

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

February 2018

TIPS

The Dressing – Red! – by Marcy Lytle

I love the color red. But I'm not necessarily a favor of all of the red hearts out there for Valentine's Day. However, red is everywhere and we may as well add this hue to our wardrobe for the month of February, leading into spring, right? What's your favorite shade of red? I like the darker shades, and I do not like pink, much at all. All of us are different with our likes and dislikes, so be bold and go for your faves!

Here are some pretty red things to consider...all from your local Target store.

Platform Shoes – Aren't these so cute? They will take you right out on date night, and on into the spring months. And they will look so cute with skirts and dresses, when the weather warms up enough to show your legs!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-dv-bryinna-platform-mary-jane-shoes/-/A-51913588#lnk=sametab&preselect=51819301>

Wallet- Look at this cute wallet on a string, and be sure to click so you can see the inside, as well! There's a place for everything! This cute wallet is super affordable, so you can carry it just when you feel like adding a pop of color to your drab winter wear that's still hanging around...

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-wallet-on-a-string-a-new-day-153-black/-/A-52692744#lnk=sametab&preselect=52632188>

A dress...or a top? – Dresses are so short these days, that's it's hard for me to find ones for my personal age. However, I often wear them as a top with skinny jeans! Why not? This pretty print with red hues mixed in is a great one, for just that!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-printed-knit-with-chiffon-sleeve-dress-studio-one/-/A-52731696#lnk=sametab&preselect=52563799>

Party blouse – This is called a party blouse, and I can see why! It's pretty enough, with all of the sleeve detail, to wear with a black skirt to a party or out to dinner, but it's also so cute with these fancy jeans, too! I love this blouse!

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-long-sleeve-party-top-who-what-wear-153/-/A-52901387#lnk=sametab&preselect=52724797&sneakTo=52901387>

Love Birds – Dress up a bench inside or out, with a love birds pillow! This doesn't have to just be enjoyed in February, the bird theme can carry on over into March and beyond, as spring approaches! Look around, and find a spot for these two love birds to roost!

<https://www.target.com/p/love-birds-throw-pillow-surya/-/A-50674900#lnk=sametab&preselect=50650025>

Beaded Earrings – Aren't these pretty? Try wearing a solid black dress, or even just denim, or gray...then toss on these beauties and you'll have a complete outfit! Look through your closet for that solid staple, and add this pop of color for the month of red!

<https://www.target.com/p/round-with-seed-bead-disc-and-bobble-beads-earrings-a-new-day-153-red/-/A-52922507#Ink=sameta>

For the Table – Staying in for Valentine's Day or date night or dinner for two? Check out this cute set of glasses for ten bucks, add a red tray for serving, and some candlelight! Just a few small items can take a drab table to dressy in just a couple minutes!

<https://www.target.com/p/large-handled-serving-tray-set-of-2-melamine-red-room-essentials-153/-/A-14996419#Ink=sameta>

<https://www.target.com/p/hello-love-jet-aime-2pc-stemless-wine-glasses-threshold-153/-/A-52717837#Ink=sameta>

Take a walk through your local Target and focus on the color red. Start with a budget and toss a few things in your cart that are in the shades from pinks to wines. Wear red, decorate with red, or eat something red. It's fun to have a reason to celebrate love with a bit of whimsy and charm...

Seven For You – Give a Little Love – by Marcy Lytle

Giving is so fun, isn't it? And Valentine's Day is all about love, which is synonymous with giving, right? It doesn't have to just be romantic gestures of boxes of chocolates, but we can give all sorts of thoughtful gifts to him, to her, to them, to the littles, or anyone at all! Giving doesn't have to involve elaborate spending, either. We don't have to empty our purses to show someone a little love.

Since Christmas was just a couple months ago, I'm going to share some cool finds out there that I saw, that might be a great idea for your gift-giving this month to your loves! They're all from World Market!

Tea Towels – These are great for a friend, or that mom who needs a little extra loving, or for a foodie friend. This beautiful succulent towel is a great idea, along with a small potted, live succulent to go with! Great idea, right?

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/succulent-kitchen-towel.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search>

Coffee and a Mug – I know, this is a standard gift, not very creative at all. But what about one that stirs the passion like this "Mr. Right" mug alongside the pouch of red velvet coffee? Add a note with an invitation to an early breakfast for two – just for you!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/mr.+right+mug.do?searchTerm=mr%20right%20mug>

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/world-market-red-velvet-ground-coffee.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search>

Tray for You – Maybe you don't have a Valentine, but that doesn't mean you don't get a love treat! Trays are awesome for home décor or serving up a snack with a friend, so treat yourself to this beautiful bouquet on wood!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/fortress+bouquet+wood+serving+tray.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

Shimmer Drops – I actually bought these earrings and thought they were lovely. I don't know anyone who wouldn't love a new pair of these for the upcoming spring season! And they're so affordable! If you want to add something more, check out this floral jewelry tiered tray! So pretty...

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/green-shimmer-linear-drop-earrings.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

String Lights – These wooden heart string lights would make a perfect gift to anyone, really. Include a note with the lights and of course, the batteries! Most of us don't spend our bucks on whimsical cuties like these, so give one to a friend!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/laser-cut-wood-heart-10-bulb-battery-operated-string-lights.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

Plum Teapot – I love this plum colored pot for tea! And any friend would love to receive it, I know I would! Add some special flavored teas, and offer to bring scones over for your next visit with her!

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/plum-flower-cast-iron-teapot.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

Tin of Cookies – Do you know an elderly friend who's alone this Valentine's Day, or a peer who's lost their true love? Show up with this tin in hand, sit down and open and share! So cute...

<https://www.worldmarket.com/product/loacker-mini-assorted-wafer-cookies-vintage-heart-tin.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn>

Selah's Style - Wedding Style Tips for every age.....by Selah Irwin

My family and I had the honor of attending the wedding of our very good friend Marcus and his fiancé (now wife) Erica! I thought I would share with you some fashion tips our family uses for getting our groove on at a wedding.

First upyours truly! My favorite part of weddings is the reception. I knew I would be hitting the dance floor, I wanted something comfy that I would still adore. My favorite store Target came through again! When I first laid eyes on this dress it was love at first sight. With its velvety soft touch on the inside but glittery and elegant exterior it makes for the perfect evening dancing dress! You snooze, you lose, so beware of the shoes you choose. Who wants to dance in heels? Not me. Luckily, I hit the jackpot and stumbled upon these glitter babies. My feet felt like a million bucks!

Do you have a teenage son who is not a huge fan of fancy? Compromise by letting him wear colored Levis with a blazer from H&M in the same tone. You will really make him happy if you let him wear his skate shoes, as long as the color coordinates. In the skate park or at the ball park, these nice skate shoes have it all.

You don't always have to pay the big bucks to have a great look. Did you know they sell very affordable cocktail dresses on Amazon (Muxxn)? My mom got this retro dress for \$30.00! She's a thirty dollar baller!

Aww.....aren't they adorable? Just look at my beautiful little cousins. When your kids are small and growing every day, it does not make sense to spend money for a dress used only at one occasion. Try to buy for the season. If the wedding you are attending is in the fall, buy a dress that will work for the Thanksgiving gathering. Likewise, if the wedding is near Christmas buy an ensemble that your kids can wear to Christmas Parties. Spring is very near, so these little ladies have no fashion fear. They can get double use out of the dresses by wearing them for Easter.

Weddings are always a great opportunity to get dressed up and look your best. I hope you have a very fashion forward February.

Hey, want to hear my favorite fashion joke? What jacket goes up in flames? A blazer!

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In the Kitchen – The Cast Iron – by Marcy Lytle

I love my cast iron skillet, except for keeping it clean and seasoned. That part's not the most fun activity in the world, but cooking in it and enjoying delicious meals out of it is! There's something old-fashioned, hard-working, and good-feeling about using the cast iron. Do you have one? It's a heavy skillet for sure, so your arms will get a workout lifting it, but it's a staple in my opinion...in the kitchen.

To keep my cast iron clean and seasoned, after each use I spread a bit of oil and kosher salt in the bottom and let it sit – then I wipe it out with paper towels – until it's clean. Never use soap on a cast iron skillet!

Here are three cast iron skillet meals that are pretty simple and scrumptious!

Skillet Nacho Dip

- 1 tsp olive oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c chopped red onion
- 2 T minced seeded jalapeno
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ T flour
- 2 tsp ground cumin
- 2 tsp chili powder
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup beef stock
- 2 cooked ground beef patties
- 1 cup unsalted canned pinto beans, drained
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup mozzarella cheese shredded
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Mexican blend cheese shredded
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped tomato
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped avocado
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups tortilla chips

Preheat broiler with rack in middle position. Heat oil in the cast iron over med-hi and add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup onion and the jalapeno to pan, saute til tender, about four minutes. Add flour, cumin, chili powder and cook 1 minute, stirring. Add stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium and stir in crumbled beef patties and beans, cook 2 minutes. Stir in mozzarella, cook 1 minute, remove pan from heat.

Sprinkle Mexican cheese blend over pan and broil 1 minute til cheese is melted. Sprinkle remaining onion, tomato, and avocado over top and serve with chips! Delish! (from *Cooking Light Magazine*)

Cheesy Beefy Cornbread

- 1 lb ground beef
- 1 pkg taco seasoning
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup self rising cornmeal

- ½ cup self-rising flour
- 2 eggs
- 1 can cream style corn
- ¼ cup canola oil
- 1 cup milk
- 1 med onion chopped
- 1 cup shredded Cheddar
- 1 jalapeno pepper, chopped (I took out the seeds)

Lightly grease the cast iron, place on med heat and brown ground beef with taco seasoning. Remove from heat, remove meat from skillet and drain. Preheat oven to 325. Mix cornmeal, flour, eggs, corn, oil, and milk in a bowl, and pour half of the mixture into the greased cast iron where the meat cooked. Top with meat, onions, cheese, and pepper. Pour remaining cornmeal mixture over top and spread evenly. Bake 50 minutes. Cool 15 min before serving. Yum... (from *A Skillet Full Cookbook*)

Apple Pie

- 2 pastry crusts (I used pack of two from freezer section at store)
- 5-6 cups pared and finely chopped apples
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- ½ stick butter, melted

Preheat oven to 350. Line skillet with one of the pie crusts. Stir cinnamon into sugar in a bowl. Alternate layer of apples with layer of sugar mixture (I layered three times). Add melted butter over top. Add top pie crust and pinch edges to bottom one. Cut slits in top to allow steam to escape. Bake on middle rack of oven about 60 minutes. (I didn't have any spillage or need for foil, but if you think you will, place foil under pan while baking).

(Use Granny Smith apples. You can place apples in salted water while chopping to keep them from turning – just drain well before using).

This turned out so well and easy – and tasty (with vanilla ice cream, of course!) (from *A Skillet Full Cookbook*)

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Tried and True – Those Plastic Bags – by Marcy Lytle

You know them well. They're hanging near the registers of the stores and they're a buck or two bucks. I'm talking about those oversized plastic bags with pretty scenes on them that are seasonal, floral, pictures of nature, or even just abstract art. I really like those bags, and more often than not, I opt to purchase one. I love them, for more reasons than just one...

On a hanger. I have a few of these bags hanging in closets where I store little stocking presents I pick up during the year. Just hang the bag over the hanger, and use it all year!

For your kids. We use these bags at Christmas time and give one to each family, or to the kids, for toting home their gifts. We use them at Easter, Valentine's, and for picnics – all for kids toys and goodies – so that things stay organized and neat.

Instead of giftwrap. If you have an oversized gift, then use one of these pretty bags as your gift bag! Not only will your friend like the gift inside, she'll be tickled to have a new bag for her collection as well!

By the front door. Find one that's pretty and matches your décor and hang by the front door. Inside store things you need to take next time you get in the car. For example, that sock hat he left at your house, those cookies you told her you'd share, that book a friend wants to borrow. Then just grab the bag and go!

In the car. We keep one of these bags in our car at all times. Usually it holds books or magazines, a box of Kleenex, a couple of pens, and maybe some walking shoes or a scarf – for cold evenings. It sits right in the middle of the floorboard in the back, and keeps everything corralled and off the seats and carpet.

In the garage. Hang one on a hook and inside keep things like Frisbees, bubbles, balls and other park toys...all for grabbing when you're headed out for fun with the kids. Since the bags are plastic, they're perfect for these type outings. (And in the summer, for poolside!)

In the closet. I like to have one of these sitting in my closet, to collect clothes as I discard them to give away. When it's full, it goes to Goodwill or Salvation Army. These bags are so much better than paper bags (they attract bugs!). And they're a bit sturdier, as well!

Do you have a stash of these bags? I get excited every time a new holiday rolls around, because I know there will be some cute new prints on the bags! And where I live, there are some stores that don't give you a bag for your items, so instead of paying 25cents for the paper version, I'd rather pay a buck for the pretty plastic!

HOME

Practical Parenting – The Tea Party – by Marcy Lytle

She received a tea party set for Christmas, with little plates, trays, tiny cupcakes, cloth napkins, and even tiny silverware. She asked me to set it up with her, while her doll sat nearby, awaiting her first bite of a pink sprinkled donut, served to her on a silver platter. I sat down and offered my own suggestions of how to set up the array, but she had her own ideas, to which I agreed to. It didn't take long to set up, feed the doll, hold out our pinkies, and then be done.

By now, our kids probably have a closet stocked full of gifts they got for Christmas, ones they love, and ones they've already discarded as "not fun." And it's tempting to set our kids in their rooms for hours, asking them to pretend play while we clean, catch up on work, or read a book. And that's good...sometimes.

However, it's also good to get out that toy and play with them.

Kids need to see how we imagine with them, talk in funny voices, and move characters across the room, or use a book or a chair for a fortress or a plank. They watch how we imagine, and it stirs up their imaginations, too!

We need to observe how our kids play and enter into their world, playing along, reading a book, setting up a tea party, or dressing a Barbie. Play releases stress!

He received a Paw Patrol Tower and was so excited to show me that he could barely talk. He wanted to demonstrate how Chase fit in the little car and careened down the roadway from the top to the bottom! This 2-year old went all over his room from toy to toy, showing me his very "own" set-ups that were not his brother's. They were all his.

It's good for him to pretend play with all of his new cars and animals, and for us to make dinner or talk to a friend. We all need alone time away from each other. That's good...sometimes.

However, it's also good to watch and listen and learn what makes him excited and watch what he can do!

Kids need to see our excitement and our wonder, as they demonstrate the fine art of lining up figures or pushing buttons to make things go. They watch and long for our approval and our applause.

We need to play with them, exclaim at how awesome it is that he built that all by himself, and observe his creativity that we didn't know he had!

How have we become a society that spends less than seven minutes a day talking to our kids? And yet they, and we, spend hours talking to our screens.

I didn't feel so good that day, and I am finding it not so comfortable to sit on the floor and play, and I wanted to just lie on the sofa and do nothing. But I could tell that they wanted interaction and interest and imagination. And those three I's were an easy give, weren't they? Just for a little while?

Let's play with our kids...for their sakes...and ours...even if our schedules get "off" for a while.

I Don't Do Teens – Their Biggest Fan – by Marcy Lytle

They're going to say you're hovering.

They're going to yell, "Stop being so nosy!"

They're going to want their space...without you in it.

Our teenagers go through this phase of growing up where they want to live their own lives, have their own opinions, and be with their friends without our instruction and input and interest. However, as much as they push us away, deep inside they love it when...

We ask, "How was your day today, and how did that test go?"

We comment, "Those shoes just make your outfit!"

We note, "I'm so proud of you."

One of the things I miss most about my mom, now that she's gone, is how she was interested in the little things in my life. I could call on any given day and tell her about a cute new pair of shoes I'd found on clearance that happened to match that dress I recently bought when shopping with her, and she'd always exclaim, "Oh, I can't wait to see them!" My mom absolutely loved to share in the littlest of successes, things no one else would really care about.

Yes, I remember thinking she hovered, was nosy, and was way into my space too much as a teenager. But as an adult and later in life, I became thankful for her interest, her love, and her attention to detail.

Our teens need our love and acceptance for who they are, especially when they aren't sure just who they are, yet.

Our teens need our nosiness when they're into something that's "not right" because it sets boundaries for them and lets them know we love them (even if they think at the moment we hate them.)

Our teens need us in their space when having members of the opposite sex over, for their own protection, when being alone could be dangerous.

Most of us know when the hovering and nosiness is too much, and we need to back off and let them grow up. And that's something where we parents have to find the balance. But when our teens are grown and gone, if we've been interested just enough, we'll be the one they phone for that tidbit of news, that promotion they got at work, or that excitement of an upcoming trip...all because we were their champion when they lived under our roof.

Go on. Be their biggest fan.

Our teens need to know we're for them and not against them, just like He is for us.

Tiny Living – Where We Are – by Leyanne Enterline

The New Year is rolling!

Brian and I were trying to think of a word for our new year, and decided to go with Trust or Faith.

Tiny living, as I've said before, is not for the weak! With many plans and ideas for our future but no definite timeframe, things are feeling even tinier!

Our plan was to live in the trailer another year then hopefully start building. However, with things costing well over what was planned for, funds ran out quickly. And with work not coming in like we thought it would, it seems that the light at the end of the tunnel is farther away now than ever.

We feel like this year is going to be a year that we need to remain faithful and trust that God will get us to where we need to be. It's so hard not knowing what the future will hold and so confusing at times. But all we can do is be in prayer, stay the Word, and praise and know that God knows our future and will have our back!

We are both self-employed, so there are times that are really busy and times that are really slow. We have so much that needs to be done on the property before the building can even start, but we don't want to go into major debt over it, so we have to wait. It's too easy nowadays to charge it to the card and get into debt. We've been there, \$40K in debt, in fact! And oh the stress that it causes is horrible! Praise the Lord he brought us through that and the home we had in California sold for the exact amount of debt we had, and we were able to pay it all off! We don't want to get into something like that again, so we are trying our best to be patient and enjoy where we are at now.

*We may not be getting the things done at the pace we would like them,
but it's all in God's timing and we will trust He has a plan,
and will have faith He will get us through all this,
at whatever timing he wants!*

Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him and He will make your paths straight."

Can I hear an amen?

Wow! I need to post those verses everywhere!

It's SO hard to remember these truths when we're in the midst of waiting! It's so easy to keep moving forward with our own plans, but what if that's not God's plan? We definitely need to slow down and ask God where he wants us to be and what he wants us to be doing. It may not be exactly how we planned, but he has the best plan for us!

So tiny living we will stay!

Praise the Lord we were given three extra propane tanks to keep us warm through this bizarre Texas freeze we've been having! The trailer sure does get chilly!

Life as We Know It - Pride and Prejudice, Mine – by Erica Simmons

This is the title of one of the great literary classics. There are two characters, one with too much pride and the other with too much prejudice, which almost cost them each other. On the eve of watching my boys turn 18, I found myself afflicted with both.

The first example deals with my pride. I had an idea for this month's article, thinking I'd interview my boys with the question, "What's the biggest thing I've taught you as a parent?" I thought this was a great idea and it would give me great material. However; I learned that in parenting like in teaching, I think I have a great idea until I present it to the children. Maybe it's because I put them on the spot and they couldn't come up with an example at the time, but I can tell you my boys' response was pretty humbling. As a parent, I like to think that I'm making these huge impacts on my children as I raise them. The good news is that even though they couldn't give me an answer when put on the spot, they do store examples away in their heart for when needed – just not when I ask them to share it with me.

When I came back in my room to sit down to write this story, I had a bruised heart, was feeling sorry for myself and thinking that I had made no impact on my children. That's when the Holy Spirit, as He always does, simply nudged me and told me that's just not what parenting is about. As I reflected over the lack of response from my children, I begin to think about the world that they live in and how it's different from the world that I grew up in. I realized the same God that guided me through childhood to a young woman to adulthood is the same God that will guide them through childhood to young men to adulthood. My part is to surround them with prayer (which I have), to lead by example (which I have), and to trust my God (which I do). Even though my pride may have been hurt when my boys could not give me an answer, I know they have all they need to walk their life for Christ and their Heavenly Father. And that's more than enough. Then, as He often does, my Father goes beyond to more than enough.

As Jerimiah and I we're coming back from my sister's house, he started talking to me. He began to share with me all the things that he's learned from me, like hard work, never giving up, and doing what is necessary to have the life that you want. I don't even know if he realized that he was answering the question that a week ago he couldn't answer. It made me realize all I had to do was look at what he was doing in his life to see what I had taught him with mine. He's a hard worker and God's favor is upon him when he goes to a new job. I'm blessed. I thank God for that opportunity, because as a parent I sometimes wonder if anything I'm teaching is getting through to my kids... and in this case it is!

Next up is my prejudice. As I was talking to the boys about celebrating their 18th birthday, I asked them what they wanted to do. They both said, "Get a tattoo." To describe the level of anxiety I felt is hard to do, so I will not try. I'm honest enough with myself to know that my views about tattoos stem from the views that others in my generation have about tattoos. I know that these views have changed over the last years and decades, but as a mom I worry about the stigma of tattoos. This is on top of the stigma of worrying about someone looking at my children's skin color and making judgments about them based solely on that, and I want to protect them. But mostly I'm letting my prejudice against tattoos drive me. Once again, I can lean on myself and my shortcomings, or I can lean on my Heavenly Father to guide me in truth only for me. This is one of those times where it will not be so easy.

This was about a week and a half ago, and I'm still not sure how to deal with the issue. I'm having a hard time letting go of the negative connotations that surround tattoos. The boys talk to

me about the tattoos being symbolic, but I just tell them they don't need a mark on their body to remind them of something that's so important in their hearts. I think it is important for me to clarify, that this is strictly about tattoos on *my* children. I have seen and I admire many tattoos on other people in my life. I know someone who has tattoos on his face, neck, arms and hands and I think the world of him. I also find myself wondering how much he has been judged because of them, too. This is nowhere near what Jordan and Jerimiah want to do, but I cannot escape the immediate, "No," that comes to my lips when they talk about getting tatted.

This decision became even harder when Jerimiah asked me to come with him when he gets his tattoo. I say it is because he is scared, but he says it is because he wants me there. After telling him that I am not sure I can go with him to do something I don't support, he tells me he would never do anything I would not support. This breaks my heart, because it is my issue to deal with. As a parent, I have always wanted them to not be afraid to be who they want to be. This is easier to do when the person in their way is NOT their mom.

Ultimately, the boys don't need my permission once they turn 18, but this issue is beyond that of age. They will be out on their own after college, when they don't even have to talk to me about their decisions. I know the relationship I have with them is such that they will in most cases need to talk to me about things, so this is about learning to respect their choices even when they don't match the choices I would make for them. This is only the first of, I hesitate to say, many.

I take comfort in knowing it is not our choices, but our love for God that will bind us together.

And so adulthood for my boys begins...

The Family Practice – Just Ask – by Brandi Oman

When I look back on childhood, I remember having fun, playing in the park, and the feeling of freedom as my bare feet hit the grass on a warm summer day. I can still feel how much I giggled, and how silly my daddy thought I was. Sure, I remember being in trouble a time or two and feeling so bad for whatever I had done. But now as a mom, I see a fuller picture. I see the dangers my kid faces every day he walks out the door, like the possible snake or any other creature out there that could potentially hurt him. I also see him having fun and laughing like I had done before. I see his feelings get hurt as some kids are really not the nicest and I have seen him hurt others as well.

Parenthood is a lot like a whirlwind where our children are centered right in the middle, can feel the chaos around them, but usually can ignore it. However, as a mom I usually feel like I'm the actual swirling effect going on around my kid. I want him to have fun, be safe, be kind, and be a leader, while wishing I could hold him and keep him safe.

So the question is,

“How do we get past all of our rational and irrational fears and let our kids be kids?”

- For starters, we know we are not the only ones who are feeling afraid and asking questions. It's easier to go through scary things when we aren't alone.
- Secondly, our heavenly father loves us and protects our children...so putting our fears in the hands of God may take some of the stress off of us and in its place bring peace; **we just have to ask for it.**
- Thirdly, we can take baby steps ourselves. It is okay to let go a little bit at a time.

There is not one mother out there that is like you, so do what you need to do in a reasonable fashion. People have suggestions, opinions, and ideas. Sometimes they are right on the money and sometimes they are a little left field, so do what you will. God chose you and me to be mothers to our children, and God doesn't make mistakes. Remember, it is okay for moms to make mistakes! Parenthood doesn't come with a handbook. We will be working on the finished piece until the day we die, and the process just gets better and better as we gain more knowledge.

I have a 7-year-old, so that means I have been in this motherhood business for a lucky seven whole years. This is the most difficult, rewarding, mentally challenging, but best job I have ever had. I never want to quit. I just want a break from time to time. God has always provided, though. Honestly, I just ask him for help.

I know. I keep saying, "Ask God for help," but in parenthood I take it from the true expert who made each and every one of us in his image, so He's the best resource there is!

Lastly, I would like to bring up that when we teach our children to love God, the main task and goals that God assigned us to is complete.

God bless us all!

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YOU

Strengthening Your Core - When the Needles Drop – by Marcy Lytle

Remember real Christmas trees? We still opt for the real version, but many of our friends do not. However, over the past holiday season, we noticed our tree quit drinking water fairly soon after we set it out for decorating. And by the time January 1 rolled around, the needles were dry and starting to drop. That was our signal to remove the lights, the decorations, and toss the tree out – before it became a hazard in the house!

Every year, we add some powder to the basin of our tree, so that the life is prolonged, but every year the tree still gets dry. We keep the basin full and check it daily, so that the tree stays vibrant and green, but by the next month, it's starting to lose its original appeal. And finally, when we hear the "clink!" of a falling ornament to the floor, we look up and see that the limb that once supported that ornament is now droopy and sad.

Trees are meant to remain in the ground, in order to survive, right? They have roots that run deep, and these roots search for water. So placing a cut tree into a basin of shallow water is bound to be a short-lived stay for any evergreen.

I thought of that verse from Psalm 1, one of my favorites, that says:

But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

Notice, the verse says "streams" of waters, not basins of water!

We cannot cut ourselves off from flowing water and expect to thrive very long, even if we look so pretty and all decorated up with lights and tinsel! The beauty of a live Christmas tree is short-lived. Beautiful, yes. But that beauty fades in a very short amount of time.

As I looked at my sad little tree and undressed it and tossed it out for pickup, I thought about staying hydrated with living water this year. No one else cuts me off from that living water but myself. I get too busy to drink, withdraw because of hurts, or just decide to coast on my own strength...until the needles start dropping.

That's an indication that I've been away too long from that living water that sustains and yields fruit.

What is that living water? It's His word to me, in the scriptures. It's his word to me, in songs of praise with others. It's his word to me, in the middle of the night when I awake and am alone with Him. It's his word to me from others, who speak encouraging life into my soul.

If you didn't have a live Christmas tree this past holiday season, perhaps you have potted plants or other greenery that has now suffered the brutal winter, lack of water, or winds that tore and destroyed. Or maybe you feel like that yourself – all withered and sad.

Drink up! Dig deep!

And don't settle for basin water that runs dry, when the living stream is nearby...

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Under the Influence – Happy Me – by Marcy Lytle

I cut my own hair. I do. And for years I never confessed that to anyone, for fear of what they might think, or that they might start inspecting my hair for unevenness and mistakes. And sometimes, I listened to other women talk of their salons and their haircuts, as if it were a competition to see who could find the best place, the best cut, and the cutest most enviable style! I wanted nothing of that!

However, my own experience with salons (and I tried them all – from cheap to pricey) left me completely dissatisfied every time. I paid the bucks, then went home and cut my hair all over again. You see, I have fine, wavy hair and it just doesn't lay like the pictures I cut out from the magazines, and it just doesn't respond to hair products like thick coarse hair does. I told my hairdressers this, but they still gooped and blew and combed, until when I left I didn't recognize who I was! I had a "set" "do" and I didn't like it at all!

Why are we afraid to be different and do what suits our needs? Since I've been cutting my own hair, I've realized that I can do it! Oh, it's not perfect, and it might be uneven at times, but I like it that way! I don't prefer hair that is set and styled. I like a messy look, and that's what I get for myself. I've finally settled into being confident in my own ability to wear my hair like I want to wear it. And let me tell you, it's liberating!

What do you hide from your friends?

- Maybe you shop at the dollar store for home décor, because you're creative, but you fear others will think you're cheap.
- Maybe you indulge in a little bit of chocolate each day while your friends shun and are critical of all things sweet.
- Maybe you enjoy a good Hallmark movie, but some of the ladies around you say they're sappy and stupid.
- Maybe you pray silently, but you see those women pray so well and aloud and with words that surely reach the heavens!
- Maybe your kids aren't making straight A's so you stay away from conversations of moms who have kids that do.

Why do we do this to ourselves? It's our crazy minds that convince us that we won't be approved of, liked, or thought well of, if people find out the real lives we live.

Truth be told, once we confess and stand up for who we are, most women will relax and be who they are around us, as well. And if they don't – if they point a finger and laugh – then let them. That's their problem.

I watched hairdressers as they combed and snipped, and I purchased a pair of haircut scissors. I own a nice mirror in which I look to see if the back of my hair is even. I wash my hair and dry it, looking for loose hairs I might have missed. And I feel satisfied and happy when I'm done trimming, and even happy that each time it comes out a little different than before.

Stand up. Applaud those who visit the hairdresser, or shop at designer stores, or eat salad 24/7. But don't be sucked into hiding away your own talents and preferences just because you don't fit the norm.

Normal.

Cut that word out of your vocabulary and replace it with happy.

Healthy Habits – Speak Up – by Marcy Lytle

Sometimes we're tired and run down, feel helpless and hopeless, and no one knows but us. We become grumpy, irritable, withdrawn and downright mean all because we're exhausted and refuse to ask for help. It happens to women all the time. Somehow, we think we can do it all, serve everyone, make every meeting, and still land dinner on the table by 6 o'clock. And we never think to do something as simple as phone a friend...

1. When you need a break from the kids for just a few hours, phone a friend to ask for a swap.
2. When you feel lost in a sea of disorganized chaos, think of that friend who loves organization, and ask for an afternoon of her time and expertise. I bet she'll jump at the chance to give your drawers a makeover!
3. When you are discouraged with life in general, text or call a friend that you know will listen and offer encouragement, not judge and shake a finger.
4. When work is unbearable, at home or in the market place, ask a friend to pray with you – just something simple – and listen and receive His peace.
5. When love is complicated and your marriage is teetering, drop to your knees and phone that friend upstairs – yeah – Him. He cares about you more than you can imagine.
6. When you feel too ill to cook dinner, ask your husband or one of your children to step up, or phone for delivery, and don't feel one ounce of guilt about it!
7. When your schedule is too busy and too full, use one of those apps like Instacart, and have your groceries delivered. I've done this, and it made my day!
8. When your parents are aging or gone, and your grief is shaking you to the core, speak up. Ask for prayer, or for a friend to just spend time with you...and receive their friendship as a gift.
9. When you just need a break and some fun, phone a friend and ask her to join you for lunch or an afternoon movie or a shopping spree for a couple hours. And enjoy yourself!
10. When you're at your wit's end trying to plan that next birthday party or event, phone a friend who thrives and has resources she'd love to share!

There are too many times that we suffer healthwise all because we refuse to ask for help. It's hard to ask for help when we know our friends also lead busy lives, have their own set of frustrations, and deal with struggles as well. But more often than not, our friends are happy to give and help. Giving feels good. And we don't always have to be the one giving. We can receive once in a while, and let others enjoy the blessing of giving.

Go on. Just ask.

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Get Fruity – In True Form – by Gabbi Crowhurst

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”
Galatians 5:22-23

Hi friends! Thank you for joining me again this month as I attempt to learn more and more about each of the fruits of the spirit. I hope you have been taking the challenge along with me! This month I have been learning and experiencing many things about goodness.

Biblestudytools.com defines this word saying, “Goodness in man is not a mere passive quality, but the deliberate preference of right to wrong, the firm and persistent resistance of all moral evil, and the choosing and following of all moral good.” I love this explanation. As Christians we are called, as it says in Luke 9:23, to daily pick up our crosses and follow Him. The cross analogy refers to anything hindering us from our journey with Christ. And most often times, what hinders me is my desire to stray from goodness.

Over the past month, I have been particularly tempted in many different ways, one of which was a longing to go back to past addiction. Another was choosing to step back from a relationship in order to realign myself with God and reconnect with Him. Even another was hearing about things some friends of mine had done and having to consciously choose to not simply accept what they were doing was okay. This month has stretched me in my values, in denying my desires, and pushing through pain to receive more of God’s presence. There are a lot of personal details that I don’t want to get into from the lessons I have learned, but here’s my biggest take away and it is really valuable:

*Putting myself in position to experience God’s goodness
sets me up to choose right over wrong when trials come my way.*

Let me explain. My strength during moments where I need to make a moral choice comes from remembering that God has been good to me, so I want to show Him my love in return through following the path of righteousness. When I was tempted by an old addiction, I remembered how kind and good God was to heal me from it in the first place. When I chose to take a step back from a relationship to spend more time with God, it was because I knew life walking close with God was so far better than occasional “visits” with Him. When some friends shared with me about some of the things they thought were acceptable, I was able to say, “No, I don’t live by that standard,” because I know that God created life to be abundant without having to give into brokenness.

I believe so strongly that the only way I have any kind of goodness inside of me is because God has shown me His goodness over and over again.

I urge you all to live in a dear friendship with God so that you may feel how good He is.

When we do this, His light will cast out all darkness within us, renew us with abundant life, and change our hearts toward His ways—and that is our truest form of goodness.

A February Prayer
By Ginny Hurley
(based on Psalm 37)

Trusting in You, Lord
Faithful One and True
My heart is fixed on Your promises
My eyes remain on You

What I desire the most
You provide beyond my dreams
My utmost delight and pleasure
Is safely in Your arms

You are the dawning of my day
My bright and shining star
My hope remains in You
The surety of my days

Quietness invades my heart
It's strong and pure within
When I seek Your face
You never disappoint

A life lived with You
Overflows with joys delight
No matter what takes place
My haven safely stays

My love for You
Dives deeper still
Within an ocean's depths
Tumult and wind are turned to peace

No matter what the circumstance
Your arms are wider still
They hold me tight
Whether morning or dark night

More than enough
Has always been my song
My enemies disappear
Your watch is always clear

Faithful lovers inherit all
They dwell in peace on earth
The love You show
My rock my strength

I have been young
Now I am old

Never have you forsaken
Those who love You well

Forever I will love You
Forever You are mine
My heart was taken
Long ago

You, oh, Lord
Are the One in whom my heart dwells!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – The 14th – by Charissa Corbin

The minute Christmas ended, I started seeing Valentine's Day items in all the stores, with red hearts on every shelf! Now, it's February, and Valentine's Day is just a couple of weeks away!

This holiday seems to be split down the middle. Some people despise it (even if they have a date), and some people soak up all the cheesiness it brings.

I have to admit that I am among the latter. I like the bouquet of flowers, the acknowledgement of how much I'm loved, indulging in chocolate and a romantic dinner. My husband is the opposite. He just believes Valentine's Day is just a ploy for Hallmark and other industries to make a lot of money, and that we don't need a dedicated day to tell each other how much we are loved.

Touché...but I still like Valentine's Day, and he knows it.

One of our most memorable Valentine's Day was back in college. We had only been dating for a couple of years, our pocketbooks were pretty empty, and we were in the midst of spring training for our sports. We had decided that with our limited budget and time, we would just meet at Taco Bell and make the best of it. I showed up in my volleyball practice uniform, hadn't showered, and I saw Matt sitting in a corner booth. There was a lit candle on our table, a single rose hanging from a vase, and packets of Taco Bell sauce that read "I love you" and "Will you be mine?" My heart melted and our fast food fare was by far better than any \$100, five-course meal.

As you plan for this day (or not), remember that some of the simplest ideas leave a profound impact. You don't need to break the bank or stress over creating an unforgettable night.

Just spend time together.

This year, my husband and I are going back to Taco Bell with our daughter in tow. I know we won't be able to recreate our date from 11 years ago, it definitely will be fun remembering that night and creating new memories.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Date Night Fun – The Shape of the Heart – by Marcy Lytle

Heart boxes on the shelves are quite dazzling, aren't they? They're everywhere, and with good reason. February is the month that hosts Valentine's Day. Whether we like it or not, whether we're romantically involved or not, we're hit hard with the shape of red and pink hearts everywhere we go! And we can enjoy it or shun it, but it's still there for the entire month...

The 14th is only one night in the month of February, but why not look into the shape of the heart for date night all month long? I'm not talking about indulging in a box of chocolates every time we go out, but rather taking a look at other ways to focus on the heart!

Pancakes, anyone? Why not have a breakfast date with heart-shaped pancakes? And wouldn't it be fun to include the candy hearts with phrases on our trays, and send each other messages while we're eating? Plan a morning where you can get up together and make them. Click on this link to see how to pipe your batter into the shape of a heart, then fill the inside, and cook! Of course, you'll need strawberries to go alongside. Look on your playlist and find some romantic music to play while you enjoy your heart shapes together. (This can be a great family idea too, with the kids!)

<https://www.marthastewart.com/318925/heart-pancakes>

Fondue for Two – Melt both of your hearts alongside melting cheese and oil in fondue pots! If you have the money and want to spend it, go out for fondue. But if you want to stay in, you can purchase cute fondue pots for not very much! Once you use your fondue pot, you'll want to do it again and again. For about 30 bucks you can get a simple one from Target. One of the easiest fondues is chocolate, dipping chunks of pound cake and fruit and even brownie bites inside! Start with a simple salad for dinner – then indulge away as your hearts (and your chocolate) are melted together!

<https://www.target.com/p/oster-174-3-qt-fondue-pot/-/A-51464779#lnk=sametab&preselect=51129782>

<https://pinchandswirl.com/italian-chopped-salad-two/>

Hearts around Town – Look ahead of time for the shape of hearts around town, and visit these places and take snapshots! For example, enter a store and take a picture by heart displays, or businesses with "heart" in the title or a heart on the sign. Hand each other a brown paper bag (that you've both decorated!) for filling throughout the night, as you stop in a dollar store, a convenience store, a discount store, a bookstore, etc. with a cap of say \$20 each! Hand it to each other "from the heart" as the evening winds down. Since you're spending money on your bag of gifts, opt for fast food from the heart – like sandwiches from a deli – and bring along a heart-shaped cookie cutter for shaping them before you bite! Then feed each other the edges! You'll laugh the night away, which is good for the shape of both of your hearts! (I love this idea for decorating the bags – check it out!)

<http://inthechildrensroom.blogspot.com/2013/01/flannel-friday-valentine-tree-craft.html>

Red Velvet, Yes! – When's the last time you indulged in red velvet? What about red velvet brownies? You can either make these ahead of time and pack them in a pretty tin, or make them together! Since you're indulging in sweets, make your date night about getting your hearts in shape through activity! Choose a path for walking, or a place for dancing (it can be in your own family room!), and spend a little energy before you indulge. And why not wear something red velvet for the evening, as well? Check out these pretty chokers from Target. Finally, purchase a piece of red velvet material and roll it out for him, as you announce all of the things you love about him and he walks toward you for the evening! Fun!

<https://www.target.com/s/velvet+choker+necklace>

<https://www.duncanhines.com/recipes/brownies/jilltaylor86/red-velvet-fudge-brownies/>

A Restful Respite – Nothing does a heart better than rest, am I right? And sometimes, we're just too tired for a full date of activities! Make your date night all about a restful heart. Start with light reading. Head to the bookstore or take a couple books from home, and read in the car together, parked under a tree with full view of a city or country – whichever you prefer. You could even read to each other! Lay your seats back and take a nap, holding hands, while you do. Find a quiet coffee shop and sip and smile, just looking at people and into each other's eyes. Finally, find something in black and white from long ago on Netflix, and watch it quietly together...without saying a word. How about *The Lady Vanishes* – a Hitchcock thriller?

<https://www.bestmoviesbyfarr.com/articles/black-and-white-netflix-movies/2015/05>

Don't pine away this month because he's not planning a big outing for you and whisking you away on a cruise! Don't sit alone and do nothing because you're depressed without a boyfriend or husband. And don't let the month go by without doing something to bless your heart...and his...or a friend's...

After 30 Years – On Purpose and Intentional – by Marcy Lytle

Back when my husband and I first married, there were lots of cars with full front seats. Not so much, now. I chose to sit right in the middle of the front seat so that I could be next to him, wherever we went. And I remember us both noticing when we saw older couples still sitting together, instead of opting for opposite sides of the car, we stated that would be us when we were old and gray.

Fast forward a few decades now, and we have no choice but to sit apart. There's this thing called a console between us. I don't have the option of scooting closer to him while we drive...but I do have lots of other options to keep us connected.

Another thing I've noticed among the long-time married crowd is that they often they walk apart, sit across the room from each other, and sometimes sleep in different beds. I get it. Sometimes, we have to choose comfort and rest. However, I also notice that it takes purposeful actions to keep from slipping away to the other side of life...so to speak...in our marriages.

Recently, it was really cold for several days, and we stayed in a few nights. We opted to read trivia cards – something we love to do – and we decided to sit on the hearth of the fireplace, right in front of the warmth of the flame – together. It was a simple choice, but rather than sit on the sofa at opposite ends or in our two chairs with a table between us, we sat right by each other as we read and played the game. I found myself gazing into his eyes and noticing his handsomeness all over again.

I'm thankful that my husband is good about being purposeful in our connection:

He grabs my hand during movies, as soon as we're done with our snacks. We snuggle closely together, and we enjoy that connection.

He opens the car door for me often, and I appreciate his kindness and thoughtfulness toward me.

He stops to embrace and hug me before he leaves for work, and when he arrives home.

He holds me at night, and rubs my back – the best massage, ever!

However, I've found that I too need to be attentive to him. It's so easy to slip into married life sans kids and lose that physical connection if we're not careful.

I try to catch his eye across the room and give him a wink.

I compliment his look or the way he walks, or his strong hands that hold me.

I thank him for his love and care and willingness to choose me above all others.

I give thanks daily to God for the blessing that he is to me, and ask for open eyes to see how to bless him more.

Just like any relationship with a friend, a co-worker, and even our relationship with Him, we can become settled, irritated, unforgiving, lazy, and downright indifferent to each other over time...if we let life get in the way. And just like we have to stoke the flames of love with Him through worship, reading his Word and adoration of who He is, we also have to purposefully stoke the flames of love with our spouse as we grow older together.

Sometimes we do sit in different chairs to watch a movie on television, but other times we stand up and move to the sofa, grab a blanket and snuggle together with our hands entwined, my head on his shoulder, and the scent of his cologne close enough to cause me to lean in a little closer...and breathe...

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ENCOURAGEMENT

Saddle Up - Soul Stillers – by Melissa Critz

We have all heard it. It's good to have times of silence - to let our ears rest in order to let our brains have a break.

Right now, as I sit here and type, I can hear *Jeopardy* on the television in the kitchen and *Seinfeld* on the television in the family room. I can hear several of my grown kids talking as they are home for the weekend. I can hear the water flow through the pipes as the clothes washer is running and the freezer is making ice. Outside, I can hear an airplane soaring overhead. I can also hear the buttons click as I type. So much noise coming at me all the time – from all angles and in so many differing ways.

During the weekdays in the mornings, I usually try to have a quiet house for just a bit. Just because or sometimes I need to get some reading done or some gaming taken care of (yes, I am a gamer). Having a quiet house is not normal for me. I have always had noise around me having had four kids all within six years of each other and being that we home schooled them. I am used to noise. I like to have the television on in the kitchen in the late afternoon as it helps me gauge my time with getting chores and dinner started and, well, yes, I am a news/weather junkie. But I do know that I need to turn it off and let the quiet reign.

Have you done this lately? If so, what have you found?

I will share what I have found. I still hear the quiet. I feel my ears searching for something, trying to find something to listen to. Sometimes I feel my mind wonder and honestly, I cannot focus. Sometimes, I start to worry and my mind starts perseverating on an issue and I think the worst. Sometimes, I start with praying and then I rabbit trail in my mind to so many other things like pressing chores or phone calls or appointments. It may be the years of being used to noise all around. It may be my lack of self-discipline in making my home quiet for longer periods of time.

What do I surmise from this? I was seeking the Lord on this, as I know quiet must be a good thing. This is what I heard – yes, in the quiet of my mind from Him.

Quiet doesn't have to be noiseless. Quiet may mean more about being at peace and rest in your soul. Noise can be all around you but is there a quiet in you?

This really made me think deeply. I came up with two things about quiet:

1. Of you are dealing with the actually physical issue of quiet and your mind wanders when the stillness is so great, then play some soft music either via headphones or with a musical instrument. Make the noise that's around you be noise that brings peace so that you can be in the quiet. Then you can think or focus. Maybe you are a student and need to study and need to have quiet but not solid stillness. Use the fan for white noise or use instrumental music. Sometimes the solid stillness is just too much quiet. Practice what it takes for you to focus on what your task is with something that will bring you peace.
2. The other quiet is in your soul. You live in a world of noise from traffic in the city to crickets at night. Noise is all around you. You cannot turn off the traffic. You cannot turn off the crickets. But you can learn what brings quiet to your soul amidst it all. What is it for you? Some people turn to things of this world (and if

we are honest here, we all have to some degree) – things like spending money, or drinking in excess, or judging others, or neglecting others in our life, or, well it goes on and on. Does this bring our souls peace? May I suggest some things to try to bring quiet to your soul? Talk to your Heavenly Father – you can do this ANYTIME and ANYPLACE in the loudest place. Seek Him in His Word and let Him speak to you. Seek out a friend, someone you trust, and talk and share – have a coffee date. Write out your thoughts – write to someone with no intention of mailing it, write to yourself, write to God. Play an instrument and sing it out. Cuddle up with your sweet pup or kitty or go groom your horses (one of my soul quietners). Find that something that will bring quiet to your soul.

David played the harp for Solomon. That brought quiet to him. What brings quiet to you? I challenge you to find this. Respond to this article and share with others – we are here to help each other. And if you need to know God, the one who loves you even before you were a thought in this world, who has loved you since the beginning of time, then message me. I would be happy to share Him with you. He loves you and wants quiet in your soul.

Words of Wisdom - What's In It for Me? – by Sofia Herrera

John F. Kennedy once said,
“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

As human beings, we live in a world where we constantly need to be entertained. It's always about *me, me, me*. Instead of seeking out what we can do for others, we're constantly looking for what others can do for us.

Philippians 2:3-4 says,

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.
Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

This is something I try to live by, but it's hard. Oftentimes, I get so swept away in myself and the things that I want that I forget to put my desires aside to love and serve other people. Throughout my life (especially in high school) I entered each relationship wondering, “What's in it for me?” “What can this person possibly add to my life that I can benefit from?” As I'm out of high school now and have started facing the real world on my own, I've been able to see that just as I'm going through my own problems, so are other people.

We're all *a/ways* going to be experiencing something difficult throughout our lives at one point or another; and if we just wait around to be served by others or if we look to others to fix our problems, it's never going to happen. All relationships take work, and it can be very easy to blame or walk away from them when things seem to be going south. But just because we don't get our way, doesn't mean we should walk away.

I've found out that the same thing goes for my relationship with God. Time after time, I've expected Him to constantly “do” for me, forgetting that I was put on this earth to serve Him and others, and not just satisfy my own needs. I can become bored in my circumstances and want to just give up. But God doesn't give up. Sometimes, I become blind to the works of God and begin to pity myself in my situations, thinking that nothing ever goes my way. Too quickly I overlook what I have and all that He has done for me.

Imagine if God did decide to one day give up on us and walk away. We give Him so many reasons to do so every day. We would serve no purpose; and then what would we have to say about things not going our way?

1 Samuel 12:24 says,
“But be sure to fear the Lord and serve Him faithfully with all your heart;
consider what great things He has done for you.”

I knew that something had to change for me at a very early time throughout my high school years. I found that if my goal as a Christian is to ultimately be more like Christ then I should not seek to be served, but to serve. I came to see that it's not always about me. Instead of looking to others, I looked for ways to serve others even if I was given no recognition.

Without God we would have no reason to walk this earth, and if He didn't exist we would serve no purpose as Christians to become more Christlike. It is because He does for us that we are able to be more like Him.

It is through God that I now ask not what you can do for me, but, "What can I do for you?"

Firmly Planted – Simply Reveal – by Dina Cavazos

For me, the end of 2017 and start of the New Year have been a time of transition and change. Half my kitchen is still in boxes from a remodel gone awry that started before Thanksgiving; a new project requiring new skills has come up, taking time and attention from the garden; but the hardest has been transitioning from one church home to another—a decision that was difficult but necessary, hurtful and yet healing. This story, however, isn't about the agony of change...it's about a new approach to change.

As I ponder the current state of things, I see a parallel: the boxes of kitchen items are like the invisible boxes containing “my stuff”—emotions, desires, thoughts, and plans. They both occupy space, visible and invisible. They're both filled with things needful and unneedful I've yet to unpack. Until I sort through them and put the needful things in their places and the unneedful in theirs, they're creating clutter and a bit of confusion.

Despite the discomfort of change the boxes represent, I know I'm on track...simplifying and downsizing has been a continuing process for me, so this serves to move me farther along. I'm letting the requirements of each day determine what I remove from the boxes and put away; this helps me decide what I really need to keep. I **like** things less crowded in the cabinets....*do I really need that many glasses and bowls?* What is actually useful and necessary, for beauty or functionality, in this blessedly simple life I'm trying to create is revealed through the process.

Like the boxes I dig through and walk around every day, the stuff in the invisible boxes of my being is *there*. I can't even clearly identify or define everything in there, but that big **I**, Self, wants to *do* something with it. The changes I'm transitioning through are a disturbance in the waters, so to speak, and my inclination is to try to set the boat right. Shift to the left, shift to the right, bail out some water: take some action, choose a direction, do a new thing. But this time, I'm taking lessons from what's happening in my physical life. This time, my peace isn't in *doing*. This time, my peace is in *waiting*—letting the process happen, waiting on God to **reveal** the way, trusting he'll show me and make it clear—just as day by day, I'm letting the flow of my daily life reveal the items I need to keep and put away.

Less clutter helps me see the things that matter. Because, after all...I only want what is beneficial, useful, lasting, and truly meaningful to be in my life—to follow *his* plan, not my own, to do the things *he* has ordained for me that will last forever. I thank him for boxes, for lessons, for change...for being relentless in his goodness and love, and faithful to his word.

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1 Corinthians 3: 13

Each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.

Moving Forward - Like a Little Child – by Pam Charro

Matthew 18:3 (Jesus) says,

"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

I wonder exactly what Jesus meant when he said that. I have heard many great suggestions: more trusting, less burdened with worry and stress, less controlling, better able to give and receive love. More simple.

And all of this sounds great. I'm sure it's all true, but I wonder if it might be even more personal than a simple set of traits.

I always love my time with the Lord, but certain "dates" with him really stand out in my mind and heart, like times when I was especially thirsty for something new and different from our usual time together. So instead of sitting in my usual spot at the usual time, I have set aside several hours for him with no agenda whatsoever. I would just tell the Lord, "Wherever you want to go and however long it takes, I am yours today."

So far on these dates, we have ended up wandering around outside, where I can forget about everything else and am free from interruptions. It has been during those special times that he best reminds me just how deeply he knows me. That he formed and knew me even as a child, even before I knew him. He will bring back very old memories and then say, "Even then, I was there and I had plans for us to be together." It enables me to give him those parts of myself that I wasn't even aware were still there, and that are precious to him. I have also found during these times that I have a childlike awe of nature, almost as though I had never seen flowers and trees and leaves before. It is exhilarating to feel such a new awareness of the miracle of life.

So I wonder if, in addition to all of the great qualities little children possess, Jesus also wants each of us to offer our own little child to him. The child that never actually goes away but can get covered up over the years. The child that is able to see newness of life every single day and be amazed by it.

The child he created to be with him forever.

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Real Stories – Change – by Elizabeth Huss

Life is a journey fraught by constant changes which everyone experiences. We truly experiences *seasons of life*. Most of us recognize these changes and accept them at different rates and degrees calling them maturing or decline, depending on how they impact us. Some of these changes creep up on us slowly and we really don't notice. I'm reminded of the time when I told someone that my husband was the blond up front. I realized that his hair was a perfectly beautiful white only when my friend said, "What blond? I only see a man with gorgeous white hair."

There are times when changes are very sudden and the profound impact lingers the remainder of our life. Some examples of that would include death, divorce, job change, and illness to name a few. For me such an event was an extreme, extensive injury. My car was hit, put into a spin, deploying the air bags and knocking me out. Then the car was catapulted into a cement pole on the driver's side, crushing me, and rendering me unconscious. I did not regain consciousness for some time and have no memory of the events leading up to the accident. The last thing I remember was getting new shoes for my trip to Israel the next day, but this change put me in a whole different world for nine weeks. I was totally unaware of first three weeks after the event, and other than two visions of heaven, I have no memories of the intensive care unit where I was cared for, for over three weeks. I consider this time to be my heavenly journey.

The first vision was at the scene of the accident when one of my broken ribs punctured and collapsed my lungs, causing physical death. Not breathing is incompatible with life and the EMT crew were able correct it. Jesus was there with me guiding me and comforting me in the turmoil and chaos I was feeling, giving me a profound peace. I was aware of an amazing marvelous light that I cannot describe and it brings me to tears just writing about it. His love and peace enveloped me and, I believe, gave me strength.

The second vision occurred when I was on my way to surgery to remove my ruptured spleen. I was bleeding out, with my vital signs going away. In this vision, I was walking into the throne room of God. I saw my husband (who had died a couple of years before) talking with Jesus. He turned and looked at me and smiled. He walked over to me, kissed me gently, and said, "It's not your time yet. You must go back."

Being an RN, I realize my injuries should have killed me. It is a miracle that I am alive, and my recovery has also been a miracle. I recovered fairly quickly and much more completely than the usual. I had a fractured skull, ribs, sternum, pelvis, right leg and ankle, and a crushed right hand. In the natural, I should not be able to walk, talk or think.

However, God has restored me.

I still have reminders of the trauma, especially when the weather changes. Most people can't tell that I have had such an experience. A nurse came to me just before I was sent to rehab in another town and told me an amazing story. She told me she came to see the "miracle." She said I was the talk of the hospital because of the attentive care of my family and friends. My

daughter, a social worker, never left the room as she played Christian music and read from the Bible on a regular basis. My friends came and prayed over me, laying hands on me and singing to me. My son, a nurse anesthetist, talked to the staff regularly about my care. The nurse also told me of a friend who had introduced her to Jesus in my waiting room when they talked about miracles.

Yes, I am changed physically, mentally and spiritually - some for the better and some "not so much."

This I am confident about that "all things work together for good" in God's economy (Philippians 4:4.) I am also confident that God does NOT change! He is always the same yesterday, today and FOREVER. He is a loving, caring life giving source for all.

He is LOVE.

What courage these truths give!

With this experience I have learned to better live life as it comes, especially as I age, lose those I love, go through life changes, and look to the future. I hope this story will cause you to consider the changes in your life as well (and you won't have a car wreck to discover yourself and your future.)

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Because It Was Good – by Marcy Lytle

I really miss my mom's German Sweet Chocolate Cake. Not sure why we always added in the "sweet" in the title, but we did. I just thought of her cake this morning and shed quite a few tears as the memories of that delicious layered cake, with pecans and caramel-like icing drizzled throughout and on top, flooded my mind. It was the best cake, ever. Hands down. And I'm not even a cake fan, but this one was delicious. She made it for special occasions, placed it on her clear glass cake stand, and we all enjoyed a slice.

I was baking red velvet brownies for my husband's birthday when I remembered mom's chocolate cake. For mom, it was all about serving us food. She always asked if we were hungry and offered us something she'd made, or candy bar from her pantry. Dad always shows us the newest flavor of Blue Bell Ice Cream in his refrigerator. My parents loved to eat and to offer food to their family. Either mom made the food or we went out to eat, because eating and family were synonymous with my parents.

My parents grew up in the Depression era. So we kids often wondered if that's why food was so important to them. My dad always said, "I can sleep tonight, because I have food for tomorrow," as he placed his leftovers in the fridge. Gathering the family around a table full of food was their way of offering life to us. It was at the table where we sat and received what mom prepared, it was around the table where we paused to give thanks for what was set before us, and it was around a table full of food that made dad feel happy and satisfied.

I get it. Had I been raised without much to eat and had to work hard long hours for one good meal, I think I'd become all about the food, as well.

My parents constantly wanted us to taste what they tasted. Mom called in the summer to say, "Have you tried the peach milkshake at Chick Fil A, Marcy? It's so good." Dad still sits at the end of a meal at a restaurant (where he always orders dessert) and asks each person if they want the last bite. Of course, most of us are already feeling guilty for over-eating our huge pile of entrée food, so we say no. And in reality, dad is pleased because he gets that last bite for himself!

What did this obsession with good tastes that my parents raved about do for me? It's made me pause and remember what they set before me.

Just like the German Sweet Chocolate Cake that reigned at holiday time, mom also tasted the sweetness of the nearness of Him as she grew older. I saw her move from a mom full of rejection and scorn as she curtly made comments to me that were hurtful, to a mom that was truly excited when I got the chance to get away for a weekend as she commented, "You need a break. I hope you have a good time." And I knew that deep inside, she longed for a weekend away, too. She had tasted contentment and the joy of giving, and I did too.

Just like dad actually delighted in each bite of food as a young boy skipping stone after stone, dad also tasted the blessing of the Word as he aged. He often called me and asked me if I'd read a certain excerpt from the latest book he was reading, one of which was called *Nearing Home* by Billy Graham. Another was called *Making Your Bed* (and dad started making his bed

daily after reading this book – at age 90!). Words of wisdom from the written word sustained my dad more than any bite of a brownie with ice cream (his favorite). He had learned that he couldn't live by sweets alone, but he needed the Word daily to strengthen him and bring him hope. I saw that he tasted that goodness, and it made me want it as well.

Today I have more of those red velvet brownies than I need to have sitting on the counter, and there's no way my husband and I can eat them all. (Why don't they make a brownie/cake recipe for two?). So I'm going to box them up and take them this morning to a small group we attend, and give them away. Some will refuse to eat them, because of the calories. But others will leap at the chance to enjoy a brownie with walnuts and chocolate chips tucked inside, first thing in the morning!

I don't want to ever forget that German Sweet Chocolate cake my mom set before me, or the sweetness of Jesus she presented in her words of affirmation. I don't want to ever scorn or make fun of my dad for enjoying food a little too much, or the stories he tells from the words he reads. It's because they tasted something good that they want me to taste, too...because it was good.

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FRESH THYME – Not in My Closet

There are some items you just won't find in my closet. They might be in your closet, because you love them, they define you, and you paid good money for them, but they won't be in mine. That's because we're different, you and me. However, when the differences in our closets affect our friendship out of the closet, it's not a good thing. If you wear this and I wear that, and we can't get over criticism and scorn, that's just sad.

Isn't it?

To bring a little humor to this sullen subject, here are some items you just won't find in my closet:

Cowboy boots. Cowboy boots are too connected with country music, which I absolutely abhor, so I'll wear other boots – but not the cowboy kind.

Animal print. I like animal print, on animals. But I don't care to wear it. That's not to say that someday I will wear it, but I haven't all these years, and I suspect I never will.

Sweatpants or suits. I try to like them, I've even bought a sweat suit (are those even a thing, anymore?) a time or two, but there it sat in my closet and I never wore it. I just feel frumpy and too stretchy, so I opt for leggings and a tunic if I want comfort.

Pantyhose. I'm pretty sure most women are with me, on this one. I used to wear pantyhose way back when everyone did, but once I was liberated – I never went back! Now, I'll wear colored tights in the winter, but my legs go bare the rest of the year. Even as I age...

Bucket bag. Do you know this style of purse? It's like a round pouch with a drawstring. I remember having one when I was a little girl, one with a picture of the Smoky Mountains on the front. But I just don't like them now. I need a purse with a shape, at least a square or a rectangle.

Denim jacket. I've tried to wear this, I think it looks cute on others, but then I realize that I connect it to the first item on my list...enough said.

Spike heels. I never really liked these even when I was younger, for two reasons. They sink in muddy ground and fall between cracks on boardwalks...and my ankles turn easily...so there!

One can learn so much about a friend by observing her closet, or what she wears. I have best friends who wear jean jackets, animal prints, and cowboy boots. Maybe all on the same day! They don't try to press me to dress like they do, and I don't try to adjust their wardrobe, either.

We're all different on the outside with our likes and dislikes. But friendship goes deeper, to what's on the inside. And it's there I find so many similarities between me and my friends. We love Him, we try to be kind to others, and we've made lots of mistakes that have brought us to where we are today.

What's in your closet? I'd love to know...

FRESH THYME – With Him – by Marcy Lytle

It's February, well into the new year, and it took me a while to get going...I'll admit it. Christmas was hard without my mom, my husband and were both sick for a month long gig of the flu and bronchitis – a gig we never want to do again – and January was just slow and deliberate. Right in the middle of the month, I'd had enough of my pity party and started fresh...

Someone had given me a daily devotional book back a few months before, and I hadn't cracked a page open. Usually, my "time with God" is spent thinking and wondering and questioning and pining...and then writing about it. But for some reason, I was drawn to the idea of a morning devotion to set my days on a better path than they were presently going. I know, that's nothing new, and many, many people have been setting aside morning time with God for years. But I had set aside my morning time with him in favor of getting started on my day and then just fitting him in as the need arose. Yes, that's what I'd done.

I opened the page to the date on which I started and there was the title "What Will He Do with You?" I read the very short devo and cried and wailed with "Woe is me" laments as I thought of the new year and what it holds for me. The verses were a reminder of the transformation Jesus was able to do with every person he encountered, no matter who they were. He had that authority given to him by his father. So of course, I prayed and asked God to transform and renew my mind so that I could be happy and prosperous and have purpose and feel good. It was all about me, this first morning devotional time with him.

However, as the day progressed and I kept thinking back on the devotional, I was pulled up out of my "me" focus. It's a given that Jesus is going to take care of me, I know that. So why I wallow in self-pity at times is a mystery to me, because I know better. It's a given that he will direct my paths and they will be good paths illuminated with his light and I'll know just where to go if I just follow him. So why I worry about impending doom is just a ridiculous waste of my time and energy. It's a given that purpose in life is always there because of my relationship with him, and that doesn't decrease with age. It only increases as his love grows sweeter.

As I realized that thinking about me wasn't really making me feel any better, I slowly heard him whisper in my ear a different twist of that question at the top of the page...

"What Will You Do with Me?"

In other words, in 2018, which is well now on its way in full force, what will I do with Jesus, the one who does it all for me? Those givens I mentioned above are settled. But what is not settled is what I'm going to do with Him.

Am I going to continue to doubt his goodness in light of pain and suffering?

Am I going to keep waking day after day worrying about life, instead of living it?

Am I going to trust his Word and eat it with gusto, or only nibble here and there as I please?

Am I going to think on questions and demand answers, or focus on peace and loving others?

It was a whisper in my ear, but one I heard loud and clear. And it's a question I want to be reminded of daily and never forget. I want to be cognizant of the fact that I have a decision to make daily about what I'm going to do with Him. He's already told me what he's done and is doing for me, and that will never change.

He knew I'd get weak and weary at times. That's why he promised that He'd be strong and enable me to soar when I am.

So today my answer to his whisper is, "I'm going to look up and reach out and squeeze back...that hand that is holding mine...and take flight," above the rocks where I sit and wait Him to do for me.

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FRESH THYME – Daily Bread – by Marcy Lytle

I've told it to my daughter, and it's been told to me, in times of crisis and worry. Be thankful for his provision today and live in the moment. And that, my friend, is one of the hardest things we humans are called to do, isn't it?

When we are hoping for a job because we have bills to pay and mouths to feed, but there are no interviews or calls coming our way, we don't want to stop and enjoy today's bread. We're wondering about tomorrow's feast and the day after that.

When our child is chronically ill and the prognosis is treatment after treatment, day after day, into months and years, we don't want to stop and give thanks for his provision today. We want our children well, now. And we want them never to be sick again.

When life in general gets hectic, we hear news of a loss in a family, or a tragedy in a neighborhood, we surely would not bring comfort to those who are suffering by saying, "Just breathe. You have today."

In fact, saying that to someone in crisis might result in a well-deserved slap in the face.

So why then does Jesus, in The Lord's Prayer, tell us to pray and say, "Give us this day our daily bread?" Why did God only provide manna from heaven for each day's need, and the manna would then spoil if it was stored up for tomorrow?

Is God some cruel taskmaster that requires us to turn off our brains that think and prepare for tomorrow? Is he being completely unreasonable when he asks us to trust Him for today and for nothing more...because tomorrow may never come?

Let's think about what our prayers and thoughts would be like were we told to pray, "Give us tomorrow all that we need."

First of all, we'd lose focus of today. When we're always focused on tomorrow and the future, we fail to notice the small things of the day.

Secondly, asking for this day's provision enables us to see and give thanks when that provision comes. Always praying for what's ahead will stir up discontent because of wonder and worry.

Thirdly, we come to him as children when we ask for daily bread. Children with good parents don't worry about tomorrow or next month, asking their parents if they're going to have food. They come to the table and eat today, wipe their mouths, and leave full and satisfied.

Living and giving thanks for today's "manna" was imperative during the wilderness journey. And the people didn't like it. They wanted to hoard and store up manna just in case tomorrow God's provision wouldn't come through. Doubt about who He was always seemed to surface, even when He'd been faithful day after day.

Any time we produce action that stems out of fear that God won't be who he says he is, we are inviting trouble. Those who stored up manna, against God's direction, found the manna to be

spoiled instead of satisfying. Those who grumbled at the day to day provision of the same manna with no variation lost the pure pleasure of the miracle of the providing hand, and ended up missing the bounty of the promised land.

I'm not good at living in the moment. I don't so much worry about yesterday, but I can sure borrow trouble from tomorrow in the middle of the night when I'm lying wide awake, and my mind is twirling. I don't want to settle my soul and give thanks for the moment that I'm breathing, because I want the assurance that tomorrow is going to go well for me and mine.

God is a present father, and we can only experience his presence by basking in the moments with him...today. He has promised that he will always be with us and never leave us, and that is supposed to suffice our thirst for assurance and peace. But the root of the matter is that we always wonder if he's going to pick one day to disappear and disappoint, just like humans do.

Today, I'm hoping for all sorts of answers for people in my family. They need a job, financial provision, healing, and hope. I have friends who need strength and peace in the most difficult circumstances. And I want to know that one day God will erase all of our pain.

Guess what? He will. One day.

But until that day, he's calling me to the table to pray and give thanks for what's set before me now. And I do not want to miss it because I'm looking into the darkness at what's ahead...

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