



# Book Study Guide

## Discussion Questions and Exercises

### General Guidelines:

1. Allow an hour and a half for meetings. Agree ahead of time (or at the first meeting) when and where those meetings will be. Ideally, there will be 9 sessions, one per chapter. It can also be fun to rotate meeting locations between group participants, giving everyone an opportunity to host.
2. Invite participants to take turns bringing snacks and drinks. Wherever two or more are gathered, let there be food!
3. Encourage all participants to have purchased the book and read the first chapter before the first session. For easy ordering, go to [www.guiltfreemother.com](http://www.guiltfreemother.com) or contact Stephanie Seigh ([RevSeigh@ptd.net](mailto:RevSeigh@ptd.net)) to buy in bulk and save on shipping.
4. For future sessions, read the chapter ahead of time and come prepared to discuss and participate in exercises. If desired, the chapter can be also read out loud at the beginning of each meeting.
5. Allow time for a "check-in" at the beginning of every meeting (2-3 minutes per person), to share what's happening in our lives, and become fully present to one another and the meeting's topic.
6. Encourage sharing at every session of promises kept. Remember, keeping the promises takes practice. Encourage one another and celebrate successes!
7. Plan a celebration for the 9<sup>th</sup> session, focusing on **The Joyous Mother**.

## Supplies Needed

Week 1: Your book; plastic name tags and inserts; markers, stickers, stamps, glitter, etc. for name tags; Motherhood Bingo cards; blank "I Love Being A Mother!" cards.

Week 2: Bring your book and your "I Love Being A Mother!" card.

Week 3: Bring your book and your "I Love Being A Mother!" card.

Week 4: Bring your book and your "I Love Being A Mother!" card.

Week 5: Bring your book and your "I Love Being A Mother!" card; prepare "Commonly Used Defense Strategies.

Week 6: Bring your book and your "I Love Being A Mother!" card; provide supplies for Gratitude Journals, including markers, construction paper, glitter, feathers, stickers, etc.

Week 7: Bring your book and your "I Love Being A Mother!" card; bring your Gratitude Journals to discuss.

Week 8: Bring your book and your "I Love Being A Mother!" card; provide 8½" x 11" paper; markers, pens & pencils and a bowl.

Week 9: Have a party! Bring food and decorations for a celebration... be creative and let your party demonstrate your group's distinct personality.

## Chapter One: The Guilt-Ridden Mother

### **Ice-breakers for the first meeting:**

1. Create your own name tags. Buy a box of plastic, pin-on name tags with inserts. Have markers, stickers, stamps, etc. available for everyone to create their own name tags. Be creative and have fun! Let your name tag represent you. Save the name tags for subsequent meetings.
2. If possible, arrange chairs in a circle, so everyone can see everyone else in the group. Introduce yourself, including name, where you live, your work (if you work outside of the home), and how many children you have.
3. Play **Motherhood Bingo**. (See attached game card.) Copy onto cardstock and cut in half to create game cards. Allow 15-20 minutes for everyone to complete their cards and get to know each other.

Directions: Give every participant a bingo game card. The goal is for everyone to talk to everyone else, and in the process fill in their card. Don't just take "yes" or "no" for an answer. Ask for details. Make notes on your card. Prizes can be given for several "wins": 6 in a row, **X**, around the box...have fun and use your imagination. When the group comes back together (after several people have gotten bingo), go around the group and share what you've learned about each other.

Note: Please feel free to adjust the game cards for your group. It's fun to include "answers" that you know specific people can answer.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Referencing the quote on page 1, look back over your life. What are you clinging to from your past that is causing you to be unavailable to your present? How can you reframe your regrets? What did you learn from these experiences?
2. What expectations did you bring into being a mother? What expectations does your family have of mothers? For example, did having a clean house make you a good mother? Did providing financially, or having a higher degree make you a good mother? Talk about examples of your own.
3. Read the paragraph on page 11, starting with "A group of friends..." What do you think has put you on the Bad Mother List? Share your story. Notice the expectations that emerge from your stories.

4. Begin reading on page 17, "What a gift!..." and continue onto page 18, concluding with, "The mothers we were born to be." What guilt have you carried forward? How have things always been done in your family of origin? How are you continuing to do those things today? Do they currently serve you, or bring you joy? What do you notice about doing things the way they've always been done?

**Exercise:** Create a Good Mother List.

Directions: On a piece of notebook paper, list 7 - 10 mothers who you believe to be "good mothers." Beside each name, list 2-3 qualities that put them on your list. (It's OK to see duplicates.)

Refine your list by making a new list of any words that showed up more than once. Return to the original list and see if there are any other qualities that you really love about your good mothers. Add these to your list.

We want to end up with a list of 7 qualities that you feel embodies the best of the good mothers on your list, so finish your list by leaving only your 7 favorite qualities.

Now, notice that you also embody these qualities! (This exercise is an adaption of the Standards of Integrity exercise taught by Dr. Maria Nemeth, and is based on the premise that if we can notice qualities in others, we must embody those qualities.) Share your list and experience with the group.

Before leaving this gathering, transfer your words to the *I Love Being A Mother!* card (see attached template).

**Note:** Bring your card with you to subsequent meetings. You never know when you might need it!

**Closing:** Acknowledge one another for being on this journey together, and for the great discussion you had this evening! Thank your hostess for the evening and confirm next week's meeting.

**Promise:** We all promise to put our card in a prominent location where we can see and read it every day, keeping our focus on our best qualities.

## Chapter Two: The First Promise - We Promise to be Present

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Also share how it was to keep your promise of focusing on your **I Love Being A Mother!** card last week. What did you notice?

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. What are your "idols"? Not sure? Look at your life. Where do you spend most of your time? When you wake up, what's the first thing you think about? Actions speak louder than words. We may say that something is important to us, but may really be being distracted by our "idols."
2. Read page 27, starting with the quote at the top of the page and continuing onto page 28, ending with "... to be present to the real needs of our children." How do you define "neglectful?" Do you feel guilty when you focus on your personal needs? What support would you be willing to accept to take care of yourself, so you can take better care of your children? Are you willing to see self-care as a loving gesture? Discuss with the group.
3. Share a time when you have been fully present to your children. What was your experience?

### **Exercise: Take a Mindfulness Walk**

Weather permitting, take a walk around the neighborhood. (Hint: If you are rotating houses for your meetings, schedule this week in a neighborhood with good walking routes. If weather doesn't permit going outside, walk around inside of the entire house you're meeting in.) Everyone take the same route, silently, observing whatever crosses your path. Upon returning to the home, share your observations. What did you notice? What did you miss? If you noticed that you missed something on the route, where was your attention at that point? Notice how quickly our mind wanders!

### **Alternate Exercise: Play the Telephone Game**

Everyone sit in a circle and choose a Starter. The Starter whispers 1 - 2 sentences into the ear of the person beside them. This person then whispers the same thing to the next person, and so on around the circle. The last person shares what they heard. Observe if/how much the sentences have changed as they traveled around the circle. Notice when we're not fully present how we "fill in the gaps" of what we're hearing.

**Closing:** Acknowledge one another for a rich evening and your hostess' hospitality, and notice how present you are all feeling!

**Promise:** We promise to practice being fully present to what we are engaged in, in the moment, and to notice when we're not.

## Chapter Three: The Second Promise - We Promise to Lighten Up

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Share your experience of practicing being fully present throughout your week. What shifts did you notice?

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. "Come apart for awhile." How do you come apart? What do you do to relax, to unwind? Share your answer with the group. If you see that you don't consciously relax, allow the group to support you with their ideas.
2. Tell your favorite joke or funny story. Don't worry if your technique isn't the best - the object is to laugh with one another!
3. When have you said "no" when you could have said "yes"? What was behind the "no"? Was it about your comfort level or your children's safety? Revisit that situation in your mind. This time, see yourself saying "yes." What outcome can you imagine?

### **Exercise: Entering the Heart Meditation**

Read the paragraph on page 35, starting with "Jesus taught us..." and ending with "... that is your essence."

Meditation: Take a few minutes right now to connect with the Divine that is within you, by whatever name you call it. Close your eyes... Relax wherever you are sitting...breathe deeply, becoming fully present to this place and this moment. Relax... Continue breathing, noticing any tension in your body. On your next breath, breathe consciously into that tension, allowing your muscles to soften and relax.

Continuing to breathe, focus now on your heart space. Breathing into this area around your heart, feel it soften, warm and open. As you continue to breathe into your heart, notice yourself becoming conscious of a wisdom found only in your heart. Continuing to breathe.... focus now on this wisdom.... this still, small voice of love and compassion and guidance.

Breathing slowly and deeply, allow yourself to rest in this wisdom. This is your essence, the Truth of your being. It is always here, ready to support and guide you. Feel how loved you are... feel how loving you are.... feel how wise you are. Continuing to breathe, with gratitude for this time and place... gently become present to the room and slowly open your eyes...

**Closing:** Acknowledge one another for a rich evening and your hostess' hospitality.

**Promise:** We promise to "go apart" in a manner of our choosing for at least 30 minutes during the week and to watch at least one funny TV show or movie, preferably with your family (the family that laughs together stays together :-)

## Chapter Four: The Third Promise - We promise to be kind.

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Share your experience of your "time apart" during the week and tell the group what funny show or movie you watched.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Read page 45, starting with the first paragraph, through page 46, ending with, "it's certainly considerate and generous." Discuss the difference between being kind and being nice. What do you see for yourself when you are being too "nice"?
2. Discuss the Sufi teaching at the top of page 47. How much would we say if we followed this recommendation?
3. Read the story starting on page 50 with "My father related..." and ending on page 51 with, "...his parents' eyes until his death." Does your family have such a story? How do these stories affect our self-image, and impact our parenting? How can we see our family history differently, in a way that would support healthy relationships?

### **Exercise:** Practice **Random Acts of Kindness**.

Make a list of 3 random acts of kindness you will do over the next week. (See below for suggestions.) Come prepared next week to share your experiences with the group. (For some wonderful stories about people giving and receiving Random Acts of Kindness, go to [http:// www.noogenesis.com/ malama/ kindness/index.html](http://www.noogenesis.com/malama/kindness/index.html)).

### Random Acts of Kindness

- ♥ Feed a parking meter that is about to expire.
- ♥ Pay the toll for the car behind you in line.
- ♥ Take a newspaper laying in a yard all the way up to the porch.
- ♥ Pay for a lunch, or a cup of coffee, for someone behind you in a drive-up lane, especially police officers, paramedics or firefighters.
- ♥ Let an elderly person or someone with a young child go before you in line at the grocery store or post office.
- ♥ Send a note to a teacher, minister or mentor, telling them how much you appreciate them.
- ♥ Compliment a complete stranger - tell them how pretty their hair is, how nice that outfit looks on them, or what a nice smile they have.
- ♥ Thank someone for doing a good job.
- ♥ Give your babysitter or daycare provider a small gift for going above and beyond with your child.
- ♥ Call your mother and tell her how much you love her!

**Closing:** Acknowledge one another for a rich evening and your hostess' hospitality. Remember to bring your **I Love Being A Mother!** card next week.

**Promise:** We promise to practice at least 3 Random Acts of Kindness this week.

## Chapter Five: The Fourth Promise - We promise to tell the truth.

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Share what your Random Acts of Kindness were and what your experience was while practicing kindness.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Read the quote in the box at the top of page 59. Think back to the last time you had a disagreement with one of your children. What did you make this event mean? Did you take their behavior personally? Was there another way you could have handled the interaction? What was the truth about what happened, remembering that the truth is what actually happened, not our opinion or perception about what happened? Discuss your observations with the group.
2. Read page 61, starting with, "Actions based on the truth.." and ending at the top of page 63, with, "...to embrace life with enthusiasm." Describe a time that you took REAL action. What was your experience?
3. Read the quote in the box at the bottom of page 67. Are you jumping over yourself as if you weren't there, in the hope of finding a better you? What does the chatter in your head say about you? Now, go back to the *I Love Being A Mother!* card that you created earlier in the study. Look at those qualities. This is what's true about you. Every time you hear your chatter start, remember those qualities!

### **Exercise:**

Becoming defensive or taking things personally can get in the way of telling the truth.

Pass out *Commonly Used Defense Strategies*. Give participants 3 minutes to pick their top 10 strategies. (If they say they don't see any, observe that that's number 22 — confusion, or number 12 – denial.) Then give them 1 minute to narrow the 10 down to 3. And finally, give them 30 seconds to pick their number 1 defensive strategy, their defensive default, or screen-saver. Now invite them to share with their tables, answering the questions at the bottom of the handout. Allow 2-3 minutes per person, for a maximum of 20 minutes. Invite participants to share their experience with the group.

**Closing:** Acknowledge one another for a rich evening and your hostess' hospitality. Bring a small (approx. 4" x 6") notebook for next week.

**Promise:** We promise to tell the truth, and observe when our favorite defensive strategy has been engaged.

## Chapter Six: The Fifth Promise - We promise to be grateful.

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Discuss your experiences in telling the truth last week, and observing when your favorite defensive strategy “kicked in.” And acknowledge one another for being willing to tell the truth about that!

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Read from page 73, starting with “Gratitude helps us recognize....” through “Gratitude helps us to see that our joy is our sorrow unmasked.” Look back over your life. Identify a time when you were filled with sorrow. With a fresh perspective, can you see that time or event as part of your journey? Can you see what you learned and how you grew from that time? Are you willing to become grateful for what had previously brought you sorrow?
2. How do you experience frustration? How do you handle your children’s frustration? If you were to become grateful for the experience, can you see it as a growth opportunity for everyone involved? When your children are frustrated, do you jump in to “fix it” or do you allow them to move through the feeling? Discuss your observations with the group.
3. Share at least one thing you can be grateful for right now in your life. What do you experience as you express gratitude to the group?

### **Exercise:** Create a Gratitude Journal.

Invite each participant to bring a small notebook to this session. Provide markers, construction paper, glitter, feathers, etc. to decorate the notebooks. Take the Gratitude Journal home and every night until the next meeting, before going to bed, write down 3 things you can be grateful for in the journal. Bring the journal with you to the next meeting and share your experience.

**Closing:** Acknowledge one another for a rich evening and your hostess’ hospitality. And in the spirit of the evening, express your gratitude for this amazing group of women!

**Promise:** We promise to write at least 3 things we can be grateful for every night in our Gratitude Journal, and to bring the journal with us to next week’s gathering.

## Chapter Seven: The Sixth Promise - We promise to be loving.

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Share your Gratitude Journals with one another. What did you notice about ending your days with gratitude on your mind?

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Discuss the ancient airline wisdom found on page 80. What does your oxygen mask look like? How do you nurture yourself? What happens to the quality of your relationships and interactions when you don't?
2. Think of something, or someone, that you feel responsible for. How do you feel? Now substitute the word "privilege" for "responsibility." Now how do you feel? Has the energy around the something or someone shifted? Share your experience with the group.
3. Remember, gently, the last time you were in the presence of someone who disapproved of you. What was that like for you? Now, think of the last time you were in the presence of someone who thinks highly of you. Again, what was that like for you? Describe the difference between the two experiences.

### **Exercise: Loving Kindness Practice**

Sit quietly, and allow all the scattered aspects of your mind and energies to settle down. Acknowledge and embrace gently any suffering or struggle you become aware of. Now, remember a person from your life who once loved you very much. Imagine this person sitting in front of you at this very moment, extending his or her love to you once again. It's all right if you can recall only one happy memory with the person--make that memory of love your entire experience, and bathe in its healing warmth.

Feel the other person's love coming toward you like warm rays of sunlight, permeating your entire being, and especially filling and warming your heart. If there is an old barrier around your heart, see it not as a massive or impenetrable wall, but as fragile as a thin layer of ice. Let the love flowing toward you melt the ice of your old hurt or fear, warming and nourishing your heart.

As this healing love comes into you, you feel your heart overflowing with love and gratitude. You feel peaceful, whole, and replenished with love. Naturally, your love and gratitude goes out now to the person who evoked it, wholly and unconditionally.

Expand your love...Once this giving and receiving of love is flowing strongly, expand the direction of your love another degree. Imagine that on either side of this person in front of you are other people in your life whom you love and cherish, and extend the same love to them, fully and joyfully. Then consider that on either side of this central person are also people you don't know very well: co-workers, shopkeepers, neighbors, even strangers you pass on the street.

Extend the same love to them, fully and wholeheartedly. Expanding your love further, consider that on either side of the central person loving you are those who irritate you, those you've been angry with, or who seem to be your enemies. Extend the same love to them, fully and unconditionally, loving and accepting them exactly as they are.

Finally, expand your love to embrace all beings. Consider now that the whole space in front of you is filled with beings throughout the universe, all forms of conscious life, including the tiniest insects, and even those who have died. Now your love is boundless and unbiased, and it shines powerfully onto each and every one, extending happiness to all existence.

Maintaining the inspiration...As you conclude the practice, don't shake off the inspiration, awareness or limitless love it has aroused. Instead, as much as you can, continue practicing the essence of this meditation throughout your day, extending unconditional love toward yourself and everyone you meet.

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*Facing Death and Finding Hope*

**Closing:** Maintaining the sweetness of the energy created by the Loving Kindness Practice, acknowledge one another for a rich evening and your hostess' hospitality. For next week, be sure to bring your **I Love Being A Mother!** card.

**Promise:** We promise to look for ways to express love this week... through "I love you's," hugs, small tokens of appreciation, and putting the oxygen mask on ourselves first!

## Chapter Eight: The Seventh Promise - We promise to forgive.

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Share what it was like to focus on being loving last week.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Read the quote in the middle of page 99. Is there a situation or relationship that has been grieving you that you could choose to see as a blessing?
2. Read the middle paragraph on page 100, starting with, "Could it be..." Bring to mind a situation that you are having a hard time forgiving yourself for. Can you see that you were doing your best at the time? Are you willing to forgive yourself, let go and move on? Now bring to mind someone you have been unwilling to forgive. Can you also see that they were doing their best? Are you willing to forgive them? Discuss with the group.
3. What mistakes from the past have you been focusing on? Notice when we are focused on the past that we become unavailable to the present. Can you let them go?

### **Exercise: I Release and Let Go**

Take out a clean piece of paper. On it, draw a large heart that fills the page. Inside the heart, write down everything you have ever felt that you needed to be forgiven for. Be gentle with yourself, and be thorough. Fill the heart with all your regrets, resentments, grief, hurt, sadness, anger... anything that may be preventing you from being fully present, from lightening up, from being kind, from telling the truth, from being grateful, or from being loving. Put down anything that wakes you up in the middle of the night, or makes you cry, or doubt yourself as a mother, daughter, wife or friend. Fill up the heart.

Now, get out your **I Love Being A Mother!** card. Look at the card. See that this is who you really are, what your heart is really full of...We need forgiveness only when we have forgotten who we have come here to be. Take the piece of paper you've filled and tear it up into very small pieces. Place them in a bowl. Now, take out another piece of paper, draw another heart, and place your card in the middle of the heart. Know that this is who you are, in your mother's heart, and forgive yourself for anything you have ever regretted. Promise yourself to live on your card, and to get back on quickly whenever you fall off.

Dispose of the torn pieces by throwing them away, or, weather permitting, placing them in a fireproof container and burning them.

**Closing:** Acknowledge one another for the courage it takes to forgive ourselves, to release and let go.... and tonight, hugs all around :-)

**Promise:** Having forgiven ourselves, we promise to forgive at least one other person this week, and if needed, to make amends to another and ask for their forgiveness.

## Chapter Nine: The Joyous Mother

**Check-In:** Allow 2 - 3 minutes for each participant to check-in regarding their week. Share your experiences of forgiving, releasing and letting go.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Look back over the past 8 weeks. What do you notice about the quality of your promises? How have you used each of the teachings in your life?
2. Remembering the teaching of the Buddha: *With our thoughts we create our world*. What have you noticed about your thoughts through this book study? Has your focus shifted?
3. Express gratitude to the other participants in the group. You have shared an important journey together over these past months. Now it's time to...

**Celebrate!** Turn this last meeting into a party, a celebration of promises kept, gratitude expressed, loved shared and forgiveness given. Acknowledge one another for work well done!

# Motherhood Bingo

Find someone who....

<b>Has one child</b>	<b>Has at least 2 grand-children</b>	<b>Loves to swim</b>	<b>Knits</b>	<b>Has twins</b>	<b>Has a tattoo</b>
<b>Has green eyes</b>	<b>Plays an instrument</b>	<b>Loves to sing</b>	<b>Has been married more than once</b>	<b>Has blonde hair</b>	<b>Meditates every day</b>
<b>Practices yoga</b>	<b>Has two children</b>	<b>Has red hair</b>	<b>Has been married 20 years</b>	<b>Keeps a journal</b>	<b>Has blue eyes</b>
<b>Loves to ride a bike</b>	<b>Has a birthday this month</b>	<b>Is an only child</b>	<b>Has a dog</b>	<b>Had a baby this year</b>	<b>Has a cat</b>
<b>Practices a martial art</b>	<b>Has three or more children</b>	<b>Has a garden</b>	<b>Loves to cook</b>	<b>Has brown eyes</b>	<b>Is currently pregnant</b>
<b>Crochets</b>	<b>Was born in another country</b>	<b>Has step-children</b>	<b>Loves to paint</b>	<b>Has moved in the last year</b>	<b>Loves to dance</b>

# Motherhood Bingo

Find someone who....

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<b>Has green eyes</b>	<b>Plays an instrument</b>	<b>Loves to sing</b>	<b>Has been married more than once</b>	<b>Has blonde hair</b>	<b>Meditates every day</b>
<b>Practices yoga</b>	<b>Has two children</b>	<b>Has red hair</b>	<b>Has been married 20 years</b>	<b>Keeps a journal</b>	<b>Has blue eyes</b>
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I Love Being A Mother!

I am:

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I Love Being A Mother!

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I Love Being A Mother!

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# Commonly Used Defense Strategies

1. Loss of humor
2. Taking offense
3. High charge or energy in the body.
4. Playing dumb
5. Needing to be right
6. Wanting to have the last word
7. Flooding with information to prove a point.
8. Endless explaining and rationalizing
9. "I'm a victim - poor me!"
10. Teaching or preaching
11. Rigidity - "I'm not willing to change."
12. Denial - "There's no problem."
13. Withdrawal into deadly silence.
14. Cynicism
15. Sarcasm
16. Making fun of others.
17. "It's just the way I am!"
18. Being highly critical
19. Withdrawal from negotiation
20. Blaming others
21. Sudden onset of illness
22. Confusion
23. Sudden fatigue
24. Acting crazy - the temporary insanity defense.
25. Intellectualizing
26. Eccentricity
27. Being too nice
28. Hearing only what I want to hear
29. Counterattack
30. Holding a grudge
31. Trivializing with humor
32. Inappropriate laughter
33. Sour grapes - "I didn't want it in the first place."
34. "I'm already aware of that."
35. Self-deprecation

Take a look at the list and try to identify the defenses you use most often. Then answer the following questions:

- How is this working for you?
- When do you use this strategy most often?
- What is "up" for you when you use it?

Think of a situation where you responded defensively:

- How else could you have responded? What is the truth about this situation?