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In the Kitchen - All the Snacks - by Marcy Lytle

You're going to need snacks this holiday season, lots of them. There will be hungry guests, kids that want "something to eat," and you yourself are going to be hungry from all that shopping and wrapping and going here and there while you enjoy the holidays! Oh yes, maybe you'll have turkey and a fancy meal...or maybe not! There's always the option to set out a buffet of snacks you've put together ahead of time, so that you have them to pull out when you're too tired to stand.

Here are a few faves, not necessarily fallish or Christmassy, but oh so tasty.

A huge bowl of trail mix:

- 5 cups Multigrain cheerios
- 1 cup Craisins
- 1 cup Honey roasted peanuts
- 1 cup Semisweet chocolate chips

That's it! Make a large bowl of it, and have it ready for guests to nibble on as they walk buy. Set out cute little plastic cups for them to dip and then dispose, after they've eaten their fill!

The best hummus:

You'll want a healthy treat during this season to grab and eat on the run, when you need a break from all the rich foods of the season. This is the best and most simple hummus recipe I've found. Just set out pita chips and carrot sticks, or make to-go containers ready to take to the theater or in the car, as you head out in the holiday madness.

- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 cans chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- 1 tsp sea salt
- 1/3 cup tahini
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 1 T olive oil

Place all in a food processor, pulse till well blended but still coarse. Adjust seasonings.

Cheddar pecan spread:

This is a great spread to have on a pretty tray with savory crackers, nuts and olive, if you wish. Have those things ready to arrange with this spread, when unexpected family or friends stop by. Or invite someone to stop by!

- 4 oz cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup butter, softened
- 8 oz sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- ½ cup pecans, toasted and chopped

• ½ tsp minced garlic, roasted

Beat cream cheese and butter til smooth. Beat in rest of ingredients. Serve. (This will last in the fridge up to three weeks!)

Note: I mixed this in the food processor, just pulsing a little at a time. I also added more pecans than called for, and I toasted them and the garlic on a tray in the toaster, just until fragrant.

Smoky red pepper dip:

Another great addition to your snack table, should guests or your family need some nibbles! It makes such a pretty color, especially when you add the red pepper strips!

- ¼ c sliced almonds
- 4 sliced garlic cloves
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1 ½ tsp smoked paprika
- 1 cup mayo
- ½ cup roasted red peppers
- 2 tsp red wine vinegar
- Red bell pepper sticks, carrot sticks

Cook the almonds and garlic in the oil til browned, about 4 minutes. Stir in the paprika. Puree in the processor with the mayo, the red peppers and the vinegar. Season with salt. This is great served in small clear cups with the sticks inside.

Almond butter:

I LOVE THIS SO MUCH. It's so easy to make and so delicious! Great to have on hand for the ones with the munchies.

- 2 cups almonds
- 2 large pinches kosher salt
- 3 T vegetable oil
- 2 tsp honey
- Whole wheat crackers

Blend the almonds and salt in a food processor for five minutes. Pulse in the oil and honey. Spread on the crackers. (I found that I needed to pulse in a bit more honey and oil, but do it sparingly, pulsing each time, until you have the consistency you like.)

Smashed Chickpea Avocado

- 1 med sized ripe avocado
- 1 15 oz can chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- 2 T chopped parsley
- Salt and pepper to taste

- Juice of two limes
- 1 t garlic powder
- Red pepper flakes (optional) and pita bread or chips

Add all of the ingredients except pita to a bowl and mash until combined. Season and taste. Scoop into pita bread or eat with chips. Super yum.

Selah's Style – The Boys – by Marcy Lytle

Shopping with boys. I didn't think it would be as fun as girls, but it really was! I recently shopped with a 7-yr old and a 4-yr old, each separately, and they had strong opinions about what they wanted to wear, and went into the fitting rooms excited to try on their choices! One wanted only jeans for winter, and the other wanting everything BUT jeans. They each chose a few outfits, a new beanie, and shoes too! It was all from Target...

These two guys are brothers, their Selah's cousins, and they like individual attention. I mean, who doesn't? Of course, we started out with a toy, and then the rest of the shopping was easy. Our excursion included lunch from Chick-Fil-A, human watching, and cloud shape discoveries...after the bags were full.

Gideon went right to the shoes and picked out this gray/red combo sneaker. The cool thing is that the laces are elastic, so he can just pull on the shoe without having to undo and tie again! And these colors are great for winter!

My favorite outfit Gideon put together was this camo pants paired with this wolf shirt (well, it's a bear, but he says it's a wolf!). I think he looks so handsome and youngman-ish in this outfit!

There were several beanie options, but since Gideon loves green, he went for this Minecraft beanie. Just a few days post-shopping and it was cold enough to wear it!

Jeans were his pant of choice, and we found these nice ones by Cat n Jack with a flexible waist for that perfect fit! There are these little elastic bands and buttons inside the waistline that can be pulled and cinched, so that there's no gap in the back. A genius fashion hack, for sure!

Augie (August is his real name) didn't want anything to do with jeans, so he opted for comfy drawstring pants that looks sharp and feel good. He chose this colorful sweatshirt to go with, and it's such a cute combo!

Isn't this sweatshirt with a slice of pizza so cute? Any tops with food on them are a hit with the boys, for sure! And the Cat and Jack sweatpants fit like a glove!

Of course, we had to get the one that caught his eye first, and that was the Ghostbusters tee! He can wear it over a long-sleeved tee for a cold winter's morning.

Boys and girls are different and fun, all wrapped up in one big blast when shopping for clothes! Stick to your budget, shop sales, go with a list, and of course...pick up a toy first!

Seven 4 You - Simple Pleasures

November and December are the months that are packed full of food, frantic shopping, and on yes – fun. But that fun stuff seems to get marked off our lists first because of that mean chaser – time! However, if possible, for our health and the health of those we love, we need to make time to sit still and enjoy the pleasures of life. Even if the table doesn't look perfect, we don't get to bake that dish, or the wrapping isn't happening...our souls can still sit still in the simplicity of pleasure.

We asked our panel of women to share their simple pleasures. I hope you find time to try one of them, or make your own...

Escape:

My favorite thing to do when I need to get away from it all is retreat to my small private area and watch *Escape to the Country* on YouTube with a warm drink by my side. I love the presenters and it's always set in a beautiful, restful spot. The English people are quirky and they love quirky houses, so it's the perfect show for me. When the episode is over and I feel relaxed and ready to get up and make plans to go to that beautiful place!

We love to take a country drive, and it doesn't have to be far. We just get in the car and go, stopping to take photos of wheels of hay, dilapidated buildings, and stately trees. We look for a cute place to junk shop and fun place to eat. Then we drive back home. Half a day outside of town does wonders for our souls.

The one thing that comes to mind is to do a Christmas devotional or some type of advent reading each day. Last year I enjoyed Richard Rohrs "Preparing for Christmas" and it was very helpful. But I must confess, whatever I am reading...I never get very far past December 19. That last week all of my reading usually goes by the wayside. But it is helpful for those weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a SioF0JRBg

On the tellie:

For my relaxation, I sit down at night and watch TV with my husband. There are only a few shows we enjoy, other than the news, so I watch for movies to record. It might take us two to three nights to watch one movie depending on how late it is when we sit down but we do enjoy it. This may not seem very exciting but during this time my husband will massage my shoulders and back, so I get total relaxation!

We have only two shows that we record and watch, together. One is *New Amsterdam* – it's about a medical director of an inner city hospital that's radical in his approach to healthcare. And then, of course, there's the drama among the staff. The other is *A Million Little Things*. Oh my, you'll have to start this one from the first episode... Both are crazy, but we like a little crazy to make us appreciate our normal.

Friends and Fall:

Every year during the fall I like to have fall days with my friends. We watch Harry Potter and old Disney movies like Halloween Town while we paint pumpkins and drink hot chocolate! And if we're lucky and it's cold enough, we even like to light a fire!

I love to host or plan something fallish with friends – like a popcorn bar or caramel apple making fun. I love the tastes of the season, so it's fun to just get together and choose all sorts of toppings for a snack. And oh, we eat this instead of dinner!

Outside:

My simple pleasure is escaping to our enclosed patio and sitting and reading a magazine or just listening to my water fountain. I have not been able to do this in such a long time because it's been so hot! I am looking so forward to being able to do this when it cools off. I also like have my quiet time outside, but that too went away when it was hot! So until it cools off I go for a walk in the mornings and just try and relax and think about the day. Walking gives me time to just think and not be disturbed by my phone or computer. So I may just keep doing it!

Some days when I am at the computer all day long, I just need to step outside in the sunshine. Or...I sometimes take a lunch break, grab a book and a snack, and park somewhere under a shade tree and read...all by myself. It's delightful.

The Porch

My simple pleasure is...sitting on my front porch, plain and simple. Before living in the home that I do now, for years I dreamt of a front porch large enough for a myriad of potted plants of many varieties from succulents to roses along with comfortable, welcoming chairs. I have that now. I sit in my large wooden rocker, surrounded by hanging plants, potted flowers, and beds with bushes that attract butterflies as well as bees. I grab a good book and a large hot café latte. I don't tell anyone where I am going. I shut the front door and I sit. I get to look out on a front pasture full of luscious grass and oaks where my horses contentedly graze. It's my place of peace, my place to meet my Lord, my place to simply be me away from it all. It's my dream come true...my porch.

Our back porch is tranquility. There are plants, we have a fire pit, little yard decor, and even lights for ambience. It's my favorite spot when the temps start falling and the leaves do too!

Tutorials:

I enjoy watching makeup tutorials on YouTube when I need a quick mental break. They completely distract me from whatever is stressing me out, and I find it kind of soothing to listen to the descriptions of the products and how to use them. Plus, I learn some cool tips & tricks!

I love watching IGTV – Instagram television – especially the styling tutorials on how to put together outfits – my fave!

https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/06/20/welcome-to-igtv/

A Sip of Something:

To relax I like to get a Frappuccino and watch a "feel good" TV show. The sweetness of the coffee comforts me. The TV show has to be something that is not suspenseful or scary and it should have a happy ending.

We purchased a huge tin of flavored teas last year for Christmas from World Market and enjoy them, especially as the temps get cooler. We even bought a cute teapot. Sipping one of these specialty teas in front of the fire (if it's cold enough!) is calming and cute...especially if it's served with a cheese board or a few snacks!

https://www.worldmarket.com/search.do?query=christmas+tea+tin

The Dressing – Coats to Wear – by Marcy Lytle

How many coats do you have? I'm sure it depends on where you live. But even here in Texas, I have several coats. It can be really cold or just cool, or breezy, or any kind of weather at all, on any given day! I enjoy having short and long coats, one for damp or rainy weather, and fashionable and casual and dressy! Why not? I have a few classic coats that I've had for years, and then the trendier ones I tend to just shop for at discount stores at an affordable price, since they probably won't be worn more than one or two seasons.

Here are a few coats I'd recommend, if you're out shopping for one!

I LOVE this **plaid coat** from Target. I've seen it in the store several times. The colors and the style are so stylish and trendy! At \$48, it seems like a great buy for this season's winter breezes.

https://www.target.com/p/women-s-plaid-long-sleeve-oversized-button-front-wool-coat-wild-fable-brown-pink/-/A-76556612?preselect=54641002#lnk=sametab

I just bought a **lavender coat** from J. Crew and one like it is on sale on line. I love it, because it's different and I found a fun teal/navy/lavender scarf to go with, at The Gap!

https://factory.jcrew.com/p/womens-clothing/coats_jackets/woolcoats/boiled-wooltopcoat/AB477?color_name=smoky-wisteria

Maybe you like the **trench coat** look, but want something a bit different. I think this cute one from Urban Outfitters with the plaid panel down the back is SO CUTE! The contrast of the two different fabrics is unique and fun.

https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/urban-renewal-vintage-flannel-back-trench-coat?category=SEARCHRESULTS&color=031

Are you a fan of the **puffer type jackets**? Nordstrom Rack has several choices in several colors! This one has a removable hood, and check out the back view – so pretty! I like the navy, as it contrasts well with so many fall colors.

https://www.nordstromrack.com/shop/product/2912787/via-spiga-quilted-hooded-coat?color=PEACOCK

Gray classic is always a great choice in a coat. It goes with the nicest of outfits, and also complements a casual day of jeans and a tee. I love this single breasted choice by Anne Klein, found at TJ Maxx. Did you know you can order online from TJ Maxx?

https://tjmaxx.tjx.com/store/jump/product/women-clothing-coats-jackets/new-arrivals/Wool-Blend-Notch-Slant-Side-Seams-

Coat/1000545411?colorId=NS1172809&pos=1:10&N=842114098+654950445

I had to include this **pretty in pink** coat with the high neck collar. I think it's so classy and pretty, and just the coat for shopping or going out on a date! It's from Zara and so chic!

https://www.zara.com/us/en/inverted-lapel-frock-coat-p08148813.html?v1=30237025&v2=1281618

If you prefer **cozy**, you might like this Teddy coat from Kohls. It comes in a few colors, and the reviews are great for comfort and fit. It looks like a coat you might want to live in all day...

https://www.kohls.com/product/prd-3827294/womens-popsugar-teddy-coat.jsp?color=Zephyr%20Pink&prdPV=22

Look for sales, comfort, and style when you purchase a new coat. And also check the label for washing instructions. I love a good coat and I'm so excited that winter is nearing, so that coats and scarves and hats – oh my – can be worn for all sorts of seasonal fun!

Tried and True – Why Celebrate? – by Marcy Lytle

Some people don't care for holidays, they'd rather "celebrate" all year long and give thanks to their parents, enjoy friends every day not just on their birthdays, and date regularly not just on Valentine's Day. I suppose there's some sense in that way of thinking, but what I've often observed is that without a celebration planned, months and even years go by with a celebration taking place!

Christmas is one of those celebrations that's debatable among many:

- To give or not to give gifts, because this world is full of needs and charity can be offered to those in need.
- Should we really spend that much time and effort to get together, when we're tired afterwards and the house is a wreck?
- Christmas Day is just a date on a calendar, and we can just enjoy the season and sights without a huge fanfare.
- Our kids don't want gifts; they'd rather have cash to spend, so why labor to think of the presents?
- Family shows up that we don't like, so let's just stay home alone and not get together.

I've heard all of the above, and more, haven't you? And while there are some valid reasons to at least rethink and reevaluate our priorities, to not celebrate should never be our conclusion! Celebration is what life is all about! Let's look at each one of those sentiments listed above, once more:

Giving gifts to our kids and their kids doesn't have to drain our accounts dry, but they need to see us give, they need to learn to receive, and they need to be taught to be thankful. It's not the gift giving that makes for spoiled rotten kids. Giving (even in time and homemade things) is a beautiful act of love, and celebrating that giving on Christmas morning can be beautiful as well, if we choose to make it so. When we say, "Thank you," our kids hear it and smile. So husbands, wives, kids and all...let's give! Charity giving? Yes! Do both, either little or big...but give!

It takes time to shop and wrap and think and make lists, but we often make it more burdensome than it needs to be by the pressure we place on our own shoulders to be perfect. If it's stressful, trim it down. Dole out and delegate. Ask for help in cleaning. Don't try to be a super Santa. Create a celebration that's within your range of comfort. And enjoy. Keep it simple and sane.

Every day IS just a date on the calendar. But all of the holidays and celebrations are just reasons to smile and do something for someone else. It's what Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Christmas, and more are all about – giving in thought and time and love – to others. How can those reminders be ignored? Instead of grieving over the commercialism, just look forward to the next time to show him/her/them a good time and some love!

Giving kids just cash at Christmas – not a fan of that. There's something to learn and to mature from, in the opening of gifts on Christmas morning with the family. We learn to be grateful, even if it's not a practical gift we'll ever use. We are allowed the privilege of blessing someone with a surprise that shows we thought of them deeply. We experience the beauty of unwrapping a surprise. We give of ourselves and our love, instead of just emptying our pockets. Cash can be part of the gifts, but please not all!

Families can be the most annoying people we know, which is so unfortunate. I get it. But if the elders call the family together and you are asked to show up, go by and be gracious. Maybe that cousin is despicable, or that older family member talks unfiltered, or that little kid is out of control. Let your kids see you show up, be kind, and love others that are different in the family – so that they can then love others that are different outside in the world.

There's a lot to learn and to enjoy from celebration of any kind, every day of the year, yes. But there's also SO MUCH to be said for making it a point to celebrate on specific days, because we all know we need a prompt to make things really happen. After all, that day that HE was born was pretty special – it was God's gift to us all – and now we have the privilege of giving to others.

Christmas Day is coming. Celebrate.



A Night to Remember – A Family Thanks-Giving – by Marcy Lytle

Thanksgiving is this month, where we gather and give thanks for food, family, and life around a huge table...at least that's the Norman Rockwell view of a "perfect" Thanksgiving. But whether or not your family gathers this way traditionally, you can call your kiddos together for a bit of family thanks, in a fun way, for a night to enjoy forever...and maybe a new tradition to start and keep!

What if...you all gathered and gave thanks just for each other? Let's see how that might come together.

<u>Preparation:</u> You'll need to print out a sheet of paper with the five questions below on it and give to each one. Little kids that don't write will need a partner to help them answer and participate. Also, set out candy that is a favorite of each one. So if you're a family of five, you'll need five bowls of candy (or fruit or chips!) You can decide ahead of time what type of snacks you want to share. And it might be fun to let each participant pick out his/her favorite bowl to hold the candy - and share why they chose that bowl at the end!

Here are the five questions to print out. As you answer, let each person take turns passing their bowl of candy around for everyone to taste and enjoy.

- 1. What item in our house are you most thankful for and why? (examples are clothes, food, bed, pet, etc.)
- 2. Think of a family memory from the past year and pick one of your favorites and tell us why you enjoyed it so much.
- 3. Pick the person on your left and give thanks for one special thing you love about him/her.
- 4. Think of the last kind thing someone in the family did for you, and give thanks to that person.
- 5. Using the letters in the word T-H-A-N-K-S, go around as many times as you can, using those letters in order to give thanks. For example, the first round might be: Toys, Home, Apples, Neighbors, Kind friends, and Snacks.

After the family has given thanks and shared their candies, hold hands and give thanks as a family to God for all good things, and pray a blessing on the holiday season to come...on your family and families that you know.

An Adage a Day – There is a Time – by Carole Gilbert

It's fall, y'all!

It's the time of year of autumn skies and pumpkin pies. Leaves are turning, football has begun, and we are all anticipating the holiday season which is upon us. What is your favorite time of year? I'm a summer loving girl but I do enjoy the changing of the seasons. After all, who doesn't enjoy autumn time in Texas?

One of my favorite all-time songs I often heard as a child tells all about the seasons. *Well, sort of.* It tells about everything having a reason, a purpose, or a season and includes the popular adage, "To everything there is a season," as well as examples to explain it. This song was written in the 1950's by Pete Seeger and titled *Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)*. It's been recorded by several groups, and first released by the Limeliters, a folk group, in 1962 and then by the Byrds, an American folk rock group, in 1965, which is the group I first heard it from. It became an international success. Have you heard it? I love singing it, even if I don't know all the words. But I do know the main words, "To everything, Turn, Turn, Turn, there is a season, Turn, Turn, Turn," and the song goes on.

This phrase did not start as an adage, idiom, or proverb, and I find it very interesting that we hear it in so many different places. It is not just the main theme to a well-known song, it has become a way to think about life, a comfort we can have when something (when anything) changes because that's what IS going to happen. You know, when it seems like something's not going to work, you think, "to everything there is a season." And when everything's going great and you know it's got to change, you think, "to everything there is a season." We don't have to "turn over a new leaf" and we don't have to go "out on a limb." In other words, it's all okay, because to everything there is a season.

I asked if you've heard this song. Even if you haven't, you've probably heard the words. They are also found in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and that's where Pete Seeger found them. He said in an interview,

"A beautiful melody will help tie this world together, and sometimes, extraordinary words will. I didn't realize when I improvised a melody to a short poem in the Old Testament that these few words would be some of the most important words I would ever latch on to."

What I love about this is that Pete Seeger didn't set out to write a Christian song, he set out to write a song that would bring beauty and togetherness to the world. This song did just that! And the words for this song just happened to come from verses in the Bible.

These are the words in Ecclesiastes 3 that Pete Seeger wrote from:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

The song goes on to say there is "a time to every purpose under heaven." I have been through most of these times and know it's quite comforting that each had a purpose. Isn't it interesting that several quotes from God's word have made it into the world of adages? And another quote from Ecclesiastes has also become an everyday proverb. It helps us know that for all these changing seasons, "There is nothing new under the sun."

Happy fall, y'all!

I Don't Do Teens - The Days After - by Marcy Lytle

What better time to allow your teens into the kitchen to train and teach them a thing or two that they can take with them to college, or when they leave home, than over the holidays! Maybe your teens already know how to cook, but if they don't, invite them to start with using up leftovers! They will be out of school with nothing to do but be bored and fight with their siblings, so why not give them a fun assignment?

For example, after Turkey Day, let them come up with three ideas of how to use the leftover turkey in other dishes. Tell them you want them to come up with the ideas, make a list of what they need, and go with you to purchase and prepare (or they can go alone, if they drive!) The weekend after Thanksgiving, let them give you that much needed break from the kitchen, and prepare a couple of meals for the family! They can look up turkey wraps or sandwich ideas, or they can put together a turkey bowl, or even make a turkey salad!

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, offer them chances to make other dishes that you might need. Maybe you're going to need an appetizer, a dessert, and a side dish, for gatherings you're going to attend or host. Or perhaps the family will need some fun breakfast items on Christmas morning while opening gifts! Tell them now to start looking for say...recipes with no more than 5-6 ingredients...to keep it simple.

After Christmas, you're going to be tired again! And those kids will still be home for another week giving you grief if they're bored! Let them peruse your pantry and fridge and see what all you have left from all the hoopla associated with the holidays. Ask them to put together two different food trays for the family. Ask them to include fruit, cheeses, nuts, meats, spreads or jams, etc. all arranged nicely and pretty on a cutting board, or a pretty tray. They can look to Pinterest for ideas.

As your teens start to make and create, give them a notebook where they can write down their recipes and ideas, for future use. This way they can have it when they become an adult, and it will be full of ideas for them to use on their own! In fact, give them the notebook now and let them fill it up until 2020 begins!

Teens want to be given responsibilities and like it when we affirm them as they show us their skills and smarts. They may not like the idea at first, but make it fun, make the notebook cute, and hand them some cash (limited) to get a few things to get started. Here are a few guidelines to get them started:

- Use up leftovers first
- Present the idea (to mom) before you make it
- Make it simple, yet tasty
- Clean up afterwards
- Record your work

Be sure to applaud their efforts and ooh and ah over their creations. Who knows, you might have a teen chef on your hands that will help you out from now on! Wouldn't that be grand?

Practical Parenting – The Christmas List – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when my kids were small, my mom gave them big catalogs and newspaper ads for them to take a pen and circle what they wanted for Christmas. The little kids circled everything, and the bigger ones were more selective. However, I recall those memories and my kids do too, as being one of the favorite things to do once the holidays rolled around. The kids were never disappointed at what they got or didn't get; in fact, they didn't even remember what all they circled. The fact that they were asked what they wanted and got a chance to dream was fantastic!

There aren't really big catalogs much anymore and most people don't take the actual paper newspaper either. But there are other ways to let the kiddos look and dream and circle and choose what they'd like to get for Christmas. It's not evil to want fun toys and play things. I think it delights our Father when we ask him for things, and it's his good pleasure to grant them if they bring us some good! So why not sit down with our kiddos and explain that we want to know, so that we can give within our budget, something off their dream list this year...if we can.

Here's how it might work:

Actually buy a weekend newspaper full of ads. Collect them for a couple of weeks and sit down one night as a family and pass them around, with markers in hand. Circle and wish. Place initials by items. And names by things we might want to buy for others!

As a family, walk the aisles of Target or Walmart. Give each kid a notepad if they can write, or littles ones your phone camera to snap pics! Walk each aisle as a family, wishing and dreaming and noting and snapping.

Collect all the junk mail from your box for a couple of weeks, with all the ads for toys and more. Sit down for a family snack and pass them around, with scissors for each person. Let them cut and paste their wishes onto a large piece of construction paper! How fun would that be!

If kids are older and know their numbers and how to round them, etc. Tell them what the Christmas budget is per kid. Maybe it's \$100. Let them sit with an ipad at night and come up with choices and wishes that fit within that budget.

One night, make it all about stocking gifts. Make a list of categories, like gum, candy, toiletries, socks, etc. and let them place a check or description by each of what they like. For example, by gum – Trident bubble gum, by candy – Snickers, etc. That way you have a stocking wish list too!

Another night, you can plan as a family what you will give to others like grandparents and friends, or each other. Talk about budget and being thankful and how giving is so rewarding. Make a list of people and ideas, as you talk about those people and what you've observed about them. Maybe the grandparent likes to read, so a kid might suggest a book. Perhaps a cousin loves animals, so a cylinder of dinosaurs might be just the right thing! Use a big white board with names, and let the kids draw what they'll be giving each person. Take a photo of it and keep it for shopping, later.

Let the kids dream. You can dream, too. If funds are tight, then dream together about family outings you can plan or fun experiences you can have at home over the holidays, and plan those. But never squelch dreaming...even when it's just wishing and wanting. It's okay and it's fun and it's something they'll never forget...

Tiny Living – They Did It! – by Leyanne Enterline

Well I'm ready for a New Year! 2019 has not been my favorite.

I don't think I'm usually one to focus on the negative, but this year has been a bit rough, from health problems to financial issues and so on. I'm ready to move on! I won't go into detail of all the negatives but there are some positives that are coming out, as a result of the pain. We have definitely been a family that has been praying and seeking God more than ever before. And the boys have been in on this! They are seeing God work in amazing ways as He takes us through all of this drama.

One huge event that just took place was my mom unexpectedly having a triple bypass last week. This was a huge shock to all of us, including my mom. We had no idea, and she had no symptoms. But in the light of it all, what a miracle that she was going in for a regular doctor's visit and he was able to catch the problem before something major happened! She is still in for a long recovery but we are truly blessed that she is back at home healing up great!

So how does this all apply to tiny living?

I have pretty much taken on the stay-at-home mom role (even though I do work two days a week outside our home). With my mom being in the hospital for so long, I was gone a lot. My hubby has continuously told me I need to let the kids take on more responsibilities. I was not ready for that because, truly, if it didn't go how I wanted it to, I'd end up having to fix it or spend more time on something that was just way faster for me to do! And really how many chores can one have in 325 square feet?

With me out of commission for quite some time, boy did our boys learn some responsibilities! So much so that when I got back into the swing of things here, they basically tattled on daddy and said how much he made them do!

So for those living tiny, there are many chores your kiddos can do (at the appropriate age):

- They helped fold and put away laundry, stripped their sheets off their bed and put fresh ones on.
- They were able to make their own snacks and lunches.
- They blew leaves off our outdoor mat and vacuumed my car.
- Their school and bible work was done way ahead of time.
- They set out their own clothes for the morning.
- They helped with all the doggie stuff, which they generally do anyway.

I've been listening to some podcasts that have focused on having our kids do more so that we can train them to be healthy, happy adults and this gives us back time. Well now with these new things the boys can do, I feel like I bought back a lot more of my time! I'm not super excited that we had to go through the craziness of my mom's surgery, but I am grateful that goodness came out it!

Tiny Living may mean smaller chores, but still there are chores to be done and its super nice to have my tiny helpers pitching in!

Remember love grows best in tiny spaces.



Thankful Bells

Thankful bells ring near and far Throughout our city streets

For God has canceled every debt The enemy doomed defeat

Harvest comes with sweet delight Come gather where you may

The crops are in, the cattle snug Our barns are filled with hay

One so grateful looks above With wonder in her eyes

Surely God has overcome Breaking barriers and dark lies

So join us in this merry dance Bring friends and kin along

Let's laugh and sing with great applause Do tell Redeemer's song

Raucous play transforms the day
The lights are always bright

For Jesus is the Morning Star In Him there is no night Thankful hearts bursts out in bloom Forever our Delight

The rescue of our lonely lives
Transformed throughout the night

It's written on the winds of time Full blown throughout the spheres

That Jesus is the King of Kings And loves us all our years

So listen now with open ears Wait patiently to hear

He'll whisper mysteries fine and true Removing all our fear

Deep darkness flies when He's around And that's just what He'll do

Rout the fog and frightful mist Open heaven and shine through

Thankful bells ring through the land The Harvest's here right now

Grace abounds, love explodes For Thanksgiving we will bow

Healthy Habits – Read to Rest – by Marcy Lytle

I get it. There are some seasons of life when there is NO time to read for pleasure. Especially while raising kids, the only thing you have time to read are medicine bottles, school papers, and labels on kids clothing and food when you shop! But then there ARE seasons when you might want to pick up reading again, or squeeze it into your routine, because you long for an escape and time to yourself...into another world. That's what happened to me about a year ago...

Oh, I read before. But I mainly read magazines. I hadn't read a good book in a very long time. I joined a book club and now receive a book once a month, which makes me find the time to read, and I like it. I feel it has helped find a bit of rest this year.

So here's a how-to and the what-and-why of getting back to reading a good book...if you've got that hankering to do so:

Why:

Reading stimulates brain activity, and keeps our minds active and learning.

Reading is relaxing when we stop our hectic lives for a bit and experience the life of those in a good story!

Reading is fun. And who doesn't need a little fun in this frantic world in which we live?

Reading enlightens the mind and inspires creativity...or at least it can!

How:

Keep the book in the car, and read for 10 minutes in the car before you go in to shop, or back into the house. Pull it out like a treasure, to read and to enjoy, before you exit your car.

Keep the book by your bed, if you're a reader at night. Make it a point to read one chapter per night so that you look forward to seeing what happens each evening, before you drift off to sleep.

Keep the book in a bag that you tote everywhere, just in case you have the time to read. Perhaps a friend you're meeting will be late, you might incorporate reading time into date night, or a coffee shop stop might also include a time to put on your reading glasses and finish another chapter.

Keep the book reading time on your calendar if you know you need the schedule, or otherwise it won't happen. For example, maybe Tuesday/Thursday during lunch, you'll read for 30 minutes while you eat. (My favorite is to find a shade tree, eat my packed lunch, and read!)

What:

Make your book choices stories that you enjoy. I tend to like mysteries, dramas and sometimes odd or unique stories. I also like some historical fiction. I don't care for sci-fi or hot romances.

Make your book choice fit your lifestyle – either a hardback, a paperback or Kindle, or however you want to read. I suggest getting a good book where you can smell the pages and turn them! Nothing beats that!

Make friends that love reading as well, and swap books. How fun would that be? Or join a book club that holds you accountable and provides discussion!

Make a stop at those little neighborhood box libraries in yards, and find a treasure there! Be sure to put one back, after you've finished your good read.

Reading is one of those activities that moms/women often push aside as a low priority on our lists of to-do's because of laundry and life. However, sometimes just that little daily or every few days of escape onto the pages of another's story makes us a happier and healthier woman when we're done...

Life Right Now – Sweaters, Words and Pits – by Bethany Gomez

I don't think I have mentioned how much I enjoy crafting and painting. It is one of those things that I love doing and wish I did more of. I could give you a list of reasons why I don't do this one thing that I love more often, but let's just say I am still working on managing my time to do all the things that I need to do and still have time to do some of the things I enjoy doing! Despite all that, throughout the year I have many project ideas in my head. However, it is not until this time of the year that I get a very strong urge to start and complete some of those projects. I think it's mainly because cooler temperatures are more compatible for making things, especially if the project requires it to be done outside. It's also because the fall season inspires all sorts of cute decoration ideas. Let's not forget that Christmas will be here before we know it, which provides the perfect opportunity to make Christmas decorations and handmade gifts!

I am happy to say that I have already started a few craft projects, mainly fall themed ones.

First, there is the sweater pumpkin craft. I got sucked into the Pinterest vortex one day and came across a pin for "Easy DIY Dollar Store Fall Decoration Ideas." One of the ideas was, you guessed it, how to make sweater pumpkins using orange Styrofoam pumpkins from the dollar store. You simply paint the pumpkins white if you don't want the bright orange showing through, then take an old sweater, cut the sleeve off, and wrap the pumpkin in it and with a little bit of hot glue, you're done. You can use them to decorate a table in your house or a mantle. This is my kind of project - cheap, easy, and cute.

The next fall craft project kind of found me. As I was walking down the aisles of Hobby Lobby, practicing self-control, I came across this cute, blank, wooden board that I couldn't pass up (believe me, I still had self-control, there were so many things I saw that I wanted to buy but didn't). The moment I saw it I thought it would be perfect for a fall word, like "thankful" to be painted on it or even a verse. I brought it home and finally decided to paint the word "blessed" on it because that is always my hope for any one that walks into the house, that they will feel blessed.

There are two other projects I would really like to start working on. The first one is to make or find scripture art to hang up in the house. I was reminded of the verse in the Bible that says to hide God's word in our hearts so that we may not sin against Him. I have always thought that meant I had to memorize scripture! While memorization is a great way to hide God's word in my heart, I have never been that great at it. I think another way to hide God's word in my heart is to not hide that I believe God's words to be true by displaying His word in my house, room, or even on my clothing, so that it remains on my mind and eventually finds its way into my heart and hopefully into others' hearts. I have one of my favorite verses hanging up above my mirror that I painted and framed. I see it every morning and every time I read it, it encourages me to keep on going. I think I've shared it before, but here it is again, Isaiah 41:10.

Lastly, one project that I have been longing to do ever since moving into my parents' house is to make a fire pit. Why a fire pit? Well, at the moment, there is a sad looking spot where scraps of wood sit for an occasional bonfire. I think a revamp is in order, but mainly, there is nothing like spending a cool evening near a fire with good friends or family, chatting and laughing into the wee hours of the night. The sound of a crackling fire and the warmth it provides produces a relaxing way to spend a cool evening. I have many wonderful memories of doing just that, but one of the most memorable times I spent around a fire pit was last year during a trip to Massachusetts for Market of Hope, a non-profit ministry event held throughout the year and in October, in a little town called Norwood Massachusetts. Two Norwood families opened their homes for us to stay and at one of them they had a fire pit on the back patio. We had some

great conversations, funny stories where shared where laughing ensued, and words of wisdom were shared by our hostess that I have not forgotten.

"God does not hurt us and if we are hurt there is a reason for it.

You just never know, but God's ways are better than our ways."

I needed those words then and I still need them now, so a fire pit is the project on my to-do list, so that more words of wisdom can be shared among my friends!

What projects are you in the middle of, dreaming of, or enjoying?

Strengthening Your Core - Unoffendable - by Marcy Lytle

This morning I thought it might be a good idea to change the name of our country from the USA to the UFO; that is, the United States of the Offended. But then I realized that we aren't united if we're offended, so it should be DSO, the Divided States of the Offended. That's where we live, and I too live among the offended and the divided...so many times.

Offenses run high in these states where we live, and I suppose we could say many of them are rightly justified. Injustices cause offense, cruel and hurtful words offend our souls, and parents/children are offending each other right and left. Parents abandon, children are wounded and offended...of course they are. Children are hateful and disinterested, and parents are offended and feel deep hurt. We all know that these types of hurts need healing...in our country...and so we pray.

But for the sake of this article, I'm referring to offenses of the less cutting kind, the kind of offenses we carry because of a sour look, an unspoken affirmation, a ridicule from someone when they're tired, a comment made offhand in haste...things like that.

I recently read an Instagram story from a highly noted Christian speaker and she answered questions that her followers asked. One follower asked for her best piece of advice, working in ministry. The answer the speaker gave was, "Become unoffendable." That answer struck me as being so true. Being offended is the number one cause that I've seen in people coming and going out of relationships...especially in the church. It happens in families too, when a sibling runs to his room because his brother won't play with him.

Wait, but doesn't that brother have "right" to be offended when the other brother is cruel?

I don't have all the answers on this subject, but I've been thinking on it...deeply. I probably get offended way too often at things that often make me wonder why I reacted so strongly. Someone can say a comment to me that doesn't set well, and I've got all sorts of speculation in my head about why they said it and what they meant behind it and how rude they were, until...that offense causes me to retreat from that relationship.

But is it the action that causes the offense, or is it what's missing in our own hearts? In other words, can we really CHOOSE to be unoffended, or do we need to consider our own hearts and receive healing, before we can make that choice?

Here's what I mean, and what I've realized about myself:

- Offenses come daily, and often I attach meaning behind what was said or done that isn't really there. At least, I don't know the person's heart, but I think I do; therefore, I'm offended.
- Offenses come from those I love the most, because I expect the most out of those I love.
 But that's not fair. I need to expect less and love more, offer judgment less and give grace more.
 Because I have received grace over and over again.

- Offenses happen in my marriage, when I'm tired, when I'm wanting to prove my point, when I'm demanding my rights. Even if he's mean, I can cast that care on HIM, and the Father I serve will deal with him...and with me. Because he loves us both that much.
- Offenses are taken at church, when our ideas aren't chosen, and hers are. We're completely aghast when changes are made and we weren't told, things like that. But the altar (in my heart) seems to be the place to leave those offenses and let them die.
- Offenses are there for the taking daily, like a never ending buffet line. They seem right
 and good, but once we've filled our plates with all the things and eaten until we're
 stuffed, we feel bad...really bad.

I'm working on this one. I'm looking deep to see the reasons I'm really offended and it's more often than not – not them – but me.

Unoffendable. A goal I hope to reach.

Upper Quadrant – Panicky Peace – by Marcy Lytle

There are so many subjects to write about regarding aging and all the fun of it...or pain of it. Every month something new comes up regarding this season of life. For November, I wanted this entry to include thanksgiving, because we all know that gratitude does wonders for the heart, mind, and body! But sometimes, finding gratitude for the aging process isn't the easiest or most reflexive thing to do. I've found that pushing the panic button is easier, and sometimes what I do way too often.

I hear about one more friend with a heart issue about to have heart surgery, and the panic button gets pushed, wondering about who will be next, and what does the future hold...except a dying body closer to the grave. Pretty pitiful, right? It happened just this week when a text came through about a cousin my age having a triple bypass! However, today I talked with another friend that was sharing with me the success of a heart procedure on a 13-year old young man. So age isn't really a reason to panic and neither is heart disease, is it? I'm pretty sure it says somewhere in the Good Book that all of our days are numbered and we aren't to worry about tomorrow...

I read about a friend that's placing her mom in a facility for those with dementia, and I remember how hard it was with my husband's mom, as we too put her "away." All feelings of guilt arise, and then if we let our minds wander further down the foggy path, we're panicking that we too may one day end up in a one-room place with a chair, if we're lucky. But I'm pretty sure the Good Book says nothing of luck or fate, but rather of provision and peace...even in the middle of some pretty intense storms. Though minds and bodies may fail, our relationship with Him is intact, and for that' I'm so grateful!

I watch my kids as they make vacation plans with friends, head out for fun family days with their kids, and arrive home tired at night with homework, make lunches, prepare for work the next day, and I panic about become more and more obscure in their world. Pity parties start to form in the rooms of my mind until my entire thought-house is full of banners and balloons of doom in dark shades of black and gray. However, I'm pretty sure the Good Book tells us to continue to give cheerfully all of our days, expecting nothing in return except the satisfaction of knowing we're obeying that mandate to lay down our lives for others. And I'm certain that joy rises up when we do, and those dark balloons pop, and color returns...to our world.

I just studied and taught a class on worship at my church where the majority of the attendees were "older" people, not any of the young couples with little kids. I thought this morning how I was so disappointed in their lack of support of "my" generation and then...I remembered how when my kids were young I was busy, too. Especially the weekends were full, with games and lessons and grocery shopping and more! And I realized that they too might be disappointed in my generation in our judgment of them and our labels on them, like being entitled. That same Good Book tells me that I'm loved all of my days and what I do is pleasing to him when I obey. I then changed my thought process and decided that we all (the olders...) need to be an example of a worshipful community full of faith and vigor and compassion and love for all of those behind us. They need our support, more than ever. I can give it or whine in my seat, and wish to receive it. I want to always be a giver...

What about you? What causes you panic in the deepest parts of your mind? Is it the future, how you're going to make ends meet, if your kids are ever going to "come around," or the fact that you too just received a diagnosis or your parent fell and now you're the parent and they're the child? We are all in different seasons of life, some with leaves that are turning brown, and some with colors in full bloom. But how silly it would be for leaves to panic! Leaves are beautiful attached to branches, or dried and used for décor or covered in gold to make beautiful jewelry. They all originated from the vine and are never let go until it is time to move on to something more beautiful downstream...

I don't want to panic. I want to live in peace. I know it will be hard some days, but gratitude for the Good Book and what it says to all of us – be of good cheer – is what I want to have always. Panicky peace is what I call starting to fall off the cliff and then realizing he's got me firmly by the hand and I'm not going down until he's ready to fly with me...not to a crash landing...but to a higher place.



After 40 Years - Those Routines - by Marcy Lytle

There's something to be said for routines. Oh sure, there's also something to be said for breaking routines and stepping out of ruts, and being spontaneous. Those times are also great! But for this month, I'm going to talk about routines...in our marriage...that is. Sometimes, those routines are the very things that settle my soul and make me smile when I'm literally feeling like the world is spinning way too fast...

Morning kisses and hugs

We both have our own way of waking up to the morning. I am up way earlier than he and I spend that time working on my laptop. By the time he's up, I'm usually already tired. He gets ready to leave and there's the first routine of the day, that lingering hug and kiss where we say we will miss each other and can't wait to see each other again come evening...

Afternoon texts and messages

I absolutely love getting a random text from him that says "I miss you" or "How are you doing?" I love to send him texts to ask how he enjoyed his lunch or to ask, "Are you coming home soon?" Dings on the phone where his name is attached make my heart sing...

Evening outings

I work at home, so he is very gracious to go out with me each evening, even if we do nothing more than get a bite to eat and take a walk, holding hands. This time together settles our minds and connects us, allows us time to unwind together and enjoy a fresh breeze. I know that some nights he is super tired, and other nights I am too, so the routine of just being together is enough...no matter what we do.

Weekend movies and dates

By Friday, we have the weekend planned, actually written out on paper, so that we have it to look forward to. Usually, there's a chore or two, and then lots of fun away from home, like a movie, a walk, a nap in the car after reading a bit, shopping, visiting, church and more. Sprinkled in those weekends are out of town day trips. Planning and having those plans to look forward to, is fun for both of us!

Household chores

We have this agreement that he makes the bed and washes the linens, and I clean and make our lunches. It works great for us. When we need to do yard work, we usually do it together, because we both love being outside. It's a rhythm we enjoy and count on each other to keep the beat...

Before lights out

We have this small book with one page devotionals that he reads to us out loud, every night, before lights go out. It wasn't always this way, but it's been happening this past year, and it's

awesome. It reminds us both to love and to put the other's needs above our own. It includes a verse and prayer. It's short and simple, but satisfying...

None of the above is anything new or innovative; it's pretty simple and plain. But these routines are like little protective fences that surround us both and let us know we are in safe spots with each other, and with Him. I know that many marriages don't have any sort of routine, that there are huge breaks between relationships, and so much busyness and separateness that routines are non-existent. For us, this works and feels good. And when life gets so stressful that these routines get pushed aside, we feel the waves, and we work hard to row ourselves back to calm waters...

What routines do you have, and can you make, to settle your souls together?

Date Night Fun – All the Things – by Marcy Lytle

You know, all those fall things that we tend to only use or do or eat during the months leading up to Christmas. Things like the popcorn popper, the fondue pot, pumpkin flavors and scents, the fireplace or fire pit, and more! Why not make date night revolve around these things this month? I absolutely love fall the most of all, because of these things, do you?

Popcorn bar – We recently hosted a party and set up a popcorn bar and it was great fun. Invite another couple or two over and have them bring part of the fun, and set it up! You'll need a big tub of popcorn with a scoop, flavors to spritz (including butter), toppings (like candies) and drinks. You can purchase tiny popcorn bags from the dollar store. Include conversation about popcorn (maybe print out trivia questions!) and even put together a popcorn jigsaw puzzle! Fun, right?

https://www.zazzle.com/small town drive in movie puzzle-116592503673137055

Fondue, anyone? – There's a restaurant in our town called the Melting Pot and there are different options of fondue from just appetizers to a full course, or even just dessert! Have a romantic date at a place like that, or make your own fondue at home and watch a romantic movie together. Find a great fondue recipe and cut up cubes of fun to dip. Try a cheesy one with cubes of bread, and then a chocolate one with fruit and cake!

https://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/tyler-florence/cheese-fondue-recipe-1906678

https://www.chelseasmessyapron.com/chocolate-fondue/

Around the Fire – If you have a fire pit, you can totally plan a date outside near the pit. Play some soft music, order pizza to be delivered, and dance to the flicker of the flames. Check out a couple of books from the library or your own collection (or the neighborhood boxes!) and share excerpts or pictures. We have this huge coffee table book of pictures from America that are stunning. Talk about your next vacation and where you might like to go. Make s'mores if you wish, for your dessert.

 $\frac{\text{https://www.amazon.com/America-Amazing-Place-Natalie-}}{\text{Danford/dp/0785830782/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=9780785830788\&linkCode=qs&qid=1570533813\&s=books\&sr=1-1}$

More Pumpkin – Halloween is over, but pumpkin season is not! Pumpkin pie, pumpkin bread, pumpkin candles, they're everywhere! Enjoy a breakfast date either at a coffee shop over pumpkin bread and a latte, or at home with the same. Light a pumpkin scented candle and complete a crossword puzzle together, as you sip and snack. Or you could have a cooking session together, making something with a pumpkin base.

https://www.onceuponachef.com/recipes/spiced-pumpkin-bread.html

Give Thanks – Why not make date night all about giving thanks for so many things? Each of you makes a list of five things for which you're thankful around town. Yours might include your

church, a favorite restaurant or coffee shop, an experience you had at a theater or arena, a particular tree or park you love, etc. Pack a picnic supper/lunch and visit each place and reminisce and give thanks together. I love this idea!

November can get really busy, so get your date night on the calendar first thing – and make it happen. Enjoy all the fun of the fall season before it's gone!

In This Together - Get Real - by Bekah Holland

Since you've been sharing your time by reading some of these tangents I've gone on, I decided there are some things that you should know about me. First of all, I'm pretty consistent. And by consistent, I mean consistently playing catch up. I play catch up with my kids and their chores, doctor's appointments, work, my to-do lists, and laundry. Okay, that last one is a lie. I don't even try to catch up on laundry. In fact, we have an entire couch dedicated to clean laundry that mocks my feeble attempts at success. But I digress... Other than that, I'm mostly friendly, unless I've run out of coffee. I am a people pleaser and I tend to apologize for everything until it even annoys me (I hate this particular trait, but I'm a work in progress).

Let's see, what else....oh my children tortured me for about a decade by taking turns waking me up multiple times a night. They pretty much broke my brain and now I'm an insomniac who needs a dozen bedtime routines, medication, eye masks and earplugs to force a reboot. I can also survive solely on caffeine and carbs. Like, if I could take only three things to a desert island, I'd choose coffee, an endless store of bread and my magically-never-need-to-be-charged kindle. In fact, that sounds like what I might ask for on Mother's Day. Also, my husband and I have recently decided that I am basically a plant. I need water (okay, coffee, but there's water in coffee so that counts) and sunshine to thrive. Too many gloomy days and I want to climb under the covers and wake up when it's summer again. See? Plant. However, while my husband has an amazing green thumb and we have glorious green life all over our house, I am not allowed to touch them. In fact, I'm not really supposed to look at them for too long. I don't know what it is, but if they sense me there, they just give up and die. They don't even wait for me to drown them or to forget to water them for seven weeks. I've even managed to kill the cactus. More than once. What can I say? It's a gift.

But speaking of green thumbs (not mine, obviously), I think it's time to start taking the same approach with our actual lives. Now, full disclosure, I excel at stressing the importance of self-care and finding ways to carve out time to breathe and regroup....but mostly for other people (my own stuff, not so much.) Some of it is a misguided view of my childhood. I've talked about my mom before, and her ability to cook these amazing homemade meals, sew actual clothes, run all aspects of our family and household, seemingly with ease. As a grown woman myself now, I'm relatively certain that she is at least partly human (sorry, but no matter how old I get, she's always going to be slightly superhuman to me). I'm sure that she cried in the bathtub and locked herself in the closet with a spoon and a tub of ice cream like the rest of us. But to me she was bigger than life and I have felt this internal need to live up to a little girl's idea of how this whole mess is supposed to look. So I push it all back and focus on the stuff that doesn't take the same emotional effort.

Ask me how this plan works out most of the time. Or better yet, ask my husband. I need gentle reminders to take some time for me. Usually those gentle reminders come in the form of my sobbing on said husband's shoulder, completely melting down because I forgot to sign my kid's homework folder (again) and I did the dishes instead of holding the other kid responsible for their chores, so obviously this will all result in our kids growing up and robbing a 7-11, emotionally stunted and never forming healthy human attachments. At this point in the breakdown, I get pointed in the direction of the bathtub with instructions to soak until I'm pruned and sane.

Why do we think, especially as women, that our needs are the least important?

The whole "put on your oxygen mask first" thing usually seems like what I'd tell other people. I'm not as kind to myself as I am to other people. I'm not as gentle or merciful with myself as I am with other people. But I don't believe that's what God had in mind for us. If you grew up in church, you probably remember hearing about how important it is to be selfless, giving, loving, and forgiving. All of these are marvelous things to be and strive for. But we forget the things that Jesus did. Like rest. Weep. Leave his friends to spend time on his own. If Jesus recognized this and took time to do what he needed to do to nourish his own soul, why don't we give ourselves the same permission?

For some reason, most of us act like we shouldn't have our own needs or maybe that they should just magically be met. We act like our exhaustion from trying to do all and be all and create all and is just our lot in life. Sometimes we wear that exhaustion as a badge of honor. A virtual trophy built of just how much we do and how great that makes us look on the outside. But I don't want to just be the doer of all the things and the care-er of all the people. I want to build up my heart and my mind and my emotional reserves so I can be a better (preferably less tired) version of me. I want to intentionally create time and space to do what Jesus did so I can love like he loved. We can't pour from an empty pot. So let's create some time, not just for bubble baths or pedicures, but for the kind of moments that feed our souls.

"Some things are better not spread too thin. Your-self and peanut butter."



Best of the Mess - All in My Mind Part II – by Ashley Zanella

Last month I shared with you my personal weight loss journey, post two back-to-back pregnancies. I shared how I was able to commit to my health and lose 60 pounds in roughly 13 months. If you didn't get a chance to read last month's article "All in My Mind" visit our ARCHIVES page for some practical strategies that helped me stick to my health goals and actually reach them. This month, I promised I would share how I was able to manage working out 3-5x a week, on average, with a 1 and 2-year old in tow.

In my mind, it's really as easy as 1-2-3.

One, it's my priority. For me, working out means a release of endorphins that turns a crazy and chaotic morning with two toddlers that I am simply responding to into an afternoon where I usually have a lot more energy ending the day than I do starting it. Instead of playing defense, I'm on the offensive - instigating a chase around the kitchen and through the halls, a tickle fight or story time instead of trying to hide under a blanket and hope my kids forget about me for three minutes. So when I get stuck and am being annoyingly indecisive about whether or not I should workout, usually the questions that kick me into gear are,

"Do I want to be kicking myself later because I am sore, but feel accomplished?"

"Do I want to be kicking myself later because I have zero energy and haven't done anything productive for myself today?"

That is another mental trick I use on myself- that working out is something I do *for me.* I was once told, during one of my first bouts of depression, that if I wasn't happier three minutes into a run than when I started, I should stop. I used to hate running. I went from hating running to running an average of 2 miles a day and usually a couple 3-6+ mile runs a week just because I loved how it made me feel. Since having my first son, I've had terrible knees and haven't gotten back into running like I used to, but the gym gives me the same release, the same time alone and the same feeling of accomplishment that turns a basic day into a better one. Making exercise a priority for me means making myself a priority, and taking time to do the things that make me a healthier, happier and stronger version of myself. I have only ever regretted the workouts that I didn't make time for.

Two, affordable gyms. I found a great local gym that is very inexpensive compared to other gyms and it provides onsite childcare. As part of my membership, I am able to work out two hours a day while my children socialize. Not only can I work out during that time, I can sit in the sauna, I can go for a swim, or I can sit on one of their comfy couches, drinking a quiet and uninterrupted cup of their coffee, while I study, write or read something. On top of the workout benefits, I get 12 hours a year where I can use the childcare facilities while I go offsite, whether I need to go to an appointment, an interview or a day date. One Friday a month, I can drop off out boys from 4-8pm while my husband and I enjoy an evening alone together. It's truly a win/win because the kids get to make a lot of new friends and we both get to use all of these perks to not only take care of our bodies, but also our sanity and marriage.

As you can see, there were many days where this gym became my safe haven and I was

thanking God that it existed by the time I was trying to get both boys to go into the right door so I could check them in, pop in my headphones and be on my own for the next hour or so. I know that a membership isn't totally realistic for everyone and in every season, but I will say that I prioritize this gym membership over any internet, music or streaming package. If we had to let one go, I'd let go of all of those three before I would cut loose this gym membership.

Three, stick with it. No matter how many times I fell off track with my diet, no matter how many days in a row I missed a workout due to illnesses in the house and no matter how unmotivated I felt, I had to make it a priority to get into the gym and I had to stick with it - meaning I had to keep making it a priority over and over again. One, two, five bad days are nothing in the grand scheme of things. But if I let that week turn into two weeks and two weeks turn into a month, I was giving up on myself. And I refuse to give up on myself. Yes, I absolutely fall of the wagon many times, but I always get back on track and snap myself out of it. There were many months where the inches didn't go down, the scale stayed the same or even went up a few pounds, the clothes started feeling a little snug again and I wanted to give up. But the journey I started did not have an end. I had goals, but I wasn't trying to do any quick fix or two month diet. I set on a journey to get back to a body that I loved, felt healthy in and was proud of. So even if I fell off track for a week, that was going to be okay as long as I didn't let a setback turn into a failure.

Last month, I shared a delicious smoothie recipe and I hope you enjoyed it! This month, I want to share a simple way to meal prep so that even with two toddlers and a full agenda you can cook a healthy, nutrient dense dinner.

Ingredients:

- 3-4 boneless, skinless chicken breast, diced
- Teryaki sauce
- Sweet and Sour sauce
- Garlic powder/salt/pepper to taste
- 1 package mushrooms, chopped
- 3 medium sized bell peppers (red, green, orange or preferred), sliced
- 1 small yellow onion, sliced
- 1 small zuchhini
- 1 can chopped pinapple or 1 cup chopped pinapple
- Rice or your favorite lettuce mix

What to do:

1) Separate the chicken equally into different zip lock bags

- 2) Add teriyaki or sweet and sour sauce to the bags, covering the chicken. You can make half of them with one sauce and the other half with the other. You can also make your own versions of these and similar sauces to reduce sodium etc.
- 3) Label the chicken bags with the date and put two in the fridge with the rest in the freezer.
- 4) Chop all veggies and add to one gallon zip lock bag in the fridge.
- 5) When it's time to cook, you cook the chicken in a large pan over medium heat with some oil (I use coconut oil). Add garlic powder, salt and pepper to taste.
- 6) When the chicken is almost finished, you add the veggies and a generous amount of additional sauce.
- 7) If cooking the sweet and sour sauce, add the pineapples after you add the veggies.
- 8) Serve over lettuce for a salad or rice for a heartier dish.

Firmly Planted - What Matters Most - by Dina Cavazos

Sometimes the work necessary to keep the garden looking good feels burdensome. The drudgery of raking leaves only to have them fall again and again, the clipping back every few months to keep even the evergreens from going nuts, the continual re-filling and cleaning of the fountains...why am I doing this? Does it really matter and does anyone even care? The daily routine of life can feel like that too. Wake up, work, clean, cook, fix, run around, deal with traffic, etc., etc. Does it ever end? What's the point? ...Life can feel like a hamster wheel--UNTIL God shows up.

Now, I believe that God is always *here*. He's always near, waiting for me to acknowledge him, but sometimes my nose gets buried in my navel and I just can't see in that nasty darkness - I'm on the hamster wheel, pointlessly circling round and round with 'no direction home, like a complete unknown'. Recently, I came up for a breath of fresh air - actually, he pulled me away from my navel and I heard him loud and clear. I can say with certainty that when God shows up in any kind of way the hamster wheel stops; Light comes, bringing Life and Truth into my world, and then I see what matters more than anything else. A few weeks ago, I had such a moment.

In previous stories, I've shared about my mission to simplify, stop the thrift store habit, and get rid of excess *stuff*. Besides clearing the clutter my kids don't want to inherit, I feel I'm following God's prompting to get to a place of "less" so I can have "more." More time and "white space" to fill in a way that's meaningful and purposeful. Then there's the prayer garden--started with mustard seed faith, it's now a place to connect, reflect, and listen to the quiet voice that keeps me grounded and centered – a place to pray words that can bring God's kingdom near. This is God's way for me; he set my feet on this path; but the shadows of old paths remain to tempt and lure away.

Letting go of "things" started several years ago when I felt I was supposed to "give away" the excess items I was storing in the attic as a result of downsizing. I'd lived in two historic homes—antique and vintage was in my blood. Giving away was hard - my thrifty nature resisted, but I obeyed—kind of, half-way. Since then, I've sold, donated, and (sometimes) given away the majority of my thrift store finds, but one batch of extra-special stuff remained. These were things I valued the most - my special treasures - and I couldn't just let them go. I reasoned they were worth selling, which would help me recoup some of what I'd spent on my home updates.

In August, a friend and I visited some shops in Taylor, Texas and on a whim I asked about booth space. Seventy-five a month, three month commitment - this seemed like an answer, and in about two days, I came up with several reasons why I should to rent the space. I priced, recorded inventory, loaded it, drove there, unloaded it and then arranged everything in a bright sunny hallway. Over the next month, I bought a few more items to sell in the booth. A few weeks later, I still hadn't sold one thing.

Here is the moment: I don't remember where I was. The surroundings can disappear at times like this. Suddenly, like lights coming on in a dark room, I realized I was going the opposite direction of where God had been leading me! I was spending time buying and selling, thinking

about "stuff," using my time and money in ways I'd been trying to leave behind. Like neon lights, the saving Word illuminated the truth,

"What does it profit if you gain the world and lose your soul?"

I felt the heaviness of being out of God's will, of not being in sync with his plan for me. At that point, the treasures became a burden, a weight I wanted to just get off of me, and I began to hate the things I'd loved. The realization of pursuing the wrong treasure hit hard—and not only that...I'd gone *backwards!* The weight of it stayed with me for awhile, but I received it gladly. The discipline of the One Who Loves Like No Other is good and loving and brought me back into alignment. I was now willing to lose it all to gain what matters most.

I immediately took steps to get out of the thrift store business; but there are consequences—he can't be anything but fair. The three month commitment remains. The entire booth is 40% off and things are now selling at that bargain price, but, after donating or giving away what's left, it will be a "loss." It would have been better to just give everything away like he said in the first place - a shortcut to where I am now! How often I've missed those shortcuts! I hope the lesson pulled this thing up by the roots. I don't mind the loss—in fact, I welcome it, because it's a small price to pay for a serious reminder that I'm not just running on a hamster wheel. His purposes for me and my mission to accomplish that purpose matter.

Listening, obeying, following...staying true to the directives of the Keeper of my soul...

that is more important than any earthly treasure.

That's what matters most...

Moving Forward – Gentleness – by Pam Charro

Have you ever considered the gentleness of God? To me, it is one of his most endearing qualities. It is a rare treat to find gentleness in this often harsh world.

I am not always as gentle as I should be. When I fall short, it's often because I am unaware of my ability to cause the other person pain or I don't trust the other person to care. Sometimes I am just so frustrated about a situation that I'm not even thinking about how the other person might be feeling.

Conversely, it's relatively easy for me to be gentle when I am aware that the other person cares or is fragile. It's also easier when I am in a good mood or not overwhelmed by the situation. Then I can more easily keep in mind that taking care of people is always more important than taking care of a problem.

Based on these statements, what can we surmise about God?

- He knows he is powerful
- He knows we are fragile
- He is in a good mood
- The situation is not frustrating or overwhelming for him
- He trusts us
- He always cares about our feelings and never desires to cause us pain

Our heavenly Father has a perfectly beautiful, perfectly gentle heart.

Real Stories – Ready for Love – by Kristina Gomez

My husband and I talked for the first time by phone on July 25th, 2016 for two hours! Conversation flowed and there was no awkward silence. Before we said our good-byes, we decided to meet in person the next day. It seemed so simple!

Below is our story of grace, hope and love...

Joe and I had both tried online dating, him more than me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to date because I feared the type of relationship I previously had. Since my divorce in 2010, I was totally focused on raising my two boys and establishing a household and career. I obtained a nursing degree to establish my career and completed years of counseling to forgive and heal. It took a lot of support and guidance to be a single parent.

The kids were finishing high school and needing Mom less. At 39 years old, I found myself telling my coworker a crazy idea that I wanted to begin to date. I went on a hike by myself the previous weekend and she said, "Joe would love to do that with you." Joe was her boyfriend's brother. It took a few months of me back and forth *deciding* if I wanted to date. But honestly, I know it was God softening my heart.

Joe was a 47-year old Christian man with no kids; he was financially stable, and ready for a wife. Nothing and no one had come for him in terms of dating. He had been waiting and praying, asking God, "If you want me to date, please bring her to me." In June 2016, Joe was prayed for and encouraged that he would meet his wife by the end of the year. He didn't know how that would happen, but he held onto faith. Not faith in that word, but faith in his Father.

I like to think while I was getting myself together - Joe was patiently waiting for me. As cliché as it sounds; it was an instant connection. One funny note is that after our first dinner date he asked me to call him when I got home to be sure I made it there safely.

Independent Kristina said, "It's not that far, I can get home by myself."

And the other part of me screamed out loud in my head, "He cares!"

I was ready to accept someone into my life to love.

Joe did all the *right* dating things and was an amazing boyfriend. I was so happy because I had *learned* a new love! We met each other's parents, we arranged a family outing with the boys, and we talked a lot to discuss life and goals.

Joe and I dated for months. He then traditionally asked my dad for marriage and proposed in December. Exactly seven months after meeting, we married on February 26^{th,} 2017.

We love being married. We have learned a lot about ourselves and each other through this process and a lot about His timing and care as we wait...

Kristina is currently a registered nurse and in graduate school with a desire to teach. Wanting to be a nurse since her teen years she has a passion for helping and caring for others. She is married to Joe with two grown sons, Javier, 21 and Adrian, 19. Hobbies include hiking and enjoying the outdoors. Favorite foods are spicy vegetarian dishes.

Simple Truths - The Evolution of a Prayer Warrior – by Erica Simmons

Back when I was writing articles for this magazine through the lens of a single parent, I wrote one about using prayer like duct tape, a temporary fix in emergency situations. Below is how I ended that article.

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

That article was written two years ago this month. Wow! I wish I could say that making the decision to become this fierce prayer warrior was as easy as writing about it. I can say that in time I have learned a lot.

- 1. God is not sitting in heaven playing chicken with me and my prayer life. He isn't seeing who will blink and give up first.
- 2. My prayer life is not some marathon that I engage in until I give up and quit, because God has not answered yet.
- 3. He is not waiting for me to cross some arbitrary mark before He answers. HIS Word releases His power and authority in a situation.
- 4. There is no such thing as critical mass for him, He is not waiting around saying He will let the situation go just a little bit further and then He will answer.
- 5. He does not want His children to spend one second in sin off track wondering if He is real and if He will ever hear our cry. No, He is a compassionate God, who loves us and wants to see us grow in the fullness of who HE is.

As Christians, when we are interceding for one another, we are not fighting the person we are in prayer for. We are not fighting against flesh and blood, but against principalities and the ruler of darkness. Here is the thing, though: he is ALREADY DEFEATED. We just have to stand by faith on that truth and send the enemy packing. We do that by praying God's word over the situation. The enemy has to flee and has to flee right then. The divine truth is we have to learn how to pray IN line with God's word. That is the path that I am traveling in my evolution into a mighty prayer warrior.

In the following example I share how this can look:

I have spent the last three days searching for an issue that was causing my report to not generate the data I wanted it to. The most important thing to do in situations like this is to isolate the problem. Once the problem is isolated a solution can be deployed, which is easier said than done. To do this, I had to examine every aspect of the report and the logic I had written. When I came upon something that I thought was the issue I wrote logic to fix it, and for three days I deployed many solutions I THOUGHT would fix the issue. However frustrating it was, each time I failed I learned something; each time I failed I was able to actually hone in closer to what the real problem was.

As Christians we all too often see unanswered prayer as a failure.

In my evolution into a prayer warrior I too walked with that mentality, but I just felt the Spirit continue to draw me deeper into understanding of why my prayers were not answered. I

remember talking to a dear friend and mentor about the generic "...not my will, but Your will be done" mantra that we as Christians all too often fall into. I just felt that at some point we should KNOW what that will actually is. The word of God tells us that we HAVE to pray the will of God and as Christians we know that the will of God is His word. I have looked at the examples provided in His word by Jesus and the disciples and I see very specific word and/or instructions in their lives. Most of the healings Jesus performed came with instructions. How did he know to tell the blind man to wash his eyes in that specific river and not just at home or at the nearest place to get water? He knew because He heard His Father's voice. I have come to desire that in my life, but in order to achieve it, I have to do as I did with my report. I have to press in and keep going after the right word for my prayer situations.

If I want what Jesus and the disciples had (and I do!) I have to seek, trust and lean into God the way they did. I have to learn to not only hear when God is drawing me near, but be obedient to go into the Holy of Holies and spend that time with Him. I have learned that for me it was not a *simple to do* thing.

It was again similar to my report example. I had to learn the new code I am using on my own about a year and a half ago and the skills I have now are so much better than what I started with, but there are so many ways I can get better. My evolution into a prayer warrior has provided me with spiritual understanding that I did not possess when I started and there is so much more I look forward to God sharing so much more with me.



FRESH THYME - Focused - by Marcy Lytle

We recently got a new car, a Kia. I'd never really noticed a Kia on the road anywhere before, because we drove an Edge. But now that we have this new Kia Sportage, we spot them everywhere! Isn't it funny how that happens? I remember when I became engaged to be married while in college, all of a sudden I saw other girls in all of my classes with engagement rings! Unless we're experiencing a particular thing, our eyes aren't really focused on seeing it anywhere else!

I was thinking about this the other day and realized that we do the same thing with attitudes. If we are currently in a bad mood, we tend to see and view and are drawn to others with the same sour disposition. In other words, bad company likes bad company. If someone will listen to our moaning and complaining, we're attached at the hip and suddenly best friends. We catch the sour smell from those nearby and want to settle ourselves in beside them, so that our own sour smell isn't so potent.

Wow, this really spoke to me!

I then realized that it can be the same for a sunny disposition. If we are in a good mood, we tend to seek out those that are up with us! If we're enjoying life, we want to be surrounded by those with happy-go-lucky attitudes just like we have! We want friends to join in on our fun, show up to hang out, and revel in so much fun we can't stand it. No naysayers here! Those ones with sour dispositions can stay home!

What does this have to do with a new Kia, or a pretty shiny engagement ring?

Our perspective shifts, depending on what we're wearing or that in which we're riding. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it is when we can't see that good thing unless we have it. In other words, until I became engaged I didn't really look at the hands of other girls to see if a ring was sitting there on that third finger. Who cared? I wasn't engaged. And before we bought a Kia, I didn't really spot other cars like it, because I was driving an Edge. Who cared if she had a Kia over there? I had a different car.

When we're happy and life is good, we tend to forget those in severe need, because it's just a downer to listen to their woes, when we're planning our next vacation. Who cares if she's stuck in a lifeless marriage when ours is great? Or perhaps we're the one in deep need because we've been sick for weeks, and we can't see out to rejoice with that friend over there that just got a new job. We're too focused on our own sniffly nose!

I learn and listen and look from practical day to day experiences, and I realize that I need to observe others more. Not just observe those that are like me, or those that are sitting behind the same wheel as I am or wearing the same ring I'm wearing, but those that are not like me at all. I need to look over at that driver in the Edge or the Telluride (a nice new Kia that I really wanted!) and lend a smile and a thumbs-up as she drives by. When I'm feeling a bit down, I know that if I look up and rejoice with my friend that's up, it will do my soul a world of good to pull me out of the pit. Who wants to wallow with pigs in the mud when she can sit in a pool and splash?

I'm sure before long I'll barely notice what kind of car others are driving because my Kia will be old news. But I'm going to work at being more aware of those around me, whatever they're driving and whatever they're wearing, and take note, compliment, and smile.

What are you driving today? And what is she driving, next to you?

FRESH THYME - Have You Heard? - by Marcy Lytle

If you're on social media or hang around the younger set, you'll hear them say things you might not understand, but you'll hear them over and over again. And you'll observe new trends, new lines of thought, and other ways to express how you feel. Have you listened in, lately? Here's what some of them are saying and what it means, if you care to know. I find it fun and interesting...

"I'm obsessed." If I've heard it once, I've heard it a million times. It's what they say when they've found or discovered a new product or outfit or activity that they thoroughly enjoy. They talk about it and describe it, and then they tell us how obsessed they are with it. I suppose it's putting emphasis on how good what they're doing really is!

"It's been a hot minute." Any time it's been a while (not a minute at all – but maybe weeks or months!) this is said to the viewers or the readers or the friends when they see them. Maybe we used to say, "Oh I've missed seeing you!" But now, it's this new phrase. Okay, then.

"I haven't washed my hair in a week." What? We always washed our hair daily, or at least every other day. But supposedly now, dirty hair is easier to style and work with, so dry shampoo is a thing, and dirty hair is okay. I just wonder if dirty hair stinks. Does it?

"I've been ghosted." This means they were in a relationship, then that person just vanished. Like a ghost. It's something that apparently happens a lot in the dating world, nowadays. We probably used to say, "He ditched me." Same thing.

"Extra" - I first heard this on a makeup tutorial when the presenter was "going all out" on her makeup routine with color and lashes and more. It still means more than enough, but now it's used to describe how they present themselves by going "extra!"

"100 percent." Nope, it's not a math term. It means to keep things real. Be a hundred percent authentic. Authenticity – it's what this generation wants and looks for in every person they meet.

"Tbh" – to be honest, to admit something about yourself. It goes with that 100 percent. Somehow, even if it's bad and horrible, if we admit it, we can be forgiven. Something to note, and think about...I guess.

"Bae" – before anyone else. We might have said something like, "My one and only," but they say Bae. Or maybe we'd say honey or sweetheart (I like neither of those words), but if we hear them say this, we might wonder, "Well who is it?" And maybe they'll tell us...or maybe not.

"Basic" – anything mainstream is basic. For example, coffee with friends is basic. It's what they all do and enjoy, all the time.

"Lit" – this means something is really good. Yes, of course, it still means the light is on. But that's probably not what she means when she says that party she just went to was so lit. Maybe it's sort of what "sick" means as well – it means good. What?

I hope you have enlightened yourself now, by reading that above list. At least you've learned a bit of a new language you now will be able to understand when you stand among your children and their friends...until it changes again. And that might be tomorrow.

Now go wash your hair...or don't. And tell your spouse that he's your bae. And find out what you're obsessed about and share it with a friend...but tell them it's lit. See what happens. Or just keep talking in your own language and smile at the terms they use, and let them alone...we had our own phrases and words as well. Geez, wasn't it neat?

FRESH THYME - I Saw the Light - by Marcy Lytle

There's an old hymn that we used to sing when I was a kid called "I Saw the Light" and it was a peppy tune with a great message. However, I'm not talking about that song or the fun message in it, but rather about an attitude. When we saw we've seen the light, we mean we finally get something we hadn't gotten before, or we've arrived, or we now see what we were missing. In that hymn, it's referring to finding Jesus. And that's a great thing, right? Of course it is! Unless...

Let me explain what I'm trying to explain!

Have you ever watched little kids playing a game? One gets way ahead and he starts bragging and stating that he's the winner, long before he reaches the END space. Or when I was teaching a class of "gifted" kids, there was always one girl that slammed her book shut when finished with an assignment to proclaim to the class, "I'm done, aren't I awesome!?" That kid wanted everyone to know that she had completed and understood what they all were still working on! Fast forward to our adult lives, and at any given gathering it seems there's always one person stating a problem and another answering on how to solve that problem doing what "they did," because it's so simple...

In other words, when we "see the light" and get something or we are winning or succeeding, we tend to want others to see how great we are and to step up the game and be like us.

Let me explain further...

We, as Christians, tend to form a theology of God and all that he's about, based on how he's treated us as we've lived our lives. If we are successful financially and have really had no setbacks, we tend to say that we are blessed because we've given or been faithful. Although it may be true that we've been faithful and have given, we base our success on the *fact* that we are "so good." If we've been healthy and never had any chronic or acute illnesses, we tend to brag about how we eat, how we live, and tell others how they ought to be "like us," as they suffer over there with their chronic allergies and stomach issues.

I do not like it when folks (because I used to do it myself!) act and talk like the light they're walking in is something to be shone in the faces of those who are still in a dark tunnel! It's NOT cool, and it is certainly not attractive for an outsider that's not in our "inner circle" of believers. I remember a time when I was first married and had graduated from college with a degree in math, when I thought those with money struggles just didn't know how to balance their checkbook (or now, it would be an online account!) It was simple, wasn't it? And I could be very non-sympathetic and judgmental on those with financial issues, until I found myself in the middle of one of those struggles!

What happened to the "light" in which I was walking? I was in one of those dark tunnels myself!

I still see it happening today. We sit and point fingers at those who aren't quite as mature as we are, haven't studied and learned who God is, or those that are falling short in one area or another. And I have never seen any good fruit come from that attitude of, "I saw the light, so

now why can't you?" In fact, that attitude will send people running from us, or fighting us in our faces, and neither has the outcome of a loving relationship with one another.

If we've seen the light in some area, we can walk in it and give thanks. But honestly, the only light we're all called to walk in – together – is the light that enables us to love each other as Christ loved us. He sat with those that didn't believe like he did, he had dinner with those that absolutely hated what he taught, and he loved the outcasts of society. He always got to the heart of the matter and spoke healing to that wound, instead of creating new ones.

If we find someone that hasn't quite "seen" it like we have, we need to be cautious and careful that we love them instead of sing a tune "over" them. If they're stumbling, we need to offer a hand of encouragement, not a word of shame. And if they're downright awkward at living life successfully, prayer can do wonders for a friend! I mean, wonders!

Go look up that song, "I Saw the Light," if you want. And give thanks that you've seen the light of God's love. But remember that it was He that shone his light into your darkness by his death on the cross. Be the light in the dark paths of others, but don't shine it in their faces...that will cause sheer blindness...sometimes permanently.

FRESH THYME – The Beauty of People – by Marcy Lytle

I had lunch with a four-year old today and I suggested that after we got our food from the drive-thru, that we sit in a shady spot and "people watch," one of my favorite things to do. His reply was, "I don't want to do that. It sounds boring." We got our food and I parked in just a random shady spot, which happened to be facing a grassy area near a toll road. He scooted up to the front seat where I told him he could sit, and his first comment was, "There are no humans to watch." Go figure. We sat and looked at shapes in the clouds instead of the shapes of humans...

That little experience reminded me something that I think of quite often when I people watch. We're all SO DIFFERENT. In one sitting of observing people I see all sorts of notable things...

Young girls have no qualms about wearing shirts and shorts that are two sizes too small.

Lots of people dress for comfort not style; in fact, most people do!

There's a guy that can barely walk under the door frame, he's so tall.

There's a lady over there that can barely shut the back of her car, she's so small.

Her hair is all shades of pink, and her hair is in a bun, and her hair is long and wavy.

His pants are skinny jeans, his pants are relaxed fit, and his pants are below the hip.

Her skin is white-white, his skin is dark-dark, and they're walking together holding hands.

That man over there can barely walk as he shuffles into the store and grabs a cart.

That lady right there can barely walk because her heels are too high!

She gets out of her car with three kids in tow, one of them a teen, rolling his eyes.

He exits his car with his earbuds on, oblivious to anyone around him.

That family looks like they rolled out of bed, literally, in every way.

That couple looks like they're dressed for success, in every way.

He's missing a leg and his ride is a wheelchair, and I wonder about his story.

She's holding the hand of a special needs child, and she looks so very tired.

I could probably write for hours about the differences in all of the people I watch come and go from one sitting in a car eating my lunch, waiting on my husband while he gets a haircut, or just resting on a bench on a trail. We're all so different. So beautifully and wonderfully different, in the way we look, the way we dress, and in the lifestyle we have chosen to live or have been handed to survive.

I hope I never forget to pause and look at the beauty of people. I hope that I catch the eye of one of those stressed out moms and give her a smile, or hold the door open so she doesn't have to let go of the hand she's holding. I want to never think judgmental thoughts of disdain because that person isn't dressed a certain way or acting like a good human should. And I want to always give thanks for each and every person that breathes like I do, sees through two eyes, or wait...there goes a guy with a walking stick that can't see through either eye!

I often get caught up in the outward instead of the inward, never knowing the why's of how people look or dress or end up as they are on any given day, coming and going as they run their errands. I don't know if they've just received a devastating diagnosis or lost a loved one, or if they just found out they got the job promotion they've been waiting for, for years!

The point it, I just don't know. But I do know that we are all made in His image, and we are all beautiful in his sight...and so I hope to see that beauty whenever I people watch, human watch, or after I find shapes in the clouds with a four-year old who thinks humans are boring...