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TIPS

## **The Dressing – Fabulous February – by Marcy Lytle**

Maybe you feel fabulous every time you get dressed, and that's awesome. But maybe you don't, it stresses you out, and you're not sure what to wear, don't like how it feels, or any number of reasons you don't feel fabulous. Well, it's time to change all that. Let's share and get dressed together as we dress for February and feel great at the same time!

Bag and a Belt – I purchased this belt and tote back in the fall and I've worn them both, most of all! Find that one accessory or bag in gorgeous color, and wear them both with all your neutrals and solids. You'll feel fabulous! Both are from Madeline Parks Designs.

Pajamas, Yes! – This pajama set was a gift at Christmas and a fave! It's from World Market. My husband knew he could grab anything from that store and I'd love it. These feel good, are cozy, and great for lounging on cold mornings. Ditch that t-shirt you're sleeping in and feel luxurious in new pajamas.

Red, of Course – It is February, after all. I have this wonderfully fabulous red flannel shirt I found at Old Navy, I love my red reading glasses, and how about a shade of red in your tights! Plan somewhere fabulous to go that you love – it can be a movie or a fancy dinner – and dress in red!

Slippers and Stripes – One Monday morning when I was working at home, I realized my checked black and white slippers matched my striped black and white sweater jacket from Ross. I felt dressed up but yet comfortable and warm, which made me feel fabulous.

A Steal of a Deal – That's how I describe this wide striped red and gray sweater I found on sale at Urban Outfitters. They have this sale area, and I always browse it and maybe find nothing....or maybe find something wonderful. This was it! I love this fabulous sweater – it's rich in color and feels just right!

Break out in Blue – Another cozy sweater from Ross. I recently purchased three on one visit, all under \$20 each. That alone made me feel fab. But I love anything rich in blue hues, and this one caught my eye. Wearing it with corduroy pants from Old Navy – the wide leg version. Love them!

Pretty in Pink – I got this fun sweater from Myka Meier on Instagram with the stitched message that's so good! I added a big pink scarf and a sweater over top for an extra layer, and I felt fabulous that day. Pink around the neck – why not?

Shop your closet, visit a thrift store, go to your favorite online option, or step into the place you love to browse and make your February fabulous in whatever you choose to wear, in any color at all – whatever looks good on YOU!

## Seven for You – Our Faves – The Panel

I love reading the favorites lists that people publish on social media at Christmas time, and I even purchased a few things on others' recommendations. And for the past few years, in February, we've been sharing our favorites that we received for Christmas. It's fun to read what others love, and to maybe try these things ourselves for gifts...or for ourselves. We hope you enjoy our faves this month:

This past Christmas was not our normal Christmas at all. My daughter is in Europe and my son is in Brazil. My granddaughters are with their mom. The plan was to do what my Dad (RIP) always wanted. He didn't want the hours of cooking and the expense. He didn't want Mom in the kitchen for hours cooking and again in the kitchen cleaning up. As we got older and started to help, bringing food and helping clean up, he still didn't want all of it. He wanted TV dinners. Something simple that would allow time to sit, talk and laugh. Family got lost in the washing up, he'd say, and he was right. It shouldn't be about the food, it should be about family.

Since this Christmas was going to be just Mom and me, we agreed to a frozen pizza, something my Dad would have loved. And at the last minute, my ex daughter-in-law called and asked if she could come over and bring the girls. She bought BBQ so Mom and I didn't have to cook. It was an unexpected surprise and the best gift of all to have them there. – Cathy

Our adult gift exchanging is kept to a minimum because of so many children. This past Christmas, I received a CD player, a beautiful plant, a family photo shoot to happen in the spring, and ornaments for my Christmas tree. And then...there was an unexpected gift that made our time together lighter and brighter. There is one family member that typically arrives acting as if they do not want to be here. They have often been sullen, negative, spreading lots of bad energy! I don't know what changed this Christmas, but this person was cheery, helpful, and talkative. It was especially a gift, for me as hostess, and since we want everyone to feel a part of the family and enjoy themselves. I was grateful for these gifts this year. - Shelley

This year I received a new make-up mirror and some new house slippers. I had asked for these and was delighted to receive them. However, this year my greater joy came from *giving* gifts to some of my adult children.

I have found that sometimes when my adult children experience life changing events like a new marriage or different employment, they encounter financial stresses as they settle into newness. So, as a parent I want to help but not insult their dignity and independence. As a result, I spent a little bit more than usual on the gifts for two of my adult children. It brought such joy to me to see their delight and appreciation. They gave me lovely gifts, but also had their children give me gifts like homemade Christmas cards, Starbucks gift cards, and Christmas earrings. Of course, the gifts from the grandkids just really melted my heart.

Another gift to me was that on Christmas Day my body allowed me to sleep in, a bit. I consider this my Christmas gift from Jesus. It was greatly appreciated and happily received.

One last gift was given to me and I doubt the kids even realize what a wonderful gift it was. This was my year to host our Christmas gathering. However, my daughter recently moved into a new house that has a great open floor plan. So, it was agreed that we would have Christmas dinner and open presents there on Christmas Eve. This gift from my daughters was a tremendous relief since I was a bit under the weather.

I had a great Christmas.- Gina

Best gifts for me were a few:

My husband gave me the cutest loungewear/pajama set from World Market. I love it and love that he knows anything from that store is a winner. And a couple of practical gifts were winners, for sure. A collapsible laundry basket and a new hair brush!

Our kids gave us a weekend away with them, and a cute card wallet full of food gift cards. How fun is that?

And finally, the little kids give us great gifts, always. They really note what we love and they give. I got a necklace, a game and a journal. Perfect. I love giving and receiving. So much. Some say as they get older, they have no need or wants for anything, so they stop giving and receiving gifts. That would be oh, so sad, for me. I love the whole process! – Marcy

My favorite gift this year came with a learning curve. My daughter gave me all the things I would need to delve into baking sourdough bread! So far I have baked one loaf of bread, and some tasty crackers. It is definitely a new adventure for me. – Beth

I love all the Christmas presents that I received but there were two that stood out. One was from my husband. He set up a Christmas present hunt like you would an Easter egg hunt. It was so fun and so unexpected! And I found so many little gifts.

My other gift that stood out was my new Restnature Eye Massager from my D-I-L and son. I didn't even know this existed! It massages your eyes while playing music if you prefer and it is also heated. It's so relaxing! It's fast becoming my evening must-have. – Carole

My favorite gifts from Christmas 2024:

- Touchless kitchen faucet
  - Two Blind Brother socks (they don't get holes!)
  - Pickle saver...you keep the pickles in juice in the fridge, but turn the jar over when you want to get a pickle...no dirty fingers in the pickle juice!
- Laura

I got a travel makeup mirror which lights up and has a small magnifying mirror that is hidden on the back. I love it because with my senior eyes I need to be able to see when applying makeup and when needing to get rid of those pesky hairs that seem to appear. I also got a cute travel jewelry box which will be wonderful since my jewelry won't get all tangled up. My daughter gave me the mirror since when we travel to her house, I am always asking to borrow her mirror. So, now I don't have to! A good friend gave me the jewelry box. Now, I just need to go somewhere! - Melissa

## **Cousin Moms – Stress Management – by Kamrin and Charissa**

Oh, my, goodness. If there ever was a stress-filled world and culture, it's now and with us, and it's probably not going anywhere. We decided to ask our two moms of six littles how they deal with all the emails, the volunteering requests, the housework, the church stuff, spouse time, and ALL THE THINGS. Their answers are great!

Kamrin

Is stress a word? Just kidding!

The older I've gotten, I have realized that a good majority of stress we feel is: 1 – our decision and 2 – not taking care of ourselves. This is my own personal journey and I've been working on it for a couple of years. I'm trying to walk daily without stress. I think it's often a mental and physical state of being on any given day. Even if our plates are full!

When I was younger, I thought I had to do it all and be all for everyone. Serving at all functions, volunteering and saying yes, yes, yes. Even others joked that "just ask Kamrin...she'll say yes." But I've been learning it's okay to have boundaries. I know it's important to serve others, but I don't believe we are to do it all. That's why we have the body – some are the hands, the feet, the arms – a full body. I don't need to do all parts and pieces all the time. However, I did live that way for a long time.

While some of what we did as young parents we felt called to, I began to feel the stress of trying to keep up appearances, but the stress began to cause physical pain. I dealt with ear and jaw pain, only to be told by my dentist I was clenching my jaw due to stress. Others thought I was managing "it all," but the truth is that I was not sleeping well, my body was in pain, I was on edge...and I'd learned to suppress it. That was not healthy.

I hit a wall a few years ago and realized that I made those decisions. I do not have to serve in everything at church or school, or even serve at all if the season calls for that. I want to be a mom first and foremost. It's easy to get caught up in being at everything and "succeed" in every aspect of life. But I've learned that "No" is a full sentence.

I have served at church and at school, but at this moment I'm serving my three kids – raising them to know the Lord. If I have so many things on my plate that I can't serve my family, and I'm stressed out to the "yes" then I'm not being a good steward of my kids. I need my home to be in order. We are busy with the kids with sports and youth group and activities and school, and I want to be present in every way. Saying yes to everyone else, I would be miserable.

So for me, the way I manage stress is learning how to say no, and being confident in that. Then I give it to Him. Stresses don't have to be overwhelming or painful when we can learn to say no, in those situations. I'm still learning! But I've seen a decrease in my physical pain, and my kids have noticed that I'm "different" in a good way! My house is in better order, and dinner is now on the table and we've eaten together more. I know that I'm at peace because I've said no outside my wall, my three kids are being invested in the way I'm called to do at this time.

For a takeaway, maybe write down all your to-do's, then pray about all the stressors and ask God to help you prioritize. Maybe categorize your non-negotiables. Mine were dinner at the table, reading the word daily, being present with my kids, and a few more. Talk to your family. This all helps to see what you're doing and what you don't have to do. Lastly, self-care is important

because you cannot pour from an empty cup. For me, it's skincare and worship time unplugged! And being my kids' events energizes and blesses me!

Charissa

Yes, stress is a normal thing that happens daily. Raising three young kids and owning a business, being involved in church and community, it seems like things start to pile up with the busyness of life! And all of this can raise my stress bar! I do definitely have ways to help manage this, but there are also times when I've just cried!

Some of the more healthy ways I use to manage stress are:

Being in the Word of God. If I stray away from this time with him daily and I start to go days without it, I feel my stress building up. I try to take time to be with Him. When I get stressed, I ask myself if I've spent this time alone in his Word and in prayer.

Scheduling "me" time. I do love to serve and I say yes to things, and I love to be there for others. However, I have learned that it is healthy to schedule *me* time, even if it's not an all-day thing. Even scheduling a manicure, pedicure, going to the gym, taking a hot shower or watching a show by myself – all of these help.

Taking a break from all the things. When I do this and just cuddle and play with my kids and be with my husband, all of this helps me. Just talking with the girls or watching a show with my husband relieves stress. I put laundry and house things on the back burner, while I fill up my bucket with love and touch.

Having a plan in place. I've really worked on this as I've gotten older, but having a plan for things seems to make life go a little more smoothly. Of course, stress can still come, but it can be minimized with a bit of planning!

## **In the Kitchen – Enjoy These – by Marcy Lytle**

Indulge, stay warm, enjoy, and all the things this month of February. I have made all of these and loved them so much, I wanted to share. In fact, every recipe I share, I have already tried. A lot of chocolate, and a wonderful dip, and a taco soup for the family...that's it!

### **Easy Biscotti**

This was easy as far as ingredients but a little tricky making it work. But worth it.

- 1 tube (18 oz) refrigerated chocolate chip cookie dough
- ½ cup white chips
- ½ c coarsely chopped macadamia nuts

In a large bowl, combine the dough, chips and nuts, knead until well combined. Divide the dough in half.

On greased baking sheets, shape each piece into a 13 X 2 ½ inch log and bake at 375 for 12-14 minutes until golden brown.

Remove and cut diagonally with a serrated knife into 1-inch slices, separating each piece about ¼ inch after cutting. Bake 5-6 minutes longer til firm. Cook for two minutes then move to wire racks.

(I found baking times to be different and I had to sort of reshape the pieces, too)

### **Peppermint Brownies**

These red and white sprinkles on top of the best brownie ever make for a fun treat for February!

Ingredients:

- 1 1/3 cups all purpose flour
- 1 c baking cocoa
- 1 t salt
- 1 t baking powder
- ¾ c canola oil
- 2 c sugar
- 4 large eggs at room temp
- 2 t vanilla extract
- 2/3 c crushed peppermint candies (I found on cake aisle)
- Glaze:
  - 1 c semisweet chocolate chips
  - 1 T Shortening
  - 2 T crushed peppermint candies

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a 13X9 baking pan with foil and grease the foil. Set aside.

In a bowl, whisk the first 4 ingredients. In a large bowl beat the oil and sugar til blended. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each. Beat in vanilla. Gradually add the flour mixture, stir in candies, spread into pan.



Bake til toothpick in center comes clean, about 35-40 minutes. Cool complete in the pan on a wire rack.

In microwave, melt the chips and shortening, stir. Spread this glaze over the brownies, sprinkle with candies. Cut into bars.

## **Taco Soup**

We had this at Christmas with the family. It was easy to put together, forget about, then enjoy later....

Ingredients:

- 1 lb gr beef
- 1 ½ cups corn (canned or frozen)
- 1 diced onion
- 1 15oz can kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 15oz can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 4.5oz diced green chiles
- 1 15oz can diced tomatoes
- 1 15oz can tomato sauce
- 2 cups beef broth
- ¼ c taco seasoning

Toppings: avocado, cheese, cilantro and tortilla chips

Cook onions and beef in skillet til beef is browned. Use a wooden spoon to break apart the meat as it cooks. Drain fat and transfer to slow cooker. Add the remaining ingredients, stir, and cook 6-8 hours on low or 4-5 hours on high.

Ladle into bowls and add toppings

## **Amazing Chocolate Chip Cookies**

My son noticed the quality of these cookies and asked me about them. We all thought the recipe turned out amazing.

Ingredients:

- 2 c all purpose flour
- ½ c bread flour
- 1 t salt
- 1 t baking powder
- 1 t baking soda
- 16 T butter melted
- 1 ½ c packed light brown sugar
- ¼ c granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs room temp
- 2 t vanilla extract
- 2 c semisweet chocolate chips

For decorating:

- ½ c semisweet chocolate chips
- Sprinkles

Preheat oven to 375. In a large bowl mix the flour and the bread flour, salt, baking soda, baking powder, brown sugar and granulated sugar.

Add the melted butter, eggs, and vanilla. Mix until combined.

Stir in the chocolate chips and using a scoop, place on cookie sheet two inches apart.

Bake til cookies are golden around the edges but soft in the middle, about 10-12 minutes. Remove from oven and let cool 10 minutes on the sheets, then transfer to racks to cool totally.

Melt remaining chips and drizzle over cookies, sprinkle on top, and allow to set before serving. Enjoy!

### **Strawberry Cream Dip**

We had this on a charcuterie board as our dessert, and it was a winner!

- 1 8oz package cream cheese, softened
- 2 T honey
- 1 t vanilla extract
- 1 pint fresh strawberries sliced
- Graham crackers

In a large bowl, beat the cream cheese, honey and vanilla til smooth. Add strawberries and beat one minute. Serve with the crackers.

## **Bookstore – The Garden Key – by Angela Dolbear**

THE GARDEN KEY was born out of a question God posed to me one sunny afternoon as I was picking up after my two Golden Retrievers in the backyard of our Southern California home.

“Would you like to write a novel?”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know how to write fiction.”

“I will show you.”

I had just started a freelance writing business for business clients after leaving a government job that was sucking the life out of my soul. And I had a degree in journalism, the direct opposite of fiction writing.

By the time I had finished combing the quarter-acre lot for dog poop, God had given me the title of the book, the subject matter, the Scripture it would flow out of, and the names and basic make-up of the main characters.

THE GARDEN KEY, a young adult/new adult/women’s fiction genre novel is the first book in *The Garden Key Tales* series. The other titles in the series include MIND OVER MADELEINE (Book 2), FISH OUT OF WATER (Book 3), and THE MID-CENTURY BREAKFAST CLUB (Book 4), which is scheduled to be released Summer 2025.

THE GARDEN KEY is a tale of lust, redemption, and really good cheeseburgers. The story is rooted in the Song of Solomon 4:12, “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.”

Goth-girl Madeleine, a senior at Biola University, has a year-long crush on a mysterious musician who shops at the music store where she works and who she covertly gazes at on Sunday mornings at her church. She finally must speak to Peter when she quite literally bumps into him in line at the local Juice Stop. The novel follows the couple as they cultivate their relationship and passionately pursue purity through some harsh and hilarious situations.

The story opens with Madeleine Marie Winger sitting in church one August Sunday morning in Chino Hills, California, battling with her biggest vice.

“I’m not looking over there again. I’m not. I wish I had not seen him walk in. Now I’m all distracted. I’m supposed to be in a state of worship, but instead, I’m fighting with lust. I feel like standing up and confessing, “Hi, my name is Madeleine, and I’m a lust-o-holic.”  
*Oh Lord, please help me to stop lusting over this guy. In Your name, I pray, Amen.*”

Through the story of the main characters, the novel reveals practical guidance on maintaining purity and the repercussions that stem from disobedience in this area of life. It drives home the point that God does have a definite plan for young people and that His plan for purity has a purpose.

I hope and pray you enjoy this book God has given me, that it makes you laugh and cry, and blesses you as well!

## **Tried and True – Last Month’s Learnin’ - by Marcy Lytle**

February is the time for all things lovely, fun, romantic, red, or just plain cute. I’m sharing all the fun ideas and things I’ve learned in the past few weeks. I hope you enjoy, and try some!

We enjoyed the most fun small puzzle called Ready Set Jet. We found it at World Market, but it’s also on Amazon. It’s a great travel puzzle to do one night in a hotel room!

Remember I added fake plants to my garden last year? I did it again, this time a pretty tall green one in a white pot, from Marshalls. I like it!

Do you decorate at all for Valentine’s Day? Maybe not. But some fun paper plates and napkins make dinners at home romantic all month? Marshalls has lots.

Have you seen the thriller *Carry On*, on Netflix? We really enjoyed it.

Did you know...(I did not) there was *The Lucy Show* after Lucy and Ricky, where Lucy and Ethel are single women neighbors with kids? Find it on YouTube and watch a few. They’re hilarious and in black and white!

No more coffee mugs stacked and falling over...these stackers are amazing! They are expandable to fit any size mug, and they give organization and make your cabinet full of mugs so pretty!

I recently found the cutest book light to clip on my bookstand by the bed, for late night reading. You need a cute one! Check out Barnes and Noble.

I gave my husband a cap rack that hangs over our closet door. Now he can find the one he wants without digging through all the shelves and drawers! We both love it. I even wore one of his caps I saw that I loved.

Have you tried the Chick Fil A crispy chicken salad with honey mustard? It’s one of my fast food faves...

Baking sheet racks. Game changer. For the kitchen. One of my favorite Christmas gifts!

Did you know that Sur La Table has cooking classes? It’s a great idea to gift one to a mom/daughter or anyone, for a gift. 11 year old Ayla was so proud at Christmas to show us her cookies she made!

I saw and made the cutest candle in a jar for Christmas, but the ribbon can be easily changed for red in February! A jar filled partially with water, then a handful of cranberries, some rosemary, and a tea light on top. Makes the cutest candle!

We went to a big band concert and saw a baritone saxophone and a bass flute – I’d never seen either! Have you?

Dollar Tree has glass bowls often, and purchasing a nice set for your entire family (I have 10 now) are great to store and have for soup nights. If you get black and white, they’ll go with most every setting!

Try adding a whimsical butterfly clip to your garden or flower bed this coming spring. They’re pretty! This was one we found at my mom’s house. I don’t know where she used it.

I saw an idea that works. Lay your cheese grater on its side and grate the cheese. It falls into the grater and you don't need a plate underneath! Awesome...



HOME

## **Practical Parenting – Spring Break Ideas – by Marcy Lytle**

I'm pretty sure most of you are back in the thick of parenting, school, activities, carpooling, work, lunch making, laundry, all of the piles of things and lists and kids and chaos...now that all of the holidays are a thing of the past, and spring break is still weeks away. Oh, yes, Spring Break. What fun things can we do then, how can we afford it, and oh gosh...it's close already?

Just in case that too is overwhelming, to think of what to do, how it's going to fit in the budget, and where can you even go that it's not super crowded...here are a few ideas to help this year. Just generic, fun, simple things to do as a family over Spring Break, in case traveling afar isn't an option, and money is tight, or time is short for you to take off work:

**Pick a park, pack a picnic, and fly kites.** Let the older kids find a park the family has not visited before and show you the one they come up with. Decide on fun picnic food that you either put together as a family or pick up on the way (Trader Joe's has such fun snacks, sandwiches from a deli is a good idea, too!). And if time allows, let the kids make kites. If not, purchase a few and go to the park and fly high.

**Pick a town and look around.** Find a town near you that you haven't been to before. Find a park there, a museum, an eatery, a cool shop, something of interest, and type it all up. Make it like a checklist with space for kids to write or draw after you visit each place. When you get back home that night, go over your sheets you filled in and enjoy popcorn and a movie.

**Pick a movie, a game, and a snack, and make it a night to remember...or several nights.** Let each kid and a parent pick a movie. Either choose a game you have or purchase a new one, or consider even charades! You can print out ideas from the internet for free. Finally, decide on snacks. If one kid likes to bake, let her make the cookies. If others enjoy popcorn, maybe make a popcorn bar with toppings. Or a pizza bar! Add blankets and pillows and cute paper plates and napkins and enjoy the evening(s).

**Pick a day to give away.** Now, the kids might not like this idea at first...but just wait. Start early going through toys, clothes, shoes, coats, etc. that no longer fit and are ready to be given away. Give each kid a box and let them fill (with your supervision). Pick a place for drop off. Then (this is the fun part), plan three friends to surprise with a gift after you've donated your boxes of items. Maybe surprise a family with a box of homemade cookies, drop off an older friend some cards the kids have made and drawn, and finally show up at the next door neighbor's house with an invitation to come to your backyard (or inside, if it's cold) for donuts and coffee.

**Pick a night for a family slumber party in the living room.** Ask everyone to "pack a bag" with a book, a board game, and a stuffie), and to bring their pillow and blanket. Set out blankets or air mattresses or arrange the chairs and sofas for sleeping, so everyone has a place. Create ambience with twinkle lights, and be ready with music for family moves. Make a little schedule and hand out to all, or post somewhere. Start early and end late, and fall asleep with flashlights you give each kid as the night ends, to create shadows and tell stories.

You could enjoy all five of those in the week and still not spend much money at all!

Now you can sigh, sit back and relax and enjoy the rest of this month. Your Spring Break is set.

## **I Don't Do Teens – Cool Cap - by Marcy Lytle**

The teen in our family, a young age 13, asked for a particular cap for Christmas and we got it for him. I didn't really know what the cap meant, but he explained it to us.

*God is greater than the hills and valleys.*

Wow! What a great way to display on one's head such a foundation truth that our teens need to know from the time they first enter this phase of life. In fact, it's one we are all still learning at any age!

Teens certainly have hills and valleys, all different and so dramatic, because even the small things (in our eyes) are huge in theirs.

Perhaps she is trying out for a part in a theater production and she makes it and gets the part she wants. That would be a hill, or a mountaintop, for her. And the family will celebrate, and many will tell her how proud that are that she got what she wanted. But if she doesn't get that part, the disappointment might be the lowest valley she's ever come across, and how we as parents deal with the hills and valleys is huge.

We need to affirm and congratulate and give thanks together, for the hills.

We need to affirm and hold and speak truth together, for the valleys.

Maybe his team lost every single game in a season, and emotions are high, heads are hanging low, and defeat is written on the forehead of your son or daughter. That's why I love this cap so much! Defeat is not who they are. They belong to Him.

So, practically speaking, maybe buying our kids some cool things that speak truth might be a great thing to do this month, for Valentine's Day...or just because:

- Stickers for water bottles with scripture and words of encouragement
- Caps like this one with reminders on their foreheads (isn't that a scripture somewhere, to bind truths to our heads?)
- T-shirts with sayings or graphics or scriptures about who they are in Christ.
- Morning breakfast cards to read to these teens as they walk out the door.
- Sticky notes on their steering wheels with love messages, for those that drive.
- Jewelry and charms they can wear to remind them of God's love.
- Their own bible, with their names engraved, for laying on their bed table for nighttime reading.

There are multiple ways to strengthen our teens' walk with Christ, and there are so many sites from which to purchase these little reminders. Amazon has a lot. Love in Faith has tees for girls. James Avery has charms. Your local grocer has sticky notes. Just search on line for faith based scripture clothing or items, and make it a point to affirm your teens with words to wear.

I'm thankful this hat was made, and I love that it's not clear what it means. So when this 13 year old kid is asked what it means, he can say it out loud to another friend, one that might be on a hill or in a valley, and needs to hear that God is greater than both.



## Homesteading - Hacks and Hotels – by Leyanne Enterline

*We are living tiny a tiny bit longer...*

Before we planned to move in to our new house, we had already scheduled three weeks of traveling! Not exactly what we should be doing before building a home, but it did make the building process fly by even quicker since we weren't home watching every move! I can probably safely say I'm the frugal one of our group, and since we've been building a home, I may have tightened the reins a little too much. But hey! Someone has to do that, right? So much so that I felt I needed to share some travel hacks.

Being gone that long was going to cost a lot of money in food if we ate out every day. Especially with two teenage boys! Asher eats over a pound of meat just by himself, so there's no way that's in the budget while on the road! I think I've gone over budget while eating on the road before, but I've discovered some new hacks...

I planned ahead but also needed to pack light. Therefore, I did bring along my handy one-pot burner in a padded little bag, a skillet, spatula, sponge to clean pot, small container of dish soap, Celtic salt in a small container, Ziploc baggies and two boxes of protein bars. Most every place we went had a store or a market type store we could go to, which was close enough, and great if not having a car. Nowadays, though, we can have our groceries delivered to our hotel! But remember. I'm frugal and don't want to pay the extra fees, so we walked! Our meals were boring and simple but affordable and yummy! One meal out to dinner can cost over \$100 at a restaurant but I got breakfast, lunch and dinner for one day for us for a little over \$50!

Breakfast was usually eggs or an egg, avocado toast sandwich & cold brew. Lunch was almond butter and honey sandwich or tuna. And dinner was beef, beans (I make sure to buy the ones with the pop off lid; otherwise, I bring a can opener!) and sometimes chips & salad.

I also learned some hotel hacks this trip when...I forgot oil! I totally forgot to bring or buy a small container of oil to cook our eggs. So I went to the little market in the hotel and asked for some olive oil in a small container, about the size to put on a salad and they gave me some! Just enough to cook up the eggs for a couple of mornings. Also they had condiments, so I was able to use mayo for tuna sandwiches, honey for the almond butter, and salt and pepper for beef. I typically buy throw away bowls/plates and utensils and napkins, but they had all of that at the hotel. And of course, they had an ice machine for my cold brew and a variety of milk options to add at the market, so need to buy that either. Money saved!

I also sometimes bought waters and found out they have the refillable stations around. Any leftovers, and I used the Ziploc bags I brought and placed in the mini fridge. And when traveling around, I just packed the sandwiches in bags as well. One hotel we stayed in had a free breakfast, so I did wrap up some ham slices to have for lunch just to change up the meal a bit! We ate out some and had some ice cream at other places, but the cheapest option was definitely to head to the store again and pick up some pints of ice cream for a much better price.

Perhaps when on vacation, some may not want to cook. But for such a long time eating out, it can get pricey and is probably not the healthiest. So for us, it worked to just cook in the hotel.

I do feel that living tiny has made me more aware of ways to live and cook simple, and I like that! The boys say they like it, too. It's kind of nice to know what's going into your meal and you know you'll like it! Goodness! One restaurant I chose for breakfast cost us \$100 and it tasted terrible!

I just wanted to share some living on the road hacks and hope that may help you some, too...in case you're traveling.

Remember love grows best in tiny spaces!

## **In Each Room – Those Candle Jars – by Marcy Lytle**

Some candle jars are just a jar and not very pretty. However, lots of them are in beautiful jars or bowls (that we pay for!) and they're just too pretty to throw away or discard. In fact, they often match our décor and can be used in so many ways around the house. Here are my favorites:

I have one on a shelf in the bathroom that holds my stitch gun (it's a favorite new thing!) It sits by the bin of wash cloths, looks pretty, keeps it handy (instead of lost in a drawer) and I love it.

Another jar holds our lighters. Why not? It's deep enough, the jar is pretty, and those loose things find a home instead of being lost in a sofa pillow somewhere or misplaced altogether.

We have these two candles we loved so much that came in a bowl, and I kept both of them. One holds green apples atop my bread box in the kitchen. The other one is on a tray alongside a couple other things, just for looking pretty.

In case you're wondering, in order to remove that last bit of wax from the jars, I just place a bowl in the sink and fill it with really hot water. Into that bowl I place the jar and it loosens the wax so that I can gently lift out the blob at the bottom. If there's sticky residue, I use a bit of dish detergent, and wipe the jar or bowl clean with a paper towel.

Another idea (which I haven't done yet) is to place some of these on a windowsill with greenery inside...or not...if the jars are pretty.

I have one square candle jar that's elegant, and I use it to hold my earring cards – they sit there nicely and look pretty – instead of being sprawled out on the shelf!

We had some roses bloom during a warm spell this winter, and then an arctic blast was on the way, so we snipped them all. A black candle jar made the perfect vase for these winter blooms!

In case you're wondering, no, I don't keep every candle jar. But I do keep the ones that are pretty, don't have too many stickers on them, or ones that are just a lovely color or shape. I like to keep one shelf open for candle jars, all kinds, just for decorating each season.

I had these two candle jars that were used at Christmas, and I love the shape of the jar. They will look SO CUTE next year during the holidays with a bottle brush tree inside, since the jar looks like a tree skirt!

You could line up several clear candle jars on your mantel, or on a shelf, and place battery-operated tea lights inside for a nice glow this month!

One candle jar I love is used to hold my mini stitch gun, and it sits in my bathroom. I've also used this same jar to hold our TV remote and a lighter!

We have an initial candle jar next to our bed, with my husband's glasses in it! So cute...

And I have a small candle jar by the sofa, holding the remote!

Candles are my favorite accessory when decorating, so I hate to throw away the jars. How do you reuse them?

## **A Night to Remember – Three Things – by Marcy Lytle**

Do kids ever get “jealous” of parent time? Maybe a new baby is in the house, and the other kids feel left out...so they act out. Maybe one child is playing on a winning team and there’s so much joy over the wins, that the one on a losing team feels less than. Or perhaps one child has a growth spurt and needs a lot of new clothes, while another hasn’t grown in a year and feels like they’re ignored. We can feel “left out” of a family to where we belong, and start thinking “less than” thoughts that make us feel bad. Let’s look at those, in light of God’s love, and reaffirm His love and our family’s love for us!

There’s a story in the bible about two brothers, one that obeys his father in all things, and another that disobeys and runs off. When the one brother that ran off finally comes home, the dad throws a big party and the boy at home that obeyed feels mad and angry. And the truth is that the father loved both of them, but one felt that he favored one.

Preparation: Ask each child to bring their favorite stuffie to the sofa or table, for devo time.

Let’s get out the stuffies and pretend these stuffies are our children in our family.

\*One stuffie jumps too much and breaks something in the house. (Let the child pretend this happens.)

Mom has to talk to this stuffie and then hold him and speak forgiveness (Act this out). The other stuffies are mad because the stuffie that broke something was being disobedient by jumping up and down. They feel angry that Mom is forgiving their brother.

What should the angry kiddos do? (Talk about the option of giving thanks that love forgives all wrongs, because it might be them next time.)

\*One stuffie is playing soccer and wins every game. Another stuffie is playing on a different team and loses every game. Mom and Dad are joyful and taking the first stuffie to a celebration party, while there no party for the losing stuffie. (Act this out).

The stuffie on the losing team feels left out and upset that Mom and Dad are so happy and take their sister to the party where she gets a trophy. He feels jealous that Mom and Dad are so joyful, and wishes he too had a party to go to, so he picks a fight with his sister.(Two stuffies fight)

What should the angry stuffie do? (Talk about the option of rejoicing for his sister and being thankful for her...knowing that learning to lose with grace is just as important as winning with joy.)

\*One stuffie grows a lot! He needs new shoes and a new coat, and lots of new pants because all of his are too short. His little sister hasn’t grown in a year and she needs no new clothes, so she just sits in the cart and watched her brother get all these new clothes. She feels sad that she’s not getting anything new. (Act this out.)

What should the upset sister stuffie do? (Talk about the option of helping her brother pick new clothes, and politely asking if she can maybe get a new shirt, too. She can be thankful for growth, and patiently wait her turn for the next shopping excursion!)

Comparing and becoming jealous of our siblings, when we have the same loving Mom and Dad, and especially a heavenly Father that loves us all, is not wise. This is stated in 2 Corinthians 10:12 (read it). Jealousy is said to rot our bones, and we don’t want that!

Here's the truth:

Our father loves us and so do our parents. If we feel jealous or left out, we can do three things:

- Give thanks
- Rejoice with others
- Be patient while we wait

And finally, we can choose to believe that truth that we are the apple of God's eye, and he cares for us...always and forever. Any other thought is a lie, and we don't believe lies.

## **Rooted in Love - Mysterious Letter – by Kaelin Scott**

Every day after lunch, my kids and I (and our dog) walk to the mailbox to check the mail. We live in the country, so our mailbox is at the end of a long driveway and out the gate, about a tenth of a mile from our house. So this is kind of our midday stretch, after school and before chores, just a little bit of fresh air and sunshine together.

Lately, the kids have found it great fun to hop on their scooters and race me down the hill to the mailbox, beating me by a mile as I trail behind them on foot. One day they did this and then also raced back up the hill before I had even reached the mailbox, laughing and whispering about something as they passed me. I didn't think much of it and just kept going, grabbing the mail and carrying it back up with me.

There was an envelope addressed to me and the return address was really strange, so I curiously opened it up while I walked back to the house. Inside was a handwritten note that said something along the lines of, "Dear Kaelin, I love your books. They're the best books in the world." And then it was signed by some person I'd never heard of before. My heart swelled at such a random and thoughtful note from a total stranger.

Then I realized two things. The first being that the envelope had no actual stamp on it. It was hand drawn and looked very convincing at just a glance. The second being that the handwriting was suspiciously similar to my daughter's. My heart swelled for a different reason.

It made sense with their strange behavior a moment before. My precious, sweet children had raced down to the mailbox to put in a fake letter to me. They'd gone out of their way to write something nice that they knew would make me smile, and they'd done it anonymously because they knew it would be a surprise. Needless to say, I couldn't keep the grin off my face. And I couldn't help hugging them and thanking them for doing something so thoughtful and kind.

And that was one of the many lessons I've learned from those two sweethearts. That it's important to encourage people in their dreams. It's important to compliment people and do nice things for them. It's important to make people feel special, even if you don't get any credit or recognition. Little acts of kindness can go a long way toward making someone's day, or even toward encouraging them not to give up.

I'm so thankful for my children's generous hearts, and I pray that I can be the same way. Toward them as they grow and follow their own dreams, and also toward the people around me wherever I go. I want to make people feel like their dreams matter, just like my kids did for me.



YOU

Waited

Time is not what we count

in current ticks

measuring more than moments

Time is our always our past and future

moving in and out

slow then fast

the timeline of our life waves and flows

alone

Reaching out

Sometimes touching

Intertwining

as your line met with mine

Somehow you belonged here

My heart already knew you

a past memory

a familiar hue

nestled in

Comforting

coming home

to a familiar joining

in step now

I waited for you



## **Inner Strength - Not Just a Table – by Michelle Wyatt**

Where does your family gather to eat meals together? Do you eat at the kitchen table or coffee table? Have picnics on the floor? Ever use dinner trays? In today's world, dinner time can look very different from family to family, and kitchen tables take on a variety of identities. Recently, I was reminded of this and more.

Growing up, we almost always ate at the dinner table and talked about what was going on in our lives. My relatives in Houston use their dinner table sometimes like a desk. We sit around the television, usually watch a game show, and use dinner trays to enjoy meal time together. It's a fun interactive time together. We root for each other as we answer various Jeopardy questions, for example. I have other relatives that base their gathering spot on how many of their family members are home at meal time. I can relate to the latter.

When I lived on my own, I wouldn't always sit at my kitchen table to eat. When I had company, I was excited to gather at the table to eat. There was something almost magical about that form of quality time together. When I had a family of my own, I made sure we had meals as a family at the table, at least most nights. Sometimes we'd have a pizza and movie night picnic style, which had its own form of magic. My mom, on the other hand, used her kitchen table for work. She spread out her files and teaching plans and worked on her computer. When the boys and I lived with her, they were young enough to eat at their kids table, so we used dinner trays and I had fun watching them enjoy their food and helped them as needed. My boys were full of personality, so it was never a dull moment.

When my boys and I moved out, we did eventually get our own kitchen table. It was a transition for us. They were at an age where they couldn't quite grasp why it was important to eat together at the table. I was okay with that. I knew maybe someday they would. When we moved and chose to find a different table, it took longer than I had planned, and our coffee table became our kitchen table. I always felt like something was missing, though. The boys did too.

This past holiday, that void was filled. We got a Christmas surprise! A table! Our first meal at the table was the best dinner we've had in a long time. We were together - no distractions. In fact, it happened to fall on the last day of Christmas break, so we reflected on our favorite parts. We all shared. It turns out that we all had at least two memories that we agreed were our favorites. That particular dinner time was certainly one of mine. I also turned that time into a chance for positive affirmations. I wrote something positive about each of my boys and they read them aloud. Then they wrote something nice about me. Matthew decided to show his humorous side; hence, the magic of laughter. This whole experience came about from the addition of a table.

My boys and I have something else to add to our list of gratitude. It is lessons and experiences like these that fill up my cup of inner strength, so I have more to use when I need it the most.

The next time you look at your kitchen table, I hope you'll see it for the magic of possibilities it can offer your life as a family.

## Life Right Now - Hurry Up and Wait - by Jennifer Stephens

Ugh.  
Waiting.

Do we know anybody who actually likes waiting? Waiting in line? We'll take a Disney style fast pass to the front, please. Waiting to be seated at a restaurant? Let's drive somewhere less crowded. The flight's been delayed how long? Should we just find a bus? A train? We've become such an impatient society that we don't like waiting for anything! But sometimes we have to wait. There's no choice. Like at the doctor's office.

Waiting at a medical appointment is so unpleasant, little rooms with snacks and a coffee bar have been added to somehow trick us into thinking the waiting isn't that bad. Um, we're not fooled. Waiting in waiting rooms is no fun and no amount of Cheez-Its will convince me otherwise. First of all, we're confined to a small space with a bunch of strangers. Second, we're made to sit in a hard chair, lined up with rows of other hard chairs (The most awful configuration is when they line up the rows "back-to-back" – why, oh, why – when the lingering scent of the meal somebody devoured two hours ago starts attacking my nostrils, well, it's just too close!). And most importantly, no one actually wants to be there.

If I'm waiting for the nurse to open that door, little clipboard in hand, to call MY name, I'm a bundle of nerves oblivious to anything or anyone else. But if I'm there with a loved one, waiting for their appointment, I notice it all. The waiting room suddenly becomes a Pandora's box of annoying noises, unpleasant smells, and bizarre behaviors that I'm now forced to endure for an unmeasurable amount of time. Perched in my chair on one such day, I settled in and opened up the book in my lap. Knowing we had this appointment, I selected a new book to bring along to keep myself occupied. But before I could dive into the first page, I looked up, taking note of the various waiting room personalities surrounding me. Now I realize the people left to wait in this twelve-by-twelve space may not be displaying the best version of themselves. Everyone is slightly irritated after arriving early (per office instructions) that we're STILL made to wait an exorbitant amount of time. But isn't that always the case? It's always hurry up and wait.

Glancing around the room, I notice the leg kicker first. This person brings a nervous energy that intensifies with every tick of the clock. Mesmerized by the beat of each kick-kick-kick, I turn back to the words on the pages in front of me, when my thoughts are suddenly interrupted by the loud voice blaring from the other side of the room. Now I'm – we, all of us in the room, are apparently attending a cooking lesson, thanks to the lady tuned into a YouTube channel on her phone. Did I mention it was LOUD (And I was trying to read a book!)? Scanning the room to see if anyone else is perturbed by this interruption I notice the guy staring into space. Literally staring. At nothing. Not the lost in thought kind of stare either. More of a dazed and confused thing. Taking a sip from the water bottle I brought along; my attention is drawn to someone else. This dude is pacing a path of anxiety throughout the tiny room. His inner agitation quickly turns outward as he exclaims, "I'M GOING STIR CRAZY!" Really? We hadn't noticed.

There we were, all of us waiting differently. We all knew we'd be there that day. We knew we'd be waiting while our loved ones were with the doctor. Yet some of us arrived prepared, ready to wait

patiently, and some came with nothing, letting anxiety and nerves take over. Unprepared and ill-equipped to handle the stay.

Sitting in the waiting room that day made me think about how we act when we find ourselves waiting for something outside those four walls. In the waiting room of life. Maybe we're in one of life's waiting rooms right now – waiting on a certain job, or a relationship, or some other significant life change. How do we behave when those wanted next steps aren't happening as quickly as we'd hoped?

Do we show up anxious?

Nervous?

Loudly interrupting the peace around us?

Or do we show up prepared?

Prepared in God's word.

Prepared through prayer.

Prepared in the knowing that God's got this.

How do we wait?

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

## Healthy Habits – Let it Go – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever thought of comparing ourselves to other as being unhealthy? Well, it is. We talk about on the HOME page for kiddos, and we're talking about it here, for adults. Comparing makes us feel less than (or more than, depending on how we're comparing) and this affects our self-image and how we feel about ourselves and life, in general. Comparison even causes us to question the goodness of God in our own lives, which is a downer...for sure!

This month, we're going to suggest several ways to let go of comparing ourselves with others, in any shape or form. Little kids start comparing when they begin sports or make friends, or have parties, or play instruments. The world rewards with ribbons and trophies, and when we don't make the cut or go home with an award, we feel less than...and that starts the fall. Or maybe we do win all the awards and we start to feel better than those around us...and that too starts the fall.

If you see your kids feeling less than another because they didn't make the team or the cut, affirm who they are, apart from awards, and establish them as loved by HIM...always...the greatest reward there is. And tell yourself this truth, as well!

If you have lost weight and feel good about yourself and look down on others who aren't "healthy" according to your standards, think again. It's one thing to be proud of what you've accomplished, but quite another to look down on those that haven't done what YOU did. Danger zone!

If you suffer a setback financially and compare what you don't have with what she does have, it only makes you feel frustrated and not enjoy your home and things. This brings on depression, and none of us wants that. Begin to give thanks for the small things, notice the sunset and the smiles on your kids' faces, and ask God to restore what needs to be restored. And be grateful that your friend is not in the same need you are. It's hard, but it's healthy...

If you are disciplined and get things done and your husband is lazy (in your eyes) and a bum, you might begin to look on him with disdain, and this creates friction and disappointment in your marriage. Not healthy for either one of you. Instead, pray for him, and let go of instructing him, and watch how God can speak and get him to listen, when you let go and trust. I'm still learning this!

If you feel as though life is passing you by and you haven't accomplished much, or life is too hard at the moment, and you're wishing and longing for the youth and beauty of the younger girls around you, this makes you feel pitiful and alone. The truth is that as we age, He is with us and by us and for us and holds us, sustaining us and offering us joy in the journey. Tell yourself that every morning, and look at Him, instead of them... You'll feel lighter in your step!

If your kids are successful and doing well, and you feel like you've really been "blessed" by God and you must have done it right, and your friends with kids that cause problems are going through hell with their family...don't find yourself patting yourself on the back. This puffs up what you did, creates a definition of blessed that isn't there, and it separates you and your friends. Think again. Success is loving each other as Christ loves us, and not comparing or finding self-worth in being better than the person next door...

Well, those are just a few of the ways that comparison can result in unhealthy "weight gain" of the wrong and heavy kind, that of pride...or shame. Neither of which make us feel good in any way.

Pray and establish again the truth of who you are in Christ and who He is in you, and that he is for you, and for them, and he loves us all. True success is knowing the truth, and then being set free to let these comparisons go, in favor of falling at his feet in adoration and thanksgiving.

And see these goodies above? Some are small, some are bigger, some are different shapes...but they're all so tasty and delicious!

Happy February!

## **A Hopeful Heart - The Price of Peace – by Christina Oberon**

Peace is something we all long for, yet so few truly possess. It's been promised by leaders, prayed for by nations, and quietly sought in the deepest corners of our hearts. But what's the price of peace? What do we have to give up to hold that delicate beauty in our hands?

For some of us, peace comes with distance. It's the quiet moments spent alone in nature, on a mountaintop or by the sea, away from the noise of the world. In these spaces, peace feels like a refuge. But it's not free. It asks us to give up connection, to let go of the bustling energy of the world and the relationships that tie us down. It's a trade of community for calm.

For others, the price of peace is forgiveness. It's not an easy thing to let go of resentment or to move past the hurt others have caused. Forgiveness is a process, a painful, raw shedding of layers of pain to expose a deeper sense of peace. But when we dare to be vulnerable and face that hurt head-on, peace grows from it, turning scars into stories of strength and resilience.

Nations, too, often pay a high price for peace, one we might find hard to fathom. History tells us that peace is sometimes bought with war. Treaties are signed, and peace declared, after the devastation of battle. Yet, can peace born from such destruction truly last? The cost, in lives lost and hearts broken, is unfathomable. Still, nations continue to pay it, hoping for a future untouched by conflict.

On a personal level, the price of peace often requires acceptance. Life is a canvas painted with both joy and sorrow, and to find peace, we must embrace all of it. It means accepting imperfections, releasing the illusion of control, and surrendering to life's unpredictable nature. Acceptance isn't giving up, it's finding strength in what is, while still holding space for what could be.

For some, the journey to peace is a battle with the self. They face their inner demons, struggles louder than any external chaos. The price here is self-awareness, healing, and sometimes, a long, lonely road. To earn peace, they must confront their fears, tear down walls they've built for protection, and piece by painful piece, rebuild themselves.

But there is also a deeper peace, a peace that transcends our efforts and struggles, a peace that only comes from God. Jesus offers a peace that is not of this world. It is a peace rooted in faith, trust, and surrender to God's will. This peace does not demand us to fight for it or earn it through our own means. Instead, it is a gift given freely, a reassurance that in the midst of life's storms, we are not alone. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid". John 14:27

In the end, the price of peace looks different for everyone. It asks for sacrifices in ways that only we can understand. For one person, it might mean letting go of a dream; for another, standing up for what's right. Peace is elusive, not because it hides from us, but because it requires us to look inward and make choices that reflect what peace means to us.

Ultimately, the price of peace is worth paying, not because it's easy, but because it transforms us. When we find peace, whether in the world around us or deep within ourselves, it heals our wounds and allows hope to flourish. And when we seek peace in God, we find a peace that surpasses all understanding, a peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.



MARRIAGE

## **For Better or Worse - Hold His Hand – by Kaelin Scott**

There's something so special about holding hands. It's a simple and pure gesture, but it speaks volumes. It says, "I'm happy to be here with you."

Oftentimes, holding hands is one of the first signs of being romantically interested in someone. It's a sweet and heartfelt way of showing someone you care. Telling them they mean a lot to you. Demonstrating the fact that you enjoy their presence.

Sometimes all you need to calm someone is taking hold of their hand. Saying, "I'm here with you." Giving them reassurance that you aren't going anywhere.

Holding hands with our husbands shouldn't be a thing of the past, no matter how long we've been married. It's an easy yet effective way to communicate that you still think the world of him. That you're still happy to be with him. That he's the one you feel comfortable and safe with.

It's something you can do almost anywhere and anytime. In the car. Taking a walk. Watching the kids play outside. At church. Watching TV. At a baseball game. Sitting on the porch. There's always a chance to grab each other's hands.

And I've found that it can also smooth hurt feelings. After an argument or disagreement, once we've apologized and forgiven each other, holding hands is a way of saying, "It's okay. I love you no matter what." Or, "I'm sorry I hurt you."

There are so many things you can say with one simple gesture, so many feelings that can be packed into intertwined fingers. It's a beautiful connection, no matter where you are or what you're doing. Two people tethered together, doing life side by side, joined together in every season.

So I encourage you to find a reason to hold your hubby's hand today. Actually, you don't even have to find a reason. Do it just because you love him. Just hold his hand.



## **Date Night Fun – Choices and Conversations – by Marcy Lytle**

Over the Christmas holidays, we had a lot of fun date nights that can be enjoyed all year. And while we're mentioning them this month of February, choose one for Valentine's week as well! A friend once asked me if ever run out of topics to discuss while out on a date, so I'm including some ideas with each date night idea. Enjoy!

**A Concert** – We splurged on this one and got tickets to hear Kenny G. He's still amazing after all these years! (We heard him decades ago). We dressed up, we enjoyed every song, and for conversation after – we talked about the band, what Kenny G wore, we looked up interesting facts about him, etc. It was plenty to talk about!

**Hotel Lobbies** – I've mentioned this before, and I'm saying it again. If there are high rise hotels in your town or a city nearby, map out about four that you easily access or walk to. Sit in the lobbies of each and grab an appetizer or a drink and people watch. You'll get in your walking, as you go to each one! Talk about where these folks might be going, look at the shoes people wear, and admire and comment on the lobby décor!

**A Night Downtown** – If you're getting away for V-Day, consider a one night stay downtown. Take a walk, shop the boutiques, grab some snacks, enjoy the patio at your hotel, bring a tiny puzzle, and talk about how much you love each other. Keep it all positive, and compliment as much as you can!

**Stroll, sit and observe** – If the weather allows, find a trail or a stroll near a busy area that also has benches or places to relax. Hold hands, dress in your comfy shoes, and order takeout to enjoy or some hot cider to sip. Look at nature, observe other people strolling, and perhaps bring a book of poems to read aloud to each other. Conversations of love!

**Morning by the Fire** – If you have a firepit or a fireplace or a TV where you can play a fireplace on YouTube, do it. Make breakfast together, or dinner. Place it on pretty trays with cute napkins. Pick a fun drink for both of you. Include dessert. Linger by the fire as you eat, and remember Christmas and all of your favorite gifts and sights and sounds, and talk about them.

There you go! Date night and conversations solved! Make it happen. Enjoy each other. And don't let date night slip away...ever!

## **After 40 Years – Nightly Reads – by Marcy Lytle**

I didn't grow up knowing anything about advent, except as a young adult when my sister started sending my kids chocolate advent calendars for December fun. I love advent calendars. But this past Christmas season, my husband and I read two advent books – one from our church – and one I ordered on line. We purposed to sit each night in one of our guest rooms in two of our "reading chairs" and tried our best to stay on track with the nightly readings.

This past December, those nightly reads with him, changed us for the better. Not only individually in our walk with Him, but together in our walk with each other. We took turns reading aloud, we discussed what we read, and we prayed together. The Advent books needed to be read daily, to be able to finish by Christmas, so being diligent to do this was necessary.

I watched him read and listened to his voice and observed his hands as he turned the pages, and I felt thankful for this time and for the Word, in a fresh way. The Christmas story, told through the pages of Advent, came alive for me as I'd never experienced before. I began to hunger more for the Word, and I found that I had been thirsty for this connection with my husband forever. Sure, we read little spot devotions from time to time, we pray often before we fall asleep, but...

This intentional time to turn off the TV, put away our phones, and actually sit in a specific spot to read and to connect and to pray, was a change. And a good one.

After Christmas was over, I found myself sad that the advent books were read and done. He felt the same. We had enjoyed these nightly reads so much, the intentional discipline it required, that we both agreed we were going to continue this into the new year.

Last night we began *Be the Gift* by Ann Voskamp. It's full of 1-2 page encouragements on how to give of yourself to others, and in turn to be healed yourself. It's a fascinating concept, to give and then be given to. Isn't it? We've been told this over and over in the Word, but it's so fun now to read practical ways to do this.

I want to be the gift to my husband this year. I want to be the gift to others. And I want to be the gift to Him, by continuing this intimate time away from the busyness of home and life.

We have struggled our entire married life with bible reading and prayer and often found it laborious, we tried to do it when we were tired, and we never could find what we wanted to read, and so on and so on...

But here we are, after experiencing a season of advent together, finding ourselves in this rhythm of nightly reads together where we feel close to Him and to each other. I'm so grateful, and I'm looking forward to all the pages we turn this year, together.



ENCOURAGEMENT

## **Under Pressure – The Heart (of Worship) – by Debbie Haynes**

What is worship?

What isn't worship?

I just read the story of Abraham again, where God tested Abraham's faith. I can imagine a conversation that could have occurred, if it were one of us in that testing! Abraham's response could have been, "Lord, you just gave us Isaac. We've had him so short a time. He isn't even established as a man with a family of his own yet..." But yet we read in Romans that Abraham staggered not at the promises of God through unbelief, being fully persuaded that what God had promised he was fully able to perform.

Abraham knew the cost of what God required – he carried the knife himself. Yet, by faith, he considered it worship. Abraham's heart-felt worship to God was in the very act of obedience, in physically opening his hands and letting go of the one thing he cherished above all else. And in opening his heart in unquestioning belief that God would perform his word.

This was worship.

I read that in this service of Abraham's worship there was no fanfare, no music, no strobe lights flashing, and no theatrics. There was nothing of man, except obedience and faith.

I believe that's what worship is. It isn't anything that comes from without, it's not in the surroundings, the lights, music, entertaining singers or anything remotely close to that.

Worship comes from within. Its source is that river of living water that flows from our innermost being upward to God and it results in deeds of obedient living.

Romans 12 tells us what real worship is. It's an appeal to...

*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice,  
holy and acceptable to God,  
which is your spiritual worship.*

Nothing withheld, nothing gripped so tightly we can't let it go and give it God. We have no rights or hold to anything. And letting go in our daily life of living for Him produces worship.

Worship cannot be reduced to 15 minutes of singing at church, but rather intentionally living our lives daily unto Him. We can trust God to faithfully perform his word towards us. What he has promised us is far more valuable than anything we can hold onto here.

*Father God, our desire is to be found obedient and faithful, and to recognize how, in living our daily lives, we can worship you. Show us and help us understand this, as we get blinded by our own will, by pressures in life. Thank you for your love and patience with us. Amen.*

## **Moving Forward – A Different Perspective – by Pam Charro**

I have known for quite some time now that Father God wants to do a deeper work in healing my heart. Naturally, immediately after receiving that message, life got especially hectic and I "didn't have time" to grieve and heal. I knew that it would be painful work, and I guess I was avoiding it, if only subconsciously.

Recently, however, I spent about a month being sick, and I knew I was out of excuses. So I obediently began making more time to just sit with God and talk, asking him to heal my heart. Tears came easily. I could feel the deep grief, which previously I had felt settled into my bones, begin to rise to the surface. It was getting ready to make its way out.

God put all of the right people and circumstances in my life to continue moving the process forward, but one particular night seemed especially important. It was about 3:15 a.m., which seems to be the standard time I will experience insomnia if I'm going to. I asked God to show me his perspective of some of my painful situations, and, one character at a time, he began to reveal to me some of the pain that each individual had been experiencing or had experienced beforehand, that had led them to become who they were when I was going through my own pain. It was incredibly liberating for me to learn that perspective, as it enabled me to have such compassion for each of them, and to not feel as defined by the way I had been treated.

Does this mean that all is well now,  
that I was not wronged,  
and we can all live happily ever after?  
Of course not.

But it was a huge step in allowing me to release the curse - what I thought it all meant about who I was.

As humans, we all have one common enemy, and that enemy loves it when we see one another as evil instead of mutually affected by evil. It deeply hurts each of us. I still need to process some pain, but now I can also cry over the pain experienced by those who hurt me, and pray that they will be or were healed.

I'm confident that the person God is making me into will be well worth all of this. I'm excited about having more of his perspective as I continue to learn, grow, and bring his love to others. Even when some of those others have deeply hurt me.

## **A Day in the Life – An Open Seat – by Bekah Holland**

Happy February, y'all! Just kidding, I hate February and since "new year new me" is not on my 2025 bingo card, I'm going to stick with my bah-humbug ways. If you've met me, read basically anything I write during this month or run into me on any day leading up to Valentine's Day, then you know my feelings have nothing to do with love for this "holiday." I do, however, make an exception for February 15<sup>th</sup> which, in tribute to my undying love of the TV show *Friends* is titled "The One Where We Celebrate 75% Off Chocolate Day." But since I don't write a marriage column anymore, you can all breathe a sigh of relief because I won't be projecting any more of my "love day" disdain...for now anyway. You're welcome.

Since I've been wracking my brain trying to think of something to write about this month, I'm going to go with a love theme anyway, just to keep you all on your toes. This kind of love is different though. I'm talking about true, undying, imperfect, messy, hilarious, heartbreaking soul mate love...friendship. Now let me start by saying that I am not a perfect friend. I usually respond to text messages in my head without realizing that I never actually typed out the words (although sometimes I even do that but that dang send button gets me every time!). My text messages are also likely novel length for no good reason because I'm incapable of using less words for something that requires like a six word sentence. Let's see, maybe a list of my not-so-perfect friend traits would be easier:

-If you get mad and yell at me, I'm 100% going to cry and think about it for the rest of my life. But if you need to, I'll take it, and try to be better.

-I am an over-sharer – if you don't want an exhausting albeit entertaining backstory, you better tell me before I start.

-If you have a problem, I will do my best not to immediately try to fix it, but I fail at that a LOT, so you'll probably have to tell me to put my hand over my mouth to make it stop.

-I'll likely be the person to laugh at completely inappropriate times and probably in inappropriate locations.

-Also, if we are in public, just prepare yourself, because I have a history of tripping over my own feet, getting caught on door knobs, and will, without a doubt, spill something on myself within the first three minutes of any drink or food being in reaching distance.

However, while I am not what any of my friends would describe as perfect, or even someone who appears to have her life together (and they are not wrong), I am one who will always show up. You can verbally vomit all your stress and rage on me and I won't bat an eye, but I will still come prepared with a shovel, tarp, and airtight alibi...just in case. You can cry, process all of the mess going on in your head, and I'll cry with you, asking if you want advice or just someone to sit in the dark with you...to see you. You can say things that you would never ever say out loud and I'll be your judgment-free sounding board for all of it. My couch is always open, you can show up without any warning and I'll have tea, coffee, wine or something stronger, depending on what the situation calls for. I'm prepared for it all.

Because friendship isn't always pretty. Mostly because this life isn't either. This life is HARD, and no matter how much you do right, stuff will still go completely wrong sometimes and leave you buried underground with no map on how to navigate your way out. And as women, we tend to be the glue for the people around us. We hold it all together even when we are completely shattered inside so that we can be strong for our partners or kids or family, whether blood or chosen. And. It. Is. Exhausting. While we're on the subject, if you come at me with the "put your oxygen mask on first" crap, I'll probably throw something at you, regardless of the truth of the sentiment. But, I

digress. We can't carry this weight alone. We weren't meant to. That's why I've always believed with every fiber of my being, that friendships are just as important as your marriage (sure, now that I'm not supposed to be writing about marriage, I can finally find a way to do it-ugh). Now don't get your panties in a bunch, because I'm not saying that your partner in life isn't your best friend or shouldn't be or whatever other arguments are flying through your brain right now. I AM saying that friendships, the real ones who've seen you ugly cry, and raid your pantry for the good snacks they know you have hidden from your husband (sorry babe), who've seen you both on mountain tops and in the deepest of trenches...those are the ones who help make you a better you. My little village of friends are the reason I can be a better wife, mom, friend, human, or at least try to be. They've held my hair back while I've been sick with grief, checked on me even when I haven't responded to their normal check-ins, and don't let me get away with hiding or pretending everything is ok for too long. They have seen my sink full of dishes, trash cans overflowing, laundry (dear Lord the laundry) that has obviously been procreating because there aren't THAT many people who live here. They've shown up in hospital rooms and held me to give me the strength I needed to hold on tighter to someone else I love. They've shared their pain, their humiliating stories, their families and their hearts. They send distracting memes and TikToks so I could remember what it felt like to laugh, have even driven from out of state to kidnap me and drag me out to a show by our favorite TikTok people on tour to give me three glorious hours of not having to think about anything but happiness. They've picked up my kids, sent dinners and have prayed prayers that while I never heard, I know without a shadow of a doubt, have saved my life and the lives of my family.

So just know, that soul-mates don't have to be romantic. They can be both. And know I am the friend you can be a mess around. I'll be a mess with you. I'll show up and fold your laundry and watch your kids so you can take a shower and nap and you don't have to entertain me...you don't even have to talk to me. I'll drop off a meal, do your dishes, uber eats wine to your house. I will sit with you in the dark, shine a light so you can find your way home to yourself. You can fall apart with me and know that I'll never see anything but the amazing, beautiful person you are. So consider this your official invitation to be your confused, tired, broken, chaotic real self. When the world is trying to crush and you need to fall apart, when you need to break and figure out how you want to build yourself back together, I'm all in. Always.

*"We are all a little broken...that's how the light gets in." Ernest Hemmingway*

## **An Adage a Day - Holy Moly – by Carole Gilbert**

As an expression of surprise, holy moly (moley) is used for many occurrences, places, and events. It's the name of a popular putt-putt golf bar, a 2019 golf game show on TV and even casseroles, for those of us who like to cook. And it's an all-around nice phrase for us to use to show exclamation.

“Holy Moly” originated in 1892, if not before. It is thought to have come from the phrases “Holy Mary” or “Holy Moses.” We have evolved through the years and also use exclamations for our surprises or revelations like “Holy Cow” or “Holy Smokes.” These two slang expressions are not bad even though they may sound like it. They simply do not give the same reverence of awe toward holiness that holy moly does.

I cannot think of a time I've used this phrase, and I don't remember hearing it much growing up. It came to mind when a recipe appeared on my Facebook page. That's not an odd place for recipes to appear but it is odd, to me, for a recipe to be named with such an expression. The recipe was Crock Pot Holy Moly Chicken. And I love using my crock pot! It's always good to use on those lazy no makeup kind of days, or on those days that you're so busy you only have time to throw something in only to come back later and the meal's all done.

Of all the ways to use a phrase, we might ask, why would a casserole be called holy moly? I guess it's got the element of surprise. And maybe the surprise is being, oh, so easy, but oh, so good!

Because of this, I clicked on the post to see the recipe. And holy moly, it's a good one! It's also easy, especially if you need to make substitutions. I didn't have cream of celery soup that the recipe calls for, which I'm sure would've been yummy, so I used cream of mushroom soup and added mushrooms, which were also yummy. Click here for the recipe.

<http://www.massanuttenantiquetractor.com/recipe---crock-pot-holy-moly-chicken.html>

I then became more curious about the phrase and started to research it. That's where I found the different places that used it in their names, like the putt-putt golf bar, the game show, and I also found other recipes, like this one, Holy Moly Casserole.

<https://cookingprofessionally.com/recipe/holy-moly-casserole> This recipe is also a good one but it's for the oven. So whichever way you prefer to cook, there's a holy moly recipe to suit your taste. Also, if you try either recipe, let me know! Also, let me know if you make it your own with any substitutions. I'd love to hear about it.

I think I like this phrase. I usually say “wow” or “yay” but “holy moly” expresses my feelings in a better way to include God and to reference Him in my surprises. And I want to include Him in everything! So, I'm going to try to use this phrase, holy moly, more often.

And this being February, the month of hopeful Valentine's Day surprises, I hope we all have a “Holy Moly” day!



## **Firmly Planted - Never Alone – by Dina Cavazos**

Everyone feels lonely sometimes. Whether in a relationship, or single, we must each struggle with that feeling of being alone in a crowd, of not belonging, of not being understood. I love this poem by William Wordsworth because it reminds me of my inseparable connection with God. The beauty of nature, reflected in the dancing daffodils, arouses a joy that comes from knowing I'm not alone, but part of something eternal and beautiful.

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud  
*William Wordsworth*

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

## Unearthly Thing - Walk In Love – by Angela Dolbear

I heard it over and over again: “Walk in love.” I heard it in church, in articles I read, and in verses in the Bible I came across.

Occasionally, I hear a word or a phrase in one place, only to hear it again somewhere else and maybe one more time. I try to stop and focus on what I hear whenever this happens to me because it seems like that is when God is telling me something. He graciously repeats it until I get it. He’s good like that.

“Walk in love” sounds poetic and pleasant. But I was unsure what it meant, so it was time to press in through prayer and research.

The first point I learned was to put away all bitterness and anger. Easier said than done. But I think of it as internal house cleaning. In my heart and mind, I picture vacuuming all the bitterness and then mopping away the anger until my mind is a clean, fresh place for Love to come in. It becomes a place I feel I can invite God to dwell. And He does. Again, He’s good like that.

The next point I learned about walking in love is to forgive. [Forgiveness means different things to different people. But in general, it involves intentionally letting go of resentment and anger.](#) So, if I want to walk in love, I must let go of resentment and anger. The link above came from the Mayo Clinic website, describing some real health benefits to forgiveness, like less anxiety and lower blood pressure. So, forgiveness is much more than spiritually beneficial; it’s also physically good for you.

My biblical research describes walking in love as living a life imitating God by showing love to others.

A practical application of walking in love is showing love to others by doing anything to help them. But it’s not to be a people-pleaser or to be codependent ([Meriam Webster defines codependent](#) as “a psychological condition or a relationship in which a person manifesting low self-esteem and a strong desire for approval has an unhealthy attachment to another often controlling or manipulative person.”)

It’s simply seeing an opportunity to do or be kind, exercising the fruit of the Holy Spirit described in Galatians 5:22 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It’s replicating these qualities. For me, it is **not** doing things like thinking critically of others and being spiteful!

Showing love to others could also include being patient, kind, and not jealous, boastful, proud, or rude. It also means loving others in small moments, such as when they are frustrating, inconvenient, demanding, or discouraging.

Walking in love seems like it goes against human nature, which it does, since it's really about being transformed into God's nature. We can develop this new nature by maintaining a close relationship with God, fellowshiping with Him through reading the Bible and praying. This will help us stay in union with Him and keep our love walking shoes on.

In [2 John](#), the Bible also says that we should walk in love and truth, which means showing kindness and love to others while also holding on to what we know is true about Jesus.

Scriptures for further enlightenment:

“Walk continually in love [that is, value one another—practice empathy and compassion, unselfishly seeking the best for others], just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God [slain for you, so that it became] a sweet fragrance.” -- Ephesians 5:2 (Amplified Bible)

“Love bears all things [regardless of what comes], believes all things [looking for the best in each one], hopes all things [remaining steadfast during difficult times], endures all things [without weakening].” -- 1 Corinthians 13:7 (Amplified Bible)

With these words in my mind and heart, I set out to walk in love. It is part of my everyday prayer for help with this new outlook. And daily, God provides the help I need to walk in love. And yes, again, He's good like that.

Blessings to you!

*Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories. Her latest release, The Mid-Century Breakfast Club, is the fourth book in The Garden Tales series and will be released in the Summer of 2025. All of her novels are available on [Amazon](#) in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats. Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, and writing and recording music with her husband Tim in their studio in Nashville, TN—listen to her new album [STORMS](#) on your favorite music streaming service. Please drop by and sign up for news, read new stories, and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!*



FRESH THYME

## **FRESH THYME - A Different Answer – by Marcy Lytle**

Have you ever prayed for snow? Oh, I have, since I was a kid. Living in Central Texas, we don't get a lot of snow, so that when it's on the forecast I can never sleep because I don't to miss it! But more times than not, when I prayed for snow, I got cold rain instead. Sloppy, muddy, cold rain that was not white and pretty.

Have you ever prayed for rain? Oh, we do here where I live and I suppose many do, when the heat is on in the summer, when drought lingers, or when our gardens are freshly planted and we need a good soaking. But more times than not, we pray for rain and we get a deluge. It doesn't come in nice timely increments that would be perfect (in our estimation) for optimum blooms and produce, but it pours and uproots and washes away.

Have you ever prayed for sunshine? Oh, you know those birthday parties you have planned for the kids and you NEED them to be outside so the kids don't mess up your house, and you have all of these cool activities that require space and a yard. But more times than not, the forecast might even say sunshine will be...but that dark random thunderstorm appears just when the kids arrive, and they're all inside...and you're insane.

All of the above are weather-related whispers of prayers that we all make at one time or another. However, we make much more important prayers, earnest and heartfelt prayers for things that are life and death situations. And of course, we choose life. We pray for the one in the hospital, for those fleeing their homes in fires, for a son or daughter that desperately needs a job. And we all end our prayers with a petition for good health, provision, safety, etc. for our family and friends, because that's what we need...isn't it?

But more times than not, and repeatedly over the course of our lives, we get just the opposite of what we pray for. Health wanes, it fails, and for some of our family members it disappears and we've lost someone and we're stunned that what we prayed for ended up being death, instead of life. We've watched those fleeing the fires on the news, and we all join in prayer for these homes to be saved, as we watch families run in terror with suitcases in hand. And then we see the photos of the homes burned to the ground. Just the opposite of what we hoped would happen. And that son or daughter in need of a job, well sometimes it's years and the perfect job doesn't unfold and someone else gets it. Or the pay isn't good, or whatever...it just doesn't pan out for our good...we say....

Why does God tell us to pray and ask for our daily bread, and then sometimes it seems what we're given is stale and full of mold?

I often revisit the Lord's Prayer, and just recently I started again with just the beginning address...

*Our Father...*

Sometimes I never get past that intro, because it sets my heart in position of daughter to father. And this is hard for many of us, if our relationships with our fathers weren't stellar. Maybe he wasn't around or was inattentive or even abusive. That's why it's SO IMPORTANT to get the concept of Our Father in the sense that it was intended. He's a good father that knows best, whether we understand it or not.

Good fathers know when to allow their child to try that first hard piece of candy, but not until the child can manage without choking. Good fathers hold the hands of their children when crossing

a street, until that child matures and learns to cross by looking both ways – something he saw his father do. Good fathers listen with understanding but answer with wisdom. But even good fathers get it wrong, hurt our feelings, make mistakes and even wrong choices as parents.

However, Our Father doesn't. So when he says to pray and ask for daily bread, he also says to start the prayer by addressing his position (and ours) before we ask.

As long as we walk on the planet, there will be soggy rains, downpours that flood, fires that erupt, and yes...beautiful snow that falls. But even snow turns to slush when the temperatures rise.

The one thing I do know is that we can trust in his good plan and his will for our lives, to bring us through all of the seasons and the weather, as these things turn and change and appear once again.

February. It's the season and the month where many are praying for an end to winter storms. Others are wishing for one more chance at snow. It's the season when many are planning dates with the ones they love, and others are mourning the loss of the one date they'll never have again. And it's the second month of the year already, and we are wondering how in the world does time fly so fast?

Be encouraged. Revisit The Lord's Prayer, and linger at those first two words when you pray. And then you might not want to ask for anything at all, but rather lay back in the arms of the One who create you, formed you and gave you life. And just receive his best in his time...as the winds and rains blow...and snowflakes fall.

## **FRESH THYME – 14 Finds – by Marcy Lytle**

It's Valentine's month. And whether you love it or you hate it, whether you celebrate or you don't, there's still always a reason to put together some fun for you and your spouse, your friend, your kids, or just for you! Maybe you need some ideas for a good time on any weekend, a list you can print and save and use all year long:

Find a new coffee shop and take a game.

Find a trail you haven't walked before and go, stop for fast food after, and feel good that you moved.

Find a new treat to try, bring it home, and find a new movie and watch it.

Find a dish to surprise, order it to be delivered, and start a new puzzle.

Find a store that sells chocolate covered apples and buy one. Pack it up, eat in the car, watch the sunset.

Find a market, take a bag, shop and fill it. Go home and create a delicious meal together.

Find a sale, or sales, and shop together, with a budget...or not. Go home and enjoy your new things.

Find a library, visit and wander, pick and choose, sit and read...then share what you read over a cookie.

Find a cozy blanket and a movie (new or old), pop popcorn, cozy up and watch.

Find a film at a movie house and surprise the one you're with, with a night out. Take a blanket!

Find an Italian place, dress up, order just appetizers, and order Italian cream cheese cake for dessert.

Find a new fast food place, order it, eat in the car, and listen to music. Then nap in the car.

Find a free concert in your area and attend. Invite others. Go for coffee and talk about the tunes.

Find a bookstore and enter the aisles. Buy each other a book under \$10, then peruse the travel aisle, and dream.

That's 14 ideas for the 14<sup>th</sup> of this month, which is February's holiday on the calendar. It might not be THE day to celebrate for you, or it might be. Either way, it's always fun to find something to surprise the one(s) you love.

## **FRESH THYME – Unruffled – by Marcy Lytle**

I don't like ruffles, in clothing, usually. In fact, I'd say I'm pretty unruffled when it comes to the way I dress. But getting ruffled in daily life? Well, I get ruffled often...and easily. I'm guessing that some of you can relate, as well.

There might be a morning when I have an agenda, a list of to-do's, and something happens to interrupt the flow I've started, and I become ruffled. In other words, my tranquility is now disturbed by something pretty minute. Maybe my husband needs to take his truck in to be serviced and I have to follow him to bring him back home. (Yes, true story.)

One weekend I might decide that we have this extra hour in the morning that we've discussed we're going to use to put away Christmas boxes in the garage, only he gets delayed and has something else to do, and my plan of organizing doesn't get done at all that day. Again, my plans are interrupted and I become ruffled. In other words, my orderly day becomes disorderly early. I did choose this time to not say anything, thus avoiding ruffling both of our feathers for the day. (Yes, true story.)

Smooth sailing days are what I enjoy and plan for, and when they don't happen, I get my feathers ruffled. And I ruffle easily. You know the feeling when you slip on a perfectly pressed linen pair of pants or a completely smooth cotton shirt, get in the car and fasten your seatbelt, and arrive with creases everywhere? That's the feeling I get, a lot.

So back in January, early on, I woke up one morning with this word "unruffled" in my mind and I decided it was going to be my word for 2025. It means "calm, not upset or disturbed." In fact, it pretty much describes my husband most of the time...except in traffic. He becomes unruffled then. I'm not talking about being calm when life is rough, I'm talking about those small things that I let ruffle my feathers that really are insignificant but I let them become boulders on my highway, that are in reality pebbles. And another description of living an unruffled life it to not be easily agitated.

I'm thinking that lots of us live with ruffled feathers daily because we live in a society that has instant gratification most of the time. Our tiny food processor breaks and we order a new one, and it's here on our porch maybe hours later, or the next day. And so it's easy and understandable how some of us can become unruffled, so quickly.

So what is this word going to look like in my life this year? Here's what I'm hoping:

- Unperturbed when my husband has a different agenda from mine, and happy to help him with his.
- Peaceful when I start dinner and I'm missing an ingredient, giving thanks we have food to eat.
- Composed when the outfits I choose don't really fit or look right, but I step out in confidence anyway.
- Cool and collected when we drive up to the restaurant only to find it's closed that day.
- Serene when the floors and house are a mess after the kids leave, and I just cleaned it yesterday.
- Smooth in my words and demeanor when I'm just so aggravated at that tiny speck in his eye.



Now, if you're thinking wow...you sure get ruffled over minor things. That's the point. Yes, I do. And it's often because of false expectations, being tired, liking things to be in order, and a list of other things that are part of my personality. But my goal for this word this year in 2025 is for me to become more mindful of what ruffles my feathers and to pause and breathe, remaining unruffled more than not.

That Sunday that I chose not to say anything when we didn't get those boxes put away? Well, I felt like I had won a gold medal because I had kept my words back, and chose to remain unruffled. I might have griped, gotten upset at my husband, and let it ruin both our days – all because boxes weren't put away. (I know, it sounds silly, but it happens...)

So, I want more of that. More biting my tongue, giving things, noting the good and not the bad, smooth sailing on calm seas even with tiny clouds above, and joy in cleaning again...because our house has enjoyed life inside.

Unruffled.

It's my word.

What's yours?