

I imagine standing at the Lord's gate with the key code in my hand. A question comes to mind, "Where am I?"

I look and see I'm standing *outside* the gate.

But *why*? Why would I stand outside if I have the gate code?

It's not rocket science. I'm either inside the gate or outside the gate.

I'm either in His presence or out of His presence.

In His presence is fullness of joy.

Out of His presence is worry, fear, depression, anger, agony, listlessness...

There is absolutely no question where I want to be. I want to remain in his presence. It's a no-brainer.

However, I often find it easier to walk with worry and complaining. I get sidetracked with looking at life, its demands and frustrations, and its complications. I somehow forget that simply being thankful carries me to Him.

So by not choosing to enter, I find that I have chosen to remain outside.

I love the way Psalm 16:11 is translated in THE VOICE:

You direct me on the path that leads to *a beautiful* life.
As I walk with You, the pleasures are never-ending,
And I know true joy *and contentment*.

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road – Thanks For Driving by Lynn Cherry

I refuse to drive when my husband is in the vehicle. Let's just say that over the 23 years we've been married he has yet to be impressed with my driving skills. He loves to drive. He watches Nascar. And he is not shy about pointing out my ineptitude behind the wheel.

Now, *for the record*, I'm not a bad driver. He has actually been in more fender benders. But if there was a driver skill spectrum that ranged from horrible to expert, I'll admit I would be closer to horrible and he would be closer to expert. How much space there is between us on the scale is up for debate.

When I picked him up from the airport after a recent business trip, I went against my better judgment and offered to drive. He was coming down with a cold, hadn't slept well the night before, and was the victim of a four hour flight delay. I knew he just wanted to get home and go to bed. I talked myself into it during the 30 minute drive to the airport thinking perhaps in his mediated, infection fighting, state he would lay back in the seat, close his eyes and not have the energy to comment on my driving. *I was wrong.*

By the time we got home, I had seriously considered pulling onto the shoulder and letting him take over on more than one occasion.

It's possible this will be an area of perpetual gridlock in our marriage. Neither one of us seems to be able to budge. I think my driving is fine. He sees room for improvement.

In the early years of our marriage, I would have allowed an unresolved issue in our relationship to drive me crazy (pun intended.) But after all these years, I'm secure enough in our relationship to know we can be different drivers with different expectations and still have a great marriage.

I used to think a “happily ever” after marriage never had conflict. Now I know that every marriage has conflict; it's how we manage it that makes for fairytale endings.

Last month, we traveled to Dallas to speak at a conference together. It was a busy couple of days; so on the way home, I caught up on my quiet time reading and wrote in my thankful journal:

#1089 Having my own personal driver.

“Thank you for driving,” I said.

“You're welcome,” he laughed.

“Why is that funny?”

“Well, of course I'm going to drive. I always drive. But it is sweet of you to thank me.”

What is so very sweet to me is that in my moment of gratitude I wasn't thinking about my vow to never drive a vehicle he was riding in. I was sincerely grateful and enjoying the blessing of being the passenger of an excellent driver.

I guess that's one way of knowing a gridlock issue isn't keeping me stuck in the past. It's just part of the journey together.

Date Night Fun – The Leaves Are Falling – by Marcy Lytle

Remember when you first fell in love? Nothing else mattered, everything fell to the side, and you pursued one another with phone calls, dates, sweet messages, and more – just to make sure your love was well known and received. As the leaves fall to the ground and create piles for playing in, take time to recreate some of those moments when you fell in love. We will help you out with some ideas below that include the falling leaves of the season!

Walking in the Leaves – Holding hands is a couple's delight. Grab his hand and find a "forest" where there are lots of leaves, and go for a walk, instead of raking leaves in your yard. This is a Saturday morning date idea, while the leaves are wet with dew. Check out ["How to Walk Quietly in a Forest"](#) and try out the ideas, as you walk, hand in hand, listening to the sounds of nature as it wakes up with you. Leave the forest (pun intended) and head for breakfast out, and order something leafy in your omelet!

Leaving it All – A road trip is awesome in the fall. And nothing sparks a day of renewed friendship and fun like heading out from your familiar surroundings into the country, or over in the next town, for adventure and good food. Leave the kids, leave the chores, and leave the city, as you head out of town. [These tips](#) might help you get started. An especially fun thing to do is get a map, highlight your route, Google each little town along the way, and head out for a unique, surprising, time while you "leaf it all behind."

Falling Leaves – Gather up a paper bag of at least a dozen big leaves from your yard of different sizes and colors. Head out for tea and sandwiches, or just a cup of hot tea at a local teahouse. As you sip on hot tea, remove the leaves one at a time and share what made you "fall" for each other, or a compliment or job-well-done comment, until the entire bag is empty. If you have the time, create this [cool jar candle](#) with your leaves – just purchase and take the supplies with you – and you'll have a memory from this date to last forever!

Leave Me a Message – Start in the morning of the day of your date night, and leave him a message three times throughout the day. Message #1 – the time he needs to be ready. Message #2 – what he needs to wear. Message #3 – how much you can't wait to be with him. Meanwhile, prepare this [delicious soup](#) (that includes two bay leaves) and serve it up for a date at home, or pack in a thermos and take it with you! After you've eaten, watch this fun old movie [A New Leaf](#).

Leave it to Beaver – Plan an evening home to watch reruns of this old show. Remember how June wore her pearls to vacuum the house? Dress up for your date, and plan a 50's themed evening, pearls and all. Start the evening by reading this [Leave it to Beaver Trivia](#). Next, make these [Leave it to Beaver chocolate chip cookies](#) to enjoy later, when you watch the shows. Finally, sit on your sofa and enjoy the simplicity, hilarity, and good-old fashioned values as you leave this decade for one in the past.

What else can you think of for a "leaf-themed" date this month that makes you remember why you both fell in love? It's good to reminisce once in a while and reinstate those foundational

first-loves as you gaze into each other's eyes once again. Make date night fun a priority in your house, for your kids to see, and for the health of your marriage.

After 30 Years - The Avalanche – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever experienced an avalanche? I haven't and I don't want to. I cannot imagine the terror of falling rocks or snow that gains strength with the flow down the mountain, destroying everything in its path. However, I have experienced an emotional avalanche that was caused by a slippery thing called the tongue.

By one definition, an avalanche is a sudden arrival or occurrence of something in overwhelming quantities. Usually, an avalanche just happens without warning. We're in an area where one little movement can cause one rock to shake loose, and the rest of the rocks on the mountain come tumbling down after it.

We see the signs that say, "Watch for falling rocks," and we know to be cautious when driving along these roads. I think sometimes that we ought to wear a sign when we get married that says "Watch for a loose tongue," because that's the loose rock that causes an avalanche between husband and wife.

I've experienced a lovely evening with my husband, out shopping and walking and conversing, only to let one slip of my tongue reveal what was hiding in my heart, rooted in bitterness. And what happens after that is disastrous.

Our tongues are powerful. And they're just like tumbling rocks when they come loose.

Here's an example:

Looking at houses for a possible move, a couple dreams together, imagining where they might live and how it might be, and all of a sudden she sees a house she loves – but it's over budget. She says, "This house is beautiful. I wish we could buy it," while remembering the last time she mentioned a large purchase and her husband's reaction was less than favorable.

She never quite forgave him for his look of disapproval back then, so when he states, "That house is too much," all of a sudden she lets out a dig something like, "You are so mean, you never want to buy anything at all." And in reality, that sentiment is buried deep inside of her because her father too squelched every bit of fun she wanted to have a child, as he was a miser and never let her buy anything.

All of these rocks of resentment have been stacked alongside the path of life on which she walked, and now she is moving one of them with her tongue. Only the rock she's moving is aimed straight at her husband, because what he now says is the last rock to land on her pile, and she can't take the pressure anymore.

She spouts off a judgment, a hateful remark, or a degrading assessment of who her husband is, attacking his character, and the avalanche begins.

One mean remark leads to another, he fights back with his scathing accusations, and within five minutes or less they're both sitting under a pile of heavy rocks, feeling bruised, beaten, knocked down and wondering what just happened.

This happens to all marriages, because we bring with us our own stash of rocks when we marry. And over the years, if we don't move the rocks and relocate them to be used under our feet, instead of atop our shoulders, one loose word or one wrong move and our world comes

crumbling down. If this happens over and over again, sometimes the fallout is too much and we're wounded beyond repair.

It's important in our relationships to deal with past hurts that we bring and place under the blanket of our marriage. They don't belong there. It's also important to deal with hurts as soon as they happen, so that they don't resurface later and cause an avalanche.

The bible says no man can tame the tongue, and compares it to kindling a fire ([James 3:8](#)). The only way to tame our tongue is to submit to the Holy Spirit...daily.

- It requires starting the morning with submission to Him, laying down our disappointments with our husband at Christ's feet, and trusting Him to take care of it ALL.
- It requires that when we feel backed into a corner, or threatened by the words or looks of our husband, we see Jesus standing right beside him saying, "I've got this, you don't need to say a thing,"
- It requires believing that Jesus will take care of things when we allow him to do so.
- It requires training ourselves to bless instead of curse.

It's hard to do this. However, I believe it's one of the key components in a healthy marriage.

We're going to slip sometimes and rocks will fall, but if we are careful to keep that stash of rocks of anger and resentment small, perhaps only a toe will be bruised and we'll walk with a limp for a few miles. But our hands will still reach out for his, and we'll round that curve that warned us of falling rocks, escaping disaster and near death.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: Mirror Image – By Kayley Ryan

It's what we check every morning before school, every Sunday before church, and even after a great workout, to see if we're getting thin.

I think mirrors are fascinating because we feel obliged to look at them but never really see ourselves.

Just like a photograph you take, a mirror image of yourself can never be as real as what you really look like.

Ask yourself this: *Have I ever seen myself for who I truly am?*

There are few scriptures in the Bible about mirrors. Perhaps that has something to do with the whole 'don't-be-vain' ideology. But when the Bible does mention mirrors, it has some pretty profound things to say. Bear with me here because I want to take you on a treasure hunt, a treasure hunt in which—I *hope*—you will begin to see yourself the way you really are.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12: **“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I am also known.”**

I'm sure this verse has about a thousand theological meanings behind it, but I want to focus on just one: mirrors don't tell us the whole story.

In Paul's day, mirrors were awful. They were poor reflections of the real person. Today, we have silvered, crystal clear glass mirrors that Hebrew women would have yearned for back then. Imagine having to do your hair and makeup in a bronze mirror?

When Paul writes, “Now we see in a mirror dimly,” he's describing exactly what mirrors were like back then. The dimness of those mirrors makes the next promise that much more beautiful—that we will one day see clearly, “face to face,” and know who we really are.

Why, then, do we focus so much on mirrors? Why do we look to them as our idols, telling us what to do and how to act so that we can look beautiful?

Recently, I read a novel by author Ted Dekker called *Eyes Wide Open*, in which a girl who thinks she's ugly and a guy who relies on his mind to exist are thrown into a world where nothing is as it seems. I really related to the female protagonist, a 17 year-old girl named Christy Snow. Throughout the book, she hated her reflection in the mirror, to such a degree at times that I wanted to scream at her, “Stop cursing yourself! You're not ugly!”

But by the end of the book, I realized that her mirror image that she was so disgusted with wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that she *believed* that's what she looked like.

I have had my own struggles with beauty, which I mentioned in my first column, “Made Beautiful.” I wake up each morning and powder up, covering each pimple and adding pops of color and definition to my eyes and cheeks. I'm amazed at how productive I am in the mornings when I want to be; that is, if vanity counts as productivity.

But lately, God has been showing me that the reflection I see in the mirror isn't really me.

The real *me* is the one who cannot be separated from the love of Christ, who shines in the splendor of the kingdom of heaven, and who glows with the enthusiasm of knowing her Father. My true identity is based in Christ, who is constantly working in me his love and truth so that I will one day look like him.

Our identity isn't based in how we view ourselves but in how God views us. In *Eyes Wide Open*, Dekker paints a glorious picture of just how valuable we are to our Father:

“You are perfect even as your Father is perfect. Made whole and blameless a long time ago...”

“Beautiful. As you are, without a single change to the real you. Atoned. Made right. No condemnation possible, no further correction needed. Your only problem now is the one you make for yourself when you are blinded to just how beautiful you are right now.”

No...further...correction...needed.

How can you possibly be more beautiful than you are now when God is living in you and working in you *his* beauty?

You may not see yourself as perfect today, but you do need to start claiming your true identity. It's not based in your mirror image; it's based in his glory.

“We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Moving Forward - When Life is Hard by Lynn Cherry

Some mornings I linger in my cozy bed and pray horizontally. If you follow this column, that won't surprise you.

I was lying in bed last month, waiting for the snooze alarm to sound again and asking for God's favor on a new endeavor.

"It won't be easy," said a still small voice.

"Wait..... *What?* God, was that really you?"

I know in my heart those whispered words were from the Father. Why he needed to share those words is another question. Usually, when I hear that still small voice it brings comfort and peace. This time it was a bit unsettling. *Of course, it won't be easy. I already know that.*

I know nothing worth achieving is easy but I still want EASY. I like to think if I'm doing what God wants me to do it will be straightforward and uncomplicated. But the reality is what God asks us to do is often hard and requires more than we believe we have to give.

I think maybe God was helping me adjust my expectations. If I expect easy and I get hard, I'll be discouraged. If I move forward knowing it won't be easy, the struggle won't surprise me. And it won't stop me.

When we want to ask, "Why isn't it easy?" a better question might be, "What do we do when it gets hard?"

As it happens, my Bible reading plan has me in [1 & 2 Timothy](#) and I feel like God, in his grace, has been answering that better question.

When life is hard:

1. The first thing I want you to do is pray. 1 Timothy 2:1 MSG
2. Keep a firm grip on your faith and on yourself. 1 Timothy 1:19 MSG
3. Exercise daily in God – no spiritual flabbiness, please! 1 Timothy 4:7 MSG
4. The gift you were given – keep that dusted off and in use. 1 Timothy 4:14 MSG
5. Pursue a righteous life - a life of wonder, faith, love, steadiness, and courtesy. 1 Timothy 6:11 MSG
6. Don't be shy with God's gifts – be bold, loving and sensible. 1 Timothy 1:7 MSG
7. So keep at your work. 2 Timothy 1:13 MSG
8. Throw yourself into this work for Christ. 2 Timothy 2:1 MSG
9. Stick with what you've learned and believed. 2 Timothy 3:14 MS
10. Don't ever quit. 2 Timothy 4:2 MSG

When life is hard, don't ask why. Ask what.

Bush Bean Blessings - Eating Elephants by Tammy Morrison

To everyone who's tired, hurting, overwhelmed...just plain suffering in some exhausting way...listen to these words: long, long ago I was in a tizzy. I didn't know which way was up as I sat across from a pile of dirty clothes that--I kid you not--was at least 3 feet high and 4 feet wide. Okay, okay, maybe 5 feet. (Don't be disgusted by my dirty clothes pile; remember, you have your own.) To give you some background: I was in school full-time, worked a full-time job, was actively involved in my church, plus my husband worked 12-hour night shifts as a police officer, and he was also in school full-time! To boot, we were raising four kids, a dog, two birds, and attending more extracurricular activities than you could shake a stick at. ***Meanwhile, back at the farm, I felt like I was going to drown.***

My vision was blurry because my eyes were brimming with tears, and I felt numb. In the midst of my numb state I heard these words: "HOW DO YOU EAT AN ELEPHANT?" Somewhere--I couldn't quite remember when--I'd heard or read this positive self-talk phrase, "How do you eat an elephant?" (HOW?) "One bite at a time!" The immediacy of this response was my God-whispered epiphany! It was the lifeline thrown to rescue me from the flood of those rising waters.

Of course, there was no way I could stuff that whole 3' x 5' pile of dirty clothes into a washer and dryer at once! It would take a system of methodical steps (tasks, if you will) to recover from the overflow. Immediately, I envisioned how I would set about "eating this elephant." This is how my mind works, you see. Consider the epiphany; next, get a mental picture of the step-by-step process (I must get a visual of what I'm setting out to do); then it's the get-your-hands-dirty-and-do-it. Yes, for me in this instance, it was literally touching that mile-high pile of smelly laundry.

You've got to realize how these systematic, menial tasks spoke to me like nothing else had in my life before, and how few things have impacted me so greatly since. This moment was THE Paradigm Shift in my life! **The concept of "eating elephants" one bite at a time is how I purposefully choose to face obstacles and challenges that come my way.** Those times I begin to feel crushed by the weight of heavy burdens, I am reminded to tackle each undertaking in bits and pieces. I'm convinced that as long as I live I will hear the echo of that life-changing moment: "How do you eat an elephant?"

On that particular laundry day, I didn't just separate those dirty clothes into smaller piles and stuff the washer. I took it a step further. I sorted them, and then separated them again, because there were so many. And then, one small load at a time, the overwhelming chore of that 3' x 5' mountain became smaller and smaller, piece by piece.

You know, there's a positive aspect to doing laundry besides the obvious fact that you get clean clothes. The fact is, there is a definitive start and finish that just speaks to me. The progress is visible from one load to the next. If you stop and think about it, many of the obstacles we face in life can be tackled much the same way:

1st Bite: SORT - prioritize your matters into levels of importance

2nd Bite: SEPARATE - determine what can and cannot be tackled at the same time

3rd Bite: WASH/DRY - clean up your act; pre-treat, if need be; soften the load

4th Bite: FOLD/HANG UP - follow-through by neatly setting things in order

5th Bite: PUT AWAY - keep everything in proper perspective

So...how's this all done? Does it happen overnight? Not often. As you can see, it is usually quite time-consuming and will require step-by-step tasks before you begin to see progress.

It really is true.

You can only eat an elephant one bite at a time.

Saddle Up - The Embrace – by Melissa Critz

Barn time!

My two oldest are now off and settled at their college and my 10th and 9th grader have headed to their music lessons. I am all by myself!

It's time for my horses. With carrots in hand and boots on, I gather halters and trek to the front pasture to gather the peacefully grazing equines. While grooming the horses, my mind reevaluates one of my horse's disease-recovery time. I come to the conclusion that it's time to get the saddle on his back and pony him while riding my other horse.

Domingo, my foundered horse, is healing slowly but nicely. However, it sure has taken a long time. During the spring, he was stuck in his stall for three months and could eat only two flakes of hay daily – a forced, much-needed diet. After a second set of x-rays, his hooves were trimmed differently and horseshoes put on in reverse. This lasted another three months. As you may understand, recovery from some diseases can take a very long time and the patient still may never be the same. This is true for my paint.

Bound and determined, I hike myself up onto saddled Elijah, gather Mingo's lead rope in hand, and encourage the horses to move on with clucking and leg pressure. While trekking along at a slow pace to accommodate the patient, I think on the word **embrace** and what it means in regards to the length of time it takes to go through *life* events. The Lord quickened to me the thought of recovery and healing – how that can take months, years, and decades. It's a process, a journey, and not necessarily an easy one either.

Just as a patient heals from physical injuries due to an accident or a disease, we also heal from emotional and mental life events as well. And that takes time. Thankfully, we are not alone in this process. Things happen in life. We make choices that can change our life path completely, forever. However, the Lord is always an active participant. He wants us to seek Him and hold on to him.

Others are available for the hurting person, as well. Just as the vet and the farrier were there for Domingo to help determine the disease and work on the healing and recovery, the Lord gives us people to lean on, learn through, and listen to – we just need to let Him guide us.

So, **embrace** is the word that kept reverberating in my head. I had heard this while riding a few times over the past month, while thinking on the changes imminent with my two oldest children, now spreading their wings. Through a time of healing, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally or all, I heard the Lord say, "Embrace it." This led me to a search on the definition of that word. I came up with quite a few, but the following two stuck out:

...to take up especially readily or gladly;
...eager acceptance.

Really?! *Embrace* times that aren't truly fun times? I thought about how a friend once told me a family vacation with a long car ride to get to the destination *is* part of the vacation and to enjoy the road trip as well – it's part of it. Okay – so *embrace* AND eagerly and gladly accept it. *But, enjoy it? Wow.* That was big. I think (speaking for

myself) I often see these side trips in life like they are getting in the way of the destination when actually they are all a part of it; part of the divine plan; part of the journey. Sidetracks in life such as my dealing with Domingo's healing and recovery are not meant to sideline us on our journey, but to give us:

- something to embrace with eagerness and gladness
- something to hold on to
- something to realize that we are NOT alone

Whether it's the patient or the loved one of the patient, there is a greater purpose for both.

The Lord wants you to embrace your situation and also recognize that you are NOT alone. He is there through every process and journey. He provides opportunity for others to come alongside, so embrace it. **Embrace** and realize that there are truly no sidetracks. They are all part of this life journey.

And the saddle partner, our precious Father, is always with us.

REAL STORIES – Faith: the Good Plan – by Meagan Hobbs

I am a daughter, wife, mother, sister, aunt, granddaughter, horsewoman, business woman, and most of all a child of God. I grew up in church and with family, but tragedy hit hard, and my mother passed away due to a car accident. My dad then remarried a few years later, and we continued with our lives. However, the death of my mom *interrupted* my life.

Whose life wouldn't be interrupted by that?

I was not the *usual* girl. I didn't play with a Barbie or a play house; instead, I was outside, riding my horse and playing there. I accepted Christ at a Cowboy Church before a rodeo started, during my sophomore year in high school. Then my life started to change for the better. I could talk to God more and live more for him, and not for myself. I met my husband our senior year and we married two years after high school. We then had our first child a year later.

Life was flowing again...

Through the years of owning our first home and working at different types of jobs, we learned what jobs we were good at, and what jobs we really hated – yes – hated. God made had a plan for us before we were born and gave us gifts and talents to complete the plan he created for us. However, it was up to us to listen to him and follow the plan he set for us. Sometimes, this included testing the doors and hallways we thought might be the ones to enter.

If we recognize our gifts and talents, then we can evaluate the jobs and requirements, and go from there.

My gifts are giving, sharing, and educating. My talent is the ability to communicate with horses. I do have a American Miniature Horse Farm in which I breed, show, and train miniature horses. And I do LOVE this job, but it doesn't pay the bills. At least, not yet.

Last spring I found myself shopping for some new clothes, and soon realized that all the cute clothes were anything but cute, by the time I put them on. My curves weren't so cute in the little bitty style of clothes that are all the rage. Having a bit of history working retail, I decided to start my own boutique. *Not just any other boutique*. This boutique is for the curvy woman like me and my friends, those of us who need some cute clothes to cover our bodies in a modest, yet fashionable way.

Our C's concept is Cute, Comfy and Conservative, and the name of the store is Cindie's Closet. Cindie is our "Betty Crocker," because she writes the blogs about fashion and how to stay modest in all the new style trends. When we started this boutique, we wanted something God can bless. We are not going to sell out to the "in-fashion revealing" style. We may not make as much money, but God is our provider, and we rely on him for our customers and to keep us on the right track. We offer Christian products as well, such as bible covers and purses.

God has a plan, and now with a growing family and growing needs, we rely on him more and more. Sometimes when life feels like it is "going to the dogs," we just keep talking to

God and keep exercising our faith. He has a good plan. And sometimes what we think is the plan isn't the good plan at all.

Love God, talk to God, and listen to God.

He loves you more than you could ever love yourself.

And his plans are to give you a future...and a hope.

Cindie's Closet is currently going to Trade Shows, Festivals and Events all across East, Central and North Texas. They will soon be getting a Fashion Truck, so that all they have to is open their doors and welcome customers inside. Check out their community page on [their website](#) to see where Cindie's Closet will be next! You can even schedule a private event and they will bring the store to you.

Cindie's Closet is more than just another boutique, it's a God Blessed Opportunity to spread his word and still offer stylish clothing to women who serve Him.

Meagan Hobbs lives just five miles north of Canton, Texas. She has been married since June 2008, and her first son was born July 2009. Her "dream job" is to have full time horse ranch.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Does Begging Help? By Marcy Lytle

“Dear God, *please* _____.”

Haven't you filled in that blank a million times?

Somehow we think if we beg long enough, reword our request so that it sounds more convincing, or work on our hearts so that our earnestness is strongly felt, God will answer the request that we're making. After all, if our own kids beg us long enough, we just might finally give in to their requests just to make them be quiet!

I've had prayer requests before that are very personal; therefore, I think of them often and present them to God multiple times a day. But this morning, as soon as my eyes opened, I wondered, *Does all of my begging God to answer really move him?* And if I find out that the answer is no, then what *does* move the hand of God?

Psalm 37:25 says this: *I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread.*

I personally don't feel we have to beg God. We do it because we run out of options, and somehow begging and pleadings helps us feel like perhaps the 70th time or maybe the 100th time (whichever number God likes) he will hear us and answer us.

I also think we somehow see begging as being a part of our faith, when in reality it's anything but.

Think about begging, naturally. When we see people begging on the street for money, it seems to indicate they've run out of options. They've resorted to begging because they've got no other choice, or they're too lazy to make another choice. When our kids come begging us for money, it's because they know up front that we have already said no, they know we don't think it's a good idea to give them the money, but they beg – hoping to wear us down – until we say yes. There's a bit of manipulation attached to that request. And finally, when our dog sits at our feet begging for a treat, it's because he's bored, hungry, or just annoying and won't be deterred until we get up and toss him what he wants.

I don't believe God wants any of those type relationships with us. He doesn't want to be our only option, after we've exhausted all of our own efforts. He wants to be the first choice for our petitions and requests. He wants us to trust that when we know that what we're asking is selfish, and he's already said no, that we trust him that he has a better answer on the way. And manipulating him is never a good idea! According to that verse above, we don't ever have to beg for treats. God has promised to supply all that we need. If we're bored or lazy, like a dog, then we're just plain annoying and need to go find the last stick God tossed for us to catch and chew on it a while longer.

So this begs the question (no pun intended):

When our prayers go unanswered and we're in desperate need, and what we're asking seems only right and good, how do we keep ourselves from begging?

- If we're begging because we're burdened, begging can release that burden. However, it's only temporary relief. We allow God a certain amount of time, and if the answer doesn't come, we beg again. Begging is really just exhausting, so why do it? We can cast that burden at his feet and leave it there.
- If we're begging because we think we can somehow change his mind with our incessant repeated prayers, then we don't really know the character of the God we serve. He isn't some mean father who's disinterested in our plight. Remember, he made us in his image, and he loves us so much that he sent his son to die and conquer death, so that we might live. Badgering him isn't necessary.
- If we're begging because we're afraid that he won't answer if we're silent, then we don't understand faith. God knows our needs before we ask. And yes, he tells us to ask. But in our asking we are admitting our need for his guidance and provision, something necessary in order to place our faith in Him. After we've asked, we need to worship and believe for His best, His timing, His provision.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? However, it's one of the hardest things to do – simply trust in His goodness and mercy – when we are in dire need.

Now to the second half of the first question – what *does* move the hand of God?

Faith. And our faith is increased by reading and hearing his Word. However, our faith is not contained in a set of parentheses that God has to answer in the way that we direct him to do so. We must believe that he is, he loves us, and he rewards those who diligently seek him. His rewards don't always come in the form of a chocolate treat that we see and desire; instead, they come in the form of gold that he sees and refines.

I've been begging God for a lot of things lately, every day. Sometimes I'm just begging, period. Other times, I'm thanking him for the answer. And I think he really enjoys the latter, because when thanksgiving comes out of my heart it means I trust in his goodness and mercy toward me and mine.

If you're begging, I'm sure you're exhausted. And if you're fearful and frustrated with God, you must have been in need for a very long time. Try laying down your requests at his feet and worshiping him instead, starting with praising his name – Jesus. Read his word, especially all the verses that talk about his character. Then look and expect the answers to come in surprisingly unique ways that will bless you beyond what you can imagine or think...

FRESH THYME - Don't Call Me Religious by Marcy Lytle

There are lots of names I don't care to be called, and "religious" is one of them. That name carries with it a stigma these days of characteristics that I hope I don't display. According to the dictionary definition, a religious person is faithful, committed and reverent to God. Those things I hope I am. But according to our society, being religious carries with it an attachment I hope is never opened when someone receives an encounter with me.

Being religious without being humble is not true religion. When I think I'm better than my neighbor on any given day of the week just because I go to church on Sundays and they stay home to mow their yard is a pious attitude that stinks. It might be more religious one Sunday for me too to stay home and help my neighbor in his yard, instead of driving away with a quick nod of the head and a wish for a "good day."

Being religious without being forgiving is not true religion. When I hold judgment in my heart against someone who has wronged me, instead of forgiving them as I have been forgiven, I'm desecrating the work done on the cross for all people. I must seek to forgive, as much as I seek to be forgiven.

Being religious without being holy is not true religion. One can dress modestly, speak without cursing, and stay away from wicked people and not be holy. Being holy is being dedicated to God and his ways, which affects our inward attitudes and thoughts. Holiness is that which draws others TO him, not turns them AWAY from Him.

Being religious without being zealous is not true religion. We must have a passion for something that is of interest to His heart. If the poor, the abandoned, and the sick don't move us to compassion and action then we have an empty religion. If the fatherless and the widows aren't a priority in how we spend our time, then we are missing the mark.

Being religious without loving our family is not true religion. If we work "for God" at the expense of time with our families, and we extend love to the crowds but only strict rules for our kids, we are missing the goal.

Being religious without failure is not true religion. Failure is not missing the mark and losing hope. Failure is when we realize our efforts are worthless without his blessing and guidance. We give it up in favor of giving in, to Him. That's a failure we all need to experience in order to offer true religion to others.

Being religious without honor is not true religion. Honor and respect go hand and hand. Honor realizes it is a privilege to serve God; therefore, we serve and esteem others because they too are created in his image.

Being religious without worship is not true religion. We cannot truly believe in God's goodness, favor, forgiveness, and righteousness without falling to our knees before him, raising hands to adore him, and erupting in song to him and about him, and then rising up to serve him.

Our friends and neighbors can see religion on the television, in the news, and in print. They can even be the recipient of religious handouts when they are in need. "Religion" is even a word used in some songs on the airwaves and in concerts. But without the truth behind the religion, the singers, the writers, and we who listen, are not set free.

The truth is that being called *religious* has become a thing, a trend, a name...and not a way of life.

So what do I want to be called? I hope that when others see me, walk with me, and talk with me that they see Jesus. And I hope that it's his name they remember when I'm gone.

Don't call me religious.

FRESH THYME - Sending Vibes – by Marcy Lytle

“I’m sending you good vibes.”

Have you heard someone say that recently? It means they’re sending good feelings your way or good luck. And it’s a phrase offered up when someone shares a need, such as feeling ill, or looking for a new job, or encountering a difficult circumstance. The conversation might go something like this,

“I’m going in today for an MRI to see what’s going on with my shoulder.”

“Oh I’m so sorry, I’m sending you good vibes and hugs.”

The phrase is said with the kindest of intention, I’m sure, but it’s becoming the catch phrase now instead of, “I’ll be praying for you.” And that makes me sad.

Prayer has become lost in a sea of other sweet offerings, like vibes, thoughts, hugs, karma, etc. It’s become just one of many ways to express to others that we’re sorry for what they’re going through, and it’s in effect saying, “We will keep you in mind.”

I don’t know how you feel, but when I’m in desperate need, I’m not too interested in receiving vibes and good thoughts from folks. It’s nice to be thought of, and if feelings and hugs could really travel and be experienced from another person, that might help for the moment. However, when a need arises, I want friends who know the power of God and believe it, and who are willing to pray for me for strength, healing, and deliverance. Don’t you?

I wondered why this phrase is so popular now, and I have a few guesses:

Prayers have disappointed. Perhaps we’ve told a friend we’d pray for them, and they died. So we think, *What good did prayer do?* Or maybe we offered up prayers for our own circumstances, begging God for answers, only to hear silence.

If we’ve been disappointed in the outcome of our own prayers, we will be cautious in offering them for others.

Prayer is misunderstood. I know I’ve misunderstood prayer many times, and made my entire 10 minute prayer time all about my needs and wants. I’ve presented God with a line of requests, much like a grocery list, and I stand waiting for him to hand me each item so I can check it off and feel satisfied.

If we don’t grasp the essence of what prayer really is, we will be exhausted after spilling out our frustrations on Him.

Prayer is offensive to some. Many of our friends don’t believe in God or they don’t attend church, so we don’t want to offend them. Sending them vibes is a safer way to bless them (wait, “blessing” someone is probably taboo too!). And if we send vibes and things don’t work out for our friend then nothing is lost. But if we say we’ll pray and things don’t work out, then God will look bad.

If we are ashamed of telling others we will pray for them in faith, we are missing an opportunity to effect change in someone's life.

Prayer indicates there is a higher power. Offering prayer to someone indicates we believe in a higher power to meet our needs, because we alone are insufficient to control and make things happen here on earth. And frankly, many people these days don't really believe in a higher power like that. They believe in the universe and Mother Earth and all of the groans and "vibes" that come with the movement of the planets, stars, and people across the nations. So when they send vibes, they're hoping the earth will shake and move things in alignment so that their friends experience freedom.

If we look at the Lord's Prayer, our example of how to pray, we see that Jesus spent the entire first half of prayer asking for nothing, but rather glorifying his Father. In fact, his petition for his "daily bread" was only about 10% of his prayer time. He knew the value of establishing his connection with his Father and aligning his will and wishes with those of his Father, so that his prayers were effective.

Prayer is powerful, and we are told to pray in faith, pray often, and pray for others.

Prayer is not an option.

If our prayers have disappointed, maybe we haven't really prayed. When "no" is the answer, we have to place our hands in His and walk with him, much like we require our own children to do when they start to run out in the street, begging us to retrieve their ball they just lost. If we don't understand prayer, it would be most helpful to look at the Lord's Prayer again and see what it is we're missing. Is it praise? Is it reverence? Is it his will? **If we're afraid of offending others by offering them prayer, we need to rethink our own position on the power of this awesome privilege we have to touch heaven for a friend.** And if all we believe is that thoughts and vibes are equivalent to the power of prayer, we are indeed in a sad state.

I've been in that sad state before, because I've experienced all of the above. And honestly, I know I've grieved the heart of my Father when I discounted the power of the most effective tool he has placed in my hands, in my heart, and in my life – prayer.

Vibes won't do a thing. Thoughts are nice, but they're fleeting. And **waiting for the stars to align and the earth to shake things into place is blasphemous when the Creator of those things wants a relationship with us, not a celestial show.**

I'm still learning and growing in the experience of prayer. But this one thing I know. When I look at the Lord's Prayer and start out by saying, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name," and I hang out on those statements alone for a while, my heart aligns, my will submits, and my worries and fears subside because of who He is and how powerful and holy he is in my life and in the lives of those for whom I am praying.

If someone sends you vibes, thank them. But tell them about the power of prayer. And please don't send others vibes. Send them power. And pray.

FRESH THYME - When it's Hard to Obey – by Marcy Lytle

It's in the eyes and face of our kids from the time they can barely walk, once they have that independence and knowledge that they can run away. We tell him to leave his sister alone when he has her backed into a corner, about to grab her toy, and he looks at us. He sees if we're serious, and remembers whether or not there were any consequences last time we threatened. And then he chooses...to obey...or not to obey.

That independence is with us throughout our lives, and it's tempting at every age to take over and control our actions.

God tells us clearly to pursue a career path, or a ministry, and we start with abandon and gladly obey, because it's something we've wanted to do, forever. However, things get hard, no one really serves us any accolades for a job well done, and in fact; quite the opposite occurs. We encounter obstacles. It's then that we are backed into a corner with that decision to make. Will we continue to obey, or will we question whether or not God really meant it when he sent us to do his work?

God tells us to trust in him and believe his word. We gladly accept him as Savior and it feels so darn good to have our sins forgiven. We pray that this bill will be paid and we rejoice when unexpectedly we receive money in the mail. But what about the times when memories of our past rise up and threaten our security in his forgiveness? Or what about those prayers that seemingly go unanswered? Will we choose to keep trusting that he is good and his word is true?

God tells us to entrust our kids to him, reminding us that he loves them more than we do, and that he will complete the work he has begun in their hearts. And then the unthinkable happens. Our kids disobey everything we've taught them, choose their own path, and run to those corners looking back at us to see if we will react. What then? Do we still claim and believe the promises God gave us for them?

It's super hard for young parents to get their kids to obey. Consistency is the key. They must make sure they have consequences for disobedience and rewards for them when they obey. And above all, parents must love their kids while training them.

When it comes to God and the maturation process he has for us in the area of obedience, most of us still want to be like our own children. We want to obey when it's convenient for us to do so. In other words, if we've got another toy we can play with, we'll gladly leave our sister alone to play with hers. But, if we don't? Then watch out. We don't want any consequences for disobedience; we only want understanding and tolerance on God's part. After all, we are still flesh. He knows our weakness. And finally, we want to weave in and out of God's love for us, depending on how we feel at the moment, judging his amount of love by the current circumstances in which we find ourselves at any given moment.

If all of this sounds harsh, it probably is. I'm being harsh on myself as I write it. Just today, a prayer that I prayed wasn't answered just like I thought it would be, and I panicked. I'm not a

child physically any more, but my reaction to the answer God gave was just like a child. I shook my fist at God and declared in my heart,

“I prayed for the best, and you gave us dirt.”

Wow. Where did that come from?

All sorts of memories and feelings arose like volcanic flames that had been stewing beneath the surface for years. They spewed out of me. More thoughts surfaced.

Why was she healed, and my friend died?

Why did I pray for protection, and we were robbed...over and over?

Are you punishing me God, for not being a good enough Christian?

It's amazing how one little act of disobedience on my part turned into a day of sobbing, self-absorption, and sadness – all because I chose to believe that God's love for me wasn't enough, wasn't good, and wasn't complete. Yes, **choosing to believe a lie is disobedience.**

Ouch.

I wasn't walking on by that person God told me to pray for, and I wasn't stepping down out of discouragement in my ministry. I was turning my back on my Savior's love just because of my own lack of understanding, and because I wanted my way. I wanted my answer. And giving God the glory for the answer he sent instead just wasn't on my agenda that day.

When our toddlers really want something badly, they often choose disobedience. As parents, we know that we must instruct them that they disobeyed, and they must be disciplined. But when our kid asks us for candy, and we hand her an apple, if she slaps that apple into the ground – what do we do? We, being fleshly parents, might react by sending her to her room, with no food at all. And she might stay there for hours. But if the parent/child relationship is secure and strong, she will emerge at some point and run to our arms, accepting the apple and the love of her parents.

It's hard to obey with our hands, our feet, and our bodies. But I think it's harder to obey with our hearts, when life hands us lemons.

God never promised answers to our prayers to be exactly what we ask for. **We only ask for what satisfies for the moment, and what makes us happy. He answers with what we need for eternity.**

And it requires obedience to trust Him with either answer he gives, choosing to believe the truth that he is a good God and rewards those who diligently seek him.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

December 2014

TIPS

The Dressing - Winter Scarves – by Marcy Lytle

I love scarves, especially in the winter. Actually, it's too darn hot to wear scarves the rest of the year, where I live. But a good scarf not only takes a plain outfit up a notch, it warms your neck, and can be worn a myriad of ways! Depending on whether the scarf is rectangular or square, wide or thin, patterned or solid, you can do all sorts of fun things with these pieces of fun material! And...scarves aren't too expensive if you find them on sale – so get yourself a good supply – and wear them!

We're going to picture each scarf here with a black t-shirt. Add your favorite jacket, pullover sweater, or cardigan – and you're good to go!

Long and lean – Wrap the scarf around your neck and pull the ends back around, then loop over and under a couple of times with each end, and then adjust. This is great for scarves that are made of lightweight material and are a bit too long. These are great for topping off a shirt or blouse, and maybe adding a jacket!

Infinite and full – Infinity scarves are loops, and this one is super full with lots of fabric. The only way to wear this kind of scarf without looking like you're ready for a blizzard is to drape it around your neck just one time and let it hang to declare its entire beauty. These are cozy, pretty, and all you need to dress up an otherwise plain top.

Warm and woolly – These scarves are usually made of wool and are super warm already, so fold them neatly lengthwise, drape around the neck, and loop through one time. Tighten if necessary, when the wind is cold! These are usually worn to match your outerwear.

Rectangular and colorful – This scarf is huge, colorful, and might just swallow up a tiny neck. Place it around your neck lengthwise, and on one half, make a neat knot. Twist the other half and slip the end through the knot for an uneven, unique look. You can twist the entire scarf before tying, just to make it appear not so large. Lots of fabric in this scarf, so it can probably stand alone, without a jacket.

Square and pretty – Fold the square scarf into a rectangle and fold over and over starting with the tip going inside, until you have an elongated shape. Place the scarf around your neck with the ends hanging down your back. Pull around one end and bring it out from under the scarf. Pull around the other end, feeding it under the first side you pulled, to hang over. Adjust. Voila! What a pretty addition to a solid dress or tee.

Infinite and plaid – If you've got another infinity scarf that's thin and light, try wrapping it around your neck twice, to make a short looped scarf, much like a necklace style. Pretty and polished! I love a soft scarf to warm my neck, and a plaid one is just right to top off a long sleeve shirt or blouse.

Subtle and stripes: This scarf is super casual and laid back. Just drape the scarf around your neck with ends in the back. Bring one around and under the loop, and let the other hang loose. This style is good for your athletic or weekend wear, for a walk in the cold or shopping around town.

Pay attention to the shape, thickness, and pattern of the scarves you buy. Then play with them. Wear them as a shawl, just over the shoulder, or in any of the shapes above. There are multiple sites on line to find how to wear scarves. Try out a new way each week!

Printed scarves are great with solid t-shirts and jackets.

Scarves add a pop of color and sophistication to an otherwise dull outfit.

Scarves can be worn alone, or you can add a dainty necklace to hang out underneath.

If scarves bother you around your neck, try tying one on the handle of your purse!

Don't be afraid to tie a scarf your own unique way and wear it proudly! Somehow, a winter scarf does more than warm your neck – it makes you smile!

Seven 4 You - The Guest Room – by Marcy Lytle

It's the holiday season, and it's likely you will be the guest somewhere, or you will have guests in your spare bedroom this Christmas season. We have two empty rooms in our house, one for the toddlers, and one for the adults, who come to stay. And for Christmas, it's nice to make sure that guest room has a few extra special touches to make those who stay feel right at home, and pampered and loved!

1. [Personal toiletries](#). It's nice, just like at a hotel, to have your very own personal soap and shampoo when traveling. So that your guests don't have to use the soap that's sitting in your guest bath, provide them their own little basket of goodies they can carry with them to the bathroom to use – fresh and new.
2. Fresh flowers – who doesn't like these? It doesn't have to be a large bouquet. That might be overwhelming. But even a single rose, or two or three stems in one of those vases you rarely use lights up the room and adds a splash of color.
3. Reading material – Be sure there's a basket or table by the bed with a few magazines or books that are easy reading – for your guests late at night. You can pick these up at the store or share some of yours that you've already read (unless you tear out pages like I do!). They might be cute [laid out on a tray](#), on the table. Be sure to include a book light or a lamp by the bed for late night reading.
4. Room in the closet. – Give your guests some space for their things. Clear out an area in the closet for their bags and room on the clothes rod for a few items they might want to hang, to loosen the wrinkles. This makes them feel thought of, and welcomed to feel at home.
5. Snacks – Of course you don't want crumbs and stickiness on your bed, but a few snacks for munchies when your guests get hungry might make them smile, when they arrive. You might include a couple of bottled waters, a piece of fruit for each person, and a few protein or [granola bars](#) that they can grab on the go the next morning.
6. Clean sheets (and fluffy pillows!) –This sounds like a given, but remember to wash the sheets before your guests arrive! Try spraying them with a [fresh clean scent](#) (something subtle) and make sure the bed is impeccably made for your guests. If this room has sat empty for months, the sheets need to be washed!
7. Tissues – A runny nose, an accidental spill, or a tiny cut all need the attention of tissues – without your guests having to run outside of their room to retrieve toilet paper from the bathroom. There are nice tissue boxes available to go with almost any room décor! Leave them on the bedside table along with your vase of flowers and you're done!

If your house is like mine, your guest room isn't all that large, and space to set things out is limited. One idea is to use one of those cute shopping bags and fill it with their goodies, to sit in a corner with a welcome card! Or...a decorative basket that you have can be repurposed and filled with your guest items, along with a note, and placed right in the center of the bed.

Just a little attention to the guest room and you won't have to go to bed at night wondering if they're looking through your drawers for hand lotion, or if they're lying awake with insomnia with

nothing to read. And when your guests go home, they'll be so thankful for the attention you gave...they just might want to come back again soon. (Is that a good thing?)

Selah's Style - Holiday Outfits Don't Have to Be Red! By Selah Irwin

Have you been invited to a holiday party? Well, here is a little something you should know. All of your holiday outfits do not have to be red!

Check out these Christmas fashions I put together. I hope you will like them, because I think they will look great at any party!

Here is my first fashion. There are a few good things about it. The first one is that it is very warm. If you go to an outdoor party, you won't get cold and you will still be in fashion! It is very comfortable. You won't get itchy if it is a dance party. Since it is black and white, it goes with any season!

Cream is a beautiful color to wear for the holidays. It pretty much goes with anything, even glittery shoes that shimmer and shine! Add fancy accessories, slap it together, and it just makes sense. Gorgeous!

If you choose a pink dress for Christmas, you can make it last through Easter and July! Just add a pretty sweater and warm shoes and you are ready to walk the runway!

I will give you a clue..... Blue! Blue is great choice to wear. If you put something sparkly with it, your outfit will be magnificent and outstanding! Don't you just love fur? I do! Add it to anything to add some pizzazz!

All of these outfits are from good ole Target!

I am really looking forward to the holidays.

Merry Christmas!

Jingle bells, jingle bells, all the way!

See you all sometime next year on a one horse open sleigh!

The Fearless Kitchen It's Tradition! – by Christina Vetter

It definitely is the most wonderful time of the year! Christmas season is just the best isn't it? I know there are so many things that can stress us out this month, but in spite of it all, I can't get enough of this wonderful season. I just love celebrating Jesus' birthday, spending time with my blessing of a family, and last but certainly not least: the wonderful traditions that fall within this month. From setting up the Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving, to setting out milk and cookies for Santa, traditions are a wonderful way to spend time with our families, and I think they're wonderful too! Many American households may have similar Christmas day traditions: wake up, get coffee, open presents, followed by cooking and eating all day. But, what does your Christmas Eve look like? What about in your house? Do you find yourselves frantically wrapping presents, eating mystery meal takeout between taping and cutting? Many years, the Christmas Eve meal is crammed into the bundle of last minute chaos that fills the day. However, in other countries and heritages, Christmas Eve dinner is celebrated with the same or even more pomp and circumstance than Christmas day!

For example, in French families (also found in Canada and southern Louisiana as well), many celebrate "Le Reveillon," a celebration that takes place after midnight mass Christmas Eve that drips with luxurious and lavish fares. Some menu items that can be found are Tournedos Rossini (filet mignon topped with a slice of foie gras and garnished with shaved truffles....yes please), oysters, scallops, smoked salmon, etc., very exquisite and a very far cry from a brown paper sack. In Italian households, seafood is the food of choice. This tradition stems from The Feast of Seven Fishes, also surrounding midnight mass, which represents the wait for Jesus' birth. Many Italian and Italian-American homes serve salted cod, calamari (see recipe below), linguini with mussels, and a large variety of other seafood dishes. After talking to a German friend of mine, I learned of a Christmas Eve tradition that her and her family love to make: a mulled wine called Gluhwein (see recipe below). In Mexican-American families, Christmas Eve is spent making dozens and dozens of tamales (see recipe below). Not a bad way to spend Christmas Eve, I think!

I'll be honest, now that my husband and I have kids, I'm desperate to find some worthwhile Christmas Eve traditions to begin in our family. Whether we follow my husband's Italian heritage, adopt another, or simply make homemade pizzas as a family every year, something needs to be started! I hope this Christmas season brings you as little stress and as much joy as possible, so that you are able to truly enjoy your loved ones. Joyeux Noel, Frohe Weihnachten, Buon Natale, Feliz Navidad, and a very Merry Christmas!!

Calamari

Serves 4 appetizer portions

Recipe and Photo Courtesy of www.foodnetwork.com

Difficulty: 

This is Alton Brown's calamari recipe, and as with every other recipe of his I've had, it is downright amazing! I recommend serving it alongside warmed marinara sauce!

Ingredients:

2 Quarts peanut oil
1 lb squid, tubes and tentacles
½ C all purpose flour
½ C plain cornmeal
Kosher salt and black pepper to taste
Lemon to taste (I recommend!)

Directions:

-Place the peanut oil in a 4 to 5-quart Dutch oven and place over medium-high heat. Heat oil until it reaches 375 degrees F.

-Rinse the squid thoroughly and pat dry. Cut the tentacles in half lengthwise and the tubes into 1/2-inch rings. Set aside.

-Place the flour and the cornmeal into a medium mixing bowl and stir to combine. In small handfuls, dredge the squid in the flour and cornmeal mixture and shake off the excess. In batches, gently lower the squid into the hot oil. Cook for 1 minute. The squid will not be browned, but lightly golden in color. Remove the squid and transfer to a cooling rack turned upside down set over a newspaper-lined sheet pan. Season with salt and pepper, (and a squirt of lemon juice) as desired. Repeat until all of the squid is cooked. Make sure to check the temperature of the oil before each batch to ensure it is 375 degrees F. Serve immediately.

Gluhwein

Serves 2-4

Difficulty: 

A German friend of mine first introduced me to Gluhwein and I am so happy she did! (Thanks again, Igne!) I can't admit to actually trying this recipe as I am seven months pregnant this Christmas, but her entire German family swears by it during the Holiday season. Heated over a wood burning stove and ladled into mugs, this recipe brings their German roots to life in their new Texas home.

Ingredients:

1 bottle of red wine
1 orange, sliced
1 cinnamon stick
10 whole cloves
Sugar to taste

Directions:

- In a large pot, mix ingredients together and simmer, stirring occasionally for 10-20 minutes, or until sugar is dissolved and spices' flavor have penetrated wine.
- Ladle into mugs and enjoy responsibly!

Pork Tamales

Serves 16

Recipe Courtesy of www.allrecipes.com

Difficulty: 

It doesn't take me long to devour some good tamales, and these hit the spot! My mom and I made them one Christmas season and they did not disappoint. They're not necessarily difficult to make, however, be prepared to devote an entire day to the process. Trust me, you'll be glad you did!

Ingredients:

Tamale Filling:

- 1 1/4 pounds pork loin
- 1 large onion, halved
- 1 clove garlic
- 4 dried California chile pods
- 2 cups water
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt

Tamale Dough:

- 2 cups masa
- 1 (10.5 ounce) can beef broth
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2/3 cup lard
- 1 (8 ounce) package dried corn husks

Directions:

- Place pork into a Dutch oven with onion and garlic, and add water to cover. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low and simmer until the meat is cooked through, about 2 hours.
- Use rubber gloves to remove stems and seeds from the chili pods. Place chilis in a sauce pan with 2 cups of water. Simmer, uncovered for 20 minutes, then remove from heat to cool. Transfer the chilis and water to a blender and blend until smooth. Strain the mixture, stir in salt, and set aside. Shred the cooked meat and mix in one cup of the chili sauce.
- Soak the corn husks in a bowl of warm water. In a large bowl, beat the lard with a tablespoon of the broth until fluffy. Combine the masa, baking powder and salt; stir into the lard mixture, adding more broth as necessary to form a spongy dough.
- Spread the dough out over the corn husks to 1/4 to 1/2 inch thickness. Place one tablespoon of the meat filling into the center. Fold the sides of the husks in toward the center and place in a steamer. Steam for 1 hour.
- Remove tamales from husks and drizzle remaining chili sauce over.

Tried and True – Stocking Gifts for HIM

It's hard to think of small things for the guys, at least in my opinion, to place in their stockings. The girls are easy, since there are so many little accessories out there for us in the stores. However, I don't like all of the Christmas boxes that show up in the big stores with little gadgets for men, because most of them seem like a waste of money! So this season, I decided to ask several guys what they have gotten in their stockings that they really enjoy, in Christmases past, or for an idea of something they'd really like to have. Below are their answers; and I hope they help you, as you shop for the men in your life:

[Swiss Army Knife](#) – Because it has a knife blade, a screwdriver, and scissors...and it fits on a keychain, this gift is a winner. These vary in price, but may average about \$25.

[Gear Junkie Keychain Knife](#) – This is another small item that fits on the keychain (a plus mentioned again by the guys), and I'm told it works very well! It will cost you about 12 bucks.

[Gold Toe Socks](#) – These are stated to be the “most comfortable” socks around, and when a mom started this tradition of placing these in the stocking, it was continued because the socks are so darn good! A pack of these might be 10 or 15 dollars.

[Fast Food Coupons](#) – These are a hit for the guys, because they can use them at work, on the go, late night, whatever... Just pick a drive-thru and get several of these little coupon books for him. Vary them up with a sandwich, burger, or taco choice! The coupon books are \$5 each at most places.

[Personal Coupons](#) – These are great for kids to make for their dads, wives for their husbands, siblings for their brothers, etc. Sit down and think about what he likes, and include a coupon for that, i.e. cooking his favorite meal, a date to a sporting event, etc. And make sure you're available when he cashes in! Cost – your time and creativity.

[Food](#) – From young to old, the guys like finding a Snickers bar in their stocking, a bag of Sour Patch Kids, or a box of pecan pralines (for the grandpas). If you have the time, a personal tin of homemade cookies is sure to be a hit! This gift can vary from a buck up to a few bucks, if you make your food at home.

[Coffee](#) – This idea is from my own husband. He loves the sample size coffees from World Market, and gets excited when they show up in his stocking. There are so many flavors to choose from! You can get a package of five for \$10.99, split it up, and drop one in each guy's stocking in your family for just over two bucks each.

[Leatherman](#) – I realize this is now the third knife-type gadget we're listing, but hey, the guys like little tools! “It's practical, works well, and is small enough to fit into a pocket...carry it every day!” These is a quote from my niece's husband. Under \$25.

[Beef Jerky](#) – I have this in a separate category from FOOD, because jerky is something between food and gum and leather, it seems to me. However, some guys like it, so why not get it? One package is just a few dollars.

[Survival Tools](#) – The guys like to be prepared...for anything. This might include a first aid kit, a snakebite kit, a water filter for camping, or a simple flashlight. There are lots of choices at camping stores, like Academy or REI. Some of these are pricey...others are not!

[The Necessities](#) – One guy said he hates spending his own money on deodorant, shaving cream, and razors. So why not free up that money of his, and give him the things he'll use? These too vary in price, depending on his brand.

[Fishing Tackle](#) – If your guys likes to fish, there are plenty of small items that will fit in a stocking that he's sure to love. Lures, jigs, and the like... Check out Academy for these, and they are cheap!

[Unique to Him](#) – My husband likes scented soaps, so he gets them every year. My brother-in-law loves camping ornaments, so we hunt for those each Christmas season. And my niece's husband asks for mechanical pencils – and those are easy to find! Listen and observe what he likes and uses, and include a personal, attentive gift just for his needs and wants!

If you'll notice, most all of the above are useful. Not one guy I interviewed said he wants a puzzle thingy, a cute paperweight for his desk or a pretty-scented air freshener for his car. He wants the stuff that's useful and practical. And he'll thank you and love you for getting it for him.

(The guys interviewed ranged from 20-60 years in age, with most of them being in the younger age range...)

HOME

Practical Parenting – 6 Parenting Pitfalls – by Georganne Schuch

In a world of parenting advice overload, most of it conflicting, it pays to retain a healthy dose of common sense. While one expert may insist that a child's self-image should never be challenged, another will just as convincingly argue for breaking down all false pride. Someone advocates a family-only policy of friends, while another suggests thrusting a child into an incessant schedule of youth groups, play dates, sports activities, and every other extracurricular activity available.

So, let's consider a few of the more popular parenting advice points:

- 1. Children have fragile self-images. Parents should never correct, criticize or otherwise make a child feel inferior in any way.**

On one hand, no parent wants her child to feel alienated or belittled in a society that seems to prize perfection, particularly in the areas of looks and talents. On the other hand, perfection is a lie. Someone is always going to look nicer or be better, if even for a moment in time. Models have bed head and bad breath, whether the general public sees it or not. On any given day, even Mozart might have missed a key signature change. Therefore, never forget that "beauty is fleeting." Teach your child that while you do think they are beautiful and talented, the world will not fall at their feet.

- 2. Children grow bored easily. Cater to their every interest, never allowing for a second of self-reflection.**

By engaging in every activity available, a child develops a mile-wide but inch-deep philosophy. They fail to develop any real talent by not concentrating on the things at which they show special skill. Additionally, no one is born knowing exactly who they are and what their purpose is. Self-reflection takes a lot of down time, time thinking about what they like, what they want, who they want to be. Boredom never killed a kid.

- 3. Children will make good choices when they understand the entire scenario. Parents do not need to set guidelines for right and wrong.**

Most choices are made based on an imperfect understanding of a situation. The earlier a child knows right from wrong the better he will understand how to make good choices, even without all the details. Practice makes perfect...well almost.

- 4. A child's palette will develop over time. Don't force them to eat healthy food.**

None of my children ever naturally preferred healthy food over junk food. I still remember the look of awe-struck wonder when my oldest had her first taste of ice cream. They definitely don't need to develop a taste for sweets; however, the earlier they are exposed to and taught about a healthy diet, the better chance they have to develop a palette that prefers good food over junk food.

- 5. Some children are high-spirited, extroverted, strong-willed, or whatever you want to call it. They need to be who God made them to be.**

Some children are rude and disrespectful. Call a spade a spade. If they have excess energy, run it off. If they talk or act aggressively toward others, put them in time out. Experiencing natural consequences has cured many a strong-will, so don't rescue a child from every situation she puts herself into. Yes, God has a purpose for how he made each person, but He meant for us to harness that extra energy, learn how to relate to people, and be teachable in order to make a difference in the world around us.

- 6. Children are born essentially good and their sin nature develops over time. They don't need correction until they understand what sin is.**

If ever there was a lie about parenting, this is one of the biggest. While a crawling baby might not consciously seek to destroy everything within his reach, he usually has an

autonomic response to the word “No,” which looks something like, “Make me.” As a parent, your biggest victory will be to rise to the challenge early and regularly. Even a toddler snub is a form of rebellion, better known as sin, and training a proper response does not require an understanding of sin. It merely requires patience, for which you will be eternally grateful when he is a teen.

I truly believe that being a parent requires less than average intelligence but an extraordinary amount of determination. It never hurts to get advice, but you should always apply it with common sense and grace. Children, indeed, are a blessing from God and raising them proves He has a sense of humor and justice.

Life as We Know It - Fingerprint of God – by Erica Simmons

The idea that every person has a unique set of fingerprints could lead to the assumption that everyone has a drastically different pattern. The truth is all of us have similar fingerprint “patterns” as many others. What makes our fingerprints unique are the small subtle differences that each of us have.

“Are they alike or different?”

“Does one have a more dominant personality than the other?”

These are the type questions I have gotten repeatedly over the years, as a mother of twins.

Just as our fingerprints identify us physically, our Heavenly Father identifies us spiritually. I like to think about us as the fingerprints of God, each one unique and special in just the way He intends us to be.

As a single parent, we are so busy doing it all, we don't take the time to appreciate our children's uniqueness. Being from a family of seven kids it was easy to get lost in the shuffle. I wanted it to be different for me and my boys. I wanted them to be seen as individuals and I wanted to get to know them as individuals.

The funny part is I remember making the conscious decision when I found out I was having twins that I would be deliberate about making sure they were not thought of as part of a whole. The first step in accomplishing that was to NOT do the rhyming name thing, and so Jordan and Jerimiah are their names. Yes, I know you can tell I was a first time parent. The things and dreams we have for our children when they are in the womb get a serious makeover when they become a reality. Life-as-we-know-it moments start hitting us, we get in survival mode, and before we realize it, some of the things we said we would and would not do were and were not done. This went on for me till I got a serious wakeup call.

One of the cool things about fingerprints is that our life experiences can contribute to making them more unique. An injury that leaves a distinct mark is one example of this. It turns out that some of our family life experiences left a mark on Jordan, and when discovered, it was heartbreaking for me.

The youngest of my boys, Jerimiah, was born with a disease called Hirschsprung's Disease. As it turned out, Jerimiah had to have an ostomy and I did not bring my children home until they were two weeks old. The ostomy was only temporary until he got old and big enough to have the surgery to go in and remove the affected part of the tract. This surgery took place when he was 13 months old and the day coincided with the exact morning of my dad's first heart attack. The decision was made that we go through with Jerimiah's surgery and my family would be there for my dad. The unexpected consequence was that I was away from Jordan for about 10 days.

Unfortunately, this was the beginning of about a four year cycle of Jeri needing surgery and me having to be away from Jordan, and this left its mark on him. He thought I did not love him as much as I loved Jeremiah. My time away from him was a huge contribution to the way he felt, but as we talked, I realized other things I did also played a role. The great thing is that we were able to talk it out and he was able to understand and see things from a larger perspective.

That experience was the turning point in my relationship with my boys. It became very important, as we had to go through some tough times when puberty hit. I did not always read the signs well and did not always get it right, but I was committed to working through whatever problems they had, alongside them. I also got help along the way.

One of the stumbling blocks for me was trying to relate to the boys based on who I was as a child. I remember talking to God about how I didn't do this and I didn't do that, and God (being God) shut me up on more than one occasion. He brought things back to my remembrance, putting a whole new spin on [John 14:26](#).

This new perspective helped me to take a deep breath and appreciate the "hand of God" in my own life and how He protects us even from ourselves at times.

Another thing I did (after talking with one of the elders at my church) was that I had the boys take a personality test. This taught me more about who they were and helped me to approach them based on who they are. Now I am better able to teach them to walk godly and watch with more peace as they transform into who He created them to be. It is my job to provide guidance, wisdom and to help them find balance in their God given talents.

Our children are constantly learning, and if we are not the ones doing the teaching, someone else is. I learned that lesson the hard way.

The great thing is now I am the one doing the teaching.

Make sure you are, too.

Take heart in the work you are doing as Proverbs 22:6 says: *Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

And look for His fingerprint in your own life, and in the lives of your children.

I Don't Do Teens – What Are They Saying? – by Marcy Lytle

Teens speak a different language, don't they?

I remember when I first heard my teen talk about “going out” at age 12 I thought she wanted to go on a date! I quickly learned that “going out” meant what I had learned to be “going steady.” Of course, my answer was still a big fat, “No way!”

Teens grow up in a culture all their own, and they learn to communicate with their peers in a language that not only do their peers understand, it often seems like a secret society which does not include old people, like parents! However, as the parents, we must understand our teen when he talks, when she mutters, or when they all speak to us with their eyes rolling when we're giving instruction.

So just what is it that our teens are saying, and how do we understand them?

The Texting. Teens have abbreviations and language reserved for texting. I think we know the familiar ones like LOL (laughing out loud) and JK (just kidding), but do you know that NP can mean “no problem” and can also indicate that “nosy parents” are looking over the shoulder? This serves as a warning to their friend to take care in what they text. Instead of trying to be nosy, it might be fun to sit down with your teens one night and ask them share the abbreviations they use. Or [check out this site](#) for a long list. And if you haven't learned to text yet, by all means do so. It may be your main means of communication when your son leaves home!

The Slang. If you listen to your teens talk aloud, instead of texting, you might hear them say something like, “I'm hanging with the fam tonight,” meaning they're staying home to be with family. That's a pretty easy one. However, if you listen long enough you might not understand anything your teens are talking about! Don't try to chime in by using their same phrases – that might be too funny and they might laugh too hard. But do [peruse the internet](#), or ask your other parent friends, and see what it is your teens are saying. Most of the time it's harmless chatter, but sometimes it can be offensive or even nasty, and they might not even be aware.

The Body Language. Is your daughter extremely tall for her age? You might catch her slumping down when she walks, perhaps because she has been teased for towering above her peers. Talk to her about being proud of the way she's created, and teach her to stand tall. Do you find that your teens have trouble making eye contact with you? They may lack confidence or be afraid. Talk to them and build them up, and be careful with the tone and the words you use when instructing them or disciplining them. And if your son is just hanging around, following you and pestering you, maybe he's trying to say he wants to do something fun with you! Take advantage, stop what you're doing; and fist fight, throw the ball, or play a video game with him. Watch your kids and how they walk, look, and move. You just might learn something about them...and about yourself.

We once watched a movie called [The Chumscrubber](#). It was not a “good” movie because it was not comforting or entertaining. It was disturbing. The story took place in a high-end suburban neighborhood where the parents were busy working and entertaining themselves, while their teens were left to themselves, unnoticed, and neglected. I cannot forget one scene where a

teen actually appears downstairs and the mom flippantly asks, “What are you kids up to?” The teen boy replies, “Oh, we’ve got Bobby tied up in the room and we’re holding him hostage,” to which the mom laughs aloud and shakes her head at those “silly” kids. What she didn’t realize, understand, or perceive, was that her son was telling the truth. He really did have a kid tied up, held hostage. But she was too busy being self-absorbed to notice.

According to the [Urban Dictionary](#), a chumscrubber is “everything we ignore - all those subjects and conversations that parents and teens should be having but aren’t – the physical embodiment of everything we’d rather not deal with, everything that causes pain, or discomfort.”

It’s hard work understanding our teens, and the “easy” way out might be to let them shut their doors, spend all night on their phones, or hang out with their friends away from our house so that we can have our “own time.” But taking the time and effort to really hear them, and then deciding to respond to them with love, understanding, and parental care just might be the very thing they’re asking for – in a language all their own.

Simple Solutions – Complicated – by Georganne Schuch

One of the hallmarks of maturity includes the realization that *complicated* is often a choice. Not every dinner has to come from *Bon Appetit*. You don't have to dig up your rock-studded yard to perfectly recreate the Pinterest pin of a lush English garden. If you live in drought-prone Texas, you're going to spend a fortune watering it, anyway. Every outfit definitely does not require perfectly matched jewelry and shoes. You get the idea. Complicated is complicated.

Most people have a list of standards they live by, whether they realize it or not. When things don't fall in line with those standards, panic and stress often follows. Think your house has to look like it leaped off the page of *Martha Stewart Living*? Really? No one cares as long as they feel loved. It also doesn't have to be clean enough to pass any white glove test. As long as you're not hoarding cats or creating mazes through the rooms with stacked newspapers and trash, you are the only one who notices anything amiss.

After years, decades really, of trying to make everything perfect, from meals to kids, I realize that my failure lies in the fact that perfection is not only in the eye of the beholder, it's a shimmery illusion that changes with the wind. Once I almost achieve one ideal, it morphs into something else, and I never reach the final step where I can sit back and enjoy an accomplishment. That whole "Reach for the Stars" sounds good, but the constant pump-it-up mentality leaves most people, or at least me, feeling like I'm chained to the ground.

If you feel overstressed and underwhelmed with something(s) in your life, stop and think it through.

Does a project/goal/activity bring peace or tension? If my stomach knots up or my shoulders start aching, I know that even when I'm doing something for all the right reasons it is probably wrong for me.

When I have to go through the mental and physical contortions of a *Twister* game to work something in, then it's complicated.

Am I working myself into a tizzy to make an impression when no one notices or cares? Sure I clean up the house for company, but is it worth me whipping everyone into a frenzy to polish the silver and wash the china that we won't even use?

When I'm too tired to enjoy what I've worked for, then it's complicated.

Will my appearance bring about the fall of the Western world? I shower and dress in clean clothes on a daily basis. I don't mix stripes and polka dots, though that may be the new fashion somewhere. My makeup and hair are pretty basic. I'm not famous, so no paparazzi will ever follow me around to record my fashion sense for the masses. I'm good with that.

When I'm more concerned about how I look than who I am, then it's complicated.

Will my attitude or lack thereof, disappoint or otherwise discourage someone who needs my attention? As a parent, I am an example to my children. As a Christian, I am an example to anyone whose path I cross, whether they know me or not. It's important to me to leave a good

impression, one which conveys grace and kindness, encouragement and a healthy dose of sanity. Dramas do not need my instigation or participation.

When I have to keep track of sides, tiptoe around feelings, and generally come across as a judge and jury, then it's complicated.

Will my dinners nourish my family with good nutrition and loving preparation? My meals won't make it onto the cover of a magazine. Sometimes, they are barely recognizable as edible. Even chefs go down in flames on occasion. I coordinate my menu plans to complement our fast-paced life. Meals with less prep and a few cans on busy nights are not the end of our healthy diets.

When I spend more time preparing dinner than I did playing with and reading to and hugging my family, then it's complicated.

Will my attendance at various activities and meetings contribute toward development in areas we value? Church happens to be important. Co-op is necessary. But things can spiral out of control from there. Ladies Night Out and toddler playdates. Bible studies and youth group. There are planning meetings and meetings to plan meetings.

When I meet myself coming and going and have to count heads to make sure I've picked everyone up, then it's complicated.

When I am in need, do I have people who care enough to drop what they are doing and come help? Is there anyone who will tell me when I'm wrong and hug me anyway? Friends are important to the mental and emotional health of all people. Pick them carefully. Invest in them wisely. But don't let them take over your life or cater to their wishes above your own family or calling. Friends should encourage you. Hold you accountable. Laugh and cry with you.

When I don't have time for friends or can't seem to break away from them to do what's important in life, then it's complicated.

Life isn't the perfect page out of a magazine or the scene from a sitcom. It's messy. It's complicated without any help from me. Staying away from complicated involves a dance back and forth across the lines of contentment and over-commitment. It takes a lot of introspection and a lot of courage to change what needs to be changed when things aren't lining up somewhere. And just know that keeping your feet on the ground doesn't mean you aren't fulfilling the best you that you can be.

A Night to Remember – Me and My Drum – by Marcy Lytle

You know the song about the little drummer boy. But have you ever pulled apart the lyrics, shared them with your family, and worshiped the King?

Preparation: Ask every person to arrive in the family room with something to drum and a drumstick. It can be a toy drum, a pot from the kitchen with a wooden spoon, a box with a stick, etc. Sit in a circle and read the story below. At the end of the devotion, play the song and drum together in worship to the King of Kings – Jesus.

Come they told me...a new born King to see...our finest gifts we bring...to lay before the king...

*Pa rum pum pum pum
So we honor him...when we come.*

Imagine a little boy being asked to join the Magi on their journey to see Jesus. The Magi had expensive gifts to bring to the baby Jesus, but this little boy only had the drum in his hand. Yet he was asked (*in the song*) to join the guys with the fancy presents, to come with them to present these gifts at the feet of the King.

Did you know that Jesus loves it when we come worship him with whatever we have in our hand? (*Have each one share how they picked out their drum and stick, and how they are all unique and perfect.*) That's what we are doing now. We're coming to the Lord to worship.

Little baby...I am a poor boy too...I have no gift to bring...that's fit to give the King...

*Pa rum pum pum pum
Shall I play for you...on my drum?*

The little boy felt he didn't fit in with the guys with the expensive gifts. He felt he had nothing to bring or offer the King, but instead of running home, he stayed and presented what he had...his drum.

Did you know that Jesus welcomes us just as we are, and doesn't want fancy gifts? He just wants our presence and willingness to worship at his feet. (*Have each person drum a bit on their drum, taking turns one by one.*)

Mary nodded...the ox and lamb kept time...I played my drum for him...I played my best for him

*Pa rum pum pum pum
Then he smiled at me...me and my drum.*

When the Magi and the little boy arrived at the place where Jesus was, the little boy began to play his drum. In fact, everyone in the scene started nodding and keeping time as the little boy played. He played his best. And then what happened? Jesus smiled at him, at the little boy and his drum.

Did you know that when we worship the King with whatever gifts he's given us – singing, playing an instrument, dancing, drawing, serving – others will notice and nod? And Jesus will smile and be pleased.

Play *The Little Drummer Boy* and have everyone softly drum and sing along as you worship together.

Jesus came to earth to obey the will of his Father to be the Savior for the world. It's that love that we celebrate this Christmas, and it's the King of Kings that we play for, and it's our wonderful Lord that loves us so much and enjoys our drums...pa rum pum pum pum.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJ_MGWio-vc

The Family Practice - The Gifts We Give – by Rachel Toalson

We sit around our dinner table, boys still munching on more food, because it's the only way we can keep them here for any kind of extended period, and tonight we need to brainstorm our Christmas gift list.

It's not for us, though. It's for all those others we love.

We're late getting started this year, since two are in school and the massive piles of paperwork alone is nearly too much to keep up with, but our boys have been here before and they know exactly what to do. And it's all I can do to keep up with all those gift ideas they're tossing out faster than I can scribble them on a notebook page.

I write down everything they say, because they're all just thinking out loud. There's a couch for a favorite uncle that makes me laugh, and there's a picture frame decorated with Bok Choy boys (the 7-year-old's newest toy obsession) that makes me want to roll my eyes, and there's a stuffed animal for a grown aunt that makes their daddy grin.

This tradition began years ago, when we reached the end of a lean year and found, by monetary necessity that we needed to simplify our gift-giving. We made all the gifts that year, and it was almost by accident that we discovered an important truth about Christmas:

It is not what we get or how much money we spend giving that holds the spirit of Christmas.

The spirit of Christmas lives in how much of ourselves we give.

And it makes sense, because there is One who showed us the example of what Christmas really means by pulling on that baby skin and lying in a feeding trough and choosing to inhabit a world nothing like the one from which He came.

The giving of ourselves and our time and our lives is the best gift of all; that's what His coming says.

This giving is the full expression of love, love that bubbles over in that memory card game cut and drawn and stacked by a 7-year-old, and the bookmark hand-embroidered with a little boy drawing for a loves-to-read grandmother, and the bowl shaped and stamped and painted by a 5-year-old.

Maybe it feels like we just don't have the time or we just don't have the ability or we just don't have the space because we work full-time jobs and the kids are in school and just managing a household with so many needs is overwhelming.

And we don't want to make the season crazier, of course we don't.

But we forget, sometimes, who lives in us.

God with us. God revealed in us. Emmanuel.

He is the gift we give with our hand-made creations, even if they're not perfect, not even

close. Even if we slip a stitch. Even if the boy molded those coasters out of clay and none of them stack perfectly circular.

They are the work of our hands, and they are the work of our hearts, and they are the work of a God who loves all the way through us.

Our gifts give the Greatest Gift, because we have held in our hearts those who will receive our offering, and we have prayed for them and we have sacrificed a whole afternoon, or two, or twenty, just to watch the way that love will warm their face when the wrapping falls away.

Maybe it takes a month or two to finish those hand-made gifts, and maybe we won't make it to all the people on our list, and maybe it means we'll have to give up some time here and there for reading or writing or sitting back with our feet up, but it is in the giving that we learn what it means to live.

This month bears a challenge:

While we wait for the gift of Jesus, we live like the gifts of Jesus.

He was the gift hanging on a tree, and we are the gifts waiting beneath the tree, molded into our hand-painted bowls and knitted into our black-cotton scarves and folded inside that hand-sewn bag.

We find life in this giving, and we will never be the same.

Ways to incorporate homemade gift-giving into your Christmas:

1. **Start small.** Make it a tradition every Christmas season to give at least two handmade gifts, and then set aside some time to work on those gifts as a family. Look through craft sites together and check out interesting craft books from the library. Think about what might speak love to those on your list.
2. **Replace one gift for your children with a handmade gift.** It's not as hard as we think. One year I gave all my boys crocheted scarves in various colors. And while they don't use them like they were intended to be used (we do live in Texas, after all!), they were still a hit—as dress up scarves and, more frequently – as jump ropes.
3. **Buy handmade gifts from someone else.** If you really don't feel like you have the skills to make something someone would actually want, check out local craft fairs and support independent crafters and artists.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - A Christmas Challenge by Marcy Lytle

10 lepers cried for healing, and Jesus made them clean.

But only one returned to give him thanks, the others were not seen.

Lord, I don't want to be found among the nine who never returned to thank you.

With every breath I breathe, let it be filled with gratitude...and thanks to you....

Those are lyrics to a song I wrote decades ago, and I thought of them again this morning. We just celebrated Thanksgiving last month, and as we move forward toward the end of the year, I want to present a challenge to all of us. Here's why:

A few years ago, I experienced "frozen shoulder." I had never heard of it before, but once I was diagnosed, several others told me they too had gone through the pain. It was extremely painful at the onset, but once the shoulder froze into place, the pain subsided, and I was left with an arm I could barely lift or use. It wasn't fun at all. I went to therapy, which was expensive, and came home nauseated after each session, from all the pulling and stretching.

After several weeks of therapy and not really seeing any progress, I quit therapy and began worshipping. After a few months of stretching and bending in worship, the shoulder began to loosen up, and over the course of that year, it completely healed.

I have been giving thanks ever since I was healed, because I never realized how much I need my arm! The ability to lift it and raise it in worship has now become something for which I am eternally grateful, and I want to raise it to my God every chance I get, in thanksgiving for healing me. Each time I worship in church, or in the solitude of my own home, I lift my arm high and thank God for healing...and I pray for those I know who are still in some sort of pain or disability.

Here's my challenge this Christmas season:

You may find yourself this month in the middle of pain and suffering, personally. Maybe you've received a diagnosis of some kind, or you're recovering from an injury. Begin to give thanks to God ahead of time, for your healing, and use that part of your body in worship...as you can.

Maybe you too have experienced healing of some kind. It can even be healing of the heart. Or maybe you broke an ankle, and now you are walking pain free. Maybe it was a healing that took place a long time ago, and you've even forgot about it. Use that part of your body in worship...daily.

Finally, maybe you're praying for a friend who needs healing. I personally have several friends who need miracles. You may have a friend who's suffering throughout their body, or a co-worker with constant migraines. Whatever part of the body that's suffering, begin to use that part of your body in worship...for that friend.

What does using your body in worship look like? How is that giving thanks?

It's as practical as playing your favorite worship songs or videos on YouTube or wherever it is you find music. Set aside at least 15 minutes to return to God and give him thanks for your past healing, your future healing, or the healing of your friend. If it's a friend's leg that needs to walk again, you use your legs in worship by jumping, walking, bending and praising God. If your own heart is broken, lift it up by physically moving your cupped hands from your heart upward, to signify handing it over to Him, while you worship. If you too were healed from some past sickness, like cancer, use that part of your body to give him thanks...in worship. And if you're smack dab in the middle of a debilitating injury or illness, lift up your eyes in gratitude for a God that loves you and cares for you more than you can imagine, and worship as you hear the lyrics to tunes that praise His name.

Jesus told those 10 lepers, after he cleansed them, to go show themselves to the priests. And when the one leper returned to give thanks, Jesus asked,

"Were not all 10 cleansed? Where are the other nine?" (Luke 17:11-19).

I don't want to be found among the nine. Do you?

However you worship – with a loud voice or clapping – or with a silent nod and a smile – thank him this month in worship with the limbs, the voice, the heart, and the body you've been given as you cultivate a thankful heart to the God who loves you and has the power to heal.

And I'm praying that as you do this,, you hear Jesus say,

"Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Under the Influence - The Simple Things – by Marcy Lytle

“I hate this weather.”

That’s my comment often, during the winter in Central Texas. Recently, my husband asked me why I use such a strong emotional word when referring to weather that I don’t like. I thought about it, and I realized that the weather where I live is the source of my frustration on many days, and I let it influence my mood way too much.

Here’s what I hate about the weather where I live, during the season of winter:

- The temperatures fluctuate from cold to hot in a matter of a few hours, and I don’t like that.
- We rarely get that pretty white blanket of snow, and when we do it’s likely to melt before morning.
- On warm days, people here bring out their shorts in the month of December – that’s not right!

Those three silly observations have way too much influence on me on any given day, so I decided to list what I do love about the winters here:

- We can dress in those comfy, pretty layers because of the fluctuation in temperatures daily.
- We have fun and rejoice over the possibility of snow, instead of having to shovel it and dread it.
- We can bare our legs on warm days, or cover them up when it’s cold, it’s our choice!

My point in this silliness is to make a point.

Very often, we are influenced in a negative way by the circumstances and situations around us, where we live, where we work, or where we play. We tend to see the negative and focus on that. In other words, we grow to hate where we live...while we envy where they live. This breeds discontent and causes us to make statements like I did that day, “I hate _____.”

However, we can make the choice to take a look at each one of those things that influence us in a negative way and we can decide to find something good about them. We can start to take delight in the path we’re on, the lot on which we live, or even the weather and the breezes around us.

People from the northern states actually pick up and move here to Central Texas because of our mild winters. That amazes me. But I’ve never experienced a cold, brutal winter where one has to stay indoors for days. I live where I might have to stay indoors one day during the entire winter because it’s too cold to venture outside. And I consider that a *lucky* day. (Photo pictured is my side yard in our last “snow storm”)

There are folks who’ve migrated here and take pleasure in the fact that they don’t need a huge parka, lined with fleece, and leg warmers for walking to work, and so they love wearing their

“summer” outfits in the dead of winter. But in my opinion, what’s not to love about a big heavy, cozy coat?

These examples are certainly simplified and relate to an external thing like the weather. But isn’t it very often that simple things spoil our fun? Here in Central Texas, we can eat outside on a patio on Friday, cozy up by a fire on Saturday, and stay inside due to lightning on Sunday. The weather is always changing.

I’m pretty sure I’m going to always be “dreaming” of a white Christmas because it seems like such a pretty picture, but when I’m dreaming, someone else is hoping snow will stay far away...

However, I hope that this winter season I look out and enjoy the variety of weather here in my city, instead of hating it and despising it like the plague.

If you too are influenced by little things like the forecast, try to note the good and the pleasantries you experience, rather than the bad and the irritations you can ignore.

It just might make you have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, even if the weather outside is frightful...or delightful!

Healthy Habits - How do You React? By Georganne Schuch

Do you ever wake up on the wrong side of the bed? I don't mean geographically speaking, like the time I switched places with my husband when I was eight months pregnant and the fan was on his side of the bed. He was hogging the airflow, so I made him move over because I clearly needed more cool air than he did. I mean waking up grumpy, irritable, less than gracious, and just plain ornery. It happens to even the saints, I'm sure.

So, the question really isn't IF you ever wake up in a bad mood, but what you do WHEN you wake up in a bad mood. Coffee and a quiet, uninterrupted shower usually help me get to a stage of partial awareness, then prayer and a quiet time reading the Bible ensures most people's safety for the day. Sure, some days require way more coffee and prayer time, but generally speaking my emotions are my choice.

I know all about overwhelming circumstances, but I keep my perspective by remembering people with far worse problems. I feel sad and helpless when one of my children suffers from a chronic stomach problem, but I know several families who are watching their child die. I feel sorry for myself when my own health problems sap my energy and leave me in pain, but I have friends who will never walk again. Of course, my problems are still big for me, but I keep my focus tuned into thankfulness, knowing it could be worse. I also reach out and try to serve someone else who needs help. Then, the challenges of life become less about me and more about others. Dinner for a new mom, or even a chocolate dessert, can earn you her undying gratitude. Visiting the elderly at my dad's assisted living facility puts a smile on all our faces.

Surely, I'm not the only person who finds some measure of comfort in complaining. Misery loves company, as they say, and when you complain you're definitely making others miserable, too. There is a fine line between sharing your challenges and asking for prayer and rehashing every single thing ever done to you and stirring up feelings of indignation, anger, and self-pity. One releases pent-up emotions and invites compassion. The other embitters you and drives away friends who want to help.

My family recently went through a three-month period where I just quit telling people our problems. I couldn't help but feel that they had to think we were making it up. Talk about chaos! More than five family members in the hospital, several children sick, one requiring multiple tests and doctor visits and medications, car breakdowns, husband traveling, death in the family, and work projects. We couldn't answer the phone without more bad news. Through it all, we prayed and thanked God for what we have. Family we care about, medical care when we need it, a mechanic we trust, jobs that provide for us, memories, and most of all, a God who is in control.

When life gets truly overwhelming, laughter is the best medicine. My sense of humor tends to be somewhat irreverent and even dark on occasion, like when I reminded my husband to pay my life insurance premium while I was going through a high-risk pregnancy. "You might need that," I said and laughed. He didn't think it was funny at all. So, I release a little tension with humor. It's not always appreciated, but, for me, it tears down the sense of being trapped by circumstances. I have a choice. And I choose to laugh as much as possible.

Crying helps, too. Ever feel refreshed after a good cry? Never mind the puffy eyes and stuffy nose. A good cry is like a reboot of the emotions. In fact, [a study](#) on the microscopic structure of different kinds of tears enforces the theory that tears produced by different emotions actually have unique molecular structures. I'm not going to get too deep here, because we might all drown, but basically the tears produced to lubricate your eye are chemically different than tears produced from grief or pain, which are different than tears produced from laughing. The body actually uses the tears from a sad cry to sort of detox. They contain a certain hormone that the body releases while under stress. No, you should **never underestimate the healing power of a cry.**

I've actually had people tell me they never get angry, to which I think, "...lie much?" Obviously, they've never tried to fix dinner with a screaming baby, the phone ringing, and a family member who wonders why you haven't had a shower in two days. Patience is a virtue, to be sure, but anger isn't necessarily evil. **Anger is an emotion, and one which can be used to motivate, demonstrate passion, and even defend righteousness.** No one is completely immune from some anger, but learning to control it, rather than being controlled by it, is the trick. Sleep, food, and exercise are my three tricks to making sure I can handle situations which stir anger in me. If I haven't slept well in a few days (or weeks), I often lack the ability to discern reality from my foggy perception. I tend to read too much into situations and assume too much about other people's intentions. Likewise, if I've subsisted on junk food for even a day, my patience takes a nose dive. Let's just say that my kids know when to hand me my dinner plate and walk away. Exercise, in particular, helps the body burn off passionate emotions. The physical energy it takes to run, lift weights, stretch, and breathe deeply won't change the circumstance, but it will help reduce the angry response.

Clearly, we humans are ruled by emotions. Our culture emphasizes feelings in everything from what soap we buy to the car we drive. We try to control too much. We categorize "good" emotions and "bad" emotions when, in fact, how we use our emotions is the key to dealing with them.

No one is immune from bad circumstances and challenges. But you are in charge of how you react to them.

Beauty for Ashes - A Good Receiver – Pam Charro

I was thinking the other day about what makes a person easy to love. There are so many things to love about people, from a quick wit to a deep intensity to an easygoing, breezy nature. We know that God loves everyone, so there are always reasons to love others, but I think I found a key element in what makes some people easier to love than others.

They simply receive what I am trying to give to them.

However, when I am the receiver and I am not receiving, that makes it difficult for the other person to be the giver that he or she is trying to be during our interaction.

I often can make it so much more complicated than it has to be.

I feel insecure and unworthy.

I don't trust the other person.

I am not getting what I feel I should be getting.

I am distracted with other things.

I know how frustrating that can be as I have often felt unsuccessful in trying to show others that I want to bless them. The enemy does not want love to be received, and there is nothing any of us can do to force others to see it and take it from us. But it does challenge me to look at my own ability to accept love from others (and, most importantly, from God). I don't want anyone else to feel frustrated and rejected when they try to bless me. And, it seems that the requirements are the same in any relationship, whether with God or other people. So I am endeavoring to be a better receiver in the following ways:

- I won't always expect another person's idea of being a blessing to look like what I think it should be. People have different strengths and abilities, but all of them want to feel accepted. Everyone has something to give, and I will pray for eyes to see so that I can appreciate those strengths.
- I will get my eyes off of myself. I can't very well take in what another person is giving if my thoughts are full of ME. I will stop and see the other person so that I can enjoy who they are.
- I will trust that the other person wants to be a blessing. Often, I have the opportunity to show another person their own ability to be enjoyed, just by believing that it is true.
- I will smile! It makes everyone feel better, including myself.

I am excited about growing in receiving from others all of the good that God put them here to be; and I hope to help them to see it, as well.

A Moment in THYME – The Scent of Frankincense & Myrrh by Debra Brown

Have you seen the Grand Canyon? Extraordinarily VAST comes to mind as I remember its breathtaking view, and the realization that it was but a foretaste of God's greatness, His creativity, and His mind-blowing majesty that He demonstrated in that canyon.

Understanding new depths of God's word can be like my Grand Canyon experience – It allows us to plumb His depths and we soon realize they are infinite.

Herbs and essential oils intrigue me. While surfing the Internet one day, I happened upon Wikipedia's description of Myrrh and Frankincense and their harvesting procedures:

Myrrh is the aromatic resin of a number of small, thorny tree species of the genus Commiphora... When a tree wound penetrates through the bark and into the sapwood, the tree bleeds a resin. Myrrh gum, like frankincense, is such a resin. When people harvest myrrh, they wound the trees repeatedly to bleed them of the gum. It has been used throughout history as a perfume, incense and medicine.

Likewise Wikipedia explains the harvesting of Frankincense:

Frankincense is tapped from the scraggly but hardy trees of the genus Boswellia by slashing the bark, which is called striping, and allowing the exuded resin to bleed out and harden. These hardened resins are called tears. ... Boswellia sacra trees are considered unusual for their ability to grow in environments so unforgiving that they sometimes grow out of solid rock. The initial means of attachment to the rock is unknown but is accomplished by a bulbous disk-like swelling of the trunk. This growth prevents it from being ripped from the rock during violent storms.

AMAZING!!

I was stunned as [Isaiah 53:5](#) came to mind.

He was wounded because of our rebellious deeds, crushed because of our sins; he endured punishment that made us well; because of his wounds we have been healed.
(New English Translation)

These two essential oils found often in the descriptions of Old Testament worship and sacrifices are also a picture of the Messiah found in Isaiah 53:5. They have been embedded deep in God's wondrous plan, and we continue to see how God has taken these insignificant details and used them to point to Christ's work of redemption from the beginning.

Lord, help me continue to plumb the depth of your great plan of salvation.

Magi traveled from afar. Driven to worship the Christ child and present Him with priceless gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gifts given historically to honor kings and deity, extravagant" gifts meant to be used as perfumes, incense, anointing oil and medicine in the natural world.

Yet, in the spiritual realm, these gifts herald the Messiah's arrival and His life's work. They prophesy His "repeated wounding" from which His "bleeding" brings our salvation - a fragrant, healing resin to our life.

Frankincense and Myrrh.

I will never think of them as a "little detail" in the Christmas story. Why?

- They show me that even the littlest of details are important to God. In this world, I am but a little part, but I am important to Him.
- I realized that the Frankincense and Myrrh were not *just* two gifts given to a baby. They were part of God's Big Plan. They not only were practical gifts; they were symbolic gifts. They *shout* of purpose.
- I can trust God to use every detail in my life to fulfill His Kingdom purposes. The good and the bad.
- I can trust the Lord's plan. I can *know* that those things in my life that have brought great wounding will in time bring a beautiful fragrance of Him to my life.
- I can trust that in death there will be life.
- Like Jesus, I can choose to *not fear* being wounded. Rather, I can choose to "fix my eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)
- I can praise God for his extravagant gifts!

In my life, there are areas where my heart is greatly wounded. Our family has suffered a great loss, and my heart has struggled to make sense of it. I see those I love hurting, and I have no Band-Aid to place over these wounds of the heart. Yet, I am reminded of the gift of the Magi. They point me to Jesus! So I will rest in His love, and allow Him to pour His healing salve on our wounds, trusting that some day He will turn the bleeding into a fragrant resin.

I am so grateful for Holy Spirit's leading me in my Internet surfing. This Christmas will have an endearing scent of Frankincense and Myrrh wafting through my home. It's a scent that reminds me of his gift of salvation, His choosing to be born in a lowly stable, His choice to be "repeatedly wounded because of His great love for me, and His precious gift of hope.

I must continue to plumb its depths.

I pray this Christmas you too will savor that same scent of Frankincense and Myrrh, a fragrant healing resin to your soul!

MARRIAGE

Two For The Road –Young Love – by Lynn Cherry

So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days. Genesis 29:20

Okay, I'll admit, this verse makes me all woozy. Imagine what it was like to be loved like that. Rachel was surely swept away by Jacob's love for her, a love so strong that seven years of hard labor flew by like a three-day weekend.

No doubt, Jacob faced arduous days in his tenure with Rachel's father, Laban. Read the rest of the story and you'll see he was not the easiest man to work for. After those first fleeting seven years, Laban tricked Jacob and gave him his older daughter Leah. A week later, Jacob was able to marry his beloved Rachel in exchange for another seven years of work. I have a feeling the second set of seven years felt like seven years.

We've had some dreamy days when everything was effortless and time seemed to fly by like a dry leaf on the wind. But we've also had some days that dragged on like years, deepening wrinkles and sprouting gray hairs by the minute. Building a marriage is not an easy task. It requires the grit of blue collar work and the finesse of corner office negotiations. The work can be tiring and trying.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could bottle up the lovely days and just crack them open again, when we need a refresher after a hard day that only felt like work?

If only it were that easy.

Maybe it's not easy to flesh out in the daily grind, but the choice is actually pretty easy. Let's look back at young love and remember those things that strengthened the love we have for each other.

Anticipation

Remember how it felt when you knew you were finally going to see your sweetheart after a long week apart? You thought about Friday night on Monday morning, Tuesday afternoon, Wednesday evening and all day on Thursday! Anticipation is a wonderful feeling. So make some plans together and then be intentional about enjoying the anticipation. A little waiting is excellent fuel for love.

Newness

After 23 years of marriage, it's easy to take love for granted. It gets familiar and comfortable. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Friendship is an important quality in marriage, but a little spontaneity is great for stirring up desire. Remember what it was like when everything was new? We need the fresh and the familiar. Try something different for dinner. Wear a new dress or a new fragrance. And rather than assuming, *I already know all about you*, keep an eye out for growth and change. Pursue a deeper knowing of your spouse and enjoy the surprises.

Enthusiasm

As you do the work of marriage, don't let it become drudgery. Remember that hard work can be

incredibly rewarding. Imagine growing old together side by side, hand in hand, and stealing a kiss like it wasn't number seventeen thousand, three hundred and ninety-five. When you really love the job it doesn't seem like work at all. That's how young love develops into mature, long-lasting, let's-share-life-together love.

Sure, there will be days that feel like years but when you look back over the long haul of your life together, I think it is entirely possible that years will feel like days when the work is fueled by love.

Date Night Fun – Cheap and Christmassy – by Marcy Lytle

Christmas is not only busy, it's the time of year when spending just one more penny on anything other than gift-giving makes your stomach hurt and gives you a headache! So instead of shoving date night aside in favor of buying your son or boyfriend another electronic toy, keep date night on the calendar at least once a week. And try out one of our cheap dates that will brighten your holiday mood so that you can endure and enjoy the holidays without breaking the bank, or losing touch with your one and only!

Give and Go. Do you know a neighbor or friend who is just unable to decorate their yard for Christmas this year, due to an illness, or disability? Look through your own stash of decorations and find an extra string of battery-operated lights, pick up a pretty poinsettia, and set this lit-up Christmas plant on their front porch, ring the doorbell and drive away (Be sure to include a card so you don't scare them to death.) Be creative, and you might be able to give-and-go for several friends in one evening! Be sure to pack some shortbread cookies and a thermos of hot tea to enjoy between each stop.

Smell and Smile. Cinnamon, vanilla, gingerbread, and peppermint – all scents of Christmas! Spend an evening together preparing these scented goodies to pack up and give away, or to be enjoyed at your family gathering. The kiddos can help you out another time. Let this night be just him – and you – dusting, flouring, baking (and tasting) [platters of sweet goodness](#). End the evening exhausted on the sofa, listening to a [new Christmas CD](#) that you purchase beforehand.

Drive and Dazzle. There are lights all over your city, and neighborhoods full of Christmas cheer. Instead of just driving aimlessly, both of you pick 3 places ahead of time, and surprise the other with the ones you choose. You drive the car to your choices, and he gets behind the wheel for his. Converse while you look at the lights about all the things you love about the holiday season. Take along a bag of Christmas sticky notes and pens, and your Bibles, and spend time finding verses to stick in with packages for your kids or family. Be dazzled by the beauty of Christmas from both the lights and the light of his word. As you head home, choose a stop for a late night coffee and a big slice of pumpkin bread.

Create and Choose. Homemade gifts really are the favorite ones received by most people. Not only do they appreciate the time and thought, but these are the gifts that are unique and beautiful. Choose a gift you can give to several people, and create the masterpieces together. Can't think of any? First, head to the Dollar Store or thrift store nearest you and pick out your baskets, bowls, or containers – even a tea pitcher might work for a kitchen gift! Next, shred your newspaper to use for stuffing, and purchase red ribbon for tying it all up. Now you're ready to fill. Think of themes: kitchen, bath, car, books, etc. and come up with inexpensive but useful items to place in the gift. Make a budget, say \$10-\$15 per gift, and spend an evening gathering, choosing, and creating your homemade presents. It will be so fun! You can bake, draw, video, write poems, make lotions or candles – the sky's the limit. One fun idea is to make a [pasta gift basket!](#)

Peppermint Patty. Peppermint is so refreshing, so why not make a night of all things red and white, and mint! Several of your local drive-thrus have peppermint shakes for the holidays.

Sonic, and Chick Fil A, are a couple of places that come to mind. Dress up in red for the season, pull up at your favorite fast food establishment, and have your dinner in the car with your shake. Or if you're counting calories, share one shake with two straws. Purchase or head home to download [A Charlie Brown Christmas](#). If the kids are up, invite them to join you in this part of the date...or watch it alone...with a white blanket to cover you all. Pop some popcorn and talk about the real meaning of Christmas, before you head to your beds for a winter's night sleep.

Christmas is supposed to be enjoyable, and that includes spending time with your date, having fun and spreading good cheer. It doesn't have to be a musical, a Broadway show or an expensive candlelit dinner (although those are fun, too!). It can be just you and him, alone and fancy-free, doing whatever makes you smile...

Merry Christmas!

After 30 Years - I Love You – by Marcy Lytle

Those three little words.

My husband and I say them when we are about to end our phone conversations, we say them when we're walking out the door to work, and we often say them at night, before we drift off to sleep.

One day, my husband left for work and I was in the middle of my own work, a bit frustrated, and just wanting to be left alone, when he said, "I love you," as he got his keys and went out the door. I didn't say it back to him. I didn't feel like saying it, and I remember thinking, *He always says that. It's just something to say...I'm going to only say it when I mean it.*

Shortly after he left that day, I felt bad for my accusation I had made in my thoughts. I knew my husband better than that, and I knew he loved me. In fact, I realized that I had often withheld that phrase and sentiment from my husband when he voiced his love to me, whenever I was angry or upset with him. If he made me mad, why should I tell him that I love him? If I'm busy and he tries to lean and kiss me, I don't feel like stopping to say those three little words that take no effort at all to voice. I know it sounds so silly, but that's how I rolled.

That particular day, I thought about my attitude towards my husband. I knew that he loved hearing me tell him how much I loved him, and yet I purposefully withheld the words from time to time, to make him wonder...

So I began thinking of those sweet gestures and words that we say as couples when we're first in love, and how they decrease over time if we're not careful, all because of irritability, familiarity, and apathy.

Irritability. Let's face it. Women are irritable a lot, and sometimes it comes with good reason. We have hormones that fluctuate, kids that pull on our legs and arms, and a list a mile long of things to-do, so why shouldn't we be irritable? And our husbands irritate us when they try to snuggle when we're hot, ask us a single question when we've already answered 100 from the kids, and when they want us to sit and watch a show when the sink is full of dishes. It's understandable to be irritated, but hopefully over the years we learn to communicate our irritability before we excommunicate our husbands. It's important to communicate love even in the middle of chaos.

Familiarity. Our husbands are the cutest thing we've ever seen, our heroes, and our princes when we first fall in love. And if we're not careful, they will become the slob that turns us off, the last person we run to for a rescue, and revert back to the green frog that came before the prince appeared. Familiarity with our husbands can lead to losing sight of that wonderful man with whom we fell in love with...way back when. It happens to all married couples, and it might happen to the way he sees you as well. It's important to make familiarity breed fondness over the years, rather than frog-ness.

Apathy. When life gets busy, the kids have to be driven to practices and parties, and we both have to work around the clock to make ends meet, we get just plain worn out and tired.

Tiredness leads to apathy, where we could care less about sex, whispering sweet nothings in his ears, or holding his hand on the rare chance we get a night out at the movies. In fact, we can barely stay awake during a movie, and all we can think about is our comfy pillow awaiting us back home. We're too tired to dress up, too worn out to smile, and too full to make even a tiny space for loving him. He'll just have to wait until the kids are grown and gone. The problem with that mentality is that by the time the kids are grown, we'll be too far apart to return. It's important to find ways to slow down our lives so that we have time and stamina to care about our relationship with him.

If you've read this far, you maybe irritable, frustrated, and apathetic about what you've just read because it sounds good...but quite impossible...to do.

If you're irritable all the time, ask God to show you what's bugging you, to alert you when you're being less than cordial, and to help you with your emotions. He will do it.

If you've grown too familiar and lost your passion, ask God to open your eyes to see the man your husband has grown to be, and find ways to give thanks and express thanks to him that will encourage him. When he feels encouraged, he will look more handsome to you.

If you're apathetic because you have no energy left to care, cut something out of your life, and fill it with time with him. Enlist the help of friends, get rid of some of your kids' activities, and quit feeling guilty if you need to catch a 15 minute nap while the kids camp out in front of the television.

And finally, practice the art of saying "I love you" as you respond to him, when you finish praying for him, and every time you give thanks for him.

If you've both forgotten these three little words and the power behind them when love is fresh and present, take time to sit down and get counseling, pray together, or repent and ask forgiveness from one another.

It's Christmas time, and God said, "I love you," to a dying world and then he sent his son to be born among us, walk among us, and die and raise to life again among us. He never tires of showing his love to us, and we in turn are to respond back to him with open arms.

Marriage is a picture of our relationship with Christ, and when we love each other as He loved us we are fueling the flame, stoking the fire, and stirring the pot of love for the whole world, and our kids, to see.

My husband just called on the phone and said, "I love you," before he hung up, and I quickly responded with, "I love you, too," and I meant it.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems - Due Tomorrow by Kayley Ryan

My English professor stopped midway through his lecture to ask his students a very simple question, "Who here procrastinates?" I glanced around the room, waiting for someone to make the first move. Nothing happened. After a few awkward moments, everyone's hand rose up. The professor smirked. His point had just been proven.

I'm going to try to avoid looking up the definition of procrastination on the Internet because I want to be as non-lazy as possible in writing this. But I will use scripture verses because I think the Bible has a lot to say about this atrocious habit we all take part in at some point in our lives.

Now, I know you're probably reading this with a strange, unconvinced expression on your face because procrastination doesn't seem as harmful as pride, lack of self-control, anger, or lust. But it actually harms us more than we care to admit.

I am the greatest hypocrite when it comes to procrastination. People believe I'm some genius because I tend to be the first to raise my hand in class and make decent grades. Yet, I can be extremely inefficient in how I achieve good grades. Why? The answer is simple: I procrastinate.

I believe there are three main ways in which humans in this world procrastinate.

First, we procrastinate because we simply do not have the time.

This is *fine*. Seriously, don't beat yourself up about it. Putting a task off until the next day is actually the smart choice to make when you simply do not have enough time. But I would also advise that you to use this excuse very rarely.

Second, we procrastinate because we are *lazy*.

The Bible warns against laziness in Proverbs 13:4, when Solomon writes to his son, "The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich." (NJKV)

We hear so often that laziness won't make us rich financially, but it also will not make us rich *spiritually*. Solomon is not talking about money here but about the soul. Let me give you an example. When I am choosing to be lazy, I *feel* depressed. I'll have a homework assignment that needs to be completed by Tuesday of next week, but I decide to wait *until* Tuesday to complete it.

This happened just last week. To my mom's horror, I did put off an ACC assignment, an essay, until the last minute. This resulted in my being late for class and my receiving a poor grade on the quiz we had that day. I learned my lesson. The next week, I purposefully finished essays way before they were due. Better safe than sorry.

The point I'm trying to make here is that procrastination due to laziness won't just bring you bad results such as poor grades or less money. It will also depress you spiritually.

Countless times I have desired mental peace, lack of stress, and some sense of purpose or direction in my life and have not found it because I was living a lazy lifestyle. That is why the

proverb says, "...a lazy man desires and has nothing." Yet as Solomon writes in the second half of the verse, "the soul of the diligent man shall be made rich." Even when doing community service work, your soul can be made rich though your pockets are just as empty as they were before you started. And that makes all the difference.

But there is a third kind of procrastination that we often overlook:

We procrastinate because of the misguided assumption that a task or homework assignment will be *easier* on a later date.

I know; it makes no sense, and I would probably never have admitted—until this article, that is—that this is one of the main reasons for my procrastination, but it's true.

Procrastination isn't just lack of effort. It's the belief that if we wait until tomorrow, the task will seem easier and lighter, and we will be more apt and skillful to do it. Now, I'm not saying this is never the case. Sometimes, we are just having hormonal days, and nothing seems doable. We might start on a difficult assignment out of a desire to be productive but end up with shoddy work because of our lack of inspiration or motivation. That's one end of the spectrum.

But you can fall too far the other way, too. I tend to over-analyze my assignments, thinking that they are way too difficult for a given day. But if I get in this habit of putting things off because I believe it will be easier the *next* day, when will I ever get them done? This third kind of procrastination is the most frightening to me because it sneaks in when I'm not looking.

It gradually deteriorates my confidence in my own ability and leads me to believe that I am just not smart enough.

On days when I feel just dumb, I walk out of my room, away from the schoolbooks and the stress, and plop down on the couch in the living room, my face buried in a pillow. I allow my mind to dwell on all the tasks I have to complete, and it exhausts me so much that I end up taking a nap. By the end of the day, I have hopefully finished two tasks, usually menial ones that require less thought than a project or essay, and I meander to the couch once more.

This time, my dad is there, watching football intently. Not having the heart to interrupt him, I lie on the couch and just try to look as miserable as possible so he'll notice me.

I let out a "Dad?" with a dejected tone.

"Yes?" he asks, still intently watching his game.

"Can I talk to you?"

"May I," he corrects me. (*He has this thing about grammar.*)

"Okay. May I?"

Pausing the game, he asks me what the problem is, and I tell him. Each time, without fail, he emphasizes the same two words, "*Just start.*" And that's it. That's all I ever need to know. A

project or assignment will actually get harder the longer I wait, so why not just start now? Why waste time when I can be actively pursuing my goals now?

Here's what I want to you come away with today: give yourself time for an assignment or project; don't procrastinate just to be lazy; and instead of thinking that a task will be easier the *next* day, convince yourself that it will be easier *today*.

Then, you will become like the woman in the last chapter of Proverbs, the woman whom Solomon tells his son to value as more precious than jewels and to seek after with all his might:

“She watches over the ways of her household,
And does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed;
Her husband *also*, and he praises her:
‘Many daughters have done well,
But you excel them all.’”

(Proverbs 31:27-29, NKJV)

Moving Forward - Waiting to Hear – Pam Charro

It seems to have been an awfully long time since I have really heard from God, which makes me a little nervous.

Why aren't I more excited about my relationship with him?

Why isn't he entrusting me with anything lately?

What am I doing wrong?

Maybe I'm depressed. Gosh, I hope not! I've got to get back on the ball here! I need to FEEL more, be more on fire for God and the things of heaven! Why aren't I getting in to the worship more at church?

What is WRONG with me?

I think all relationships go through less than exciting times. I am so grateful for God's patience while I spin my wheels, trying to figure myself out and get myself pumped back up, when **all he wants is some down time with me.**

I finally made myself sit still with him for a while. I didn't even know what to say, but I knew it was simpler for me to make the time than it was for me to keep feeling guilty and worried.

Eventually, I asked him, "What do you want to say to me? I can tell there is something."

I believe he said, "I have something rather large to show you that will really move our relationship forward. But I will not reveal anything else until you remember who I am."

So simple.

All of the information in the world will not benefit me if my priorities are in the wrong order. Yet I **constantly find myself wanting to learn and understand instead of being satisfied with fixing my eyes on Jesus.**

This walk with him is not about me evolving into something better while he fills me with information; it is about me enjoying walking with him. When I forget to enjoy him, everything becomes a duty and a burden, and I start to get insecure about how I am "doing."

I still don't yet know what he wants to tell me, but I am determined to just look at him for a while.

He knows how to communicate when the time is right.

Psalm 130:5 "I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope."

Bush Bean Blessings – The Intentional Gift by Tammy Morrison

Here we are...at the end of another year. Yes! 2014 is nearly over, and it's hard to fathom that 2015 is already knocking at the door. Christmas is just a few short days away, and we're full throttle in the holiday rush. As this year comes to a close, let me encourage you to give **yourself** the best possible gift imaginable during this busy season: take a few precious moments for a self-reflective inventory.

*Yikes!
I don't have time!
That's so selfish!
I've got to take care of everybody else...I'll be okay!
No, thank you!
NO!
I don't WANT to!*

The consideration of taking the time for a self-reflection is often a difficult task. As women, we are, by nature, fixers--of everything and everyone else--except ourselves. We will invest our time and energy pouring into so many other things, yet we refuse--even reject--the very notion of helping ourselves. It's unfortunate because we know in our knowers that it's difficult to tend to everything and everyone else if we aren't first taking care of ourselves. And yet we go on and on and on...

We approach care-taking and care-giving with a backwards approach. Others first; us last. Then when we cry out in frustration and exhaustion, we actually have the gall to wonder why.

My advice?

STOP! NOW!

Take a break, read through this article, and REFLECT. Pour yourself a cup of coffee (or hot tea or hot chocolate), wrap yourself in a blanket, and kick up your feet. Present yourself with the insightful gift of self-reflection for this moment in time. Are you ready? Begin with a heartfelt prayer to God for an open heart, open ears, and an open spirit. Now...reflect.

Hearty Matters ♥

- ♥ I am challenging you to (literally, not figuratively) draw a picture of a heart on a piece of paper.
- ♥ Inside that heart, I want you to list every emotion and feeling you are experiencing right now.
- ♥ Contemplate each emotion and feeling you listed. Why is it there? What purpose is it serving? Is it helping you or hindering you?
- ♥ Consider how you can best deal with each emotion and feeling you're experiencing. What can be accomplished in the immediacy of this moment? What might you need to revisit at a later date?

Listen Up ☞

- ☞ How good of a listener are you? My English teacher used to say, "I know you can *hear*, but are you *listening*?"
- ☞ Hearing and listening are truly two different approaches; do you "hear" in order to *react*, or do you "listen" in order to *respond*?
- ☞ Food for thought:
 - Do you *listen* to God, or do you just *hear* Him?
 - Do you *listen* to others, or do you just *hear* them?
- ☞ Practice what you, undoubtedly, preach: *listen, listen, listen*. Slow down long enough to listen--not just hear--what is going on all around you. Most important of all, *listen* when you become aware that it's time for you to take care of YOU!

Spirit Realm †

As this year rapidly winds down, take time to evaluate yourself in the following areas compared to this time last year:

- † Are you more giving?
- † Are you more loving?
- † Are you more understanding?
- † Are you kinder?
- † Are you more gentle?
- † Are you more compassionate?
- † Are you more thoughtful of others?
- † Have you *grown*? Or have you *grown stagnant*?
- † Are there areas in your life that need refreshing?
- † Do you trust God? *Really* trust Him? Do you rejoice in Him? [Psalm 13:5-6](#).
- † Do you possess hope? [Psalm 42:5](#).

All year long, as well as in the holiday rush, it is imperative that you slow down long enough to tend to yourself. Be still long enough to allow the Lord to minister to you: "Be still and know that I am God..." Psalm 46:10. This means learning to let go of everything that weighs you down.

One way or the other, what you are filled up with **will** come out. You will either "leak" out grief and frustration or you will bubble over with joy and goodness. The beauty of it is that YOU are the one who gets to choose which it will be. That's pretty powerful stuff. Choose to pursue--to relentlessly pursue--the essential life-giving force of Jesus. He longs for you to long for Him and promises to fill you with strength.

Who doesn't want to be stronger?

"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God" Psalm 42:1.

Don't just make your pursuit of self-reflection and redirection a one-stop wonder, or when you finally reach your wit's end. Make it a point to frequently fulfill a self-reflection. When you remain focused on taking care of yourself, the other aspects of your life will seem to flow more smoothly. Not only will you portray a much more endearing spirit, you will find that you can actually endure the challenges of life much more easily. Jesus promises us that if we remain in Him, He will remain in us ([John 15:4](#)).

Love yourself, and those you care about, enough to give yourself the greatest gift of all: *life*.

Reflect on *you* today.

Saddle Up – Signals - by Melissa Critz

My two high schoolers are busy with their heads in their books, so it's time for me to head outside. Digging in the vegetable drawer of the fridge, I pull out two large carrots. I always provide these treats for my horses when it's a workday. After the usual ceremony of grabbing the halter, opening the barn, and gathering together grooming equipment, I head to the front pasture to get Elijah.

On the way, I holler and signal with kisses that it's time. Some horse owners have to be sneaky with the halter. I don't have to do this. My horses just pop up their heads, look my way, pause, and then go back to grazing until I buckle the halter on their head – such a blessing!

This day is completely reserved for Elijah. Domingo, my horse that has recovered from foundering, is slowly building up stamina with some weekly work. But, alas, today, I just want to spend time with the other one. With the radio playing some upbeat music I go through the regimen of picking hooves, brushing, saddling - the norm. All the while, I use signals for him to pick up his hoof by clicking with my tongue and running my hand down his leg with a quick pinch on the back of his leg if needed. Elijah is so used to the regular habits that he knows exactly what to do.

Horses like quiet stability – regular, expected – consistent habits. I also always talk to my horses just like anyone talks to a pet.

“Elijah, time for the saddle...now time to head to the round pen for some work...”

Grabbing the lunge whip and bridle, we aim for the round pen where lunging without rider occurs and rider in saddle work commences directly after. As I go through the motions, I hear my *Saddle Partner* encouraging me to see the connection in all the signals that I go through routinely. While lunging, I cluck with my tongue, smooch with my lips, and encourage with words. While riding, I use my legs with pressure and release, again use my words to guide into transitions, and use my fingers and wrists subtly for changes in direction and also transition.

Signals – so very meaningful – can easily be misused or even missed. The horse animal does not do well with loud, ugly noises. Horses respond very well to soft, well-meaning signals that are not obtrusive and disrespectful. One example is my philosophy with the lunge whip. I do NOT touch the horses anywhere on its body with any part of the whip. The noise is enough. The animal needs to respect the tool and the person, not fear it. If fear invades, then the animal will not respond to the guidance.

The Lord impressed on me many meanings in all this:

Our Father uses many signals for his children all the time. Yes, He does speak in loud ways such as wind, thunder, and lightning in Hebrews 12. But He also communicates in “the Gospel (as) a gentle voice of love, grace, and mercy, of peace, pardon, righteousness, and the free gift of salvation through Christ” ([Got Questions Ministry](#)). I felt He was showing me the importance of being quiet and just being...with Him.

Sometimes these signals may be overlooked as they can be so subtle and quiet.

- Is someone trying to give you a word but you are too busy to listen?
- Is that devotion or even your own Bible resting closed for too many days?
- Is your mind too cluttered with daily business to squeeze in prayer life?

Signals come via many ways:

Nudges as you read, with words that prick your soul and come to life in your life – they become real and you hear the Father!

Whispers in your ear, in your mind, and in your heart, as you focus on what He loves and desires for you, for His people, for His kingdom.

Guidance down His narrow path, when you seek wisdom from His Word and from others in your life who also love Him, by listening.

Just as the winds whisper through the trees just out my door, He is there and wants to whisper to you LOVE, GUIDANCE, JUSTICE, JOY, and TRUTH in knowing our Lord Jesus has done it all for you already.

Signals...don't miss them. Ask for Him daily to show you His truths so you can grow in the saving knowledge of His Son.

Find your Saddle Partner.

He is waiting for you.

Real Stories - What Do You Call Him? By Kristin Thompson, Ginny Hurley, Nataly Rulmyr, and Celeste Brune

This month, we asked four women, who don't know each other at all, to take one of the four names of God found in Isaiah 9:6 and share what that name means to them. Because all four of these women know the same God and have experienced his love, I knew their stories would be fabulous, unique, and personal to each of them. And they are. One of the cool things about knowing Jesus personally is that his love connects these four women, even though they've never met face to face. They are family, because they have the same Father.

I invite you to read each one, as if you're listening to a friend tell you about this wonderful God they serve, and receive the personal message from a loving Father this Christmas season that he is indeed all you need, and you too can call him by name...

Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Wonderful Counselor by Kristin Thompson

One of my favorite names for our God is, "Wonderful Counselor." I love that we serve a God who knows each of us so intimately and cares for each of us so deeply that He makes himself wholly available to give us guidance through the ebbs and flows of life. Not only does He make Himself available, but He WANTS us to seek His guidance and His direction. It absolutely astounds me that God desires to love me in this way!

If you've ever spent any time in the office of a professional counselor, you know that the counselor will spend most of the session listening to the client, asking a few questions, and then listening some more. After listening, the counselor will make a few observations, offer some reassurance and comfort, and then give input. Often times, the input is thought-provoking and challenges you to grow.

God counsels us in the same way. He never leaves us and is always available to listen. Through prayer, we can speak to God plainly and transparently about our feelings, our struggles, and our thoughts. He listens intently and patiently, because He cares. Psalm 73:23-24 says, "You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory." What a beautiful truth!

God makes Himself available to us, takes us by the hand, and offers guidance through the many pitfalls of life. The purpose of that guidance is growth. He loves us enough to not leave us where we are, but instead He wants us to be transformed into His likeness. So He uses the many trials and tribulations that we face in this life to do just that.

He listens, offers comfort, and then He changes us from the inside out.

Mighty God by Ginny Hurley

Since I was a little girl, I have known God as powerful and mighty, the undisputable King of the Universe. I remember the smallest prayers being answered and how my identity in His goodness began to spring up. Each problem or painful time, He was there. I remember Him holding my hand and speaking to me when I was afraid. I don't ever remember darkness. His presence was tender or powerful, depending upon the situation.

When our firstborn came way too early, at a whopping 2lbs 12 ounces, with Hyaline Membrane Disease and a paralyzed diaphragm, we were told he would have trouble with his eyes, hips, and breathing; that possibly through the years, things would improve. He was in the hospital three long months, yet God was always Mighty. On leaving the hospital, he had grown, but still had these issues. My father-in-law laid hands on him and prayed. Immediately, Tobin was healed! His legs grew perfectly straight, his eyes and lungs, perfect!

Then some years later, just as we were bringing home our treasured adopted son, we were met with a note on our front door stating that we had to give back our baby. Through much hardship, many tears and craziness, our adoption was final after two long years. We knew our Hardy was a Hurley from the beginning of time, God's mighty gift to our family!

Presently, as I ponder these memories, and so very many more, faith wells up in my spirit like a fountain. God is who He says He is and He can do what He says He can do. Period! Our God is God! There is no other besides Him. His grace and mercy flow from a place without borders or boundaries! It is never dependent upon me, or what I do. If I stray, or disobey, He does not change. He remains faithful to the end. When He chose to go to the cross, He changed eternity forever. He became a curse, so I could be a blessing...forever, Mighty God!

Everlasting Father by Nataly Rulmyr

What does "Everlasting Father" mean to me?

When I look at my life as a Christian, I think that the words "Everlasting Father" have been such a cornerstone in my relationship with the Lord. Knowing that I have that father, who loves, forgives, and builds me no matter my struggles, is one of the most solid defenses I have against the world and the enemy.

I use my husband as an example who is by far, the greatest earthly father I've ever witnessed, and to think that God loves me *more* than my husband loves our daughter is so incredibly overwhelming. It's almost unfair to compare Jesus to our earthly fathers because truly, they cannot hold a candle to him.

Through Jesus we find eternal life, he is the giver of the greatest gift we could receive, and without Jesus we certainly do not amount to who we were created to be.

Knowing that my Father is my protector, I am able to step out and work in his word. I don't know that there are many people who would honestly admit that they want to live outside of their gifts and talents. Only through our everlasting Father and his encouragement and grace can we discover these gifts to truly live the life intended for us.

The greatest thing about my relationship with our Everlasting Father is that there is no judgment and no expectations, because Jesus loves me despite my flaws. I do not love him and please him out of fear because I know that where his love is, there is also grace. I thank him for that daily.

Our Father does not quit his love for us. He finds us in the highest and lowest of places and loves us right where we are, and that's why his love is everlasting.

Prince of Peace by Celeste Brune

When I was a little girl, I remember hearing the phrase "Prince of Peace" through hymns and other songs. My mind was set on the melodies of the songs and not necessarily focused on what the words *Prince of Peace* really meant. As I became older, the Prince of Peace meant no wars and a harmony among people and nations. But, of course, that wasn't really happening around me and my world. From each history class I took, to news on the television, there was always a war, violence among others, and tensions between nations. It was a puzzle to me that there wasn't a true peace as I defined it. It wasn't until I got much older that I began to fully grasp what peace from the Prince was all about.

Recently, I heard very negative news about my elderly father who currently resides at a facility. I was told by the executive director that my dad needed to move elsewhere for care, to a skilled nursing facility. The staff at his current facility could no longer give him the proper care he required, and there was also the added stress of safety for staff and my dad. The director didn't leave it at that; he went on to say my dad needed more palliative care, or end of life care. *I am moving my dad to die.* Those words played out in my head.

Emotions were all over the place, and this situation created a big challenge for me to overcome the unrest in my heart. I immediately began a dialogue with God regarding what was going on in my mind, heart and soul when I said, "Surely, you can calm me down and help me through yet another trial in my life."

True peace does not come from external sources. It originates in our inner core, our heart.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, in my world, imparts His internal peace. He brings me peace through God within myself and within others. Augustine wrote: "Thou hast made us for thyself, and the heart of man is restless until it rests in Thee."

As much as *I did not want* to move forward with moving my dad and the outcome it would present, I knew that I had to, and with help from our Lord, I would make it through.

Yes, I might stumble, but I was grateful to know I could lean on the Prince of Peace. If you trust in Jesus and His Father, he can crush the war within your heart. In short, the Prince of Peace is our positive, well-being, reinforcer!

“The mountains may disappear, and the hills may come to an end, but my love will never disappear; my promise of peace will not come to an end.”

Isaiah 54:10

If you've now read through all four responses to the names of God, you will see that he's personal, he's enough, he's available, and he's present in our lives. All we have to do is acknowledge this truth and invite him to be our Deliverer – yes – that's another one of his names! He came to set us free from fear and death.

Do you know him? What do you call him?

FRESH THYME

20 Favorite Things from 2014! By Marcy Lytle

Christmas is upon us! I love Christmas shopping and I love seeing and listening to others share about their great bargains and finds. It helps spark my own interest of cue me in on a deal that I wouldn't have known about otherwise. Oprah has her favorites, but if your wallet is anything like mine, Oprah's things are not affordable! And I looked at them all. They're not even practical for my lifestyle! So I thought it would be fun to list my faves of 2014, 20 simple things that make life fun:

1. **Magnetic board** – This is from [IKEA](#) – makes for good wall art in the kitchen or in the office – for spices or office supplies!
2. **Hanging file** – I have this in my kitchen for my recipes for the week! I have magazine clippings and other papers I need for each week – it's from [Office Depot](#). This keeps paper clutter off the kitchen table!
3. **Lanterns** – These are GREAT for inside or outside – on the porch, on your table, atop your cabinets (like mine) or just hanging in a cool spot! - from [Big Lots](#).
4. **Artwork by Abby** – My daughter's friend is a great artist, and the proceeds from her work help support [Seek Justice](#), a team that aids in relieving women and children in poverty. I am hanging this piece in my kitchen! Check out [her page!](#)
5. **Milk bottles in a basket** – These were a gift, and they're great for fun drinks (with added straws, of course) or for toppings for ice cream, or even as vases with individual flowers in each! – [Amazon](#).
6. **Swan Creek Candles** – I can only find these at one store (Wildflower in The Triangle) where I live, but they're available on line, and not only are they so pretty in reusable pots, they smell so wonderful!
7. **Nightlights** – I change these out each season or holiday, in my guest bathroom, along with the hand towel, and a jarred candle. [Kirkland's](#) has cute nightlights, but you can find them all around town!
8. **WM Apothecary Hand wash** - Not only do I love the look of this bottle, the hand soap scents available at [World Market](#) are awesome.
9. **Cork wall tiles for closets** – You can pick up packages of cork board at your local [office supply](#) store, mount them on any wall space in your closet, and organize your jewelry and magazine clippings of outfits that inspire you!
10. **A front porch chair** – If you don't have a place to sit on your porch, you need one. A fun chair is a premium spot for people watching, reflection, or time alone...found mine at [Kirkland's](#).
11. **Butcher block cart** – These can be super affordable to very pricey – depending on where you shop. I found this at [Big Lots](#), and it sits under my magnetic board.
12. **Bowl for fruit** – Woven bowls in a hue that provides a pop of color can make your kitchen sing! Just add your bananas, oranges and apples, and you've got yourself a centerpiece! Why not buy one from [Eternal Threads](#) – to help out those in poverty?
13. **Red barn and wheels of hay** – I can't purchase these, but I can go for a drive and view them and snap a phot of them – and it's one of the most relaxing, fun, things to do! Take a break from the holiday hoopla and find yourself a pretty picture!

14. **Pretzels with PB & Chocolate** – This was a favorite snack this year! It's just those honey twisted pretzels dipped in peanut butter, and covered in chocolate chips. You deserve this treat!
15. **Bags on Sale** – Fossil has cool bags, but they're way expensive. However, almost any time I visit the outlet store, there's a shelf of purses 70% off. These two were a steal, and so beautiful. You can shop on line, but I haven't seen these great sales, except inside the stores.
16. **Cute unique ring** – This was found at [Forever 21](#) for under five bucks – and I love it!
17. **Cookie Butter** – Have you tried it? I don't care for it, but my family does. It's sweeter than peanut butter and apparently doesn't stay on the shelves long at [Trader Joe's](#)!
18. **[It's a Wonderful Life](#)** devo book – Yes! We started this a few weeks ago, one per week, what a fun way to connect with Him and with each other.
19. **Wrap and twine** – If you scour the clearance OR the dollar section at Target, you can find these cute neutral wraps, and ribbon or twine, for your gift wrapping needs!
20. **Tennis/casual shoes** – Shop at Urban Outfitters in their clearance room and visit often – you can find some cute comfy unique sneakers if you do!

There, you have them! If you haven't completed your Christmas shopping, consider putting a few of the above items on your list for yourself...or others!

What are YOUR favorites from 2014? Share with us!

FRESH THYME - Five Little Boys – by Rachel Toalson

The lights their daddy hung twinkle hope, and they're all gathered in the family room, unpacking ornaments from last year, hanging them as high as they can reach. They are in there and I am in here, peeling cookies from a baking sheet and stacking dishes on a towel and wiping down counters, like I've forgotten everything I said in that Family Council meeting just an hour ago, where we talked about choosing presence and stillness and full engagement during this Advent season.

Here I am thinking about this catch-up week ahead because I've just had a four-day holiday weekend and I'm already behind, and there they are laughing at the beauty and unwrapping all that sparkle and hanging all those memories.

I still my hands and steel my mind, gazing toward that glow-room.

In there, where Daring Boy giggles about the handprint he made last year, "Remember this, Mama?" and he wraps it around that limb bending with the weight of three other orbs he already hung there.

In there, where Blue-eyed Boy shouts about all the glitter sparkling in the lights, on his hands and the floor and those baubles.

In there, where Tall Boy stands on the arm of that chair, stretching just as high as he can go, and he almost, almost touches the top of that tree, but not quite, not yet.

And a voice whispers it softly.

Go. Go there with them.

So I do. I leave that sponge on the countertop and those cookies to cool on silver sheets and all those other dishes stacked in a dirty sink, and I stand in the middle of the room, watching them decorate the whole bottom half and right side of that tree.

"Isn't it beautiful, Mama?" Tall Boy asks.

Beauty, there in all those empty spaces, in all that green, untouched by glitter? There, in the whole side and upper limbs that hang no shimmering adornment? There in a tree we will have to fix later?

He looks at me long, and I remember those words.

Go. Go there with them.

Go there with the children who see beauty everywhere.

"Yes," I reply. "Yes. It's perfect."

Because this season is not as much about doing it all perfectly but giving what we can, touching those places we can barely reach for their height and ours, beautifying the bare so it glimmers in the light.

Because one makes a difference to one.

Because we don't have to touch all those limbs to create something beautiful.

My boys finish their hanging, and then we step back to admire all that lopsided magnificence, all those limbs blazing with the touch of five little boys.

FRESH THYME – Give it to Them – by Marcy Lytle

I have elderly parents, as do a lot of my friends. And if your parents are still young, then you've got elderly grandparents. Or maybe you're reading this and you're an "older" person yourself! We all have contact with those who are way up there in years, and I've noticed a few things that bother me about the way we treat those who are older and wiser. And there are a few things we all need to consider, because one day...we will be where they are.

Yes, there are older people who are mean, wicked, and hateful. However, we all know lots of older men and women who are as sweet as can be, who need to be seen and remembered and valued. It's easy to dismiss them as not being of our "generation," and therefore of no use to us. But that idea couldn't be further from the truth.

Consider this:

They don't want to be talked to like a baby. Old people aren't children. They don't need to be talked "down" to or scolded as if they are. And just because they're old doesn't mean they've lost their ability to converse with adults. Let's give them the dignity they deserve for making it so far to the finish line, with a few bruises and bumps perhaps, and if they're not in diapers – let's don't treat them as if they are.

They are slow for a reason. We recently helped my parents out of the car and across a street to a restaurant, when a guy on a bike rounded the corner just before my parents were able to step up on the curb. My mom clearly had a cane in her hand, but he blurted out anyway, "This is a bike lane, people." And yes, I was stirred up as I responded back to the guy to remind him of who it was on my arm – my elderly mom. It was as if he hadn't noticed her at all, and when he finally did, he stopped his mouth. Let's give the elderly time to move at a slower pace, and let's be patient while they do.

They want to be thanked. Grandparents love to bless their children and grandchildren. From little candy Pez containers at Halloween, to a card with a five dollar bill inside, they think of us and want us to have "a little something" on any special day. There's really no excuse at all for not stopping to call them to tell them thank you with our voices, so they can hear the gratitude from our hearts. If we forget this simple act of thankfulness, we are spoiled. Let's give the givers a word of acknowledgement for their thoughtfulness...always.

They want to be visited. No, it's not always fun to visit the elderly, especially if they're in a nursing home. Nursing homes smell bad, and they're just plain depressing. But it's not really about how we feel when we visit the oldest ones in our family. It's all about how they feel, away from their family, or stuck at home because their bones ache, or away from the busyness of life because they no longer can keep up the pace. They're lonely, and a 15 minute visit won't ruin our plans for the weekend, but it will make their entire day when we stop by. Let's give the wise old people the gift of time and conversation, even if it's not on our phone or through a computer.

They have new fears. The fear of falling is a big one. No one wants to fall, but if we fall, we get back up, we heal, and we're on our way. If they fall, it could be disastrous. The fear of dying is near. Perhaps she is fearful of him dying before she does, or vice versa. The fear of

loss is huge. Losing eyesight, hearing and mobility will change their lives and their relationships. Let's give those we love a sincere prayer, assurance, a helping hand (if they want it), comfort, and all the encouragement we have to offer. Those in a long race need to see people at the finish line cheering them on, so let's be there for them.

They have great wisdom. These folks have lived for decades, lots of them! They've lived through love and loss, war and peace, children and no children, financial gain and financial losses. They've seen it all and they just might have a nugget of truth that will help us skip out on a dumb mistake or downfall if we take the time to sit with them. We can ask, listen and learn. Sometimes their wisdom might be outdated, but it's still wisdom and we can glean from what they have to say. Let's give them opportunity to speak into our lives out of the gold reserves they have built up over the years.

They won't be around much longer. They know this. We know it. And it's a sobering thought, when they're standing at the edge of the timeline of their role on this earth. We all know that our time on earth can end any given day, and we hope we have lots of years left to live. However, to know that each day you wake up might be your last, because you've lived a long time already, must be a hard pill to swallow...or is it? If you've got elderly family members who know God, talk to them about the future of their life after life. Let them share with you the glory of knowing Jesus. And if they don't know the Lord, show them his kindness by offering them love and sharing with them the heart of Jesus. Let's give them Jesus, and let's receive Jesus, from those who already have him in their hearts.

Deuteronomy 5:16 says, "**Honor** your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you."

I can't think of anything else that will assure you of a blessed life here on earth more than the act of honoring those who started out life before you in another generation. They paved the way, they set the stepping stones, and they built the foundation on which you walk. Honor them by caring for them with dignity and respect, and by offering them your best.

FRESH THYME - Look at the Sunrise – by Marcy Lytle

I left one morning this fall before the sun came up, and returned home just as the sun was rising. On the way to my destination, I felt overwhelmed by the darkness of life. I was thinking about several of my friends who had experienced the shock and surprise of death or bad news, and I cried out to God, as I sometimes do when I'm alone in the car,

“God, I don't like the surprise of death. Why does it have to appear so suddenly? I'm afraid.”

I shed quite a few tears as I prayed for my friends and their experience of sorrow and sadness that I had seen in their faces.

As I continued to drive in the darkness, some time had passed, and I looked ahead on the horizon. I saw shades of orange and gray beginning to emerge, and where there had been just complete darkness, the outlines of trees in the distance started to appear. I began to look around me and realize that I could see the faces in the cars beside me, where previously all I saw were headlights. The completely darkened sky begin to light up, and I heard God whisper,

“Look at the sunrise.”

That wasn't really what I wanted to hear God say to me. I wanted him to tell me that death and sorrow were gone and would never touch anyone I knew ever again. But that's not what he said.

So I looked at the sunrise, and realized the comfort and peace that it offers at the start of each new day.

- The sunrise is the assurance that the light of day is coming.
- The sunrise is the reminder that though the sun sets for the night, it returns in the morning.
- The sunrise is full of color and hope as my eyes take in all the shades as they change into the bright yellow of the day.
- The sunrise reminds us that God is in control of that which surrounds us ([Psalm 50:1](#))
- The sunrise takes place all over the world, and we are told to praise him as we see it rise and fall. ([Psalm 113:3](#))
- The sunrise is something man cannot create or copy, it's unique and only comes from God ([Psalm 74:16](#))
- The sunrise reminds us of God's mercy on his creation ([Luke 1:78](#))
- The sunrise speaks of his power, because nothing can stop the sun from rising ([Isaiah 59:19](#))

As I arrived back home, the light of day was awakening and so was my soul, as I again placed my hope and confidence in the Maker of all things good.

I am sorrowful and saddened with my friends, but my hope and prayer is that they too, in the darkest of the dark, look up and see the sunrise over the horizon and the light of day that always follows.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=nQk7RQg5p3k&list=UU2q3C_Ywn-JprYAd-opCKA