

WHAT'S HERE NOW

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

16 SESSIONS



BY JEANNE STEVENS

Introduction

Hi, and welcome to the *What's Here Now?* small group discussion guide! When I was writing this book, I pictured people gathering together to practice being present. Whether you're meeting in a living room, over Zoom, in a church, or in a sunny backyard (pick this location, if you can!), my hope is that the sacred question *What's here now?* will help you begin a whole new way of living with God, yourself, and others in the here and now.

It sounds simple—what's so hard about being present? The problem is most of us don't know how to do it. Our bodies are here, but emotionally, spiritually, and relationally we're not really *here*. In not being present, we become disconnected from what is happening in our lives—disconnected from our own bodies, hearts, and minds. We become disconnected relationally, from God, ourselves, and each other. We react through the day and unconsciously rehash *what was* or think through our *what if's*. Eventually, we can forget how to be present with *what is*.

This small group study is structured to discuss one chapter each week, over sixteen weeks (because for some reason, I wrote fifteen chapters! Why did I do that?) My prayer is that you will feel more awake, alive, and soaking in the *now* by the time you wrap up this group, but if sixteen weeks is too long, there's a path for condensing your discussion into ten or twelve weeks on the last page. Regardless of how many weeks you have, the greatest gift you can give yourself is a willingness to be in the now. I'm so grateful for this journey. Let's begin!

May you *be here, be you, and fully belong* to God, yourself, and one another.

Jeanne

STUDY SESSIONS

Week 1: Location, Location, Location

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WEEK ONE: Location, Location, Location (Introduction)

"We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking." – Richard Rohr

1. The cover of *What's Here Now?* says, "How to stop rehashing the past and rehearsing the future—and start receiving the present." When you are alone with your thoughts, where do you find your mind 'hangs out' the most, in the past, present, or future?
2. The book begins with Jeanne's friend describing a mental space free from tension, without anxiety, absent of loneliness and fear, and rooted in love. Spend some time reflecting on when you last felt this way? Was it yesterday? Last week? Last month? Has it been years? If it wasn't recently, what might be keeping you from being at peace in the present? Was the description appealing to you? Did it even seem possible?
3. Jeanne realized what she was missing was the KNOWING she was living in the presence of God. What did you think of the quote from Richard Rohr: "We cannot attain the presence of God because we're already in the presence of God. What's absent is awareness."
4. Answering *What's here now?* requires some healthy noticing, to experience presence. Take one minute (have your group leader set a timer) and consider each question in silence:
 1. What am I sensing in my body?
 2. What am I feeling in my heart?
 3. What am I thinking in my mind?
5. If you feel your mind wandering, notice where it goes and try to draw back to the present. Then discuss how that experience felt. Was it peace-filled? Challenging? Uncomfortable? Which question seems easiest for you to notice? Which question is most difficult?
6. Take the next week to pay attention to what's here now. For example, you might put a reminder on your phone, or create a time to check in with yourself and repeat the exercise from today: Set a timer for one minute, take four deep breaths, and ask yourself each question: What am I sensing in my body, What am I feeling in my heart, What am I thinking in my mind? Report back to the group next week on your progress.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Psalms 139:8, Psalms 46:1, and Exodus 33:14. What do these verses have in common? The truth is that God is ever-present. We just forget God's here with us. Read Psalm 46:1 out loud. God is with us wherever we go. As Jeanne says, "The present is God's zip code." Spend some time meditating, journaling, or praying through these verses over the next week. Say them out loud or write them line by line. God is never *not* present; we are the ones missing from the present.

WEEK TWO: Rehashing the past—Blame (Chapter 1)

"The past is a great place to learn from, but it's a terrible place to live." - Jeanne Stevens

1. As a group, check in with one another by asking each person to share an update about this past week. You could also begin your time by "checking in": What am I sensing in my body? What am I feeling in my heart? What am I thinking in my mind?
2. Last week's homework was to find spaces in your day to check in with your emotions, your thoughts, and your body. How did it go? Share with the group.
3. Today, we dive into some of the emotions that can transport us to the past, beginning with blame. Jeanne defines blame as "Giving away responsibility for my actions to someone or something else." Blame allows us to point a finger rather than facing our responsibility. Think about a specific situation or pattern of blame in your life. (An easy way to recognize it is to look for those transferring emotions: accusation, punishment, humiliation, or criticism.) How can you begin to untangle this loop of blame that spirals you backwards into the past?
4. Jeanne names three common patterns of blame: Directing (controlling the narrative and deflecting accountability elsewhere), Defending (citing facts to shift accountability elsewhere—whoever wins the argument doesn't have to own their words or actions), and Deceiving (spinning tales and half-truths to deceive ourselves out of accountability). Which one is your blame go-to?
5. Blame is often an unconscious pattern. On p. 37, Jeanne suggests we get conscious and pay attention to where we might be blaming (with a lot of love and compassion for ourselves), by asking these questions:
 1. What's really going on in this situation?
 2. Why do I want to ignore responsibility?
 3. Why am I so ramped up and committed to being right about this situation?
 4. Is there another way to look at the content of what's happening here?

6. Remember that blame keeps us from solving our problems if we focus on the perceived problem, instead of the *real* problem. This requires openness and vulnerability. Spend time this week reflecting on any blame loops you've noticed that pull you into the past. (Also, if these situations are traumatic, find a good counselor to help you work through these questions.)
7. The past is a great place to learn from, but a terrible place to live. How might you begin catching yourself when you start rehashing the past? How can you kindly and gently bring yourself back to the present?

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Jeanne closes the chapter with words that anyone blaming others (or themselves) needs to hear: "May almighty God have mercy on you, and having forgiven your sins, lead you to eternal life. May the almighty and merciful Lord grant you indulgence, absolution, and remission of your sins. Amen." How can we extend kindness and mercy to the people we blame? What words of compassion can you speak and pray over that loop of blame to finally leave it in the past?

WEEK THREE: Rehashing the past—Shame (Chapter 2)

"Shame has a simple goal: To get you to believe you are unworthy of love." - Jeanne Stevens

Note: Unlike blame (which is often rooted in anger), shame is tender. Often it comes from a circumstance where we've condemned ourselves and prohibited healing. Discussing shame requires vulnerability and trust. Agree, as a group, to keep today's discussion confidential—and full of hope.

1. Start your group by checking in with one another, asking *What's here now?* What am I sensing in my body? What am I feeling in my heart? What am I thinking in my mind?
2. How is the process going as you try to check in with yourself? Are you beginning to "catch yourself" rehashing the past? What are you noticing?
3. Shame is a deep and often debilitating feeling that causes you to believe you are broken or bad and therefore not worthy of belonging. It traps you in the past so you cannot experience present healing. Knowing this, is there a circumstance, conversation, or life experience from your past that has you feeling trapped?
4. A simple way to remember how shame works is through the acronym, **Self Hatred At My Expense**. If guilt says, "I did something bad," and blame says, "You did something bad," Shame says, "I AM bad." Is there a particular way you rehash a story of being bad in your life?
5. "There will always be someone who doesn't see your worth. One of the quickest ways to remove shame from your life and live in the present is to never let that person be you." (p.53) As you notice slivers of shame in your life, how can you practice self-compassion and empathy? What might that look like for your story?

6. Shame deceives us into believing it will be too much work to detangle our shame. Not. True. The treatment Jeanne prescribes includes four practices:

1. Examine your shame stories – How might you get curious and examine the places where you are deceived into feeling unworthy? Do so with compassion, and love (and a counselor, when needed.)
2. Practice healthy noticing – How do you talk to yourself about yourself? Can you try to observe your life from the outside in, rather than from the inside out?
3. Pay attention to where you hide – Shame pushes us to go it alone. Notice where you detach and disconnect and start to ask why. Ask yourself *What's here now?* when you begin to detach.
4. Share your story – Shame loses its stronghold when we share our shame stories with healthy, loving people. Who can you detangle your shame with? (Side note: It's only week two of this group. You absolutely have the right to unpack your story elsewhere. Just remember, the danger of isolation is greater than the risk of intimacy. Don't betray your present with past pain.)

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Romans 8:1. If shame is preying on your mind, how can you step into the freedom of this verse? How might you not only untangle your shame story but also remind yourself that God himself forgives and does not condemn you? Read Genesis 2:25 and pay attention to the emotional state of Adam and Eve. God knows how toxic shame can be in our lives. He does not want you betraying your present over past pain.

WEEK FOUR: Rehashing the past—Grief (Chapter 3)

"It is in the soil of loss and grief where God does deep and transforming work, but no one ever invites this work."
- Jeanne Stevens

Note: Grief is a process, and its timetable looks different for everyone. Make sure to create space for those in the group who are walking through grief. Not all grief is the same, but it all needs space.

1. It's nearly been one month of asking, *What's here now?* How are you progressing as you recognize what you are sensing in your body, heart, and mind? Are you able to ask *What's here now?* during your day, outside of this group?
2. As we discuss grief, go around the group to gently learn who might be walking through some present or unprocessed grief. You can ask the question, "What is a loss in your life that you have had to grieve?" There are five stages of grief that people move through differently (Denial; Anger; Bargaining; Depression; Acceptance). Which of these stages have you experienced in your grieving processes?
3. "All change is loss. All loss changes us." Most of us know the big spaces of grief associated with losing important people in our lives. However, there are different levels of grief, and all loss is worthy of being grieved. How do you approach the grief associated with change and loss? Is it something you recognize, or is it something you try to avoid?
4. What is the difference between giving into grief (the process of feeling powerless from loss) and going into grief (the process of facing loss so that we can heal)? Can you explain in your own words? Have you experienced both?
5. If you are in a season of loss, examine the chart on p.69 to help assess where you are in your grieving process. Are you at a place where you can see grief growing something in you?
6. Jeanne gives three pieces of advice for when we are helping someone else move through grief: Show up – Speak up – Shut up. Do you have a story of when someone showed up, spoke up, or appropriately shut up for you?

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Psalms 31:9 and Psalms 88:9. The Psalms are full of grieving. Notice the language. David feels grief in his soul, in his body, and in his emotions. We are not meant to "get over" our losses. They teach us in ways that permeate our present lives. If you are grieving today, create space this week to meditate and journal about how your mind, your heart, and your body is processing your grief. Somehow, when we walk through grief and honor the role it is playing in our lives, we can experience even more of God during our pain.

WEEK FIVE: Rehashing the past—Bitterness (Chapter 4)

"The longer you hold a grudge, the longer the grudge has a hold on you." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Check in with one another: *What's here now?*
2. Bitterness is withholding forgiveness. How does this definition resonate with you?
3. One of the easiest indicators of bitterness is when you have a made-up conversation, on repeat. The one where you (perfectly) lay out your case and your offender heeds your wise words and agrees to change, or agrees you were right....you get the idea. Do you have one (or more) of these conversations regularly? Unraveling bitterness begins with identifying these loops that pull us back into our past.
4. Ask someone in your group to read through the circumstances on pp.80-81. Do people and circumstances jump to mind as you hear these symptoms of bitterness?
5. Withholding forgiveness seems like it gives us power, but it chains us to past pain. Spend some time discussing spaces that repeatedly pull you into a bitterness-loop. Sharing your stories with others can help you see new perspectives, and begin the (very difficult) process of letting go. What, exactly, do you need to let go of? Remember, letting go does not mean we forget, or that the circumstances didn't matter. The goal is to release the power that past bitterness can bring into your present moment.
6. Jeanne describes sitting with our feelings as a starting place for forgiveness. Go back to the incident in your own life and ask yourself *What's here now?* When you go back to that event, what do you sense in your body? What do you feel in your heart? What do you think in your mind? Say it out loud or write it all down and then declare what you want to let go of. Then...Let. It. Go. Pursue the work of forgiveness. If you are able, take the process one step further and identify how that hurtful circumstance taught you something.

Note: Obviously all pain is not the same. As you reflect on the spaces where bitterness is dragging you into the past, also examine the nature of your hurt. In some cases, the work of forgiveness can be pursued alone. However, as Jeanne says, "we live in a world where absolutely horrific and painful things happen." If your bitter circumstances are too heavy to detangle on your own, reach out and work with a counselor to help you pursue freedom.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Some of Jesus' last words on the cross were for us. Read Luke 23:34. Take a minute and think about exactly what was happening to Jesus as He uttered those words (or read Matthew 27:27-44). What do you think Jesus was feeling in his body, heart, and mind? How can Jesus' incredible model of forgiveness unlock you from your own?

WEEK SIX: Rehashing the past—Guilt (Chapter 5)

"Guilt harkens us back to what *was* so that we cannot fully experience what *is*." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Start your time today revisiting the exercise from week one. Set a timer and spend one minute in silence to experience presence, asking: What am I sensing in my body? What am I feeling in my heart? What am I thinking in my mind? Then, take a few minutes to discuss how the experience feels now. What is different from the first time you asked *What's here now*?
2. How are you doing with healthy noticing? Are you becoming more aware of those times when you leave the present to rehash the past? What does that look like for you?
3. Jeanne describes guilt as "storing up yesterday's mistakes to carry into tomorrow's reality." Is anyone in your group willing to share a place where guilt is dragging you into the past? Pay attention to how often you say or think the words *would*, *could* or *should*. These are clear indicators that guilt is at work.
4. When it comes to guilt, it all goes back to the gaffe (p.92). Guilt says, "I did something wrong." That's okay. Mistakes are a part of day-to-day life. However, sometimes our minds can deceive us. As you unpack the incident that draws you back to the past, try to examine it from all angles. Is your guilt real, or perceived? Is there an unhealthy *should* or *could* that have you picking up *unnecessary* guilt? Bring that perceived guilt out into the light. Discuss with the group.
5. In circumstances where you have productive guilt, how can you graciously accept that you, like all of us, made a mistake? Sometimes, just naming the mistake out loud can help take away the power your mistake has over you. Guilt is transformed when we learn from our mistakes. How can you let this experience serve as a guide for you and become a gift in your life?
6. Love always beats guilt. Get creative and brainstorm some methods to proactively remind yourself that you've set down your backpack of guilt. You're not meant to carry it anymore. As Jeanne says, "Keep it light."

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read and discuss Psalm 103:12. Does it sound as though God is keeping a record of wrongs? The reality that our guilt can teach us and become a gift in our lives is incredible. This is our last week focusing on ways we rehash the past and we've had many opportunities to notice our strengths, as well as our weaknesses. Spend some time reflecting on how far you've come. Focus on the gift that comes from forgiving yourself, learning, and letting go.

WEEK SEVEN: Rehearsing the Future—Worry (Chapter 6)

"Interruptions are inevitable, but worry IS avoidable." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Today we dive into the first chapter about rehearsing the future: Worry. Go around and have each person share, in one word, something you worry about. Then share what worry feels like...in your body and in your heart. What thoughts come from worry?
2. It's easy to brush off worry as a normal part of life, rather than recognizing how often it dissolves our happiness by rehearsing tomorrow's headaches. What did you think of Jeanne's definition, "Worry is living in a not yet that is worse than your now"?
3. Spend some time reading through the statements on page 103 and see how many you can instinctively finish, to get a sense of some circumstances you're worried about.
4. One of the reasons worry can feel normalized is because it stems from the interruptions and chaos of normal life. When you worry, do you tend to turn the volume up or down? Why?
5. "Worry wants to trick you over and over, into believing its presence is necessary in your life." Do you believe that worry is avoidable?
6. The anecdotes for worry are Slowness, Stillness and Silence. Which of these limits do you need to practice more regularly in your life? How did you react to the idea that setting limits are a form of self-care?
7. Do you pursue a rapid pace, maintain unboundaried relationships, or allow excessive input? Are there ways to actively turn these down in your daily life? Dream for a bit, as a group, about what that might look like. Name some spaces in your life where it's time to build some limits.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Matthew 6:25-34. Jesus desired to draw people out of their not-yet moments and into the now. In this passage, why does Jesus call out birds and flowers? One lives higher and the other lives lower, rising above and below the circumstances of life. Birds and flowers don't hypothesize about worst-case scenarios, or live enslaved to obligations. Taking your hands off the spiritual steering wheel can only happen when we practice the power of the present moment. What work do you need to embark upon to let go of worry?

WEEK EIGHT: Rehearsing the Future—Denial (Chapter 7)

"Denial is the worst kind of lie—it's the lie you tell yourself." - Jeanne Stevens

Note: Today's topic, denial, is one of the most difficult to own. Quiet and self-reflection are a prerequisite. The first few questions are designed for quiet journaling, to help each group member analyze where denial might be at work.

1. Start your group by checking in with one another, asking *What's here now?* What am I sensing in my body? What am I feeling in my heart? What am I thinking in my mind?
2. One of the hardest parts of Denial is that many of us have trouble seeing it in our lives. "What is so tricky about denial is the longer we do it, the more power it gains in our lives." Warning signs for denial include ignoring, avoiding, and dismissing. Spend five minutes quietly journaling about the spaces where you tend to ignore, avoid, and dismiss.
3. Denial is most easily identified when we pay attention to our bodies. Often there is fear...a lack of sleep...head-aches or pain...a lack of self-care. Sometimes, as Jeanne experienced, we can identify denial based on our inability to really talk about what's troubling us. Saying you're "fine," when you are not is a great indicator of denial at work. Again, spend some time mentally walking through your day. Are you able to accurately describe *What's here now* when people ask? Does the way you talk about your life match how your body tells you you're doing?
4. Escaping emotions is a unique piece of denial. Are you good at recognizing what you're feeling, or is this a growth area for you? Share with the group the specific emotions you tend to avoid, neglect, or escape?
5. The best learning starts with UNLEARNING. Jeanne uses the word HERE to help us begin to unravel our denial. Share with the group what part of HERE is easiest and most difficult for you?

H - Hold the evidence (acknowledge what happened)

E - Express your emotions (give them space to be named and felt)

R - Receive your body's messages (implement boundaries for self-care)

E - Editing the limiting belief (start noticing and rewriting the scripts that tangle you)

6. Denial insidiously convinces us to delay our lives out of misinformed self-protection. You don't need to do more or be more. You are in the right place and the right time, RIGHT NOW. How can you join with God and co-author your story with freedom today? How might you focus on bringing patterns of denial out into the light this week?

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Matthew 16:36. More than any other emotion, denial can turn us into human doings, rather than human beings. When we become detached from our emotions, we miss the present. What are you willing to start losing in your life, to gain a new one that's fully engaged in the present and aware of how God is working in it?

WEEK NINE: Rehearsing the Future—Pretending (Chapter 8)

"Hiding all the time is a terrible way to live. It keeps you from the present and from living as your true authentic self."
- Jeanne Stevens

1. Start your group by checking in with one another, asking *What's here now?* Specifically focus on your feelings. Today, answer the question, "What am I feeling in my heart?"
2. Have you ever thought about your Automatic Self? (Who you think you are? / Who you tell yourself you are?) Spend three minutes making a list of the things you like to tell people about yourself. (Have your leader set a timer.) Then, spend three minutes making a list of the things you don't want people to know. Discuss the things you don't want people to know. Do they seem less powerful once you name them out loud? Take note of some of the common themes.
3. Pretending looks for other people—rather than God—to validate us. Think through your story and share some places where you learned that pretending was better than acknowledging the truth. Sometimes, our pretending begins when we are celebrated for it. Is this true for you?
4. The present is God's zip code but pretending keeps us out of it. Instead, we mentally travel to a rehearsal for what we *wish* were true. We can stop pretending by acknowledging where we are and accepting that reality. One of the best ways to stop pretending is to be willing to learn in public—to choose vulnerability. Go around the group and have each person share something hard that you're learning about yourself.
5. As a group, read through the statements on page 142. As you read, highlight what rings true for your automatic self. Then, highlight the statements your authentic self has learned/is learning.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Ephesians 5:13-14. Block off 30 minutes this week (right now; on your phone) to meditate on this verse and journal about places where you can leave the darkness of pretending (not wanting to admit weaknesses and flaws) and come into the light. This week, when you ask *What's here now?*, pay special attention to the places where you are tempted to gloss over things you *wish* were not true and instead, embrace WHAT IS.

WEEK TEN: Rehearsing the Future— Obligation (Chapter 9)

"Should says yes, even when yes is not best." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Obligation can be defined with one word: "should." Start your group today by answering the question: What do you feel in your body when you hear the word *should*?
2. Shoulds are everywhere. Some are innocuous (even necessary), but others yank us from the present, forcing us to rehearse a future full of unspoken rules and expectations. How do we identify the obligated shoulds in our lives? By noticing how they land in our bodies, minds, and hearts. Obligated shoulds lead to resentment and burnout. Take a few minutes and think about the past two days. Do any obligated shoulds come to mind?

3. Ask for a few volunteers to walk through the Predictable Pattern of obligation:

OBLIGATION > RESENTMENT > ENTITLEMENT > ESCAPE

4. Take the real example you identified from your life and answer these questions in your group:
 - Why did I say yes? (What was the unspoken rule I followed)?
 - When and where did you notice resentment building in your body? Was it stress in your shoulders and neck? Tightness in your chest? Share what resentment physically felt like.
 - When did you notice the resentful thoughts beginning? What condemning thoughts did you tell yourself? Did you then shift the blame to someone else...as often happens?
 - Where did entitlement (becoming obsessed with having your needs met) begin?
 - Was there a way you escaped due to your disappointment/frustration?
5. When we start noticing this unhealthy pattern, often the "why" behind it is fear. Fear of rejection...fear of failure...fear of what others will think. Think through some of your recent unhealthy shoulds and name the fears that motivated them.

6. Now, take the same scenario from before and talk through the New Pattern of thinking:

RADICAL GRACE > PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY > HEALTHY BOUNDARIES > SACRIFICIAL LOVE

- Am I choosing to do this out of love, or fear?
- I have a choice in this situation. I do not HAVE TO do this. Is this a healthy yes for me?
- It's perfectly acceptable for me to say NO. Have I given myself that freedom?
- Can I do this, lovingly? Am I trying to earn love, or to give love if I say yes?

7. Jeanne says that we can say No and still love (p.153). Do you believe this? How easy or difficult is it for you to put up boundaries and say No?

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Matthew 5:16. What sort of "yes" do you see in this passage and what is the result?

WEEK ELEVEN: Rehearsing the Future— Waiting & Control (Chapter 10)

"When God invites us to wait, he also invites us to release our will." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Kick off today's group with a *What's here now?* check-in: What am I sensing in my body? What am I feeling in my heart? What am I thinking in my mind?
2. This week we're looking at control, and much like worry, control can look like a good thing. "Aren't I supposed to have autonomy over my own life? Shouldn't I plan for every circumstance? Isn't that the responsible thing?" The nuance with control is when it takes us out of the present moment. Control seeks to create something different about a future we are not yet in. As you continue to pay attention to your present circumstances, where do you find yourself trying to control the future? Is there a theme? (Often it might be more obvious at work, or in parenting, perhaps in caring for a parent.) What do you feel in your body when you try to control? What's your true motivation?
3. Waiting on God and surrendering control go hand in hand. They cannot be separated. In fact, seasons of waiting often make us insecure and uncertain. So, what do we do? Double down on control. Share with the group a season of waiting from your own life. Were you able to surrender or did you grip that steering wheel and "help God out"? What was the outcome?
4. Control can look responsible. It can resemble a wisely formed plan. How do we untangle our motivations to make sure we're not pursuing self-sufficient settling? Do you notice any of the motivations mentioned on p. 158? (Spiritual confirmation is no longer a part of your planning; personal preference and desire are the main motivation; opinion outweighs obedience; you cannot flex when plans fall apart; jealousy and comparison fuel your planning.)
5. Unlearning control requires DEEP WORK, and the process begins with ACTIVE WAITING (watching for how God will use the waiting to transform you) and RENEWAL (raw, real, honest confessions.) Think about something you're waiting for right now. How could active waiting change your perspective, so it's not all about getting what you want? How might an active conversation with God (even if you yell and scream) further change the way you view the waiting?
6. Waiting and control only dissipate when we trust and surrender. And what's wild is that it takes much less energy to surrender than to control! When we are surrendered, and at peace, living in the here and now, our hopes become abundant and wide. The twist in seeking to control everything is that it leaves us feeling less in control. Have you experienced both sides of this coin? Share with the group.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Romans 8:26-28, using The Message Bible, if you can. Do you see that God is not in the thing you're waiting for? He's in the waiting room, doing his good work while you wait. He's there. We just must watch for him.

WEEK TWELVE: Receiving the Present—Emotions (Chapter 11)

"To be healthy and whole requires you to be emotionally aware." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Today we leave the past...and the future...and we start focusing on how to live in this now moment! Rather than a *What's here now?* check-in, instead share which f-word you use when it comes to uncomfortable feelings: Do you typically fight, flight (escape/ignore), freeze, or fix your feelings? Only pick one word and share with the group what that looks like for you.
2. We can't really experience anything if we're not present to it. Emotions don't need answers; they need to be given space. Do you tend to think of emotions as being bad, or good? How would your day change if you did not fight, freeze, fix or flee from your emotions, but simply allowed yourself to *feel* them?
3. Think about your relationship with feelings. Do you believe they are trustworthy? Do you believe they are important? Do you believe facts are safer than feelings, or that the life of faith somehow ignores them? Why do you think a transforming relationship with God, yourself, and others requires emotional awareness?
4. If you picked up the practice of repressing your emotions, have you experienced the progression of unfelt emotions morphing into a mood?
 - Unfelt sadness becomes apathy.
 - Unfelt anger becomes bitterness.
 - Unfelt fear becomes anxiety.
 - Unfelt delight becomes depression.
 - Unfelt excitement becomes gluttony.
 - Unfelt tenderness becomes detachment.
5. Have you ever seen what this looks like in yourself, or others?

6. Here is the good news: We can always start the practice of giving our emotions space and releasing them. The process begins with naming emotions and then...feeling them. You can't heal what you don't feel. Do you find yourself worried that your feelings will be too much, or too messy? Are you worried you cannot trust them and acknowledging them will make things worse? Take 5 minutes to journal how naming and feeling emotions could help you in the following areas (from p.184)

- Naming and feeling _____ can help me ask for what I need at _____
- Naming and feeling _____ can help me ask for what I want at _____
- Naming and feeling _____ can help me talk through my conflict with _____
- Naming and feeling _____ can help my partner understand _____

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Genesis 37-50 (the story of Joseph) and circle all the emotional language. Joseph's life is a roller-coaster (and you thought all those people in the Old Testament were boring!) Notice where and how emotions are released. Only someone emotionally mature could be without bitterness and forgive his brothers. Joseph is emotion-full.

WEEK THIRTEEN: Receiving the Present— Thoughts (Chapter 12)

"If you get control of your thoughts, you will get control of your life." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Go around and share *What's here now?*
2. Have you ever spent time thinking about your own thoughts? Have you believed your thoughts just...happen? What do you think about the picture of us allowing our thoughts to land in our brains, as though we are clearing a plane for landing?
3. Much like emotions, if we pause and pay attention, we can CATCH OUR THOUGHTS, naming them, and recognizing them. Is this something you do in your life? Share where you are in this process.
4. When you clear a thought for landing, you start believing it's true. Read through the familiar thoughts and the invisible toxic beliefs linked to them on pp. 196-197. As you begin to catch your thoughts, stop and ask yourself some follow-up questions:
 - Is this thought true?
 - Should I clear this thought for landing?
 - Is this thought going to help or harm my life?
5. We cannot thoughtfully clear our thoughts to land if we have millions of jumbo jets all landing at the same time. There is some healthy space required in our lives to start noticing our thoughts. As a group, read through the thoughtful subtractions and additions on p.200. Share any additions or subtractions that will help you clear the runway of your mind.
6. When we stay engaged with the now, we can consciously change our thoughts, by asking *What's here now?*—substituting present grace for rehashing shame; trading present love for rehashing blame; choosing present hope over future stress. As you go into this next week, pay attention to the thoughts you allow to land and celebrate becoming the air traffic controller of your own mind.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Philippians 4:8 and discuss or journal all the goodness in these verses. These are the thoughts we can always allow to land. Does this list inform any of the thoughtful additions or subtractions you're pursuing this week?

WEEK FOURTEEN: Receiving the Present— Body (Chapter 13)

"We cannot ignore the bodies we live in and expect an abundant life" - Jeanne Stevens

1. Discussing our relationship with our bodies can feel like the height of vulnerability. Check in with one another about how you felt about this chapter: What's here now in your thoughts? What's here now in your feelings? What's here now in your body?
2. Discuss whether your body is something you pay attention to, or is it something you ignore?
3. Think about how you treat your body. Do you push it to the limit? Do you listen to it? Are you giving it healthy rhythms of rest? What sort of fuel do you give it, and why?
4. Isn't it interesting that our thoughts and emotions can swing us into the past and the future, but our bodies remain here? Do you think of your body as one of the most reliable gifts God has given you?
5. Do you treat your body as a place to practice the presence of God? What did you think of the quote from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "We are not physical beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a physical experience."
6. It's easy to pick up (and believe) lies about our bodies. They steal, kill and destroy us when our bodies crave care, curiosity, and courage. Think back on your own story. What helpful and hurtful beliefs do you hold about your body? How can you be more caring, curious, or courageous with this one body of yours?
7. Of all the aspects of getting present, most readers struggle with an awareness of their bodies. We haven't been trained to pay attention. Go around the group and name three things you're grateful for about your body.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read John 10:10. Many of us are missing out on the full life promised because we have stopped paying attention to what is happening within us. How can your body help you live your life to the full? If this question seems overwhelming, spend some time writing your body a thank you note, giving yourself some space to notice all your body does for you.

WEEK FIFTEEN: Receiving the Present— Gratitude (Chapter 14)

"Receiving the present allows us to live in the here and now and accept it all as a gift." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Begin by sharing how often you're able to ask *What's here now?* in your day-to-day life. Are you catching yourself when you visit the past or future? Any progress on capturing your thoughts? How does it feel to create space to name and feel your emotions? Can you sense the presence of God as you thoughtfully go about your day? Share your progress.
2. Were you surprised to see gratitude as an important element of presence? What's unique about gratitude is it often rises to the surface in both the best and worst of times. Can you share a time in your life when you felt squeezed, and despite the darkness, came away with a deeper understanding of all you were grateful for?
3. "Peaceful circumstances do not create gratitude. Gratitude creates peaceful circumstances." Gratitude changes the frame for how we view all of life. It helps us to grow in PEACE (remembering all you have to be grateful for), PERSPECTIVE (look up, look out, look in), and PERSEVERANCE (to *stay with* what is.) Which of these by-products of gratitude is most appealing to you, and why?
4. Gratitude is a transformative part of choosing presence. How can you add gratitude to your check-ins, not only noting what you feel, think and experience in your body...but also what you're grateful for?

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read Luke 17:11-19. Stop and think about it for a moment. These folks had leprosy...and then they were healed. This healing meant all sorts of new things, like community (previously they were ostracized) and belonging (the life of a leper meant solitude). And yet, only one {former} leper returns to Jesus to say, "thank you." And it was this one—the one who practiced gratitude—who Jesus said was "well." What do you think he meant?

WEEK SIXTEEN: Receiving the Present— Belonging (Chapter 15)

"You are worthy of belonging – You have nothing to prove – You have everything you need today." - Jeanne Stevens

1. Last check-in! *What's here now?*
2. How does living in the knowledge that we are beloved (by God) help us to belong...to God, to ourselves, and to others? How can you remind yourself that you are, in Brennan Manning's words, "One beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is an illusion."
3. Have someone read the statements on p.231 out loud. Where do you tend to go looking for approval, control or security? Are you looking for someone to give you what you're not fully offering yourself?
4. Jeanne tells the story of preaching a Sunday message having only brushed her teeth. Spend some time taking stock of your relationships. Do you have at least a few friendships/relationships where you don't have to perform, but can come as you are? If not, the next few questions can help you find your people.
5. Vulnerability cannot grow in isolation. Isn't that frustrating? We'd all love to perfect our vulnerability alone, with no one watching...but then, it's not vulnerable. The winning combination is vulnerability + connection. This takes courage. Have you ever been the first person to be vulnerable in a group? Have you noticed how one person being vulnerable can change the whole level of connection for the better?
6. Belonging is believing: You don't need someone to fix your feelings, You don't need someone to tell you how to handle what you're going through, and You don't need someone to take away what feels hard. Do you agree that in relationships, we need to be reminded that we are not alone?

As we wrap up this study, may you choose to live in the present moment with God, yourself, and your people. May you be here, be you, and fully belong. Now, go and live in God's zip code: The Now.

FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

Read "A Beloved Benediction" (p.242).

SUGGESTED STRUCTURE FOR A 12-WEEK STUDY

1. Week One: Introduction
2. Week Two: Blame
3. Week Three: Shame
4. (Skip Grief; skip Bitterness)
5. Week Four: Guilt
6. Week Five: Worry
7. (Skip Denial; skip Pretending)
8. Week Six: Obligation
9. Week Seven: Waiting and Control
10. Week Eight: Emotions
11. Week Nine: Thoughts
12. Week Ten: Body
13. Week Eleven: Gratitude
14. Week Twelve: Belonging

SUGGESTED STRUCTURE FOR A 10-WEEK STUDY

1. Week One: Introduction
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9. (Skip Waiting and Control)
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11. Week Eight: Thoughts
12. Week Nine: Body
13. Week Ten: Gratitude and Belonging

ALL THE THANKS...

I have always believed that since we were made FROM Community (The Trinity), we are therefore made FOR the community. Life is just better together, and I am so grateful for the people who helped me create this small group guide.

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Soul City Church—I love that we are still saying after all these years, circles are better than rows. I am so grateful that you were the first community to experience this content and practice being present TOGETHER.

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Jeanne