

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

July 2019



The Dressing - By Style - Marcy Lytle

I love to observe women and what they wear. Every lady has her own style of dressing, and when it comes right down to it, there aren't that many variations. However, the variations out there are very distinct. And so many stores cater to all of the different looks we as women want and wear. Some stores have a feminine and lace look, like Altar'd State. Department stores are overwhelming to me, because of the different brands and lines of clothing all spread out, but I know there are women who only shop at department stores and nowhere else. Regardless of where we shop, we tend to find a particular style we call our own...

This month, we've provided one look for each of seven styles. And we're of course opting for something cool. I like to switch around my look from time to time, but mostly I fall into the classic with a bit of trend on top. How about you? I chose all of these looks from Charming Charlie this time.

Ladylike and lace – Check out this white lace top in peplum style! I love the simple jewelry she's wearing with it. This is so pretty and dresses up a denim skirt or jeans so well, for date night out!

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/jonsie-lace-peplum-top/CHC102892791.html?dwvar CHC102892791 color=100&cgid=featured-shops-shop-by-style-classic&openedfrom=Category

Country flair – Plaid is the quintessential pattern for that country feel, and this shirt can be worn now...and on into September and October. This top ties at the waist and gives all the feels of the colors of a country drive...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/cassey-vibrant-plaid-top/CHC102888282.html?dwvar CHC102888282 color=960&cgid=&openedfrom=Search%20Results

Classic and cool – Nothing speaks classic like a simple stripe in a cool color. This top can be worn to work and then out at night, just by switching up what you wear with it! It looks comfortable, pretty, and not too much of any one thing...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/jerica-striped-top/CHC102830822.html?dwvar CHC102830822 color=702&cgid=featured-shops-shop-by-style-classic&openedfrom=Category

Trendy and cute – Light and sheer kimonos are everywhere this summer. And it's not too late to score one for your summer swims and trips to the beach. Don't you love this red color!? I think you could wear this on into the fall...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/kailikimono/CHC102970657.html?dwvar CHC102970657 color=600&cgid=featured-shopstrending-now&openedfrom=Category **Colorful and bold** – Have you thought about just adding a bright color in your handbag this summer? I love this yellow/gold color, and it seriously goes with so many outfits!

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/7th-ave-mini-top-handle/CHC102866577.html?dwvar_CHC102866577_color=700&cgid=&openedfrom=Search% 20Results

Simple and comfy – Do you own a pair of palazzo pants? They're as comfy and cute as they come! And I've seen them on the racks in lots of stores. This blue stripe pair is calling your name...

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/perfect-palazzo-pants/CHC102871974.html?dwvar_CHC102871974_color=450&cgid=clothing-bottoms&openedfrom=Category

Boho chic – This is in the Boho category but is very mildly so. I love the stripe and the flow of the dress. That's the Boho way – loose, carefree, and beautiful!

https://www.charmingcharlie.com/anita-stripe-midi-dress/CHC102969373.html?dwvar CHC102969373 color=200&cgid=featured-shops-shop-by-style-boho&openedfrom=Category

Don't let others dictate your own style. And don't feel like you're stuck into only one look. Venture out. Try a style or two that you are drawn too, and then shop the looks! Happy July!

Seven for You – A Little Luxury – by Marcy Lytle

This is our column for the panel question that I pose to a group of ladies every month. We just started it last month, and I'm loving the answers and the variety of input from each one! This month's question was, "What luxury can you not do without?" I wanted to know what pampering devices or experiences or items women really love to have, things they will scrape and save just to keep having them in their lives. Maybe you might need a little luxury in your life, so here are some great ideas!

The Head

- The one thing that to me is not just pampering but essential is LIP GLOSS! I take it everywhere! I'd be lost without it. AND, I definitely like it to sparkle! Anastasia Metallic Rose is my favorite! https://www.sephora.com/product/lip-gloss-P404830
- I get my hair done every four weeks. This is a bigger ticket item but I love my hairdresser and meeting all her cohorts. We have regular conversations that tend to lead to Jesus, and some peeps aren't believers. It's a really cool time to see how the Lord works those conversations!
- I have had beady eyes all my life. I wore mascara which worked often but I wasn't blessed with many eyelashes and I always had black circles under my eyes. Over the last five years I have experimented with clumps of 3-4 lashes, strips of lashes. I never wore them out in public because I was afraid of looking silly. A year or so ago, I discovered Amazing Lash Studio. I decided to splurge and try this new business. Oh my goodness! I looked in the mirror and saw beautiful lashes that made my eyes look "normal." Individual lashes are applied on top of my real lashes. As my own lash grows out so does the added lash. My eyelashes have filled out some but I continue to have the extended lashes applied. If I have lashes and lipstick on, I'm ready for anything! https://www.amazinglashstudio.com/
- I love using salon quality shampoo and pure natural soap instead of the stuff from the grocery store.
- My luxury is ... I've always paid a little bit more to get my haircut. There is something relaxing about going to a pricier hair salon and knowing they are going to take care of me 100% ... there are no worries, as I'm paying extra for them to take care of my hair. I can go without makeup, dress down, not have money to do something, but I always look forward to visiting my hairdresser every few months. It's relaxing!
- My little luxury that I would never want to be without is hairspray, which I need every morning!
- This is not expensive, but the luxury I *can't* live without is mascara. This is mainly because my eyelashes are blonde and not visible. I need it to define my eyes.
- My luxury is Mary Kay makeup and skin care. Although it is not the most expensive, it is also not the cheapest. I have tried other brands and this is the best for me.

The Hands

 I would pick my nails being done every two weeks as my luxury. Can I live without this luxury? Yes. Do I want to? No. I like how they look and enjoy seeing the end result. I feel happy when my nails are pretty. My clients also enjoy seeing what color and design I choose.

- My enjoyment currently is getting my nails done every two weeks. I did give it up when
 we had some budget issues but my husband was totally on board with me getting back
 to it!
- I'm at the nail salon right now! A professional mani/pedi is so special but it takes some maneuvering to work it into the budget. I also love to get a sugar wax but it's such a small niche that I've only found a tech that does it when I'm in Texas. I've only gotten two sugar waxes but they are AWESOME! https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sugaring-hair-removal-treatment-pain-what-is-it n 7697128
- I love getting my nails and face done. I so enjoy beautiful nails! But they are both a luxury I indulge myself with...

The Body

- Scented shower gel from Bath & Body Works about \$12.50 but often goes on sale. It lathers up better and lasts longer, so it's totally worth it!
- I think that my monthly massage is quite a luxury but in reality it is very necessary for me to continue to work.
- I love my bidet! It is so helpful for extremely sensitive skin problems! Our grandchildren
 were having this problem until their dad installed the bidet, which made a believer out of
 me, since I have had skin issues my whole life. Now, when we travel away from home,
 it's really missed!

The Feet

- Pedicures make me feel so good and pampered. I don't get them often, but I love them!
- If I could do anything, it would be a monthly pedicure (and manicure.) I feel pampered and special when I leave the salon. I get to have one with my youngest sister and Mom in a week.
- Getting a pedicure is definitely one thing that is so hard for me to give up! I wear open toed shoes A LOT and I've found that I get very self-conscious when my toes aren't painted. I'm not sure if I'm the only one, but when I look at the feet of a male all I can think of is how unappealing they are. So when my toes aren't painted it makes me feel dirty and rough, sometimes even like I'm less of a woman because my toes don't look "pretty."

The Mind

- I love books and get new ones all the time. I have a stack that I am going through and will never end as I always keep adding to it.
- Lunches out with special friends and taking vacations with our kids are a true luxury and a blessing. There were times in our life and marriage when these things would've been out of the question. We watched every penny and seldom deviated from the budget. Having been in that position definitely makes these things feel luxurious.
- I belong to The Book of the Month Club. I get a brand new book monthly, a hardbound one, with a bookmark! I look forward to each book and finding quiet time alone, to read

each chapter. It's \$14.99 a month, and a delight! https://www.bookofthemonth.com/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI9ZbrqdTQ4gIVArbACh2h2gE2EAAYAS AAEgI3MfD BwE

The Stuff

- I appreciate driving a car that I really LOVE instead of one that just gets me from point A to point B.
- My luxury is my Mini Cooper car. I could struggle along with an old beater to try and save \$\$ but I lease the Mini and I never have to worry about maintenance. It's heavily built, made by BMW, and in the Minnesota snow it moves like a little tank. I'm happy. And that's my luxury.
- I am thankful for a new car, as opposed to a used one. We spent years and years fixing up old clunkers (for which I'm thankful we had!) but now opt for a new car every few years. My husband is tired of working on cars!

The Food

- It's a luxury having a few squares of rich dark chocolate every evening.
- I never want to be without frozen yogurt! I need it every night, and it's a luxury for sure!
- I would be hard pressed to give up my Starbucks Frappuccino.
- I look forward to my cup of coffee every morning. I use a Keurig coffee maker and like to have a variety of flavored coffee pods available. And, I use Silk Almond Milk Vanilla flavored creamer in my coffee. It is more expensive but I really like the flavor and creaminess. That's my daily luxury.
- I enjoy using Instacart once in a while, without guilt. On a particularly busy day or when I'm just too tired to go to the store and fight the crowds, I order online. It's not much extra to do so, and I'm delighted when they show up in a couple of hours with my groceries at my door! https://www.instacart.com/store

I don't know about you, but I thoroughly enjoyed reading about each woman's desires for pampering. There is no use in judging another friend for what she spends her money on, or her time. Each of us is an individual with individual tastes and needs. I could care less about having a manicure (maybe it's because I had a traumatic one!) but I totally agree with some of the others. We're all different. And some of these things above...I now want to try!

Selah's Style – Summer Play

It's the middle of the summer and all kids want to do is play outside or swim in the pool. And for most of our kiddos, it's quite hot outside, and we parents don't want to spend dollars on expensive clothing that will just get dirty with all the wear and tear. However, lots of kids have definite ideas when it comes to dressing themselves for a summer play day, and these three are no exception.

Augie, Ayla and Gideon siblings and each one likes to pick out their outfits for the day, for vacation play. They even pack their own suitcases before traveling! Let's peek in to see what they wore on their recent vacay away...

This bright summery, full-of-flowers, top is from H&M, as well as the yellow shorts. Ayla loves to shop, and she picked out this outfit recently on a shopping excursion with the girls. The material is soft, it moves, and for dinner this night, she ditched the hat and added a flower necklace!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0749103001.html

All three kids dressed up for a tour on vacation today, and Gideon and Ayla bought a souvenir cap from Blue Bell Creameries. He's sporting the vintage vibes, and she opted for pretty sky blue. Little brother Augie chose a stuffed cow. But look at those shoes he's wearing! They're from Old Navy, and they're waterproof!

Here, the two brothers are ready for lawn games! Gideon didn't think he liked flip-flops until he found these comfortable ones from Old Navy. And Augie has on his green water shoes, even though there are no water sports involved on this family game day.

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/search.do?searchText=boys%20flip%20flops&autosuggest=true

One of Augie's signature styles is a button up shirt. This one is a bit big and a bit wrinkly, but his aunt rolled up the sleeves, and Augie quite enjoys the comfort of roominess. He was on a bumpy hayride so held onto his aunt's purse for stability!

Ayla also chose this top at H&M while shopping, because of the cute bunny. It's navy and white, and pairs nicely with her pink shorts! She's checking out her neck fan that her Ella gave her for keeping cool on those hot days.

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0696944006.html

Gideon is ready for July 4th with his Red, White & Blue t-shirt worn with comfy red athletic shorts. He's really great at coordinating his outfits for each day. And the game he's playing is so fun. A card is placed in a headband, and the person has to ask questions to try and guess what picture is on his head! (from Dollar Tree)

Check out Augie's shorts! He wanted jean shorts and found this cute denim pair at Old Navy. They have a drawstring waist and cargo pockets, and he loves them! They're great for playing lawn darts. Has your family tried that game?

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=393136032&pcid=999&grid=undefined_1_undefined_NaN

Kids need comfort while they endure the dog days of summer, and moms/dads need funds for vacations and outings. H&M and Old Navy have great prices for the littles, and Target's Cat & Jack line is super affordable, as well! It's fun to take the kids shopping to see what they pick out, what they put together, and how they style it all, once they're home and packing for a weekend away...with the family.

In the Kitchen - Summer Skillets – by Marcy Lytle

I recently purchased a cast iron skillet cookbook. I use my skillet some, but not enough, and wanted some more ideas. Several of the recipes in this book looked simple enough, and super tasty. And why not serve up some of these this summer for your family and friends?

Giant Cookie

- 1 c softened butter
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 t vanilla
- 1 t baking soda
- 2 t hot water
- ½ t salt
- 2 ½ c flour
- 2 cups dark chocolate chips
- Nuts (optional I used pecans)

Preheat oven to 350 and heat the skillet in the oven while making the batter. In a large bowl cream the sugars and the butter. Add eggs, one at a time, combining each time before proceeding. Stir in vanilla.

Dissolve the baking soda in the hot water and add to batter, along with salt. Stir in the flour, chips and nuts.

Remove skillet from oven (it will be hot!) and put batter in, spreading with spatula. Place in the oven and bake about 25 minutes (test to see if done in the center) til golden brown. Serve with ice cream, if you desire!

Quinoa Casserole

- 1 cup dry quinoa
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 ½ T olive oil
- 1 ear of cooked corn kernels
- ½ red bell pepper diced
- ½ cup onion, chopped
- 1 jalapeno seeded and sliced
- ½ t salt
- 1 cup grated cheddar cheese

In a small saucepan cook the quinoa in the broth, let it sit covered, to fully absorb the liquid.

Meanwhile, remove the corn from the cob and cook in the cast iron. While that's cooking, dice the other veggies. Add them to the corn and cook til onion is soft and peppers start to brown.

Stir in the quinoa, season with salt and combine all. Keep skillet hot to lightly brown the quinoa, about another 10 minutes.

Stir in the cheese, remove from heat and serve.

Lemon Cake

- ¾ c sugar
- Zest of two lemons
- 6 T butter cut into pieces
- 2 eggs
- 1 c flour
- 1 t baking powder
- ½ c milk

Preheat oven to 350.

In a large bowl, combine sugar and lemon zest, working them together. Add the butter, and cream til light. Add the eggs one at a time, combining thoroughly after each.

Mix the baking powder with the flour. Alternately add the dry mix and the milk to the buttersugar mix, til thoroughly combined.

Grease the skillet with butter, and then add the batter.

Bake 30-35 minutes (insert toothpick in the middle to see if clean). Cool and cut into wedges.

This is great with a little lemon/sugar juice or fresh fruit! Even pecans sautéed in butter and brown sugar would be great on top!

Spareribs Made Easy

- 2 lb pork spareribs
- Salt and pepper
- Juice from ½ lemon
- 1-2 cups BBQ sauce (I used Stubb's)

Preheat oven to 350. Wash and pat dry the ribs, cut (if necessary) into sections to fit into the skillet. Season both sides with salt and pepper. Place the ribs in the skillet and sprinkle with the lemon juice, then put the skillet in the oven.

Bake about 90 minutes, turning halfway. For the second half of the cooking time, brush with BBQ sauce. Turn again last 15 minutes and brush again.

Tried and True – Grand Status – by Marcy Lytle

A few years ago, I wrote "On Being Ella" where I shared my discoveries about what a new grandmother needed in her plethora of goodies, if she was going to survive this new part of her life with littles around her once again. I've decided this subject needs a little more attention, once again. You may still be a young mom, but all of us women eventually are headed to the grand status of being a mother to our children's children. It's beautiful elevation, that's for sure, but not one to be taken lightly! There are some heavy duty requirements to retain such a status!

Stamina – I suppose this is one of the biggies we all need, as moms. Little kids have energy, and our own energy is quite a bit less than it was when we were 20 or 30! Getting up and down from playing on the floor, pushing and climbing with them on playgrounds, and getting up again at night (when they sleep over) is tiring!

We keep up our stamina by trying to stay fit through taking long walks often, and by eating and sleeping as best we can.

Messy containments – Here's what I mean by this. Little kids make messes. But we have our houses back in order now, since the kids are grown, and we really don't want sticky hands and markers and crayon on our walls again. We have found that having a box or a little desk or an area just for crafting, coloring or painting helps contain the messes. The kids are only allowed to color or use glue in one spot, and all of the items go back in the box when we're through.

We have time to make these little play stations, because these kids don't live with us, they just visit us... (Plastic desks and organizers are awesome from Michaels!)

Hotel time – You're going to be TIRED when the littles leave your house after an extended stay. In fact, you'll be tired when they stay for a few hours! It helps sometimes to have a hotel stay right after the kids stay with you, so that you can relax and rejuvenate. For example, after a weekend at your house with your children's children you'll find yourself ready to leave your own premises to a place where you're pampered and a pool is nearby. Go on, put away a little extra funds for hotel time for down time, after the chaos time.

We love taking a staycation in a hotel not far away, just to swim and rest and do nothing.

Extra monies – While we're talking about funds, if possible, make a category in your finances for these little kiddos. Some will want to go shopping – often. Others will want you to stop for fast food or take them to indoor trampoline houses or fun parks. And they all will want to buy a toy at one time or another, something new to play with at your house. You're going to want new things too, because your own toys and books and activities will need replenishing! Five Below is great for a stop-by to let them get "one thing." Watch for coupons and sales, and give these little monsters a dollar limit when you're out – teach them early the importance (but the pleasure, too) of wise spending.

When we're out and see deals, we purchase them and keep them in a closet for that next visit.

Thick skin – Go on. If you haven't developed thick skin by now, you will suddenly have to as your grand status is often tested by these little ones. There will be days when they think you're all there is, and they'll want to sit and cuddle forever. But other days, cousins or aunts and uncles will be on the scene, and you'll be the last one they want to talk with. It happens. As they grow, they want to spend time doing other things rather than what you've planned for them to do. You did it to your parents and your grandparents. Let them grow. Don't wear your feelings on your sleeves. And don't pout and demand that they do what you want them to do. Smile, love them, and praise them. That's your new role, now.

We try our best not to coerce our kids to pay attention to us. We didn't like it as kids, and we don't want to place that pressure on them.

Lists – You're going to need ideas and lists of places to go and things to do with these little folks when they're in your care. You may want to sit on the sofa and just enjoy watching them play. That works when they're babies. But when multiple kids arrive at your house of all ages, they're going to want to go and do. So ask your friends for freebie ideas for activities, the best parks, the cheapest eats. Peruse the internet for deals in your area. Tire these kids out. You'll be glad you did come evening time, when they will be ready for bed and out like a light...quickly.

We keep brochures and lists of kids movies, we watch Facebook to see where parents take their kids, and we write down ideas of splash pads and parks, etc.

Prayer – Your children are in the throes of parenting, and you remember what that was like. You barely had time to say a prayer before bedtime, because laundry and messes awaited you, and work and spouse time, and all of that! So now you're in the grand status of no littles living with you, and you have the time to pray. Kneel down, call those kids by name, make a journal, send your kids encouraging (not instructive or critical) verses, and cover them all in faith and prayer and blessings. It's the grandest privilege of all!

We say a quick prayer before the light goes out at night and cast those burdens of our kids and grandkids onto Him...because he can handle it all and move mountains.



Practical Parenting – Shopping Sanity – by Marcy Lytle

Once kids are old enough to talk, they're old enough to say, "I want a toy!" She doesn't have to be a teenager to realize that there's a rack of clothes calling her name, and he will tell you he needs tennis shoes in every color at a very early age! They start pointing and wiggling to grab, they start asking and demanding to buy, and it can be a nightmare trying to teach and train and temper these kiddos that want everything in sight!

Here are a few ideas for moms, dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles...all of us that have shallow pockets and little hands nearby trying to empty them:

When we keep the three littles, we sometimes <u>take them to the Dollar Tree</u> and give them each \$5. They can carry their own basket, and pick out five items each. This gives them buying power (the basket), and if we hand them five one dollar bills, they feel rich! (We secretly pay the tax at the register).

When shopping with littles in tow, <u>have a conversation</u> before entering the store about whether this is a shopping excursion for just groceries, or if they are allowed a toy. Give them the guidelines and stick to it. Maybe they can buy one thing from the Dollar Section at Target. Perhaps they can choose a Slurpee OR a toy, but not both. Or if the answer is no altogether, perhaps let them bring a color book and a crayon to stay occupied while they look. They really can't help it that they don't have the patience of Job while we browse the aisles for an hour.

If it's an actual shopping excursion for clothes, talk before you go and figure out what exactly you're looking for. Don't go open-ended! She will have 30 outfits in the dressing room and want every single one! Maybe she needs a couple pairs of shorts, a pair of sandals, and then one surprise treat like a necklace. Make a list and hand it to her, and check it off when items are found. Stick to your guns...

<u>Teach them early to shop clearance and sales items</u>. In other words, don't let them loose to roam every rack and shelf in the store. Make it a fun treasure hunt to look for sale signs, and how to find their size, etc. If an item they really like is too much money, talk about waiting and watching for it to go on sale next time!

<u>Start the kiddos a shopping piggy bank.</u> It's nice to have one for giving and saving, as well! But a shopping one is fun to have for store trips. Maybe clean your purse and offer them change once in a while, or even a dollar or two if you have extra. Then once a month, let them empty it to see how much they have for that new toy they've been eyeing or seen on TV! They'll be delighted and learn the power of putting away for a later splurge...

That's five tips. Think of more. But whatever you do, don't get caught in the store with greedy children, piles of toys, and screams of "I want this!" Talk often about store etiquette, shopping savvy, and the power of a dollar – earned, given, and spent – and the pleasure of it all as they grow wise and tall!

I Don't Do Teens - Call Me! - by Marcy Lytle

I remember the first time my son went out on a date, or slept over at a friend's house, or rode his bicycle down the street, alone. It was petrifying. In fact, one night he stayed with a friend in a house behind us, in the culdesac. During the night, our son was afraid and decided to just get up and walk home, in the middle of the darkness (he was in elementary school.) Scared me to death! One of the scariest things of all is watching our son or our daughter drive away in the car without us! When we are not by their side to protect, rescue, and instruct, we worry about their choices and the others they encounter...

I don't think there are specific ages when we allow our kids to emerge out of our house without us into a friend's car, over to their house, or to that party...without us near. It all depends on our individual kids. But there are some ways to help ensure safety and peace of mind...both what we parents need on their first trips alone:

To ensure safety:

Give them an iphone. Get one that has parental parameters, but let them have one and encourage them to use it for any situation in which they find themselves afraid or unsure.

Give them an inch. Start small. If he spends the night with a friend and is responsible and obeys all the rules given, then he gets another inch. But if he's not, the inch is taken away. It's a simple game of measurement...

Give them covering. Teach them and pray with them about what is right and what is wrong, even when you're not present to see what they're doing. Teach them to also pray, to have a relationship with God, one that hears that still small voice and obeys it, when tempted.

Give them trust. As you see this wise little adult start to peek its face from behind the eyes of your teens, speak your trust to them. Offer encouragement and accolades when they obey, and speak your trust into their ears and hearts.

To have peace of mind:

Communicate with the parents. If teens are going to another house, make sure parents know they're coming, what they're doing, and will be present at all time.

Communicate with God. Ask God for wisdom and guidance as to when to say yes and when to say no, to that request to go away all alone, without our eyes behind them.

Communicate with friends. If you're afraid of letting go, or your teen has broken trust, or you're unsure of when to say yes, talk to other parents for advice and counsel. Ask them to pray with you.

Communicate with your spouse. Don't parent alone, if you have a supportive spouse. Talk with him/her and agree together on what is best for your teens. It's not a peaceful home if you let them go, and he says they should have stayed.

Kids are going to grow up, hop on their bikes and ride off to the corner store...or get behind the wheel and drive to the other end of town. We're going to want a call when they arrive their safely, and that call is important. It's important for the teen to obey and honor by making the call, and it's important for the parent to receive that call so that relief can be had. That's the beginning of it all...that call.

Teens grow up fast. And it's our job and privilege to help them leave our homes, eventually without us beside them to grab the wheel if they start to veer. It's one of the scariest jobs of parenthood...letting go. So don't go it alone, and don't be unwise by sending them alone before they're ready. Pray, pray, pray. Then get ready for smiling when they return home at night or to visit when they're grown and gone.

Tiny Living – Observations – by Leyanne Enterline

This photo of a damselfly (part of the dragonfly family) reminds me of what I write about most, trying to enjoy the little things.

This tiny creature has so much depth to it that I never knew! And if I hadn't slowed down to consider it, I'd never have known its beauty. Here are a few random facts that I learned about dragonflies:

Their life span is super short as an adult. They only live from 2 weeks to 2 months. They have four independent alternating wings that allow them to fly at speeds of up to 60 mph. They can also fly backwards, stop on a dime and head 20 feet straight up!

Such incredible, tiny creatures!

Another awesome fact is that they eat mosquitos, so I'm definitely going to look into seeing how I can order some dragonflies to live on our property! Not sure if one can do that, but we've raised some butterflies before. So, why not try?

These facts just make me think, *Wow!* If God cares so much about the intricate design of a dragonfly how much more does he care about us? It reminds me of the verse in Luke 12:24.

"Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!"

Sometimes, I feel like those birds with no storeroom. There's not much room in our tiny space and I get overwhelmed and frustrated at not having more "things" or room for all the "things" I do have. However, I need to be reminded that these are just things and I don't really need them.

God has provided us with exactly what we need and there is no need to store up any more than what he has provided us with. *Wow, again.* I'm preaching to myself! This is so hard to do, because we are definitely not living how the world expects us to live, and sometimes I get caught up in wanting all the things of this world. But we are not called to conform to the pattern of this world. (Romans 12:2)

So...I will continue to try and slow down and enjoy the little things, like admiring the dragonflies. And I'll try my best not to worry and consider the raven, and know that I don't need to store up more than is needed.

A Night to Remember - Arrghh! - by Marcy Lytle

We recently went on a trip with our kiddos and tried out something we had heard a friend of ours share that he did with his family. He mentioned three R's – Rehearse, Recall, and Remember – so that's what we did. And we added a pirate spin on it, as we did all three around the table each night of our trip away. It's not hard to get in family devo time, when the family is already together eating. So here's how it went down!

<u>Preparation:</u> We used a blob of silly putty for our pirate's eye, but it might be a better idea to have the kids make an eye instead! As we ate our dinner, we passed the putty for the next person to place it over their eye as they called out a pirate, "Arghhh," before sharing their part of the R's.

Recall his faithfulness:

Explain what "faithfulness" means to the kiddos. You can talk about being loyal, constant and steadfast. Talk about faithful friends, and how even the best of friends can hurt our feelings sometimes, by ignoring us or talking about us behind our backs. However, God is always faithful to hear our prayers and answer them, to be with us in every situation, and to turn bad things into good things for our lives.

With this first exercise, let each one take a turn recalling an event in their lives where God was faithful in providing, comforting, or helping. As they place the pirate's eye, they start with a loud, "Arggh!" Then the littlest might say something like God helped him find his missing dinosaur, and the oldest in the family might tell the rest about how God provided a job when he needed it the most!

Remember his character:

Explain what "character" is. It's a person's nature, the way they are, their true selves. For example, in superheroes movies it's their character to swoop in and save the day, because that's who they are. They rescue and they save.

With this second exercise, the patch goes on again with a loud, "Argghh!" as each one shares what they know to be the character of God. You can let an adult start by saying "God is good, all the time," and so on. Perhaps one of the kids might say, "God is power and love!" Each one will encourage the other to say out loud what they know to be true about their heavenly Father. And if they can't think of something, the rest of the family can help with hints.

Rehearse his promises:

Explain what promises are. They are declarations that we will do a particular thing, but even the best of humans often cannot keep promises. Maybe we promise to tell the truth always, but then we fail. Or what about when we promise to obey next time, but we mess up again? And sometimes we run out of time or money to keep promises, too! Promises are meant to be kept, but even our best attempts are futile sometimes.

With this third exercise, place the patch and declare another "Argghh!" and say out loud what you know to be a promise from God! He will never leave us, his love lasts forever, and he will never destroy the earth by water again, and so much more!

If you need some reminders, you could even have prompts on 3X5 cards in the center of the table to help out kids when they're stuck. They can draw a card and read it, if they can't think of a particular R to share.

We had some good laughs at the putty eye and the pirate "Argghh" and we also had some good encouragement from all, as we recalled, remembered and rehearsed what we know about God. We are told to tell our children and our children's children about God and what he's done for us. What better way to do that, than to gather together and eat – where the full table is one of his blessings as well!

The Family Practice - Slug Life - by Brandi Oman

Caiden is a boy and I am not. He loves creatures such as spiders, lizards, and yes slugs. I am very opposite and believe good bugs are dead bugs.

When I was little, it brought me pleasure to watch a slug turn into slime after pouring salt on it. Caiden will rescue those slimy little things, name them, and decide that the household will love him like family. So what do boys, slugs, and compassion have in common?

When I found out I was having a boy many years ago I remember feeling excited. I knew I was going to love him until my last breath here on earth and beyond. I didn't know God was going to use him to show me so many of my faults, need for growth, my strengths, and ability to be taught.

Society has taught us boys need to be tough as mud, rough as a bull, mean as machine, and strong as a buffalo. When I see my son, I see some of those traits but (even better) I see a heart of compassion, fight, love, sincerity, and true genuineness.

I still don't like bugs, but Caiden taught me that even though the creature may appear disgusting, it is an innocent and sometimes a weaker being. He loves everything regardless of appearance or ability to disrupt our current comforts.

Rain and storms usually bring out slugs, generally speaking. That can happen a lot in our own lives when we are going through a trying time. All of the uncomfortable situations appear and are brought to light. I believe God uses our children's generous hearts to show us that there is more to the "slug" in our life. It may not appear to be pretty; it may be a little icky, but at times with compassion we can find a way to take care of the issues until they pass.

Exodus 33:19 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁹ And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.



Strengthening Your Core - Robbed No More - by Marcy Lytle

We started something new when we presented our new look for THYME – it's a poll on the COVER page. Last month our first question was "What are you lacking most?" and of the choices, peace and joy were picked. In our next question we asked what robs you of your peace most often, and the answers were kids and the future. I'd have to say I would probably answer the same!

As I looked at this beautiful photo of a lady wrapped up in a warm coat, standing outside a beautiful red phone booth while visiting a foreign country, I thought of just what I wanted to write about in response to the answers given in our poll.

Look at the photo with me. And let's imagine and speculate for a moment...

It must be cold and uncomfortable there, because she's wearing something warm to cover up against the cool breezes. That's what we do as women, when life gets crazy, we feel out of control against life's strong winds, and we need something to calm us and bring us comfort. We cover up and wear heavy coats, so to speak, that often are cumbersome and heavy – even though they do the job of comforting until the winds subside.

She's arrived at a phone booth, and is opening the door to step inside out of the wind, to make a call. (Okay, I know these type phones probably don't work anymore, but let's say they still do.) She's a wise woman indeed to find a place to step away from the weather, and she's even wiser indeed to make a call for help.

Look at her smile. She knows she's found a place of refuge and that all is going to be well, because she's about to call someone that will come get her and rescue her from the cold. She's excited that this phone booth, this beautiful phone booth, is in her path and the door is open!

When I saw this photo, I thought of the lyrics to a hymn that says, "Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." And I realized that this one little act that I so often do not do is the very thief of my peace and robs me of my joy.

When I am concerned about my kids (grown, though they are) or worried about the future of growing old and what "might be," I look up and see this looming red attraction of a phone booth waiting to be used. His door is ALWAYS open and he's always there for me to call, to pour out my heart, and to cast all my care over on Him. I can only do that if I step inside, remove the coat, place the coin (my faith) in the slot, and call on His name.

There's power involved in making a call on a phone, power to reach a person miles and miles away and hear his voice as if he were standing right next to you. I'll never understand that power, but it's real.

We don't have to wander around in the cold brisk wind, wearing a heavy coat, with a frown on our face.

We are reminded by this photo that he's painted his communication booth in a bold bright color that's calling us, inviting us, and luring us in to drop the coin, communicate the need, and hang up – knowing that He's heard and is answering for our "GOOD."

It's that "good" that we all struggle with after we've made the phone call, worried that He won't make good on his promises we believe to be ours. But just look at creation and how he set in order the sunrise and the sunset – his faithfulness in the sky – every day and evening. It may be dark at the moment, but the sun is sure to rise. He's sure to care for what concerns us and bring us out of the booth into the light of day, when the sun is high and we can skip in the light, coat-free.

Under the Influence – Big and Tiny – by Marcy Lytle

This photo is among the photographer's "Floating Leaf" series of shots. He named this particular picture "Big and Tiny" and it's fitting, isn't it? There's this giant leaf and then a really tiny one nearby. In fact, the tiny one is almost unseen because of the largeness of the other leaf. However, they're both in the same water, floating in the same direction, wherever the river flows.

As women, I think one of the things that never leaves us is how we see ourselves in the light of those around us. And our size, big or tiny, seems to matter SO MUCH. It matters as soon as we reach the pre-teen phase, and it stays with us until we get weak and weary and are unable to care anymore. It's even enhanced more so with all of the social media that abounds.

However, when I look at this photo it exudes peace. It's not because the big leaf is so pretty and large, or because the tiny leaf is so obscure and small. It's what's beneath them both. That serene water on which they float, without sinking or drowning. The water that moves them, side by side, in the same direction.

They've both fallen off of a tree where they were once attached and vibrant, but now they're at the end of their life, where they are loose and carried away. All the competition and striving to be the prettiest, most colorful and vibrant, and healthiest and alive leaf on the tree are gone. They're floating on equal ground (or water).

I think sometimes about how much time in our lives, as women, is wasted in looking at our size. Oh, we look at more than that for sure – like our skin and our clothes and our eyes, etc. – but our size seems to matter so much. I'm pretty sure that 100% of this frustration with our size comes from the television, movie and fashion industry. Models are thin, actresses are fit and trim, and there's this insatiable hunger and thirst for the perfect body so that we will be admired by all who see us.

But here these two leaves of different sizes have now found themselves floating beside each other, thinking perhaps that this is the end. And in the leaf world, big is good. The bigger the leaf the more we want it for decorating and pressing and watching as it blows. The little tiny leaves get swept away and deposited in the trash. Yet, in the women world, tiny (skinny) is of value, and big (overweight) is swept away.

I wish that Tiny and Big could co-exist in respect and admiration, don't you? I love it when big women get parts in films, but it shouldn't be that we stop and note, "Oh, she's a big woman, how cool." It should be the norm. And I wish that skinny women that diet to keep their jobs could know the joy of eating without guilt or binging, don't you? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the clothing industry combined the plus and the 00 onto racks side by side, where Big and Tiny had to shop side by side, as well? Why should Big shop over there in that private space away from the huge space for Tiny?

I find myself judging myself, and others, based on weight sometimes. In my life of 61 years I've envied the waif-like girls without an ounce of fat on their bodies. And I'm sure I've wondered about those near me that have extra pounds, like why they're so overweight. I'm guilty of

standing in the mirror and allowing what I see justify my bad mood for the day, when I'm less than satisfied.

I don't know how to solve all of the problems in the world, but this one problem of Big and Tiny envying and judging each other has to end. We need to end it so that our daughters focus on academics and kindness, instead of salons and plastic surgery. We need to stop it so that our granddaughters see us stand up tall in our sagging skin and our thinning lips. We need to make sure they never ever hear us say, "I'm too fat," or "I hate the way I look," or "I can't believe she's put on so much weight."

I will end my story by saying of course, it's healthy to stay fit and trim and all of that. But that measurement has become way too narrow for the good of women everywhere. Good health is essential, but we are not created to all look the same in body size and shape...just like the leaves.

And one day, we'll find ourselves floating along beside that woman we envied or judged, and we will find ourselves with a choice. We can grab her hand and encounter that next water fall with glee together, or we can scream alone. I'd like to think we can enjoy the ride in laughter and thoughtful conversation, never seeing the size or shape difference we once thought so important...

Healthy Habits – A Clean Closet – by Marcy Lytle

One of my good friends and I were looking in her closet one day, because she wanted to show me a couple of tops she'd bought and wanted ideas of what to wear with them. She has a big closet, with awesome shelves, and yet it was packed to the max! Like we all do, she had collected years and years of clothes and accessories, some she wore and some she didn't, and was just overwhelmed with how to even begin organizing and cleaning.

So what does all this have to do with healthy habits? It does! A clean space, where it was once messy and disorganized, makes one feel so good and light and happy. When a closet is clean, we want to enter it, create in it, get dressed in it and then...we exit feeling great and put together like we can conquer the world.

Here's how we organized and how we felt so much better when the organizing was done:

First, we went through every piece of clothing and tossed whatever she hadn't worn or won't wear or didn't like (maybe it was gifted and not her style.) Gone was the guilt of parting with it, because we put it all in bags to give away.

Secondly, we emptied every shelf. There were towels and sheets that had been hurriedly stuffed on top of each other. There were all sorts of fabric and mismatched old bedding and others things that we were able to discard, because they were torn or old or never being used again. We filled lots of large trash bags!

Thirdly, we used what we had. I had brought some boxes I hadn't used from my house, and we set them on their side and bottom, to not only decorate but fill and place back on the shelves to order things.

Fourthly, we organized the clothing into categories and ditched all metal hangers, in favor of only plastic ones. She actually had enough of them, once we cleaned out the old clothes!

Fifth, we fold each fitted sheet, top and pillowcases into sets! The fitted sheet is folded first, and then the top. The fitted is tucked into the top one, so that the puffy edges are covered. Pillowcases are laid inside, as well, and then the entire bundle is folded into a neat rectangle. All towels and cloths are folded the same and organized by color.

Sixth, we tackled a couple of drawers where she had tons of t-shirts stuffed inside. We folded them in squares with the front side up (so it's easy to tell which shirt it is) and placed them back in a neat fashion, in the drawers (the Marie Kondo method!)

Seventh, we looked at what tops and bottoms needed matching pieces and made a list. We realized that if she had a denim skirt, a lot of her favorite tops would be pretty with it! Two of her new lace-wraps need something pretty to go underneath. And a tie belt would look great with a couple of blouses to bring shape. We now know what to look for, while out shopping!

All of that, and about three hours later, and we were feeling tired but good. The closet was inviting, organized, and place of rest and fun instead of chaos and clutter.

That organization brings health and happiness to any soul...so try it! Enlist the help of a friend, play music, chat and laugh. All of that will make for a fun time and beautiful outcome. Then go to her house and do it again...

Created for Life - Perfect Balance – by Ginny Hurley

Bright and early every morning we can anticipate observing a world of splendor right in our own backyards. Even though it is July, green fields still spill out upon the roadways throughout local neighborhoods. This year we have especially enjoyed the exquisite result of rainy days and nights.

Breathtaking flowers fill the landscapes while fountains shoot water into ponds and pools. Even the creeks still flow with fresh water from springtime. It is truly a beautiful place to live.

The butterfly receives its nourishment from the colorful flowers, while the flowers reproduce because of the beautiful butterflies. What a perfect plan. Hidden in plain sight all over our world, God's perfect balance is displayed for all to see.

We realize in a heartbeat that our hot sun will roast the lawns and things will begin to turn brown. Yet while it lasts, we hope for continued rain and cooler breezes.

The universe was created in perfect balance, and we long for it to remain that way forever. Our identity began in a perfect garden. It's in our DNA. It's who we are. Beauty was adorned in every nook and cranny, given to us to discover. What a joyful scene to picture! Can you see it? Each season brings new insight into the Father's heart for His family. When the leaves turn brown and fall to the ground it only brings hidden activity that surpasses knowledge. Then a time of dormancy is welcome when winter settles in.

This is just too wonderful for words! Tiny details, tiny insects, the tiniest of critters are perfected in God's perfect balance. Though men have tried to destroy what God has made, it is impossible. God is continually creating new life and bringing hope to all creatures in every land. Loss and poverty, war and darkness cannot keep God's love away.

"Now, if anyone is enfolded into Christ, he has become an entirely new person. All that is related to the old order has vanished. Behold, everything is fresh and new." 2 Corinthians 5:17

The purposes of God will never be overcome.

He is the Perfection of Beauty, the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Morning Star!

Life Right Now – A Slower Pace – by Bethany Gomez

It's the month of July here in Texas, and anyone that has lived here for over a year, at the very least, knows that mid-summer means heat, unrelenting heat. In July, if at all possible, I can be found in one of two places: somewhere with central AC or hanging out near a cool body of water.

Who's with me?

Specifically for me, July also means one more month of summer break left which I am so, so grateful for and I have been really trying to not take this blessing of summer breaks for granted. Last month more than ever, it was a huge blessing to be on summer break. June was a busy, emotional, bittersweet month for me. Things on my to-do list for June were as follows:

Think about packing

Netflix

Nap

Marie Kondo my closet, pack a little

Work at my part time job. (about 15hrs/week)

Attend roommate bachelorette party

Pack

Help build a fence for sister's dog

Nap

Paint a guestbook tree for roommates wedding reception

Help my parents move to Brenham

Help my roommate move to Dallas

Load up my, and my sister's, stuff to move into our parents' house, that now boasts a fence Rest

Cry, cry some more

Clean our rental house and turn in keys, maybe cry some more

Prepare for roommate wedding reception

Attend roommate wedding reception, celebrate and dance the night away

Get up, drive to Houston, attend my cousin's wedding (What was I thinking?)

Nap

This list is by no means an exhaustive list, but you get the point. I would be remiss not to mention that my sister had pretty much the same to-do list, minus the summer break. She is a multitasking queen.

Here is to hopefully slowing down to the speed of a turtle this month and not the speed of a hare.

There was something on my to-do list that was regretfully missing. What wasn't on that list was spending time with God. Over the years, I've struggled so much with having a quiet time. I sometimes tell myself,

"He already knows my thoughts. I don't want to keep repeating what He already knows."

"When things slow down in my life, I will find the time to read my Bible and pray."

"I get fed the Word once a week at church and I read the verse of the day on my Bible app. That will do for now."

All of those thought processes have led me lately to feel like I've merely been existing instead of living; slowly sinking in the sand. I know the only way to truly live is to put God first, which I haven't been doing. I want to be more intentional about having a quiet time and praying so that I will remain firmly planted on "The Rock," Jesus Christ, for He is the firm foundation.

While I was cleaning out my closet last month, I came across a small, seemingly insignificant booklet called, "An Adventure in Prayer." It caught my attention because in my heart I have been longing to pray more and be more. intentional about becoming closer to God, so I read the whole thing right then. It was simply about this invitation to participate in this 30-day prayer experiment. I was intrigued. I had really no doubt that I wanted to commit to doing this experiment, so that is what I intend to do. It's a start.

I'm starting out on a new adventure with my sister and starting on a prayer adventure and I pray we both will keep our gaze on God and our feet on Christ the solid rock...at a turtle's pace and at a turtle's rest.



In This Together - Sometimes a Mess - by Bekah Holland

I grew up in a household where we talked about "garbage in, garbage out-if you're ugly on the inside you'll look ugly on the outside" and singing songs like "Be careful little eyes what you see..." and "I'm going to let it shine, let it shine." This was mostly because I was an 80's baby born in the Bible belt and this was basically a requirement to be let inside of a church building. But when I look at my marriage, or the marriages that have inspired me (or terrified me), I wonder if this really rings true.

Living in the middle of a high-tech world, we "get to" peak inside of the lives of people both near and far, the famous and the obscure. We watch with bated breath as they show us snapshots of sweet smiling kids, how they're involved and patient parenting moments, romantic kisses in a kitchen without a single dirty dish in the sink or sticky handprints on the fridge. Inspiring, right? Obviously that's what our lives are supposed to look like. I mean, just look at those pictures and videos and latest Instagram posts! We must be doing something, or maybe everything, wrong.

My house rarely has an empty sink or spotless floors and counters. In fact, I have a couch that is literally dedicated to the mountain of laundry that I can never freaking get through. And while my kids are the most fantastic creatures in existence, they are also jerks sometimes, and I am not always patiently guiding them through their sassy mouths and cranky moments. Lots of times, I find myself criticizing or yelling or crying (or likely all three) at the same time.

My husband and I will go months....MONTHS between dates. We don't even have the excuse of sleepless newborns or no available babysitters. We're just tired and lazy and suck at prioritizing each other sometimes.

However, if you're looking in from the outside, things look fine...great even. We have a wonderful home, great careers, cars to get us everywhere we need to go, growing and thriving kids, smiles on our faces, and the list goes on and on. But get past our pretty exterior, and you sometimes see a mess. And I don't just mean dirty dishes and messy floors. I mean struggling relationships, hurting hearts, and spiritual dryness. If you could see inside my day, you'd see me wake up early every morning with the intention of spending time in the Word and a bit of exercise to energize me before starting my day. But what's the saying? The road to hell is paved with good intentions? So that might be a bit dramatic, but you know what I mean.

My intentions and my follow-through are two different things, some days. I do wake up early, but what I do after that is stumble to the coffee pot, drink said coffee while checking email, read a bible verse, think about my day, play a game on my phone, and then convince myself to count walking back up the stairs as my exercise for the day. So while I look great on the outside, sometimes I let my insides fall to pieces. And while my marriage looks fine and dandy, we've had sometimes that we have struggled to look each other in the eye. And there are issues that sometimes we have to tiptoe around because we can't find common ground. And while looking at my home from the street view it looks beautiful, sometimes we've lost the peace that once resided within those walls.

I know we all want to put on a great front and a happy face. We want to show that we've got it all together and paint our prettiest picture to show to the world, and even to our friends and family. But what if we were really honest? What if the pictures we paint weren't just Monet's?

I want my life to be transparent (okay, I want to want my life to be transparent). I want for women to see that they aren't alone....lots of us have messy kitchens and toys all over and bathrooms that smell like freaking pee because little boys can't aim (sorry, touchy subject in my house), and maybe even have kids eating cereal for dinner because we just can't any more. And that's okay. It's okay, because this life wasn't meant to be perfect and gentle. And since we messed up perfect before we even started, let's stop trying to pretend. Instead, let's encourage each other and show our scars and flaws and sinks full of dishes. Let's sit on the messy floors with our messy friends and laugh and cry together. No more perfect on the outside, faking it till we make it garbage.

I just want to do better than I did yesterday. And if I don't, then I'm not going to pretend that I did because of some silent, ridiculous expectations I've set based on the snapshots where I see into the lives of others. I'm just going to do my best to prioritize time with my husband. And by my best, I mean I'll probably just crawl on the couch near him with my book while he watches some show I may or may not care about. And then sometimes, I'll put on real clothes and we'll go eat queso and chat about nothing and everything like we used to do before life got in the way. We'll probably forget and push it off because we are fantastic at procrastinating things that require us to get out of our stretchy clothes. But we'll keep at it. Mostly because we love each other and trying is good.

But also, I want our pretty outside, to show that we're trying for a pretty inside first. Or maybe at least we'll show an example of messy people living and loving the best that they can.

Date Night Fun – The Monthly Calendar – by Marcy Lytle

There are at least four weeks in every month, they are there every year, and yet so many of us let weeks and weeks fly by without stopping to date the one we're with. We say we're too busy, the kids take up all of our time, we're too tired to go out, and everything costs too much. But in reality, we just don't plan and make it happen. Just like we make it to other appointments because they're scheduled, we have to set up appointments with each other...or date night never happens.

Here are five dates to fill into your calendar in the month of July, from a quick hour together, to an entire evening...and something in between. Read them, adjust them to fit your likes, and write them on your calendar right away. Then do it again and again, every month. You'll learn to smile and look forward to those little squares where you've scribbled "Date Night" and you'll clear other things to make it happen. We're even including topics to talk about!

One hour – If you have kids, put them to bed and create a spa time together. If no kids, stay awake long enough to make this happen. Set out lotion for a foot rub or a neck rub, or a hand massage. Spend 15 minutes on each other. The second half of the hour, indulge in dark chocolate and strawberries while you listen to your favorite tunes on Youtube, discussing the lyrics and why you like the songs.

Two hours – Meet up for appetizers early, before the crowds hit. Enjoy your favorites, as you talk over your day (No talking about money or kids!) Just listen and make sure you give thanks for at least three things that happened that day. On the drive home, if there's time, take a different path down new streets, zigzagging your way through town back to your house. Observe and laugh, with no iphones in sight. Talk about what you love about each other, as you observe the architecture of the houses you're passing in the new zones in which you're driving!

Three hours – Time for a dinner date and a walk! Start later and go to your favorite restaurant. If possible, make reservations, so that you have time for a walk after. Or go on a weeknight, when restaurants aren't so busy. You pick one time, let him pick next month. After the sun is down, go for a walk in the neighborhood where the restaurant is. See what else is nearby and make a note of stores you'd like to visit later, when they're open. As you walk, share your favorite scriptures or what God has been downloading to you, or what you'd like to study in the future.

Four hours – Make it a museum or art/library date. Check out the hours of a museum or art house and head there, to browse and observe. Don't gripe or complain about a "different" kind of date – just try it! After you've browsed, head to the library to look up more on what you read about or saw, and study it together for a bit, discussing a bit of art or history. End up with an ice cream for snack at the end of the date.

Five hours – You COULD see a movie, but let's keep the conversations and connections going! Drive across town to somewhere new, out of your circle of influence. Try meeting up with another couple, and spend the date time with them. Opt for appetizers and drinks, and really

check in to see how your friends are doing. Ask about their kids, their jobs, their parents, and their personal lives. Ask how you can pray for them. Spend the second half of the date by a body of water somewhere – a pond, a lake, a fountain, etc. Bring your lawn chairs and pack a dessert, and talk away until your time is over.

There you go...five ideas for you to try, to place on your calendar, and to make them happen. You can do these over and over again, tweaking the activity as your time allows. But use that calendar and don't let anyone else erase your date night, just because they pressure you to volunteer, guilt you into keeping their kids, or demand that you "should" show up elsewhere. Date night is just as important, so keep it and make it and enjoy it!

After 30 Years - Downtown - by Marcy Lytle

When you're alone, and life is making you lonely
You can always go
Downtown
When you've got worries, all the noise and the hurry
Seems to help, I know
Downtown
Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city
Linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty
How can you lose?

Those are part of the lyrics to a song by Petula Clark from 1964. I was only 7 years old then, but I remember the tune to this song. If you don't, take a listen, and then read on...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sku-1hqA5xw

The photo above is part of downtown Austin. We live in a suburb of Austin, just north of the city, as do a lot of my friends. And when I talk to other couples, they often opt to just hang out in the suburbs instead of heading downtown to the heart of the metropolis. I get it. There's the main obstacle – traffic. It's hard to find parking. And it's just easier and quicker to stay near home, on date night.

However, when I saw this photo of 2nd Street downtown, the little lights in the trees, and the people on the sidewalks, I remember why we head down there at least every other weekend. It's quite fun, and it feels like we've exited our own little circle of a world with a small radius around our house.

Heading downtown on a Saturday or Sunday is so fun, especially when we have our day/night planned out. Here's why:

- The food is better. The burbs mostly have chain restaurants and a few locals, but downtown has the vibes and the flavors...and the food trucks! How can one miss out on that fun?
- The energy is high. Yes, there's traffic to plow through to get downtown where I live, but we sort of know when to time it so that it's not terrible. We don't head down on weeknights very often at all, because of rush hour. But we do on Saturday afternoons. There are people walking everywhere, and it's fun to get in the middle of the mix.
- The charm is still there. Downtown parts of cities have the old buildings, the older streets and street lamps, the twinkly lights, the pedicabs and horsedrawn carriages, and all sort of "old world" attraction.
- The height is rising. Along with the charm, right in the middle of it, are high rise hotels. Have you ever just dated in a hotel for a night? It's so fun to sit and watch people, taste appetizers, walk the floors and observe or catch live music in the lobby.

- It's different. Sometimes, when we stay in, stay close and never venture out, we forget there are others different than we are, people to see and meet that don't run on our streets. And that's always a good thing.
- The shopping is unique. Yes, we can stay home and visit Target or Walmart, but why do we want to always go to the big box stores? There are boutiques and cute shops that line the streets downtown. Some are pricey, but some hold affordable treasures!
- Darkness is lit. I mentioned above the twinkly lights. They're in trees, the lamps are on, the neons are flashing, hotels are bright, and they're all so inviting. It's fun to stay until after dark and walk among the lights of the night.

When we go downtown, we feel like we've really been somewhere. We enjoy all of the hustle and bustle, the flavors and flamboyance, and the coolness of some place other than our own backyard. Sure, there are wonderful dates we have when we stay local, as we stroll parks and eat fast food nearby.

And just like the lyrics of that song say, "How can you lose?"

There's always something new or crazy or busy or fun when we pack up for the day and head downtown on a date, to shop, to eat, to walk, or all of it. It's so fun. And when we grab hands and walk together at a brisk pace from place to place, we feel as though we've escaped for a while...and we have.



Bless This Mess - More Will Stand - by Ashley Zanella

When you look at this picture, what do you see? You might say a few twigs, leaves, or a flower upside down. That's not what I see at all. I see:

A plan thwarted.

A life uprooted.

Damage.

Destruction.

I can feel pain in this picture, a deep, suffocating pain. Yet, amongst the shadows I see hope. Hope that as seasons change and seeds get sewn, where one flower once stood, more will stand. Hope that persistence, time and storming the weather will eventually bring us to a place that is beautiful.

There are storms all around us. They swirl and thunder and strike lightning, hitting the very foundation we walk on. Our lives are filled with a series of mini storms and some of us experience hurricanes so strong that it peels that same foundation away completely. But in between those storms, we have the opportunity to see the beauty that is life. We can appreciate the ebb and flow of the good times and bad times because the bad times allow us to be truly thankful for what we have.

It humbles us to realize that nothing is guaranteed and everything requires work. It pushes our foundation that much deeper so that as the storms keep rolling in, we can feel more and more grounded. We start to realize how much we can withstand. We see ourselves as survivors and it empowers us all.

If you are struggling, just know you are not alone. We all go through periods of distress. If you are human, you are predetermined to experience distress. You can make it through this, whatever it is. No matter how earth-shattering your pain is, no matter how many petals you've lost to the storm, you will find a way to make something new. But like in this image, nothing in life is guaranteed. You're going to have to put in the work. You're going to have to push through the tears. You're going to have to plant new seeds.

You're going to have to grow again. And it might be painful. But it's worth it.

Firmly Planted - The List - by Dina Cavazos

I've never been "that girl"—you know...the cute one, the funny one, the popular one everyone wants on their team. After years of thinking I was somehow defective, I now know that I'm just fine, thank you. The false images and unspoken, or even spoken, expectations the world and well-meaning people planted in my impressionable unredeemed mind as I was growing up have been steadily replaced and nurtured by the One Who Loves Me, who places crowns on my head.

I've reached the point where I'm comfortable enough to be honest about things that used to bother me or embarrass me. For instance: one of the worst activities ever devised for schoolage kids was the "pick the three people you would want to sit with" exercise. Truly this was thought up by the devil himself to give children complexes. A sheet of paper would be passed around and on this paper you were to write the three kids you would want to sit with or play with, or whatever. I remember doing this for years, even in high school, and it was devastating for me because I felt like I would never be chosen—and there was that piece of paper circulating for all to see that my name wasn't on it. Truth be told, I still have doubts that my name would be written on anyone's "favorite" list, but now I see things differently.

Getting older brings an enlarged perspective, but it's not years alone that have impacted my view. Long ago I did one thing that changed my life forever, even though I had no idea at the time of the real meaning of my decision. Like a seed that lay dormant in the desert, this decision planted Life in my personal desert, and that Life began to grow as it was watered over the years...many years. Because of that decision to give my life to the true Lord Jesus, and the years lived out with him by my side, unseen and not understood as he most often is, my vantage point enables me to see that, whether it's real or imagined, it's okay if I'm not anyone's favorite.

There is only one list that matters, and I'm on it. To all of you who struggle with not being on a favorite list.....be encouraged! All those who are his are on The List and we're all wearing crowns.

1 Peter 5:4

And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Simple Truths - The Aftermath – by Erica Simmons

We've all seen them, the pictures that emerge after a storm has hit. We see the destruction, the aftermath, after the storm has raged and the assessment begins, followed by creating a plan. The process of rebuilding lives, buildings, communities begins. That is how it works for physical storms. But, what about spiritually?

How do we handle the aftermath of a spiritual storm?

Last month, I shared how I struggled with writing my article, how I was not hearing God's voice because the storm was louder than His voice (which is easy when you focus on the storm and not God). Now I am walking in the aftermath of my spiritual storm and my assessment has begun.

It began with me taking my eyes off my circumstances and putting them on the word of God. Once I did that, what I thought was silence from God was actually Him whispering to me in the storm. I was like the guy in this video who is playing the game whisper.

Facebook link

https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2181313328748922

As I began my shift, I was unable to hear clearly and was all over the map with trying to "guess" what God was saying. I was jumping the gun on the message and trying to make it what I wanted it to be. In the end when I "got" it, I too was excited like this guy was to hear the message, but then like the grandfather when the realization of the message hit him. What God was saying to me was more than words to hear. It was a gift, one that brought joy, hope and peace. A peace that brought clarity to the words God spoke to me all those years ago.

"If who you are is getting in the way of who you want to be,

you need to change who you are. I am."

That word helped me to become more like God in my thinking about some things all those years ago, and God wants to use it again in the aftermath of my spiritual storm.

In the aftermath of physical storms, the rebuilding involves replacing the destroyed with a newer version of the old that was before. In the aftermath of a spiritual storm, God wants to replace the old destroyed wrong way of thinking and behaving with a new way, His way. If who I am is getting in the way of who I want to be, I have to change who I am.

Who I am is a mother that loves her children and wants to protect them at all cost. How I do this is by trying to say the right things that will bring those "aha!" moments. I work to lay out carefully constructed arguments of pros and cons with the hope that they see I am "right" and do things my way.

Who I want to be is a mother that loves her children and hits her knees in prayer to cover them as they walk their road. A mother who has leaned into God and will have the message He wants to deliver when and if they come to her for advice. A mother with the strength to guard her tongue and trust God, knowing He has a greater plan for them than I ever could. It starts with prayer and it ends with more prayer, not just for Jordan and Jerimiah, but for me as well.

Unfortunately, I am allowed the opportunity to put this into practice, as Jerimiah has had to move back home. He is hurt and disappointed in himself. I now have to surround him with love, which is the easy part, and help him through his aftermath. He is discouraged and I have to walk the delicate line of helping him see and understand the great things he can learn, as well as be honest with him about some choices he made. I can't do that without praying and seeking God in how to handle that. It was tough, as I just wanted to do what I could to get him home before we dealt with anything, and he got a little wishy-washy on me at a critical time. I then let my frustration boil over. But he is home now and the healing can begin.

Who I am is a Christian who gives so much of her time at her job (I love it), in a leadership position. I come home and say tomorrow I will do this or that for God.

Who I want to be is a Christian who takes advantage of the leadership opportunities for Christ. I have wanted to lead more and I have just let excuses get in the way. No more! I have stepped up and said to God, "I am here." I'm in some new situations since my last article. Even if the way I think He wants to use me turns out to be a different way...that is great, too.

Glance at the video again. Once the dad understood the real message, it was a sweet, sweet gift. He did not complain at all about the message not being any of the things he thought it was. That will be me. I will have some false starts in what I think God is leading me to do, but I will keep my focus on God and what He is saying to me. Like the grandfather in the video, I will eventually get it. The two important things the video teaches are that God NEVER stops saying the message and I am to never take my eyes off Him. The son-in-law continues to say the message and the grandfather is focused and intent on getting the message. That should be us as we listen for His voice even in the storm.

Intense focus on HIM.

There are many other examples I can give of who I am and who I want to be. Some I have already began to put into practice. The first one is to be a better housekeeper. Again, I have many excuses for letting the things I want to do go undone, not least of which is how my back gives me so much trouble when I am up and about for too long. But enough is enough.

Since I was hosting our Memorial Day family get together, I just decided to tackle some of those chores. When it says God uses everything, He uses every single thing to teach us more about Him. I spent hours up and doing on that Saturday getting chores completed and when I tell you my back was not an issue, I mean it was not an issue! I didn't have to fight through the pain or discomfort because there was none. Through rearranging cabinets, cleaning out the pantry and the refrigerator, it was amazing.

The message?

God provides, we just have to be willing to do, and He will take care of the obstacles.

This can be seen in the examples in the Bible when those God chose tried to use excuses, He overcame all of them, but what if those He had chosen had never been faithful enough to start?

This is the message for this month. In the aftermath there is purpose, there is learning, and most importantly there is God. He is waiting for us to turn to Him, to trust Him to lead the way in the rebuilding process.

Look around at all the wonderful things He has created.

There is no better architect than the creator of the universe.

Moving Forward - I Am Loved – by Pam Charro

I remember hearing a story, years ago, about a well-known Christian speaker who was getting ready to write her first book. As she prayed, she asked God, "What would you have me write about?" God replied, "Tell them I love them." She responded, "Lord, I'm pretty sure they already know that." He answered, "No, they don't. Tell them I love them." Obediently, Joyce Meyer's first book was titled *Tell Them I Love Them*. Apparently, we don't know it as much as we think we do, and...

Love is a really big deal to God.

Like most Christians, I "knew" God loved me. I fell in love with Jesus back in the late '80s when a few people explained to me who he was and what he had done for me. But, sadly, the high didn't last, as shortly after my baptism, I became swept up in a flurry of religious activity and all of the "shoulds" began to drive out the joy. I started feeling more like a slave than a beloved daughter, just like the prodigal son's older brother in Luke 15. I continually felt I had to earn everyone's approval, including my heavenly Father's. I have had to fail him pretty epically over the years to find out just how deep and unconditional his love for me truly is.

In fact, only recently have I really come to know the intensity of his affection for every fiber of my being. Not only did he send his beloved son to die in my place so that I could have right relationship with him (which would have been plenty all by itself), but he fearfully and wonderfully made me in my mother's womb and knew everything about me long before I was ever born (Psalm 139). He determined the exact time and place where I would live so that I would seek him and find him (Acts 17). He sings over me with delight (Zephaniah 3). And he will never leave me or forsake me (Deuteronomy 31, Hebrews 13). All of these are just a handful of his loving thoughts towards me, but I couldn't really receive them into my heart until I recognized the lies I was believing instead. Lies such as "My pain is small compared to others' so he probably doesn't care about it that much." Or "He probably loves most people more than me because they have it more together than I do." I didn't recognize the orphan mentality that I had and I had no idea that I was keeping God at a distance because I thought he expected me to go through all of my less than glorious phases (basically, my entire life) alone in my bubble of pain and confusion. It's been so very liberating to learn that he desperately has been waiting for me to welcome him into my pain bubble so that he could finally be the best friend for me that I've needed all these years.

And that knowledge has changed everything! I no longer struggle at all with insecurity regarding God's love for me; I just have to stop and apply it to my situation every time I feel overwhelmed, and then choose to trust in whatever outcome happens. I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that my Father loves me...even the deep down yucky stuff in the darkest crevices of my soul.

What safety and freedom, I have finally found in this life! What acceptance for any situation, past, present, or future. And it's so amazing and wonderful to know that he has this same intense interest and love for every single human being he created.

Real Stories - Finding My Voice - by Tanya Dorris

Livefreeandwhole.com

Are you on a journey of finding your 'voice'? Have you ever wondered how to find your 'voice' and what that even means?

In preparing for writing this article I looked up the definition of voice. I came across an article by Ginny Wiehardt entitled *Learn About Author's Voice in Fiction Writing*. As a writer, I thought her definition appropriately defined voice. Not for writers only, but for everyone. "Voice is the author's style, the quality that makes his or her writing unique, and which conveys the author's attitude, personality, and character."

In Hebrews 12:2, it says that Jesus is the Author and Finisher (perfector) of our faith and the text describes what He did for us. "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."

What does this have to do with finding my voice? Everything!

Growing up, I was the daughter of a successful football coach in small west Texas towns. Everybody knew my dad, so they recognized me as Coach Watkins' daughter. I always assumed I had a standard to uphold. I now understand that I let resentment grow in my heart because of that.

As I began my high school years, I began searching for my own identity. Unfortunately, my identity was being fashioned by rebellion, disappointment, and betrayal. It was the 70s and our country was at war. So, as the song goes, I started looking for love in all the wrong places.

I moved to Austin, Texas as a 19-year-old desiring a lifestyle that Austin was famous for. I worked in various jobs around the city and began to sink in a hole of escaping and despair. I am grateful that I survived those years of abusive relationships and deep addiction. The amazing part was that unknown to me, I had friends and family praying for me.

Thankfully, in my mid-20's, I hit bottom and started looking up. It took me about six years to realize I needed a Savior. I turned from my wicked ways and gave my life to Jesus, but my soul still needed a lot of healing and tender loving care.

My identity became about serving Jesus, getting myself cleaned up, becoming a good wife, and being the best mom I could possibly be. So I went to bible studies, prayer meetings, and everything else I could do to perfect myself. I became wrapped up in performance. All the while, I felt as if I was dancing on bricks that could fall underneath me at any given moment.

Then one day, about 20 years later, God gave me a very special gift. I was invited to be part of a campus ministry at the University of Texas. It was only God's grace that opened that door for me and I am so grateful I chose to walk through it.

There, I worked with three men in their 30's that saw potential in me and began calling it out. I was 15 years their senior and balked at their suggestion that I should be part of the mentoring team for the female students. After all (I told myself) I was too old to be working with college students, so they hired me as an administrator, not mentoring university students. I hadn't even graduated from college. So, what did I have to say!

My confidence was at an all-time low, but with the insistence of Jeremy, Justin, and Brent I answered the call and found my 'voice' for the first time. These girls needed to know who I was as a *woman of God* and not a secular professor. I poured my knowledge of the Word into them and listened to their needs as we took walks, ate lunch, prayed in the prayer room, and worked together on projects. It was awesome!

I am so very grateful for those 3 ½ years with Campus Renewal. I became acquainted with my ministry style, my God-given identity, and began walking in a more confident attitude, personality, and character. I grew further to know the Author and Finisher of my faith and the price He paid for me which gave me the confidence and joy to continue growing and finding my voice more and more.

I began recognizing the damage that trauma and shame had done in my life and began researching and educating myself on healing and restoration. It's been a hard, but extremely important part of my journey.

Eight years later and with a new assignment, I've been able to more confidently answer God's call to write. I found my voice in a new way and I'm growing in it day by day. I now know my voice is to help others hurt by trauma and shame to become who our Author and Finisher has made them to be. To live a life that is free and whole. And I'm enjoying the journey!

I found this sign on Pinterest from tumbler.com. It really sums it up well.

YOUR LIFE IS NOW. SEIZE IT AND MAKE IT AMAZING.

FIND YOUR VOICE.

DISCOVER YOUR PASSION & PURSUE IT.

be honest, generous, & kind.

surround yourself with love, laughter, & truth.

LET YOUR HEART BE YOUR GUIDE.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

BE BRAVE & WILD AT HEART.

take chances, ask questions.

be fearless, make a difference.

THIS IS YOUR TIME.

Picture at: https://unsplash.com/photos/s-F84X3ltu0

I am a wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, and friend. I build relational bridges in communities by having honest discussions on issues concerning race, gender, sexuality, and ways the generations can better work alongside each other in harmony. One of my passions is to equip people on how to conquer trauma and shame. I am an overcomer of both and find joy in helping others experience the freedom I now have.



FRESH THYME - I See You - by Marcy Lytle

We have a list a mile long of friends we're praying for...for healing of the miracle kind. From kidney failure to cancer to autoimmune issues, we're praying hard for these people to be healed. They are super weary, and need to be surrounded by people that have faith and will pray. And we consider it a privilege to be among that crowd.

In addition to our friends that are suffering, they have family members that are nursing them, working double shifts, staying up at night with frustration and fear, and all sorts of things that come with being the next of friend/kin to a very sick person.

I remember when my husband had to have his hip replaced, and when he suffered electrical shock of the worst kind. I was frantic and fearful. After the fear subsided and I knew he was going to live, then came the recovery time. He had rehab, doctor's appointments, I had to help bathe him and wash his hair, make him meals, and clean up after him. He wasn't able to help, so I grew tired.

And let me tell you, I don't have a nursing bone in my body at all! And not much patience, either!

I grew tired quickly and became snappy, when he was still recovering and suffering in pain. And I felt horrible. Absolutely horrible, that I would wish he'd hurry and get better so I could get back to normal life. I felt guilty for not serving him with joy. And I even felt times of anger that he had hurt himself or had these physical problems that required surgery and money and time and healing. Somehow, there was a tiny bit of blame on him for being hurt or needing help. *What?* I must be a terrible person, I thought.

So this little story right here is to encourage all of you spouses, sisters, moms, dads, friends, etc. that are taking care of a person in need of a miracle.

- He sees you, too. He knows you're tired, and it's okay and understandable that you're tired and need rest.
- He hears you, too. He understands the weariness that sets in after days and days of serving and giving, with all the focus being on them and not you.
- He is not disappointed in you, at all. He sees the effort and the fear and the anger, and he can handle every emotion you have and will have.
- He is with you, just as much as he is with the one that's disabled at the moment. And
 your pain is no less than their pain, although so much of it is internal and not visible to
 those around you.

On the other side of years now of those panic-stricken months and months of dealing with recovery with my husband, I remember what it's like to take care of someone in need. And I remember wishing someone saw me and understood me and cared that I was tired and a bit spiteful at the circumstances. But I didn't have the courage to speak up, for fear I'd be judged or misunderstood.

If you're caring for a sick person, speak up. Talk to someone. Scream. Pray out loud. And for goodness sake, ask for a break and take it. There is NO SHAME in being tired from being worried. Weariness is a real thing, and it can settle in, even when we're doing good for others.

Don't you think Jesus grew weary of constantly being touched, asked, begged and persuaded to come here and go there, to heal every sick person in the town? Sure, he did. It's why he excused himself out into a boat or away in a garden, to cry, to pray, and to rest.

God knew the importance of rest. After all, he created a whole day for it, after creation. He said that rest was good. He tell us when we are weary to come to Him and he will give us rest. And weariness comes in all forms, but especially in the form of caring for the ill.

I'm praying for you right now, the ones I know that are caring for others, and it seems the caring will never end. And if you're not on my prayer list, leave your need below, and I'll add you to it.

I don't know if your friend or family member will recover fully. I pray that they do. Boy, do I pray for that miracle. And equally as important, I pray for your full recovery too, after your hands and feet slow down, your mind is at rest, and your spirit is renewed.

Sometimes, the best thing we can do is call out for help, whether or not others understand. He does. And he is just as excited to rescue those who are weary, as those who are sick. He's a good Father, like that, yes He is.

FRESH THYME – Light is Everything – by Marcy Lytle

We read this little book together at night before we go to bed, and we cannot see the text at all unless our lamps are on. And even then, we need more light to fully read correctly. And if we're reading in the broad daylight of sun streaming in the car window, we can both see just fine! It's amazing what light does for the eyes!

We know that it does the same job on photos. A little light from a filter changes the entire look of the image, taking it from blah and undefined, to bright and glorious with just the infusion of light! Light is essential at night when we come in from being out, and we step into a dark house. It illuminates our path, it reveals things that might make us stumble, and it enables us to get from the front door to the bedroom in one piece! Light arrives through our windows early morning, after the darkness of night, and lets us know that a new day is starting. It's cause for us to open our blinds and let its rays stream in, so that we can see the beauty of nature just outside our windows!

Light is everything!

- In the very beginning God created light and he commented, "It is good."
- Jesus states, "I am the light of the world." We are to be the light, as well.
- We will constantly stumble around unless we're reading His word, the light switch for our path.
- We are the only light to a dark world, a world that sees dimly and unclearly and not at all.
- The light He gives cannot be overcome by darkness. That's awesome to know and to believe.
- We can have relationships with each other that are healthy, if we walk in the light of love.
- Our eyes are the lamp of our body. This tells me we have the power to set the switch to light.
- When our hearts are clean, we no longer fear the light, the exposure. We welcome it.
- Light is armor. How so? Darkness flees at the sight of it.

I'm amazed when I see the sunlight emerge from behind the clouds. In the heat of the summer, that sunlight tans, it burns, it makes me uncomfortable, and I want to go in and hide away from its rays. But in the dead of winter, when it's cold and dreary, I want to bask in it, soak up its rays, and stay in it, if I'm outside all day. Sunlight is essential. It's always present. In fact, according to NASA, there is nothing more important on earth to us than the sun. Without it, the earth would be a hard ball or rock of ice.

It's the same with the light from the Son. Without him, we would live in darkness; stumble and fall, and fear every noise that we could not see. We would be of no hope to those around us, and we would be overcome even unto death. Without the Light of the World, we would be isolated because relationships would scare us, and we'd never venture out on paths unknown. Sin and all of our mistakes would keep us in darkness, because when the Light shines, all of our mistakes disappear. And without his light, we'd be open target to all of the critters that roam seeking prey in the middle of the night.

I'm thankful for the light of day. It reminds me once again that His promises are true. He set the sunrise and the sunset into motion, and they will continue until the end of the ages.

Next time you switch on a lamp or walk from the darkness into light, or lie down in the sun by the waves at the beach, think about how...

Light is everything.

And without it we cannot live effectively in this world, in our homes, or with ourselves.

See the photo above? The title of that still photo is called "Delicate devotion to the light."

FRESH THYME – Never Disappointed – by Marcy Lytle

I've been going to church a long time. And I've shared before the ups and downs of my experience. I remember loving every minute of serving, and then shaking after church was over because I was burned out. I recall lots of great relationships that I made with "church people" and then losing so many of them at an early age of 17, and being bitter for years. And finally, I've been personally offended by the words and actions of others, so much that I toyed with giving up church altogether.

I've written before on the benefits of taking kids to church, of attending as a family, of the great pluses of congregational worship and prayer and unity. But even all of that can become mundane, a chore, and a ritual that plays out over time as something on our to-do list, instead of our play list.

Today, I sometimes hear people state that a specific Sunday was blah or not that great, stating that the music was too loud, the sermon lacked power, or there were just so many out and the church looked sparse and sad. I myself sometimes look around to see who's there and judge the success of a Sunday on the number of bodies filling the seats. All of that makes me and my friends feel like we've wasted a couple of hours on a Sunday morning that we could have been doing something a lot more fun and a lot more productive!

Over the past few years, I've come to realize that there are really two things that have enabled me to never be disappointed when I step inside those doors. Seriously, when I focus on these two things, I never come away wishing I'd been elsewhere.

Here what I remind myself to do:

Come to worship. There's nothing like worship, personal, and with a Body. And it doesn't depend on whether or not the "right" songs are played, if the music or tempo is loud or slow, or who's leading. Oh, that can affect the intensity if we let it, but it can't squelch our personal worship. When songs are played, we can focus on the lyrics and the truth behind them. As we sing, we can give thanks with a joyful heart for the character of the God we serve. And respond. By all means, we can respond to the call to worship to lift up His name and praise him for all he's done. It does the heart, the body, the mind and the soul a world of good. And it pleases Him. And that is NEVER disappointing.

Come to bless others. Instead of wondering if she or he will speak to us kindly, ask about our family, or invite us to lunch, we can come through the doors only to give. We can look for newcomers, pray for those who look sad, speak to friends and ask about them, smile at everyone, and don't miss a person. And we don't have to even entertain one thought about whether or not someone is going to speak to us...instead we can speak to everyone we can. We can happily give of our gifts (encouraging words, acts of kindness, generous giving, etc.) and use them to their fullest, having prayed before church ever starts for an opportunity to be a blessing. That too is NEVER disappointing.

You see, we have it all wrong. We expect others to satisfy this need in us that they are never meant to satisfy. We want them to notice us, take care of us, and be a blessing to us, and we

also expect God to come down and answer every prayer and make our lives comfy and cozy...which of course, we all want! But the way to enjoy life and church, and a body of believers that are flawed just like we are, lies in the worship of Him and the service of others. And even a dull sermon won't be completely wasted when we're sitting there worshiping Him and praying for the one that's speaking to us all. Maybe he/she is having a bad day...and our prayers will bless their day.

It always has, and it always will be, about Him and about others.

Period.

And that is never disappointing.

FRESH THYME - Those Birds, Though – by Marcy Lytle

I was mowing this morning, as I do quite often, and there they were again. Those darn birds. There were three this time making squawking noises as they landed on the freshly cut grass right where I had just cut. As the mower neared them again, they flew away and then came back, again right where I just had mowed. This annoyed me, terribly. In fact, I realized that there are so many things that annoy me about birds:

- They're so impatient. Why can't they wait until I'm completely finished mowing and then swoop down to gather seeds or grass or whatever it is they need?
- They're so loud. I wish I could understand them, but they sure do squeal and make noise about whatever it is they're doing while swooping and landing and flying away once again.
- They're scary. I feel as though (if they wanted to) they could just dart right at my face and peck me to death (too many viewings of *The Birds* in my life...)
- They're ugly. Those big black birds with fat bodies and spindly legs gross. I wish they'd go away. Pretty red cardinals are pleasant to the eye, but not these big black pests!
- They're messy. I just get my car washed and head out to leave, and there it is. White goop right by the door handle. It makes me so mad that they have the audacity to poop in my space!
- They're intrusive. Have you been to a grocery store where a bird has sneaked in and just roams the aisles up and down, in the air and on the ground? Gross!
- They peck the tomatoes. This is the most annoying of all. We try to grow pretty red tomatoes for our salads and sauces, and we check the garden and see holes where their sharp beaks have been...where they don't belong!

The Bible has LOTS to say about birds and our observations of them.

- We're supposed to take comfort in his provision, when we observe how he cares for the birds.
- He created them and told them to increase...sigh...so maybe that's why there are so many!
- He values the birds and brought them into the safety of the ark before the flood.
- Some of the ugliest of all birds have a purpose to clean up the dead carcasses of road kill.
- God compares his care over us to the wings of a bird over her children, as she covers them all.
- There will be birds...even in heaven.

After all of that thinking above, I think I just put away the mower and realized how annoying we must be to God, because we are just like the birds that flitter around beside me while I try to do the work in the yard. We too squawk and grow impatient, and we're messy and intrude where we do not belong. And yet...HE LOVES US. He created us in his image and gave us value and worth. Not only that, he delights in each one of us.

Next time you're going about your day and something annoying gets in your way, think about this story about the birds and smile. Be encouraged that those birds will fly away once we near them with that big machine...they always do. But they'll return again to gather and build and give birth and fill the air. It's what they were made to do. And we have a purpose, too. If we just observe and learn and grow wise in patience and wonder and peace, under the shadow of His wings that cover and protect...just like those annoying birds do when they too get their nests built and cover their young.