

August 2019



Seven for You - DIY - Panel of Women

This month's question to our panel of women was to ask them about any DIY products or projects they've used or completed at home, ones they enjoy and can share with all of us! DIY is so popular these days, especially if we can provide a cleaner product with less chemicals, save money, or just put our personal spin on something we love to eat, wear, or pamper ourselves with.

Here are a few fun ideas for you!

Cleaning:

As a cleaner, I use hydrogen peroxide. I put it in a spray bottle and use it to clean our bathroom sinks and shower stall. It doesn't have a strong odor and is not full of harmful chemicals.

I am a minimalist about cleaning supplies. I use Dawn original blue dish soap for EVERYTHING and buy it at Home Depot for \$1.96 bottle.

I use Dr. Bronner's Castile soap in foaming dispensers for all bathroom hand soaps, toilet cleaner, and sometimes shampoo.

I use only All Free and Clear laundry soap liquid, plus Borax and Fels Naptha bar for stains and I use nothing in my dryer...no dryer sheets or balls, etc! Don't need it!

Décor:

I used kitchen hand towels and table napkins in patterns that I liked over a curtain rod instead of curtains. I hung the hand towels first over the rod and then put the napkins in a diagonal pattern over them. (see pic)

I actually took a class in arranging flowers! Of course I improvise, but the things I learned were:

- 1. Start with greenery. I thought this was kind of weird, but when making an arrangement it actually works! Instead of filling in with greenery you fill in with the flowers.
- 2. This is kind of hard to explain but arrange your flowers in 3's like 3 roses on each side and then fill in with your other flowers.
- 3. I try not to cut them too short to start off you can always cut a flower shorter but you can P not make it longer once cut.
- 4. Then after all of this I just throw out everything I learned and starting arranging since sometimes my groups of 3 don't always turn out like I want or I just buy sunflowers and put them in a vase since they last a long time inside!
- 5. Don't forget to look for stuff in your yard! Especially greenery! Rosemary and herbs are wonderful!

About five years ago, I took a little course about these four disciplines. Because I'm not a painter, I decided to make me something as a daily reminder to keep these disciplines out of magazine clippings.

Yard:

The biggest thing I have done recently is take on my own garden design. I had a landscape designer give me a few tips and offer to do a complete layout for me but the price was over \$500 for just the design. So I decided to do it myself, little by little. And after talking to friends, I now have allowed myself the freedom to pull up a plant and transplant it somewhere else if I don't like it's original spot. It's a trial and error and learn-as-you-go project. I really enjoy the process so far.

After going through the drought a few years back in our area, I hate to use water in excess, especially for something like our swimming pool so I came up with this idea. I made a gutter system that runs from our roof into our pool so when it rains our swimming pool is filled. It cuts down on cost of water considerably and we have some of God's greatest natural commodity to swim

in.

Personal:

As I've gotten older, I have acquired allergies to a lot of facial lotions. So for nighttime I have a mixture of about a tablespoon of olive oil with a couple drops of lemon juice. This small amount lasts me for several days. I read about this online and I'm hooked. I love the way it makes my face look and feel and these ingredients I always have on hand.

I make my own face wash: 1:1 Castile soap (Dr. Bronners) to witch hazel plus a few drops of each tea tree & lavender essential oil (Young Living). Combine in a travel size squirt bottle. Wet face and hands & pour a penny size amount in your hand. Lather on face and rinse.

Ever since I was 13, I've been waxing my own lip and eyebrows. I've never been to a salon to get them done and I can only imagine the amount of money it has saved me! It's pretty easy, too. A lot of people may be intimidated because well, our eyebrows are a pretty important facial feature. However, the nice part is that you're in control! There are all sorts of special tools to help guide you in getting the job done and with the internet there are thousands of tutorials that can show you how to do it properly. I could head to Walmart or Target and get the little at home waxing kit to place in the microwave, but if I want to properly DIY I go to a beauty supply shop. I personally like to go to Sally's; there they have a wax warmer with different heat settings, wax for all types of skin (dry, oily, acne prone, etc...), wax strips, wax sticks, cotton pads, and even a solution that removes the excess wax that you missed. However, my hack is that I just use coconut oil and it removes the wax just the same! I honestly couldn't imagine getting my brows done by anyone else other than myself and I've even done some of my friends....Who knows maybe it could be a good side business.

I use diluted Johnson and Johnson ORIGINAL baby shampoo to remove eye makeup...my dermatologist insisted. I use only coconut oil for facial moisturizer.

My recipe for bath salts is the following:

1 bag of Dr. Teals bath salts (fragrance free or other) approx 6 cups in a 3 lb bag

1 can of sea salt fine crystals 1.6 lbs

1 1/2 - 2 cups of baking soda

20 drops of Lavender Doterra essential oils 15 drops of peppermint and/or 15 drops of eucalyptus

I pick whatever scent I want, and if my sinuses are acting up either of these work well. And my muscle aches are treated, too!

I recently made rose water and keep it in the fridge in a spray bottle, for spritzing my face throughout the day. I especially like to spray my face if we go out in the evening for a refresher!

I just clipped rose petals (ones that have not been treated with pesticides) and brought them just to a steam in distilled water, on the stove. Then I covered them and let them steep for several hours.

After that, I just drained the water into a bowl, and filled my bottle! That's it!

Feels so great and is good for the skin.

Clothes:

I sew almost all my own nightgowns from tee shirts and or tank tops. I use one for the tank top style and one for the skirt...cut off the sleeve and neck and use the bottom part.

Food:

I make my own bone broth because I feel like it is healthier and I have more control over the ingredients than what is available at the store. I make it from a basic Insta pot recipe.

I don't buy much in the way of convenience or prepared foods, I make most everything from scratch including bone broth. Even if I buy a rotisserie chicken I boil the carcass for soup.

I love to make my own hummus. To me, it tastes 10 times better than any store-bought. I've tried lots of recipes and this is one of the best and most clean. And one thing I didn't have was tahini, so I used sunflower seeds and pepitas instead, and they worked!

- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 cans chickpeas, rinsed and rained
- 1 t sea salt
- 1/3 c tahini
- Juice from 2 lemons
- 1 T olive oil

Place all in food processor, pulse till blended but still coarse. Adjust seasonings to taste.

Hair

I cut my own hair. I went to too many salons and came home upset, and dissatisfied. So I purchased a pair of haircutter's scissors and a hand mirror (for looking at the back) and I observed the stylists, and now do my own! I have wavy hair and I like texture and variation, so it works! I snip all around, not too much at one time. Then I wash and dry and look at any places that need attention, and snip a little more. That's it.

The Dressing – Early Fall – by Marcy Lytle

I know, it's August and cool temps aren't coming to most of us for a while. However, one of my favorite things is to look through my closet for summer pieces that I can transform into fall pieces. I like to think how they can be transformed and what I need to make that happen. Let me share with you what I'm talking about.

Sheer blouses – Maybe you have a blouse that's sheer and summery, but it can be transformed and worn under a jacket once cooler temps arrive. Here's a cute jacket for this fall that you might want to hang in your closet next to that blouse. Or (see photo) add a scarf and your suede booties and carry the look into September with long shorts!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0721270005.html

Flowerdy tee – Those summer tees you've worn all summer long will look stylish and slide right into the next season worn under a cardigan. Check out the fall hues in these cardigans and wear them with your summer tees.

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0679854002.html

Sundresses – Perhaps you bought a couple of sundresses that you wore to summer weddings, or maybe you still have one coming up this month! They too can be easily transformed into a fall outfit with a longer sweater that drapes over to cover your shoulders in the fall!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0793137008.html

Those cropped jeans – If you've got cropped jeans/pants that have been your staple all summer long, don't put them away come September. Pair them a short jacket and a tee. Add flats, and you've got a great look!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0713533002.html

White jeans – Don't fold them and tuck them away in a drawer just yet! Leave them hanging up and pair them with a heavy sweater. Seriously, this is a cute look!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0448509020.html

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0738882001.html

Sandals – If they're brown or black, still wear them in early fall! They will look completely fine with any of the outfits above! It's no longer a no-no to show your toes after Labor Day, if the sun is still high and temps are still soaring. But if you do want to cover your toes, check out this cute pair of sandals that make for a great transition to fall!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0606710003.html

Pastels – Maybe you have a few pastel shirts hanging in your closet. Especially if it's a button up shirt with a collar, keep it alive. Wear it under a darker shade of that same hue in sweater. It will look elegant and pretty!

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0695632003.html

https://www2.hm.com/en_us/productpage.0693917003.html

Obviously, we probably won't be wearing our bathing suit or carrying our straw totes on into the next season, but we can definitely get creative and wear our summer clothes bit longer in new ways that even surprise us!

Selah's Style - Sadie & Josie - by Marcy Lytle

Sadie and Josie are Selah's cousins and they just moved back to the mainland from Alaska, with their mom and dad. They got to stay and visit a bit with some of their other cousins a few weeks ago, and enjoyed a bit of swimming, shopping and playing – all the things kids love to do together! Playing with cousins is the best! And so is sharing a little fashion sense as you do...

Augie and Sadie were at Target with the family and discovered this cool group of sunnies (that's sunglasses, for short!) While Augie tried on several pair, Sadie turned toward the camera in her cute and comfy dress from Old Navy. Check out her choice of necklace – it just compliments her dress so well! Sadie will be 3 next month!

https://oldnavy.gap.com/products/dresses-toddler-girls-12m-6t-C1017759.jsp

Poolside, Sadie and her little sister Josie (almost 1!) are enjoying some Texas heat and working on their stateside tan! Josie's cute suit and float device is from Target and Sadie's stylish suit is from Old Navy. Their mom was thrilled to spend a little time walking the aisles of Target, something she hadn't gotten to do in a long while!

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/category.do?cid=54738&#pageId=0&department=165&nvt=Left %20Nav&nvt=Baby%20Girls&nvt=Shop%20By%20Category&nvt=Swimwear

Shopping at Altar'd State with her mom and great aunt, Sadie found herself going back to the jewelry over and over again, looking for accessories to go with her ensemble. Check out her cute pigtails and that winning smile! Especially note the hair ties worn high up on the arm as bangles – what style! I think it's a great idea! Her shorts are from Target and the shirt – maybe one she received from an older cousin!

https://www.altardstate.com/as/accessories/hair-accessories/clarissa-scrunchies/001078 109144.html

Josie thoroughly enjoyed shoe shopping with the family at Tyler's Outlet in Austin, Texas. She sat for a long while in her slightly used dress (from another cousin!) and tried on sandals and looked for the perfect shoe! Josie could have browsed for hours...never tiring of all those choices!

https://www.tylerstx.com/

Old Navy has lots of cute graphic tees for toddler girls, and Sadie likes this one because – YES – she is a strong girl! She and her cousin Ayla have that "messy hair don't care" look because they're all about playing at Catch Air – an amazing indoor playground for kids! These two cousins are having a blast together!

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/category.do?cid=36374&#pageId=0&department=165&nvt=Left%20Nav&nvt=Toddler%20Girls&nvt=Shop%20By%20Category&nvt=Graphic%20Tees

In Alaska, Sadie's mom says she mostly shopped at Old Navy because that's all that was there, and their prices are so affordable. But once she returned back home, she missed Target so

much and loves their clothes for kids! Lots of choices and they're all so cute. Especially when they're worn with family to all sorts of fun places before summer is over!

In the Kitchen - Friends' Recipes - by Marcy Lytle

I saw a friend post the most amazing photo of something she'd made and I asked her to share the recipe with me. Then I asked if I could share it with you! That made me realize I'd love to share several of my friend's amazing tastes, so I asked for more submissions. August is a great month to try out something new from the kitchen of a friend...or two.

Tomato Tart – by Milissa Jenkins

I had extra tomatoes from when my dad went to East Texas, so I made this yummy tart, in fact this recipe makes two!

Heat oven to 350 degrees.

- 2 large tomatoes
- 8 oz grated sharp cheddar
- ½ cup or more of mayo
- Black pepper
- 2 pie crusts

Lay one pie crust in the bottom of each pan. Sprinkle the cheddar (mixed with mayo and black pepper) along the bottom, leaving enough of an edge to fold. Layer sliced tomatoes on top, sprinkle with kosher salt, and fold over the pie crust.

Bake until pie crust is browned and cheese is bubbling up between tomatoes – about 15-20 minutes.

Authentic Street Tacos - Lindsey Fultz

This is a super quick meal, as it can be prepared in 30 minutes. You'll just need a large skillet or wok for the meat, and a small skillet where you can warm the tortillas. Enjoy!

- Mission street tacos Mini corn tortillas
- HEB Mi Tienda Seasoned Diced Beef
- Half white onion, diced
- Cilantro, chopped
- Lime wedges
- HEB That Green Sauce salsa

Place about half of the seasoned beef in a wok or large skillet, heat on high, and sear the meat. (You don't want to do all of it at once, because it won't sear with the whole package.) Set aside first half, and sear the second half.

Once all sides are browned, return the first half to finish cooking for a few more minutes. It shouldn't take long, since the meat is diced. Test cut one piece to check to your desired doneness.

Warm the corn tortillas in another skillet to cook them thoroughly, flipping on each side on high heat until brown marks appear lightly, and tortilla is more flexible.

Assemble your tacos with the seasoned beef. Squeeze juice from 1 lime wedge over it, top with onion, and then cilantro. Top with green salsa, to your own taste.

PULLED PORK PASTRY PUFF

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 (17.3-oz) package puff pastry, defrosted
- 3/4 pound pulled pork
- 3/4 cup BBQ sauce
- 1-1/4 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 Tbsp water

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat oven to 400°F. Line baking sheets with parchment paper. Set aside. Unfold pastry sheets. Cut each sheet into 9 squares. Toss pulled pork with BBQ sauce. Arrange pulled pork and cheese down center of the pastry squares. Fold two opposite corners of each square over the filling and press edges to seal. Place on prepared baking sheet. Combine egg and water. Brush each pastry with egg wash.

Bake 15-18 minutes, until golden brown. Serve warm or at room temperature.

My tips:

- make sure you don't cut the squares too big; mine tasted great, but ended up being rather
- I also used the pastry wash to help seal the edges together
- buy pre-cooked packaged meat that you can easily heat up; this will cut the time in half
- add peppers or other seasonings of choice to pulled pork for added flavor
- be sure you roll these up tight or they will flatten out and sink slightly after you pull them out of the oven

Tracye's homemade lasagna

feeds 8-10 people

takes all day (wanna let that sauce simmer as long as possible) pre-heat oven to 400 degrees.

Use a 9X13 pan.

Ingredients for both sauce and filling:

2 pounds of ground beef

2/3 cup of sweet onion minced (i only mince because I have a picky eater and if she finds onion she will stop eating)

5 cloves + of fresh garlic minced (we LOVE garlic so I actually use around 8)

1 can of 28 ounces crushed tomatoes

2 cans of 8 ounces each tomato sauce

2 cans of 6 ounces each tomato paste

1/2 cup of water

2/3 cup of red wine (I prefer a cab sav or merlot)

3 tablespoons of sugar

1/2 to 2/3 cup chopped fresh basil

1 teaspoon of salt (I probably use more as I just "eyeball" it)

4 teaspoons of italian seasoning

2 teaspoons freshly ground pepper (again I don't measure I just "eyeball" it).

1 big container of whole milk ricotta

1 bag of shredded italian three cheese blend

1 bag of shredded mozzerella

1 bag of shredded pizza blend cheese

1 bag of grated parmasan cheese

1 egg

garlic powder, onion powder, salt, pepper

1/2 cup of freshly chopped basil

Either homemade noodles (Super easy and inexpensive) or 1 box of SKINNER oven ready lasagna noodles.

For the sauce which I personally think tastes best when allowed to simmer all day.

brown the ground beef- I also add the chopped onion and minced garlic to the meat while browning. Once browned drain off all fat/grease and put back in pot. Now add the crushed tomatoes, both cans of tomato sauce and both cans of tomato paste. Now add the water, wine, sugar, 2/3 fresh basil, salt, italian seasoning and ground pepper. Stir thoroughly. Put on low and stir about every hour. I really do start this about 9 am and then let it simmer ALL day till about 4:30. It's so yummy!!!

Ok, now, once you are ready to assemble your lasagna to put it in the oven to bake, go ahead and make your yummy ricotta concoction:) Place entire container of ricotta, 1 egg, 1/2 cup of freshly chopped basil, 1/2 cup of three cheese blend, 1/2 cup of mozzerela and 1/2 cup of pizza blend cheese, salt, pepper, garlic powder and onion powder in to a bowl and mix well. I don't have measurements for the salt, pepper, garlic powder and onion powder. I just put in what i know my family likes.

Make sure to pre heat oven to 400 degrees

Take 9x13 pan and put just a dab of your ricotta mix on the bottom so that your noodles can stick to it and not slide while you are trying to cover them. Place one layer of noodles on bottom, then smear some of your ricotta mix on your noodles, then sprinkle with a bit of all your cheeses, now put a layer of your meat sauce and sprinkle with your cheeses. Place another layer of noodles then ricotta, cheeses, meat sauce and cheeses. I find that I can only get a total of two layers of ricotta and meat in my container.

Place in the oven and cook for 45 minutes to an hour (depends on your oven). I do allow my lasagna to cool for up to 30 minutes after removing it from the oven in order for it to have time to set.

ENJOY!!!!!!



Tried and True - Paper Calendar – by Marcy Lytle

I see so many friends checking their phones when they're asked if they're available for lunch next week or to attend an event. Their calendar is on that little device, so that's where they go to look at their availability. However, I still use a paper calendar that I hang on my refrigerator! Am I mad? Apparently, not. I asked readers about their choice of calendars and it seems there are still some of you out there with me – you like paper, too!

What a crazy thing to write about, you may think. But in reality, my paper calendar is one of my favorite things I have and attend do. And let me tell you why:

- I absolutely love getting a new one each year. My criteria is that it has to look good with the décor in my kitchen and have nice large squares for filling in. If there are stickers that come with it, that's fun, too. I search and shop for just the right one, as one would for a piece of art!
- I also love turning the page to a new month. I am surprised with the new image, and I love the new empty squares waiting to be filled in with anticipation and fun for the coming weeks. It's one of the simple pleasures in life that brings me joy, just like biting into a fresh peach from a roadside stand on a hot August day.
- It helps my marriage! I try to write any activities coming up on the calendar and remind him to look at it, note it, and that way he doesn't have to ask me questions! It helps so much when he's looking ahead and realizes what's coming up, without me having to say a thing.
- I love to plan and anticipate. If we have a road trip, a vacation, a picnic, a date night...it's all filled in so that I know what's coming up and can say no to requests that might take away necessary fun time. I'm a firm believer in down time from duty, so scheduling in fun makes sure that chores and life and people don't interfere.
- It's availability at a glance. If we are needed to assist someone, to attend a party or event, or just to be open for helping someone or visiting a friend, it's nice to glance and see what squares are open...and to make sure there are some! Too much filled in only makes us both tired; but just the right amount gives a good balance to our pace of life.
- I can keep for reference. When the year is over, I usually file away that calendar at least for a while. If we wonder when that was that we went on that trip, we can look back and find the date! So helpful!
- It helps me keep track of birthdays. At the beginning of the month, I fill in family and friends' birthdays so that I can remember to get a gift or send a note or pray a prayer. If the calendar comes with stickers, I like to place a birthday on the square!
- It's great for long-range planning. At the beginning of each season, we pull it off the fridge, sit down together and look at the season at a glance. We go ahead and write in road trips and vacation times, and even special chores like fence-fixing or garage cleaning. If we don't fill them in, they won't happen. Life gets too busy.
- It's the same point of reference for both of us. Like I mentioned above, not only does he know to look at the calendar instead of asking me questions, but...he too can schedule

in date nights for us, find out if he's available to serve somewhere, and fill in his own ideas for fun things to do. It's a win/win pack of paper for us both!

Do you still hang paper calendars, or have you totally gone electronic? I know lots of people use their electronics for scheduling business related events and activities and that makes total sense. Carrying a phone is a must and having that info at hand is necessary. But for home and family and couples and fun, nothing beats the smell, the look, and the feel of a paper calendar to hang up and display, to turn and fill in, to read and enjoy...

Hint...wait until after January 1 to shop because they go on sale 50% off!

Practical Parenting – Save on School – by Marcy Lytle

It's that time of year to start shopping for back-to-school clothes (those must-haves!). However, just purchasing school supplies can for sure break the bank! Depending on the ages and temperament of your kiddos, there may be one that is super picky about what he wears, and another that could care less. I remember being so sad when I could no longer pick out my kids' clothes and bring something home to surprise them, because they had opinions of their own. Imagine that! I also recall being stressed out over the cost of everything, from clothes to shoes to backpacks and more!

I'm a pretty practical person, so here are a few pointers if you too are a stressed out mom/grandmom/aunt or friend in the throes of helping the littles in your life transition into the next season and come out with dollars still left in your account for after school ice cream and evenings at the movies.

Target Cat and Jack – Surely, you've heard of this brand. I'm so pleased with Target for this line of clothing for children because it's super affordable and super cute – a great combo. This summer, we were able to snag shorts and tops for \$4-5 each.

https://www.target.com/b/cat-jack/-/N-qqqgm

Ross and Marshalls and TJ Maxx – I sing the praises of these two stores all the time. You definitely have to look and you have to revisit again and again, but you can't beat the prices on clothes for the kids. While you're there, toss in a shirt for yourself! I'm a big fan of their shoe selection – so many to choose from!

Dot Dot Smile – This company is owned by my daughter's friend and she sells the most sensory friendly twirly dresses ever. They're not cheap, but if your daughter has issues with the feel of things, a few of these dresses might be worth investing in. And they require no ironing or buttoning or any such attention!

https://www.facebook.com/dotdotsmile.janetthill/

Old Navy – The sales Old Navy has are super. Especially end of the season. But they also run sales, and they give away bucks for future use. I really like their packs of pajamas for the little ones. Super comfy and cute for the cooler months ahead. Also check out Burke's Outlets for super cute and affordable sleepwear for the kids.

https://www.burkesoutlet.com/search/?SearchKeyword=girls+gowns

H&M – Have you been to the kids section of this store? H&M is known for offering affordable women's clothing in trendy styles, and they do in kids as well! The styles are simple and on a recent shopping excursion there, 6 year old Ayla picked out about eight pieces of clothing in 15 minutes time! A record! Check out their racks of simple dresses at simple prices, and jackets for the boys and the girls.

https://www2.hm.com/en in/kids/campaigns/4210d-say-it-with-sequins.html

Secondhand – I know lots of young moms that only shop at thrift stores for themselves and their kids. I'm personally not a fan, but I'm sure it's a good thing to recycle old clothing from previous owners that barely wore them. So if you're into that sort of thing, go for it! You most probably will have to spend time and effort finding all that you need, though, if you've got a bundle of kids to buy for.

I personally stay away from department stores. They overwhelm me and I don't care for their styles, usually.

I know how much I can spend per child and I try to stick to that limit. You can do the same. If you only have \$100 right now, only spend \$100. Buy the essentials like socks, underwear and shoes. Then see how the kids can transition their summer clothes on into the first month of so of school.

- Buy them both a light jacket to wear over the summer tees.
- Have leggings on hand for her to wear under her sundresses as the temps start to fall.
 (Cat and Jack!)
- Reuse the backpack from last year, perhaps allowing them creativity to embellish or decorate. Or check out Burke's Outlet – they have really cute backpacks – cheap! https://www.burkesoutlet.com/search/?SearchKeyword=kids+backpack
- They probably need shoes because feet grow! Maybe let a family member that's asked take over buying one item of clothing, like shoes!
- Label so that your kid doesn't end up losing their jacket for good the first time they wear
 it and leave it. https://www.amazon.com/Sharpie-Permanent-Laundry-Marker-Black/dp/800387BTJS
- If she likes bows and jewelry, let her make her own. Maybe have a jewelry swap just before school starts!
- If he insists on those particular shoes in that particular brand, have him work for the money, honey.
- Pajamas for her can be simple little nightgowns (have you ever shopped Burke's Outlet?) and he and she can wear dad's and mom's old t-shirts and may love these the best!

Finally (or first) pray. God promised to provide for our needs. If funds are low and your kids need clothing, ask your Father to provide the money, the coupons, the discounts, the sales and the friends that are just waiting to give. He will do all of that...and more. I have two grown kids as proof that they never lacked for anything that they needed. Ever.

I Don't Do Teens - Be Aware - by Marcy Lytle

I remember back when my kids were teens, Facebook was gaining popularity and my kids were on it. I too got an account, just for the sheer purpose of keeping up with what my kids were doing, seeing who their friends were, and as a little guard – they knew Mom was on their social media account. Moms have that right, you know, to be aware and be there. Now fast forward just a few years, and there are even more concerns as our kids begin a new school year, especially the teens in our family.

Here are some things to be aware of, as you parent and pray and teach them to stay...close to God and all things safe:

- Phones are a privilege, not a necessity. Yes, we like our kids to have them for safety purposes, but be aware of the dangers you know that lurk, and the temptations they are easily swept into. Guard your kids' minds and hearts and eyes, in any way that you can.
- Streaming platforms like Youtube. Ask your kids what they're watching and watch it with them. Any time they're hiding away or shying away from showing you, it's probably not a good thing. Ask for a list of videos they watch and be interested in what interests them, always. Don't let it go, in favor of your own interests.
- Self-image and self-awareness is high This is why your teens will be drawn to stories of celebrity teens with eating disorders, the singers that write lyrics about thoughts of suicide and issues with boyfriends, etc. Pay attention to the lyrics of songs that are popular. Take time to google the artists on your kids' playlist. Don't be the parent that says, "I never knew she liked that." And by all means, affirm your kids in every area of life, and affirm yourself so that they never hear you too say, "I'm too fat," or "I feel worthless." Get help, be a positive role model.
- Gaming Rules I don't mean to know the rules of the games they play, but rather know that gaming itself rules their time and minds! Teens are interested in gaming, and gaming can be addicting and damaging. Encourage your teens to go outside, get active, write music and stories, interact with God through reading and youth group, etc.
- Bandwagons There are trends everywhere, and once school starts up your teens will be called to jump on bandwagons from the latest food craze to the latest dumb prank craze. Train them, talk about standing up and being different and unique, and not blending into a band full of clones, just to appear cool.
- Pizza or Sushi? Whatever foods your teens crave or talk about, teach them. Let them start cooking and deciding on healthy ingredients, and creating. A creative mind is a great mind, instead of one that wanders or follows. Let them create in the kitchen.
- Movies and Books Probably your teen likes one or both of these. If they're drawn to dark stories with dark characters with sinister, evil tales...talk about it with them and see why. If they insist on seeing rated R movies or films with sex scenes, talk about the dangers and offer alternative activities. What they see and what they read imprints their minds and hearts, sometimes forever.
- Vaping and suicide and drugs and alcohol It's all out there targeted at your teens, and their friends are going to offer it all, say it all, and beg your child to go down that path of destruction. Experimentation is a dangerous thing when it comes to addictive behaviors.

And negative thinking is a slippery slope. Surround your kids with love and family, take them to church and find healthy friends. Be a healthy family...together.

Talk to your kids. Listen to your kids. Pray with your kids. Affirm your kids. Those four things provide a safe boundary of protection and freedom that make for a healthy and happy family. Then cover the whole arena with prayer.

Will your kids get into trouble this school year? I don't know the answer, and it's up to the choices they make. But our job is to pray, be there, be aware, and care. Then all the rest, we have to cast over on HIM, because he loves these kids more than we do. And he will never stop chasing after them with His great love, because he's that kind of Father.

Tiny Living – Humbly Thankful – by Leyanne Enterline

Living tiny for almost three years has definitely been a humbling experience.

At first it was exciting and fun to go against what most think is absolutely crazy. But as time has gone on it's become a little frustrating with the odd looks we get when people ask,

"Where did you say you live?"

"Why haven't you started building?"

Many obstacles have come in our way of building, so it's just not happening with our planning. We continue to wait on God's timing.

One never knows what someone is going through and why they live the way they live, but I've learned to try my best not to judge.

1 Peter 3:8 says,

"Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy,

brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind."

Just like the verse states, we are all in this together and I want to have sympathy and love others through whatever they are going through.

It's easy to jump to conclusions and think, Oh, they don't know what they're doing, they can't handle their finances, or they need to be doing things a certain way. It's easy to judge but much harder to love.

We lived in California for a couple of years and owned a nice house, had nice cars, and traveled but we got into \$40,000 in credit card debt. One would never know on the outside by the way we lived, but the debt destroyed us on the inside. Finally, with lots of fasting and praying we were able to sell our house for the exact amount we owned in debt with just enough for us to move back to Texas.

I am thankful for what we went through to learn to try not to judge, and instead have sympathy for others going through their own struggles, as well. At the time it was a very rough ride, but what God brought us through has been so amazing!

So living tiny it still is for now! We will wait on His timing and enjoy the tiny living blessings.

Remember Love Grows Best In Tiny Spaces!

A Night to Remember – Sundaes are for Sharing – by Marcy Lytle

We recently had a sundae bar with friends, and I thought afterwards why not suggest that idea to families, with a lesson to go with? The sundae bar was so fun, because we had ice cream for supper! What's better than that? I love that we have the freedom to enjoy life, without the confines of legalistic boundaries that stifle us from enjoying who God made us to be, and this life he gave us to live. This month, as the family enjoys the sundae bar, the talk will be about freedom to live and have fun...and to share that with others.

<u>Preparation:</u> Purchase vanilla ice cream and several toppings you know your family will love (crumbled cookies, chocolate syrup, strawberries, chocolate chips, etc.) Set out cute bowls and even decorate the table with twinkly lights, if you have them. Surprise the family one evening by announcing you've chosen to have ice cream for supper!

Ask these questions or read these statements, and then chat as you enjoy your sundae bar together.

Why aren't we having a normal supper? Isn't it bad to skip a healthy meal and eat ice cream?

Sometimes, it's okay to indulge in a few treats and take a break from all the rules...if it's safe and okay with mom and dad. School is about to start, and teachers will have rules. If she says today we're going to close our books and play a game, then go for it. But when she says open the books and let's learn; we must obey.

• God's word is there for our guidance and safety and life, but so is his freedom to be who he made us to be and enjoy this life.

Everyone's sundae will look different, depending on what each one likes on top. Some might like crumbled cookies and others just want chocolate syrup! But we can each enjoy our own creation!

When school starts, there will be kids in our classes that dress differently, talk a different way and even learn in different ways than we do. That's what makes the classroom so fun – all of the differences!

God's word says we are to love others as we love ourselves. And that means those who
are different, too.

Vanilla ice cream is what we chose for our base for our sundaes. It's plain, but then we can make it decadent with all of the goodies we pile on top.

When school starts, some days might seem plain ole vanilla, and other days might be so exciting like all the toppings piled high. And still other days might seem like our ice cream has melted and ruined! But he has promised to be with us in each situation, to make good out of it all.

• God's word is like vanilla ice cream. It's the basis for a good life, a good school year, and good things.

Sundaes have to be eaten right when they're prepared or they melt. Ice cream is delicious but if left out in the sun it will ruin quickly! No one wants a soupy bowl of hot cream!

When school starts, we will have lots of chances to do good for all of the kids in the classroom, including our teacher.

 God might whisper in our ears to play with that kid, or speak a kind word to that girl, or help out the teacher. His whispers are like ice cream. We need to obey quickly, or we will lose the opportunity to bless a friend.

Sharing is the best, around a table full of toppings and ice cream. If one person takes it all, then someone will be left missing out!

When school starts, there will be lots of chances to share our smiles, pass around kind words, or pour on happiness when someone looks sad.

• God's word is best when it's shared. We know that Jesus loves us, but do our friends?

I Corinthians 16:14 says "Let all that you do be done in love."

John 15:12 says "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you."

God is so creative, and he can help us think of all sorts of ways to bless and love our friends, just like the way we feel blessed tonight, eating ice cream for dinner!

The Family Practice - Summertime Madness - By: Brandi Oman

Our summertime has included sunshine, heat, sunscreen, anything that includes water, and lots of fun.

Recently, Caiden and I went to the Typhoon Texas water park. We played, laughed, ate, and relaxed. It was a perfectly hot Texas day, there were a lot of families, and waterpark chaos was definitely happening. After being there for about four hours, I told Caiden it was time to go. I turned around for a moment and that is when my panic set in.

Caiden was nowhere to be found. I looked around for a moment and then began to yell, "Caiden!" "Caiden!" and there was no reply. I started a perimeter search of the area where we had been. My heart was beating in my throat, my body was shaking in a panic, and I was seeing red. In what felt like hours, but in reality was only a minute or two, I found him. He was safe, he was playing with other kids in the pool, and nothing was wrong with him.

When I got to him, I explained to him the importance of communicating with me about what he is doing and where he is going in such a crowded busy place. I told him that for him - he was having fun and enjoying himself, but for me - I got scared that something awful could have happened to him.

We all have these moments in parenting where we lose sight of our child for a moment and panic. We beg our children to listen to us because we understand the dangers of the world more than they do.

I see so many times in my own life where I know there is risk in my own decisions, have heard people counsel me on the decision I make, but then I choose my own way. I don't think God panics like we do, but I think he feels the complete devastation of our refusal to follow simple instructions because he knows the dangers and the consequences of not doing so.

Thankfully, Caiden was fine and I didn't have to get authorities involved, it didn't me a long time to find him, and he now understands the lesson of following instructions the first time. We still had a marvelous time and we plan to go to the water park again...before fall arrives and another season begins.

Luke 11:28 "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."



Under the Influence - Turn on a Dime – by Marcy Lytle

It may depend on how old you are if you've heard the above phrase or not. To "turn on a dime" means to make a quick change in direction, super quick. It originated when talking about boats and how a boat could maneuver and turn sharply. And since the smallest U.S. coin is a dime, thus the phrase came to be.

It has since come to be used in talking about relationships. When we have a close friend that gets mad and dismisses us with a flash, she can be said to turn on a dime. She once liked us and now she doesn't, all over something we see as being small. However, she saw it as being huge! And the phrase can refer to our own self when we too "turn on a dime" when someone has offended us. Maybe we think she's our best friend and she acts or says something that hurts, and our first and quickest reaction is to think, "I'm done with her!" Even though we've had years of good times, we can turn on a dime and forget all the good in a flash – with one wrong move by her!

I've had people turn on a dime with me and I never knew what happened. I asked, and they didn't answer. I thought we were good, and then they were gone. But I too have turned on a dime with others. And it's all because of these things:

Anger – maybe an injustice takes place and she was the one responsible, so judgment spews out of our mouths and she's "outta there" forever – out of sight and out of our mind.

Hurt – maybe she accused you of something that is untrue and you cannot believe it, so you decide to throw away all your years of kindness because of her one sentence directed at you.

Disappointment – perhaps you're always doing the asking and she never reciprocates anymore, so instead of talking it over and finding out why, you ditch her. Done and gone.

Abuse – maybe you were once close, but now she's using and abusing your time and friendship because she's changed and in so much need...always.

Gossip – someone told you what she said, and she admitted that she said it, so now you are appalled at what she said, so you say – that's it!

Even in a marriage relationship, years of loving and commitment can go right out the door in a moment's action of infidelity. The faithful spouse turns on a dime and sends the unfaithful one packing.

I get it. And I think God gets it, too. He knows when we feel anger and hurt and disappointment and all of the above. He totally gets it. He too had friends turn on a dime on him – in the garden when he asked them to pray – and at supper – when one of his followers betrayed him for gold. These guys had committed to being in a relationship with Jesus and yet when life was tough and temptation was strong, they failed in a split second to acknowledge Jesus as their friend and Lord.

Jesus was wise. He knew when to withdraw and when to leave the company of the crowds and friends that hurt him. But he never withdrew to dismiss or forget those who betrayed him. Once he rested, ate, and felt better, he prayed. John 17 is a great prayer by Jesus to his Father, where he mentions all those that the Father gave him.

Yes, there are abusive relationships that won't ever be restored because of safety and mistrust, etc. However, there are many relationships that we dismiss too early in a fit of rage, because of one mistake, and because we refuse and cannot forget.

I don't have the answers to how long it takes to heal from someone leaving our lives quickly, when we were with them forever. And neither do I have the answer to how long it takes to get over someone that's hurt us in a moment of weakness.

The lessons I'm learning are these:

I need to be careful of what I say and do on a whim, when someone in earshot or eye level might hear or see and repeat it to someone I love.

I need to aware that when others say hurtful words to me or fail to respond as I wish, there may be a reason and I need to wait, pray for them, and let time and wisdom rule.

It's hard to turn on a dime, in a boat, or a vehicle, because sharp turns require skill and expertise. If the driver lacks either, the boat will capsize and many lives will be lost. This is probably why turning on a dime is not the best way to react, especially when there's wide open water to take time to sail and think and heal...and there's a Father up above that's waiting for us to cast those huge cares over on His shoulders so that we can run free.

Strengthening My Core - Too Odd for God – by Marcy Lytle

I know I'm not the only one that feels odd at times because I hear others say it as well. I have lots of quirks and feelings and likes/dislikes that don't match my peers...in the least. And especially if we've had others comment on our oddities or "weird" qualities in a negative way, we come away wondering if we're so odd that even God raises his eyebrows in wonder.

However, have you visited a zoo lately? There are so many odd animals and creatures in the cages. Some have huge pink butts, others ridiculously long tongues, and still others are just awkward-looking. And we know that God made them all! So if we feel odd in the way we look because we're too short, too tall, a little plump or have skin that's freckled...we should strut around with our heads held high because of our uniqueness! The animals certainly do!

That's just one way that we can feel odd – in the way we look. But there are so many other ways we feel odd, and I want to focus on our feelings. We might think we're the "odd man/woman out" because we don't feel the same way as others do about subjects, relationships, food, etc. And if literally everyone in the room likes and enjoys a particular activity or train of thought and we absolutely feel different altogether, we can wonder again, are we THAT odd?

Recently, I did wonder if I was too odd for God. I was dealing with old issues that I've dealt with for decades. I was struggling in my faith and really annoyed at people, and I really just wanted to get off the planet! (At least for a while) I had thoughts and feelings that I knew weren't "normal" and I just wondered one day what God thought about me. After all, shouldn't I be over some of my annoyances at this age in life? And what defines normal, anyway? I knew better, but just felt weak and vulnerable.

We've been watching a lot of movies lately with gay/lesbian themes, and in every one of them these folks feel odd or out of place, they struggle with their identity, they look for love and affection. And in almost every film, we get a glimpse back in their childhood life with their parents...where because of their affinity for music or dislike for the "norm" they were treated with disdain and disapproval. Their oddness made them feel unloved.

It's so important in those formative years that we get affirmation and love for who we are, regardless of whether or not we turn out like all the other kids. If we don't, we struggle the rest of our lives with fitting in, feeling accepted, and frustrated in not knowing if we're "okay."

This particular week I was especially low. And I began to review what I know. Couldn't that be a rhyme to remember?

"When you are low, review what you know."

- I know that I am created in the image of God.
- I know that I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
- I know that Jesus loves me.
- I know that he wants a relationship with me, as I am.
- I know that He hears every cry and every prayer.

- I know that he knows my thoughts before I ever speak a word.
- I know that He works everything (even my highs and lows) together for good.

I'm pretty sure many of those who followed Jesus felt like they might be too odd for God. Maybe they had evil ways (cheating tax collectors) or were unfaithful (adulterers) or were weak (sank into water when they were told to walk) or even crazy (those possessed with demons.) Jesus never passed by one odd person because of their oddity. In fact, he spoke to them and revealed to them their deepest needs and then he met those needs. He sought out the odd in society to love them and never to shun them.

When I'm down and low and feeling odd and out of sorts, I'm thankful for the reminders I read about in his Word about how much he loves me and cares for me, in all of my oddities and more. And if the odd stuff is bad stuff, he'll work it all out. But if the odd stuff is good stuff, he'll let me be and teach me to thrive.

Healthy Habits – And Now Another – by Marcy Lytle

I was driving in the car the other day and became so annoyed with Siri. Have you ever done that? She wasn't understanding my directives, and I was losing my patience with this voice without a face! So I decided to tell her so. I said, "Siri, you're so frustrating!" And guess what her reply was? "Take a deep breath." (pause) "And now another." What? That just made me even more annoyed with her!

However, I took a deep breath and then I laughed at the absurdity of the conversation I had just had with a nobody.

That experience made me think about this column and how there are some really simple and real ways to relieve tension and frustration, if we can remember to take five and heed the directives, even if they come from a source like Siri.

Breathe – That's what she told me to do. And that's what I did. There's really something quite healing about breathing deep. It's like the tightness in our chest is relieved when we breathe in deep and then exhale slowly. We forget this simple exercise that works so well.

Read – Some days I just steal away from my work and sit in the sunshine or shade and read a chapter in a book. It's not a deep thinker type of book, because that would just require more intense focus. Rather, I choose a book about characters that are remotely different from my world, so that I can escape to that era or part of the world for 15-30 minutes. And it works! I feel better for doing so.

Mow – I have suggested a few times that we get a gardener to take our yard maintenance work from us. But then we keep going, and every time I'm through mowing, I feel good. Not only have I walked and sweated, but I've accomplished making an overgrown piece of grass into a beautifully trimmed block of green! I feel elated!

Garden – Maybe mowing's not your thing, but gardening is. Even if it's August, you can plant succulents or herbs or indoor plants. In fact, take a succulent planting class in your area! There is something so healing about digging in the dirt!

Walk outside – There are days when I've been working all day inside, and I'm a grouch come evening! However, if we step outside and walk a mile or two, I feel like a different person! I may have to push myself to do it at the end of the day, but I'm always glad I did after the mile is up. The wind is necessary to blow away the stress...

Nap – Not possible, I know, for moms of littles unless they nap, too. And then you want to clean the house and get things done! But for those who can, a little short nap does wonders for the soul and the psyche!

Play – So if you're surrounded by littles, then stop and play with them. Stop the laundry and the dusting and the list-making and play. Get wet in the splash pad with them, build a zoo in a shoe box, laugh at a funny kids' video they're watching. And that leads me to the last one...

Laugh – A good belly laugh is healthy! If you find nothing to laugh about in your day, then ask a friend to tell you something funny. Make yourself laugh at the mishaps of the day. Listen to the laughter of children and make yourself join in, and see if the laughter doesn't then come easily and more frequently.

What else can you remind yourself to do? We all know the things listed above, but we get caught up in living life and forget to do the simplest one of all, that directive that annoying Siri told me in the car.

Take a deep breath. And now another...

Life Right Now – Sisters – by Bethany Gomez

I can't believe that another summer break is coming to an end for me. My older sister and I are trying to settle into our new place. As my sister put it, "Our new normal doesn't feel normal yet," but I have no doubt it will. I have this feeling that it will start to feel more normal as I say goodbye to my summer break and get back into my full time job routine.

Lately, I've been so thankful for my older sister even though the dynamic is a little different when it is just the two of us. We are sisters after all. When it's just the two of us I think we feel less self-conscious about griping at each other a little bit more than normal. I've made the statement a couple of times that we basically resemble an old married couple. We fight, usually over small things, but then we are always quick to forgive each other and move on.

We are incredibly close. The fact that we are only 18 months apart may make it obvious why that is, but I think one of the main reasons we are so close is because we are so different from one another. We each have different strengths and weaknesses that balance out somehow. But we are not so different that we don't understand each other. Does that make sense? Whatever the case, I don't know what I would do without her.

There is a song by Taylor Swift, called "I'm Only Me When I'm With You" and there is a particular part in the chorus that I think kind of sums up our relationship. It goes like this:

Well, you drive me crazy half the time

The other half I'm only trying

To let you know that what I feel is true

And I'm only me when I'm with you

We do drive each other crazy sometimes, but what I think is great is that I can be myself around her. I don't feel any pressure to be anything other than who I am when I'm with her, and that is truly a freeing feeling.

My relationship with my older sister has not always been so strong. At one point when we were younger, I allowed a seed of jealousy to take root. I almost let it grow out of control. I resented my sister for a long time. She got everything I thought I needed to be happy. While I struggled with acne, she had a clear complexion. While I grew taller, bigger, and wider eating the same things she ate, she had this petite, slim frame with a high metabolism. While I had small, round eyes with straight eyelashes, she had these big, beautiful almond shaped eyes with naturally curled lashes that went on for days. While I struggled with being shy, she was outgoing and made friends easily. I had very low self-esteem in those days. At the time, I knew I shouldn't be having these jealous thoughts, but I didn't know how to break free from them. Thankfully, through the Holy Spirit my mom was able to discern what was going on with me and she sat me down, talked to me and prayed with me. In that moment as I sought forgiveness, I remember almost instantly that the feeling of jealousy left. I realize that had I chosen to let that seed of jealously stay I wouldn't have a close relationship with my sister that I have today. I was set free to love myself and in turn love my sister with all of my heart.

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness.

God is so, so good! He loves each of us the same. I'm so thankful for His love and forgiveness.

I don't know what God has in store for my sister and me as we travel down the road together for a time. Could it be He wants to strengthen our relationship? I hope so. Does He want to use one or both of us to help each other or help someone else? Maybe. Whatever it is, I want to make sure I don't take for granted this time that we have together.

My sister wrote a post about our time that we spent living together with our best friend. In it she said that her "life hasn't exactly gone the way she had planned...but God always has a plan and works all things out for his good." I couldn't agree more.

I trust that His plan for each of our lives is going to be wonderful, not easy, but better than anything we can imagine.

Created for Life - Uncovered Mysteries – by Ginny Hurley

Mysteries have always been one of my favorite genres. Delving into secret stories and hidden agendas appeals to my sense of adventure. I can read a book and transcend into the time and place in my imagination. Movies are great, but I find that reading the author's original intent is much more satisfying and exciting. Besides, today's movies can be so graphic and disturbing, while a book leaves the pictures to your own imagination. I'm also stealthy at cutting a violent scene or skipping a part in an exciting novel that I know bothers me. Creating in my mind what the characters look like gives me joy as my favorite fiction characters become heroes or heroines in the stories. When humor is mixed with a great mystery, I can seldom put it down, laughing with a sense of foreboding as the character clumsily stumbles upon the answer or culprit. In most cases, when a book I've read or author I love makes a movie, I am usually disappointed in the actor or actress chosen for the main part.

As I was reading in my favorite version of the Bible, *The Passion*, I was again captured by God's mysteries that He has hidden for us to discover. I love how He hides things to be revealed to us when we search and seek. As I was reading in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, I was again captivated by the words spoken by Paul and realized how the true mysteries are hidden in another world. I won't write the whole scripture here but will give a portion of what God spoke to me through...

I Corinthians 2:6-11

"It's wisdom that didn't originate in this present age, nor did it come from the rulers of this age who are in the process of being dethroned. Instead, we continually speak of this wonderful wisdom that comes from God, hidden before now in a mystery. It is His secret plan, destined before the ages, to bring us into glory.... Vs 9 Things never discovered or heard of before, things beyond our ability to imagine—these are the many things God has in store for all His lovers. But now God unveils these profound realities to us by the Spirit. Yes, He has revealed to us His inmost heart and deepest mysteries through the Holy Spirit, who constantly explores all things. After all, who can really see into a person's heart and know his hidden impulses except for that person's spirit? So it is with God. His thoughts and secrets are only fully understood by His Spirit, the Spirit of God."

This message quite overwhelms my ability to perceive, yet I know it is true. My understanding of these mysteries is only revealed by my acceptance and revelation of His Holy Spirit. As I allow His spirit to dwell inside of me, His mysteries will continually be unveiled. I cannot, in my own wisdom and study, uncover things hidden from ages past. Only as I join His Spirit within me, will I be able to uncover true jewels and treasures from heaven. I love this, yet it leaves me trembling in the kind of awe that surpasses worldly mysteries and agendas. This kind of fear is what we were created for, the kind that is from another world, a higher one, revealed for those who search it out.

We were literally made in His image, created for a life of adventure and mystery. What a good and perfect Father! He knew us before we were born!

I can almost see His smile as I discover His rich blessings and favor! Right now as I ponder these thoughts, I can't help but laugh at His fun and joyful Spirit!

What an adventure, and there's so much more to come!



In This Together - Little Joys - by Bekah Holland

Get comfy, y'all. I've got a story to share. One I heard not long after I found myself married and in a similar place.

This couple was young and newly married, completely in love and ridiculously poor. When their first anniversary came around, they knew there wasn't going to be romantic candlelit dinner with white tablecloths and 5-star service. The woman was feeling a bit disappointed, knowing that the things she had dreamt of were closer to a silly fairy tale than reality, and the man was struggling with his confidence as he couldn't give his wife something beautiful to celebrate their first year together. They rose the morning of the big day, got ready and went on with their days and jobs, both wishing they had some grand gesture to give to show their love. Later that evening, after a dinner at home, with handmade cards and words of love, the woman walked in to her bathroom. Waiting for her was a bathtub with drugstore bubble bath next to it, several tea light candles and a bowl of red hots. Immediately, her husband started apologizing that it wasn't fancy chocolates or expensive bath oils. But this act of love moved her. He did what he could with what he had. They both found a moment of joy in the smallest of acts.

I'll be honest, this story moved me in a big way. Because I was definitely that girl. I had these ideas in my head of what my marriage was going to look like. These pictures played out in my mind, full of unrealistic expectations, and I never once thought about anything marring that cozy little life I imagined. And in case anyone was wondering, that played out exactly the way you think it did...not at all. We hit bumps right out of the gate. Sinkhole sized bumps. And we celebrated our first anniversary, a month after our daughter was born, so we were sleep deprived and I might have cried. Twice. Before we even left the house. I mean, it was lovely and the time together was great, but it was a far cry from the visions I had when I was young...er.

Our first New Year's Eve together was anything but glamorous. My past NYE celebrations consisted of sparkly jewelry, pretty dresses and stupidly high-heeled shoes. But on December 31st, 2007, things were a bit more low-key. With our baby asleep in the next room, and wearing our finest t-shirts that may or may not have smelled like spit up, we toasted with the finest champagne available from the nearest gas station. Don't be jealous. And we sat around our computer to check out this newfangled website called YouTube, watched funny videos and laughed until we cried. It is, to this day, one of my favorite memories.

As years rang in and ended, sink holes arrived and left, struggles came and went and came back around again....we had to learn to find joy in the little things. I learned my husband's favorite snacks and candy and he learned my favorite authors and wildflowers. We would write notes encouraging each other and find ways to give in small ways. But as we did those things, we found more and more that all of these "little" things were actually not so little. The sticky note on the mirror meant more than the diamond earrings. The candy bar on the night stand said I love you more than the newest gadget (well, maybe not more, but it said it almost as well). And we've had many date nights curled up watching a favorite television show with cheese and crackers because going out was just too much.

We loved those times!

Funny enough, on our 10th anniversary, we got all dressed up, went to a very fancy restaurant and ordered very fancy food, only to have most of it boxed up, run home, put on our pajamas

and eat the leftovers laughing on the living room floor. It was, by far, my favorite part of the night. In our 13 years of marriage, we have found the joy in the little things:

The small gestures that have great impact.

Words of encouragement.

Long hugs in the kitchen.

Getting takeout after a rough day so I don't have to cook.

Finding joy in the little things helps me find contentment on days when things are good, and even on days when I just want to hide under the bed until it's all over. It's helped me on days that I need to remember how much I love my husband, even if I don't particularly like him at the moment (come on, you know it happens sometimes.) And, it's helped him remember how much he loves me, even when I've lost my keys for the 14th time in the same day, regardless of how many times he's tried to get me to leave them on the danged hook he put up just for me.

Sometimes, we all need to stop and smell the proverbial roses, love the ones around us and see the beauty in being right where we are.

Date Night Fun – Summer Drives – by Marcy Lytle

It's August. Back to school is happening, those summer projects are still waiting to be completed, maybe there's one more trip to be had before we say good-bye to summer, and so much more to fill our calendars! However, date night awaits us all as well! And this month we're presenting to you five summer drives to take, so that date time with him is fun and different and a summer event you won't soon forget...

Drive across town – Make it a point to get in your car and drive to a part of town you've not been to before. Drive through the neighborhood, visit a coffee shop in that area, and even check out a community park or pool there. Make sure you're out away from your little circle of homes, and into another area to explore. <u>Exploration</u> together is invigorating and the best fun ever.

Drive in the country – Head out of town. Pack a cooler, stash a few books or a newspaper in a bag to read, take a game, toss in your chairs and some sunscreen, and head out with no particular place in mind. Just go. Decide on how long you'll drive. Expect and look for beautiful scenes, country homes or abandoned places, wheels of hay, or late summer fruit stands. Stop and take photos. Pull over under a shade tree and nap. No map, having <u>no agenda</u>, is relaxing and needed for the best fun ever.

Drive to the beach – If you have a coastal beach, go. If you only have a beach at a lake, go. If there's only a man-made beach at an amusement park nearby, go. Browse the stores for sales on beach buckets or other games for the sand, even if they're generally for kids. Purchase some clearance water shoes! Pack up snacks. Being a kid in the sand and watching the sun set over the ocean (or lake) might make for the best boost for your marriage ever.

Drive to the hills – Maybe you live in flat lands. Surely there's a hill SOMEWHERE for you to find or create or imagine. Hills cause us to look up, to climb, and then to ascend and descend. It's all about <u>noticing our surroundings</u> and giving thanks for the beauty in creation. This time pack binoculars. Look at wildlife, sketch what you see. A little looking out beyond to the hills reminds us to give thanks and that makes for a romantic ever after.

Drive to the stands – Fruit stands, farmers markets, vendors that sell their wares, etc. Make a list and hit a bunch all in one day! Fresh produce, something homemade, a bite of one last summer peach, do it all! Keep your marriage fresh just like the <u>freshness</u> you encounter at each stand. It might make for a date you'll want to do over and over again...forever and ever.

Get the picture? You want to make memories with date nights, you want to relax, enjoy each other and the beauty around you, and you want to get away together...and remember those vows and that fun...forever.

After 30 Years – Keep Walking – by Marcy Lytle

We neither one really want to, sometimes. It's too hot, or we're too tired, or we just ate, or we don't have on the right shoes, or we are sleepy. You name it. We can easily come up with excuses not to go for a walk. We all do it. Or we'd rather just exercise alone in our own way, at our own pace, and at the gym away from him, and away from home. That's good too, but there's really something about walking outside together that invigorates both of us physically, mentally, and in our marriage.

Just yesterday, it was 97 degrees and mid-afternoon, not a prime time to take a walk. However, we had been driving for hours, we had a movie scheduled later, and I could feel myself become irritable and restless. I needed to walk.

He, however, was tired and looked at the temperature, and was sure it would be dangerous to walk in the heat of the day. And, of course, it can be. He wasn't sure he had the right shoes, and he just wanted to pull over and nap (which we did that, too!)

But here's the deal. We both feel SO MUCH BETTER after we get out of the car, put on our walking shoes (I keep a pair under my seat at all times), grab a water bottle (we take these with us, too) and start moving. We choose places that have shade and a breeze, if possible.

This particular Sunday we chose Mueller Park, one of our favorite walking trails. It's around a pretty body of water with a fountain, there's always a little man selling frozen treats, there are birds and rocks and ducks and turtles, and oh yes –beauty!

We pulled up and noticed that not many were on the trail – duh. It was 97. Did I mention that? We told each other we'd go slowly and return to the car if we felt the least bit overheated. We filled up with water, stopped at the bathroom, and started walking.

Nope, we didn't hold hands. It was too hot. But we observed the people we did pass. Jon made noises like a pigeon at the pigeons on the ground near us (way too near us). He stopped and bought a frozen treat that he ate quickly, before it melted. We talked about the beauty of the trees and how we wished we'd gotten their earlier for the farmer's market. I even did a "summer shuffle" where I skipped a little, because I just wanted to.

And when we came around back to where we parked, we looked at each other and said, "Let's go again," and we did.

We were burning hot and sweaty at the end of this walk, and we fell into the car and turned up the AC on full blast, as we backed out to head to the movies.

Every single time we walk, I feel better. Stress goes away, my heart is pumping faster, I feel like smiling, and all my grumpiness is elevated to pleasant words for me and for him. Now, how could that ever be a bad thing?

It's hot in August, at least for most of us. And we can walk in a mall (yes, we've done that) but we miss that sunshine and breeze. Did I mention those two things? They're vital. We will opt for earlier or later walks when we can, when the temps are at least below 90. But no matter the

time of day, if we can find a body of water, a trail, some water, and a frozen treat nearby – we're good to go – to keep on walking.



Best of the Mess - Poop on the Window - by Marcy Lytle

Our writer of this column is a young mom with two little boys and was in the process of looking for a job, when the kids got sick, and life just got messy...as the title implies. This past month she was extremely busy and wasn't able to get her story written, so I'm covering for her. As I began to think on a subject, I decided to write about how when life is messy, it's okay to say no, to step away, and let someone else...

Here's what I mean:

- When our calendar is too full, it's okay to decline yet another invitation, even if we're worried we might offend. Keeping our sanity is not selfish, it's wise.
- When our minds are racing with all sorts of destructive or fearful thoughts that clutter up and crowd out the truth, there's nothing wrong with texting a friend and saying, "I'm a mess. Please pray." Gathering our scary thoughts that are spiraling downward is a healthy thing to do.
- When the house is literally and visibly messy, it's okay to not beat ourselves up and allow ourselves grace to clean when we feel better, after we've played with the kids, or when we've slept better at night. A clean house is great, but a messy house shows life has occurred.
- When what we're wearing is dirty, stinky and too tight because we've given birth, had
 kids climbing all over us, or nothing is clean in the laundry, we can burst out laughing at
 the absurdity of trying to be perfect. Perfection is way overrated.
- When our faith is weak because that friend is dying, our mom is ill, our children seem depressed, or our husband just lost his job, we can cry out to God in anguish with moans that cannot be uttered in words. He can take it. He understands. And he doesn't judge us. He loves us.
- When the car smells like dirty diapers all the time, the slime is now part of the décor, and the floorboard is not visible because of toys, socks and empty drive-through bags, we can ask for help...yes we can. We can insist that everyone take a bag and grab 10 things and empty the car for Mom. We are not super woman, and never will be.
- When our fridge has sticky jelly outside of the jar, leftovers with no labels that are now growing mold, and when the door swings open the whole family holds their nose, we can purge and throw away everything without guilt. No, we don't have to eat every last bite, explain why we tossed that carton with ¼ cup of milk in the bottom, or cry over the carton of blueberries we forgot we had that have now gone bad. Messy fridges happen.
- When we arrive back at our house from a play date where her house was perfect, her sofa was white, and her kitchen boasted a bowl of pretty fresh lemons, we don't need to step inside our front door and wish we were like her. Comparison is a joy killer, and we all need joy to be strong.

Are you getting the picture? I'm sure I haven't hit on every mess that comes to our life at times, sometimes because of our neglect, but mostly because we're moms, wives, and women that breathe and live.

For all you young moms reading this article, let me tell you this. I'm 61 and just this year, I finally have my pantry and fridge somewhat organized like I saw in a magazine decades ago. But even with no kids living in the house any more, nothing stays pristine or perfect or organized, even with just the two of us. We still get messy in all areas of life and have to ask each other for help, and call on friends to pray.

It's the best of the mess that makes this life worth presenting to others. Presenting perfection is like trying to keep a car window glass clean when there are storms blowing through, African dust settling in, and birds flying by that poop right after we exit the car wash. We do the best we can, we clean as often as our lives permit, and sometimes those who see us take a finger and write in our dirt...but so what?

When we open our doors, there's laughter to be heard, cries to be consoled, and the smell of something cooking in the kitchen...even if it's a smell of something burning. Life is happening right now, and we're blessed to be a part of it, mess and all.

Simple Truths - Keeping It Real – by Erica Simmons

Note: My son and I talked, and he gave permission to share this story. My reason for sharing is for all of you that also struggle with real life at home with real kids. This story is for all of us, to speak up, share, and be real...on the road to healing.

Have you ever watched one of those time-lapse videos where people are drawing, painting or creating something? In the beginning what they are creating does not look like much; but as they continue to do their thing, a transformation takes place into something amazing and beautiful. That's how the work of God looks in someone else's life. Since we are not the artist or (in God's case) the creator, we can't see the potential in the canvas, lump of clay, piece of wood or stone or the life of another. What we see from the beginning is something we can't find any value in until it is complete. Since we can't see, understand or comprehend the value, we dismiss it, belittle it or attack it...especially when it is in the lives of those we love and care about.

The month's story is not going to sit well with some readers. However, there will be someone out there that my unashamed revealing of the truth with help.

One of the things I have so often wished as a parent is that I had someone to go to and share my struggles and my children's struggles, their choices. I wish I had someone who had similar experiences. In hindsight, what I really wanted was a quick reference guide as to how to deal with it all and make the struggles go away as quickly as possible. Secondly, through all my years of writing for *A Bundle of THYME* I have made it a point to protect my boys from judgment, so I shared what we were going through in generalities. This month, I am going to violate my rule of protecting my child from judgment so that I may be the first point for someone else. After all, our life is our testimony and our testimony can be someone else's strength. I am going to keep it real and trust that those who need this will find renewed strength in an area of their life where they may have started to falter.

So, off we go...

Three years ago Mother's Day weekend is when I found out, and I will never forget it. At work, we had come to the end of the arduous testing season and were going out to have our year-end celebration. I decided to run home really quickly and when I pulled into my driveway, my son Jordan and his friend were acting weird coming from the side of the house. I told him what my plans were and noticed his eyes were red. I went in the back gate and didn't see anything until I turned to go back out. In the corner of the gate I saw it, a makeshift bong made out of a Golden Peak bottle. I lost it, told his friend to go home and that he was not welcome here anymore.

I am hurt and I am angry and I am ashamed. I call and tell my co-workers I can't make the celebration. I will say what so many parents have said before me. I NEVER thought my son would ever do drugs. Here is where I pause and share what I have learned in the years since this discovery.

The single biggest reason I thought Jordan would never do drugs was because as a 5th grader after he graduated from the D.A.R.E program he came up to me and said "Mama, I will never do drugs." That's right. I took the words of an 11-year old child to be the deciding factor of whether

or not for the rest of his life he would use drugs. I did not follow that up at any time with a conversation about drugs, even knowing that my sister, niece, and nephew all smoked marijuana. This is not a how-to article. This is simply the truth. Take from it what you will.

It has now been three years and I wish I could tell you that Jordan no longer smokes marijuana, but I can't. It has been three years of counseling, shouting, crying, anger, threats and learning to listen. He also listens to me about my fears and concerns of the impact of drugs. His dad had a drug issue that eventually destroyed any chance of us being together as a family. So much of the research talks about marijuana being the gateway drug to harder more illicit drug use, not to mention the risk of getting caught with these drugs and having this on his record. I am learning to understand some of his issues with anxiety, stress and later grief of losing his friends in a deadly car crash. In the course of things, we have learned to talk openly and honestly about his smoking. It is not always easy or comfortable, but it helps. Especially after an incident that happened with him and a group of friends a few days ago.

They all went to an Airbnb. The group was mostly current and former members of our church youth group ages 16 to 20. Jordan thought that it would be okay to smoke marijuana while there. Well, it was not, and of course it got back to all of the parents. Jordan and had a heated discussion about understanding the appropriateness of this behavior. I told him that as hard as it was for me to accept his using it, that it was understood that this behavior would not leave this house.

There are some conversations that have to be had and there has been trust and opportunities lost, but it is not all bad. At this point, if you are still reading, you are probably thinking, *this woman is crazy*. She is out here putting her business out for anyone to read. Yes, I am sharing something that is very private and personal. Something I would not have had the courage to share a year ago. But this takes me back to when I started the article with about God being the creator and seeing the potential in the midst of the ugly, messiness of human living.

Even though I don't know the final outcome, I do have faith that God who started this work is Jordan is going to also finish it. That is not all. As we watch the videos, there is a point where even we began to see the progress from where the artist started. That, too, can be seen in Jordan's marijuana use.

As stated above, one of my concerns was that his marijuana use would lead to other more dangerous drug use. Even though I found out about his drug use three years ago, he has been using for four years. How could he have been using for a year and I not know it? Having never used or been around drugs myself, I did not know what to look for. My sister said she saw smoke around him and his friends, so I started smelling him and keeping my eyes open. I later learned that smelling his hands is where the evidence of smoking would be.

Not only has my son not progressed to harder drugs, he is now using less and his emotional mood swings are fewer. When people who have not seen him for a while see him now, they can see the changes in him to the more positive fun-loving guy that he is. His aura is back and he continues to teach me things.

I have always known that Jordan will do great things for God; he has always had this undeniable wisdom about him. This is even true, now. Also, only one of the youth participated with the marijuana, and she also was already using. The biggest issue is that there were others around, and it is not my child's place to expose other people children to his drug use.

That said, after talking to him about this past week's activities, he shared with me a few things I think are insightful. You may say I am just trying to put lipstick on a pig, and that is okay, but I know his story is far from over. This is but a glimpse of yet another frame in the work of His creator.

My job is to keep the lines of communication open, keep praying, and above all have faith.

His life will be God's testimony.

Firmly Planted - Bits & Pieces - by Dina Cavazos

Seven birdfeeders scattered through-out the prayer garden—seven gifts of abundance, safflower and millet seed free for the taking. Every day the birds come and feast on what God has provided them through my hand. But, as much as I'd like to pick and choose, the birds aren't the only ones that enjoy the gifts. There are rats lurking. Early yesterday morning I looked out and saw what I loathe to see...not one, but *two* rats feasting in one of the feeders, their long tails hanging down.

Of course there's going to be rats! A gourmet meal is served up nearly every day. If only they would stay out of sight—but they have the audacity to appear in broad daylight, no invitation needed, flaunting their escape skills. There, on the patio, is my grandson Austin's BB gun, no BB's. Even if I was able to hit one rat, I doubt a tiny BB would do much damage. But it would make me feel better, and maybe it would sting enough to discourage all of them. *Note to self: get some BB's*. I went out quietly and threw rocks, sending them scrambling up the long S-hook into the tree, no doubt laughing at me. Several of the feeders have baffles to make it harder for squirrels and rats to climb onto the feeders, but not this one.

My disgust compels me to take immediate action, so I start thinking how to make a quick baffle. I have bits and pieces of things saved that sometimes drive me nuts (because you know my mission is SIMPLIFY not COLLECT), but sometimes they're actually useful. I found a round metal plate with a hole I'd drilled some time back. I used a washer at the end of some wire to attach it to the suspension hook but it tipped way off balance. In my collection of bits and pieces I found a decorative metal piece I'd saved from an old birdfeeder. I added it on top and the weight helped balance the whole thing. The bird feeder now has a one-of-a-kind Rat-Keeper-Outer.

As I was putting together this functional and purposeful item from leftover cast-off bits and pieces of things, the wind stirred in my ear...or was it the water gurgling in the fountain? No, it was more like the light changed. It's hard to tell, sometimes, what happens in the prayer garden. All I know is I felt a peace settle over me, a *knowing* that, because my heart belongs to the One Who Makes Something Out of Nothing, he's got me. He has incorporated all the bits and pieces of my crazy life, including mistakes, failures, and best laid plans gone wrong, into something functional and purposeful. My ability to put pieces together is only a shadow of what he is able to do, and *that*, *is a gift!*

Moving Forward - I Love My Life! - by Pam Charro

Is your life awesome and amazing?

Do you feel that you walk in power and the atmosphere changes when you walk in the room? Are you aware that God is constantly bringing you new favor? Do you feel like a strong world changer?

If you're like me, you can't always answer "Yes!" to this question.

I get tired.
I look at circumstances.
I lose perspective.
Life can really be difficult.
And I get worn out.

But recently I've become aware of the power available to us as God's people when we speak that we love our lives, even when we don't feel like it or can't see it.

Why would that be true? Because when you say that you love your life, you are agreeing with God that he is good and that he knew what he was doing when he put you here. You're reminding yourself that there is always something new and exciting around the next corner. And you're speaking faith that God will give you new strength, your trial will pass, and things will get better.

God is faithful in making your life and mine into a masterpiece. Let's adore him for all that he is and all that he will do by deciding to love our lives, no matter what. Victory and power are ours!

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk among mine high places.

Real Stories – Summoned to Trust – by Stephanie Moon

"Do you trust God?"

I had a really vulnerable moment with a friend recently who asked me that question. I was surprised by my reaction as tears immediately welled up in my eyes, and ashamedly I answered,

"No."

Typically, encouraging people to trust God because He is good and faithful was my M.O. Being raised as missionary kid, I had countless moments in my life where I experienced God's faithfulness. For example there was one time our old minivan broke down in the middle of a desert on a 22-hour road trip to Houston and a complete stranger literally just gave us his car. *Unbelievable, right?* After experiencing several similar stories like that, one would think by this point in my life I would trust God more easily!

So what was holding me back from trusting God in that moment?

A few years ago, God put on my husband's and my heart to start a ministry under the non-profit organization A.C.T. Intl., called One29 Ministries, to proclaim what John 1:29 says, "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" We do that through three avenues- worship, missions, and justice. The more we walked in creating this, the more and more our hearts grew specifically for missionary care. We became increasingly aware of the many needs that missionaries all around the world have. The mission field can be a lonely place, and our aim is to offer true community and walk alongside missionaries as they navigate unique challenges. We want them to know that they are loved, not forgotten, and are being covered in prayer. We also want to serve in practical ways like leading worship and caring for their youth and children as they gather to be poured into, as well as building and maintaining relationships with these people who are laying their lives down for the furthering of the gospel.

Serving missionaries in this capacity requires a heavy load of work and resources, and recently we have been feeling the Lord asking me to step down from my full time job in order to take on more responsibility to operate One29 Ministries. As exciting as that sounds, this requires me to raise support for our ministry, of which our goal has not been met yet, as well as my income.

And I must say that taking that leap of faith in obedience is overwhelming and scary. It is my nature to look inwards at my capacity and think,

What if I fail?

What if I can't find the support we need?

What if I can't handle the times I feel rejected?

What if...

I was processing all of this with my friend who asked me that simple question that revealed the condition of my heavy and fearful heart.

"Do you trust God?"

All of the fear I had about moving forward, about being obedient to this calling, about leaving a steady income, about starting a role that I knew would make me grow and step out of my comfort zone was overwhelming.

The next morning on my drive to work, in an effort to find some relief for my heaviness, I opened an audio Bible app and I begged God to speak to me. And He did, showing me His faithfulness. This passage read in my car, and gave me the words of life I so desperately needed.

Isaiah 45: 2-5

I will go before you and will level the mountains.

I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.

I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places,

so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel,

who summons you by name.

For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen,

I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor,

though you do not acknowledge me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.

I will strengthen you,

though you have not acknowledged me,

so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men

may know there is none besides me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Wow. How easy it is to focus my fears, my ability, my capacity, and my comfort. I know that I am not capable of accomplishing this great task on my own, but He reminds me time and time again that He can. He always has. He always will...because He is faithful and good.

I wish I could tell you how this story ends, how we've met all our funding goals, and how now I live without any fear. But I can't.

What I can tell you is that as we continue to walk in obedience, our trust in God and our understanding of living by faith increases. I can tell you that in moments of desperation, God draws near and always come provides what we need. And I can tell you that living a life continually being desperate for Him is so worth it.



FRESH THYME - August Observations

I was watering my garden this weekend and observing. It's something I do every time I water. I look to see what weeds need to be pulled, I notice whether or not bugs are eating our roses, I look to see if leaves are drooping, and all the things a good gardener does. Except, I wouldn't call myself a good gardener at all because I let my plants get way too thirsty before giving them a drink! As I was watering, I realized that August was coming, so we needed to get ready for the heat and the lack of rain.

I began to think...

Lots of my flowering plants will not bloom in intense heat, but they still need watering. Lots of watering. In fact, they need more watering more often, and deeper watering, so they don't wilt and die.

Some of my plants will die, because they're annuals. In other words, they need to be replanted each year if I want color in my garden of that variety.

The grass will need attention, because heat can burn the grass and cause dry patches.

Mulch might need to be added to the garden, to help cover the tender roots and the ground, so that the water stays in, instead of evaporating.

I will have to schedule for more watering times. I cannot just sit and allow spring rains and sun to do their jobs. The rains are now scarce and the sun is too hot.

Some plants will thrive in the heat, like okra. Do you plant okra? I haven't in a while, but it grows great in the summer heat – and tastes so good when it's coated in cornmeal and fried!

As I thought about August heat and its arrival, I realized that sometimes I just give up and let things die because I myself don't want to stand in the heat, either. My husband never gives up on the grass and has a set watering schedule, attends to dry patches, and makes sure our grass thrives even when it's 100 degrees-plus outside.

All of the above observations came strongly, because I was feeling the heat of life at the moment. As I stood there watering, I stood there weeping as well. I was tired of building up my faith, I was weary in well doing, I was out of words to offer to friends who were hurting, and I was just exhausted, much like the leaves on the Turks Cap that look so pretty when perked up but so pitiful when that perk is gone.

I didn't even feel like watering my soul, replanting my faith, paying more attention to His word, or any of the "gardening" things that make color and beauty thrive. Every summer, I'm tempted to just run inside and stay, and let it all wilt and die. It's just too much work!

I'm SO THANKFUL that our Father doesn't give up on us when the heat is on, and we're standing wilting in the heat. He's always an amazing gardener that shows up with buckets of water, fertilizer, wings that offer shade, plant food that makes us grow, and so much more. He never gets weary or tired.

I find that amazing.

I find that comforting.

What observations are you making this month, in the heat of the summer, when the sun is too hot and raindrops are too few?

Consider writing them down, then stepping outside to water your own plants this season, and observing some more. Learn from nature, receive peace from the way He's made the world and its beauty to respond to care and attention, and then soak in His presence and thrive.

In the middle of the hottest part of the year...

FRESH THYME – Bad Memories – by Marcy Lytle

Not too long ago, I came home to find our front door ajar. It seems my husband had left in a hurry and failed to pull the door so that it latched. All at once, I remember decades ago coming home to find my door open and my house a mess, because burglars had entered and taken everything of value. Of course, I panicked and stayed on the phone with my daughter while I walked around to make sure no one was in the house, or anything was missing.

Why don't bad memories leave us? I can still recall lots of things that happened to me as a kid that were hurtful, shameful and embarrassing. I have a hard time putting out of my mind the time my mom spent in the hospital, and other traumatic events. I even struggle with forgetting past wounds and hurts from things said or unsaid, when I needed a helping hand and instead got a judgmental finger.

I was thinking about memories this morning and how I absolutely love recalling the memories made from vacations with my kids or Christmas time together as a family, around the tree. Those are sweet memories I never want to forget! But those memories that were hurtful, I so wish I could forget them!

The bible says that He forgets our faults when he forgives our sins and remembers them no more. However, we don't forget them. The cool thing is that even when we remember them and call them up and talk about them, our Father has erased them from ever having any sort of effect on our standing with him. We are clean, free, and loved.

But let's just think about what would happen if we didn't remember certain events, even the bad ones:

- We'd forget that stepping in that ant hill brought bites and pain. And we'd step in it again.
- We'd forget that sitting for hours in the sun burned and made blisters, and we'd literally die
- We'd forget that we were abused and how Jesus rescued us and saved us and loved us.
- We'd forget that dark clouds mean rain, and rains can be stormy, and umbrellas should be taken.
- We'd forget that we're allergic to peanuts and we'd eat them again, and swell up over and over again.
- We'd forget that we stumbled and fell because of disobedience and we'd continually have skinned knees.

Get the picture? I got it this morning. Memories are not meant to weigh us down or shame us or cause us grief, even the worst of memories. They are meant to help us recall the faithfulness of God, to remember what we learned from those mistakes we made or those made against us, and to rehearse all the good recollections so that we stand firm and know the truth – that He is with us always.

When memories of the bad surface, stop and think for a moment, and then move on. If it's a scary memory, like the one I had when the front door was ajar, move on through it. Face it, and realize that today is not that day. But if the memory is a good one, recall it, write it down and share it.

I don't like having bad memories pop up, but knowing now that they don't have to rule my day but rather only serve as a reminder, I'm able to categorize them and file them away. There's such freedom in that knowledge.

Are you recalling all of the bad things you've experienced today? Don't sit in that pool of stagnant water where flies will soon collect and bite. Step out of that pool and over into the flowing water that washes the bad away and reveals the smooth stones that remain, glistening in the sunlight of today.

FRESH THYME - Every Day - by Marcy Lytlte

Every single morning I wash my face, I rub lotion on my body, I spray on perfume, etc. etc. It's this morning routine that I do before I head out the door, without fail, over and over again. As I was rubbing lotion all over my dry skin one morning, I thought about how there are so many things we do that require attention every single day. And I realized that even if one day goes by without doing them, our lives suffer. And yet, we ignore the everyday and opt for the pain. Why do we do that? I don't know. Think about these things with me...

If we don't keep our skin hydrated daily, we become itchy and scaly and begin to break and peel.

If we don't keep our hearts softened through forgiveness and love, we become hardened and wounded.

If we don't brush away the filth from our teeth daily, I cannot imagine the stench and the infection!

If we don't cleanse our mouths from degrading and self-abasing declarations, we can't stand ourselves!

If we don't discard our bed clothes and put on our fresh outfits, we aren't presentable to anyone!

If we don't open our eyes to others and the beauty of the day, we miss what He's presenting daily!

If we don't fix ourselves something to eat, our stomachs growl and we become ravenous and mean.

If we don't digest his Word when our souls "growl;" we become anemic and weak, unable to stand.

If we don't walk and move about briskly, we come feeble and brittle and lethargic and sick.

If we don't step out of our comfort zone into others' lives, we become self-focused and die on the vine.

I could probably type about this all day, thinking of daily physical activities we make sure to never skip, because we want to feel good, look good, and appear good to the world around us.

But really, so often, we skip out on the second half of those groupings above way too much. And then we wonder why we feel bad, look bad and appear bad to the world around us.

I'm about to start that morning moisturizing routine right now, and I'm hoping I remind myself once again to keep up the heart and soul routines every day, as well. It's easy to want the "escape to another planet" when we're weary and want an "out," but he calls us back to himself and says eat, drink, and then go and be...a blessing to those you know...today and every day.

FRESH THYME - To Give or Not to Give - by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever given of your time or effort or money and then totally resented it afterwards? I have.

For example, maybe you give your time to help someone move, you spend hours packing and sweating, only to have that person sit there and tell you where to place things and what to do, without lifting a finger. It happens.

For example, perhaps you put for the effort to show up and attend an event a friend is hosting; only to find out the event was a bust, there were people there who were rude, and in fact your friend didn't even recognize that you were there. What a wasted evening...

For example, there might be a time when you gave sacrificially to help a person in need only to realize later that they squandered what you gave them, never said thank you, and totally didn't need the money you gave in the first place.

I've experienced all of the above and ended up resenting the time, the effort and the money I expended to help another.

I remember telling my kids years ago, when they became youth pastors, to realize who they were serving at ALL TIMES, because HE was the only one that would reward them. I have to tell myself that own advice at times, as well.

Resentment is not a nice piece of luggage to tote around on one's shoulders. It's heavy, it's unsightly, and it's full of all sorts of things like regret, judgment and bitterness. Not one of those is becoming on our faces or our backs... And yet, that's what happens when we give and realize that our giving wasn't appreciated or we weren't treated with respect and love for our giving.

However, we set ourselves up for a fall when we don't remind ourselves at the very beginning, before we ever lend a hand, show up, or empty our pockets that it only matter that He sees, and He has promised to reward us for our giving. In fact, he says he gives us back more than we can ever dole out.

Oh yes, there's wisdom to be gained from giving lavishly on those who don't steward well. We should always give with wisdom.

But when we've prayed and decided to give, we need to realize that:

- Giving out of a heart of obedience and love is all that's required of us. It's not our job to then judge the recipient of our gift.
- Giving because we feel we are supposed to give is the joy in and of itself; not whether or not that person thanks us or appreciates what we do.
- Giving joyfully out of the abundance we've been given is right and good and holy and wonderful, and when it leaves our hands we're done. God is pleased, period.

I don't want resentment in my heart for anything I've ever done, but I do have to stop and take inventory of that backpack on my back. So often, I realize that I do have a few heavy stones of

bitterness because of love or sacrifice or giving unrequited or unappreciated. People will always disappoint; in fact, we will be the ones who disappoint sometimes. His word says He loves a cheerful giver, and giving cheerfully is only possible when we give out of obedience and love, expecting nothing in return. Not even a thank you.

That's hard to do. For me. For you.

But the answer to the question posed in the title "To Give or not to give..." is always to give. Never stop giving. Proverbs 11:25 says, "A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." It has nothing to do with whether or not our giving is reciprocated, but it has everything to do with whether or not our giving is generous. And it is when he says to give, and we do.