

Rewriting the Mother Code

Guest: Dr. Gertrude Lyons

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Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Relationship Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr. Gertrude Lyons, Lead Faculty member, Senior Life Coach, and Director of Family Programs for the Wright Foundation for the Realization of Human Potential and a woman Rewriting The Mother Code.

Dr. Lyons' work inspires people to take control of their own personal transformations. She has made it her mission to challenge traditional notions of mothering by facilitating raw, open conversations about mothering, womanhood and parenthood. She spent the last 18 years empowering individuals, couples, parents and families to bring out their best selves through helping them realize meaningful, successful lives with the aim of bringing new perspectives on personal transformation to as many people as possible.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Thank you, Meagen. It's always a little interesting to hear yourself reflected back, but thanks for doing such a beautiful job. I appreciate it. And I'm so grateful to be here.

Meagen Gibson

I understand entirely what that sounds like.

So I know that you, I inferred it there in the intro, but you have this concept, the Mother Code. So I would love it if you could start by explaining what you mean by the Mother Code and what that means for your work.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Yeah, for sure. So we all have codes installed in us about all things life related. And I call the Mother Code, but really, Rewriting The Mother Code is what I want to support, mainly women, people who identify as women, in addressing and acknowledging, and hopefully by doing so, empower themselves.

So what I'm talking about, in the very shortest sense, is stepping back and looking at what has been wired in us from our childhoods and our family upbringing as well as our culture that is currently disempowering us or inhibiting us from living to our potential or maximizing and being our best selves.

So in a nutshell, it's that journey, it's a process and hopefully, and what I've seen, when women embark on that is it's definitely a roller coaster, a pretty wild ride, but one that brings satisfaction, a

possibility that I don't think is talked about. And why I'm hoping by me talking about it, I'm not the only one talking about this, just to say that, but to be another voice in the conversation of empowering.

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And then the nuances so that women in whatever they mother, and then the third element of Rewriting The Mother Code, addressing the wiring, both those wirings, but then understanding and expanding the definition of mother to include all women. Because we all mother, we may choose to mother children, but we also mother our relationships, careers, our dreams. And then the most neglected, but most important person we need to mother is ourselves.

So it's really opening up that space for us to have a transformative journey when we're doing our caregiving and caretaking and giving so much that we realize what's possible and what's given back to us.

Meagen Gibson

And I heard you mentioned earlier that it's a wild ride, but if I hear you speaking about it the correct way, and please correct me if I've misinterpreted, but it's essentially just taking a look at our own family systems, the culture that we were raised in or informed by, and really checking in to make sure that that definition that we may have just fallen into, as to what it means to be a mother and to mother in the world, is in alignment with what is truth to ourselves and how we want to show up in the world. Is that right?

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Yeah, absolutely. I love you underlining that because there's so many aspects to it and that's such an important one, why would I go back and look at all that wiring? It's so that in the moment we can take advantage of the experiences and be not as rocked by them and then have that end up translating into healing for ourselves, developing ourselves, growing up with our children or the things that we're caring about or the people that we're caring about. So, yes, it definitely is exactly what you talked about.

Meagen Gibson

And just to tell a short anecdote that I think relates to what you're talking about, I discovered a few years ago, before COVID started, that every time I would get a call from my children's school, I would be just emotionally distraught. It didn't matter if it was good news, if it was bad news.

And so I had to pause the last time it happened, it was literally, I remember, so I was in the bread aisle at the grocery store, and it was so poignant because it was very apparent that I was having an out of alignment reaction with the reality of the conversation. My default was just to be upset. And the fact that I was in public in the bread aisle also made it like, whoa, there's something else going on here.

So I had to dig in and look at my wiring and look at how reactivity to news was modeled when I was a child etc, etc. We don't have to get into all that, but it helped me unpack, how do I want to show up in those moments? I wrote myself a script so that I could change my reactivity around it, and it's completely changed the way that I receive news about my children and the way that I can be present for it in myself, for the person giving me the news and also to support my child. So I think that's in alignment with what you're talking about.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

It 100% is, Meagen. And I know you said, from my upbringing, yada, yada, but that's the roller coaster of deep work. Sure, identifying how did news happen in our family? I don't know if you would have had as big of a reaction if you were in your home, not around other people. It's almost like, oh my God,

other people are going to hear this or know, or just the possibility of other people knowing that, of course, we're assuming it's a problem, there's a problem with my child.

[00:07:08]

So that's all evocative, there's feelings with all of that. And just what you're naming is addressing that in the moment, oh my gosh, what am I feeling right now? And then, I may not in that moment unpack it all, but I can identify, yeah, this is one of those triggers.

And then I love what you did. That's a way to take care of yourself and mother yourself in that situation, is to realize those are trigger moments. I can work on that and look at what it is so that when something like that happens in the moment, I might be able to even change my demeanor or embrace it differently. But for now, I have a script, and that script gives me security and allows me to stay present with myself so I can be with what's about to come my way.

That's a great example. Thank you. I love it.

Meagen Gibson

And I didn't mean to yada yada over the whole childhood. It was more of just being clear about some stories are not mine to share in this story.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Of course.

Meagen Gibson

It wasn't, let's bypass all that childhood stuff. It was, this is not the time or place for that.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

I think it's so important because, it's not what you were doing, but I think in our culture, we don't necessarily see that as part of the process or we just want an easy way through it. If we're going to have the ultimate benefit from it, for our growth and development, that process, and thanks for clarifying but I want to underline it because I think that isn't what's spoken of enough. And when I say roller coaster ride, that's the roller coaster ride. This is bringing up so much stuff, and I just want to get rid of that anxiety. Can someone just tell me how to handle the situation where we can. But it's not going to be effective if I'm not doing that deeper work.

Meagen Gibson

It's so funny because I think it's both a trope and a point of resistance for people when they want to start doing inner work is, I don't want to talk about my mother, I just want to talk about why I'm dissatisfied at work. And we're like, I hear you... Or I don't know why I can't find a long lasting relationship. I don't want to talk about my parents. I just want to talk about why I can't find someone today. And you're like, I understand that.

And what those of us who have been doing the work for a while understand is that it always weaves back into it. It doesn't mean that it's all about it. It just means that it informs the present day reactions and emotions and decision making if you're not aware of those things.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Just raising the awareness but then we also get so out of touch or out of tune with our emotions that inside we know that it's going to bring up emotions. And that's where it's like, I don't want to talk about my mom, and that's code for, I don't want to feel those feelings anymore.

[00:10:12]

And when we can start having a healthy relationship and embrace those feelings, it's almost like exercise. You do it because you have to for a while, but then it starts feeling good, and then you start seeing the results from that work and reacclimating to this powerful tool or part of ourselves, our physiology that we've turned off, we turn that back on. And that's a cultural belief as well as family, that one of those big inhibitors that get in our way of having real, intimate, profound moments, we can't have them if we don't feel our feelings.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And once we begin to feel them it's also I find that people, they feel them, but they don't know what they mean or they aren't able to attach them to a particular... They just say, I don't feel good or I feel sick. It's like, okay, well, where is that actual feeling and what's it connected to? Are you afraid? Are you in shame? Kind of getting deeper beyond just like, I'm uncomfortable. We all seem to just stop at discomfort and then don't dig into the why of the discomfort, even if we can get that close to it.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

100%. And ride those waves. We stop ourselves.

And then I like making the distinction between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional. And we bring about suffering when we resist, and then we're like, see, this is bad. This is awful. You're not actually feeling the feeling of the pain, or whatever emotion, and it's causing you suffering. But then we think the suffering as the actual feeling, but we're not actually allowing ourselves, opening that door to feel the feeling. So once you do, you can start making that distinction but that comes with some practice.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

With some steps, we have to have a lot of compassion for ourselves on this journey.

Meagen Gibson

And we've talked about some things that are maybe not ideal about childhood, things like that, but I also want to point out that having difficult emotions or discomfort and looking at the family you were raised in and the culture you were raised in doesn't necessarily mean that it's bad or damaging or traumatizing. It could just be as simple as you're a working mother with a family and you had a stay at home mom growing up. And so you've never had that particular challenge modeled to you, and you don't know what to do and you feel conflicted because you want to be the mom you had, but you're not in the same circumstances.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

I love that you brought that up, Meagen, because until we bring all of this to the surface, just like what was so. And we do that at a level without judgment. And some of it is like, I have a lot of feelings about that or I didn't like that. And then, I've had women say, I'm afraid to be a mom because I don't see how I could ever be a mom, as good as my mom was.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons - [00:13:31]

So whether they were awful or warm and loving and providing, we have to make our own choices. So we're going to react and be, I don't know, lost at sea a little bit, but cast about in a way until we say, yeah, I liked this, I didn't like this. I have this paradigm, and I don't even know how to do that. How am I going to get supported in that because this is whole new territory for me? Just like you're saying.

And that's where vision comes into being. That's where once I've laid all that out, now I can start choosing, what do I want? What feels right to me? Where are my values? What do I see as possible? Whether I've seen it modeled for me or not, I think this is possible.

Because what we don't want to do is just react. We don't want to react to some of the negatives and say, well, I'm just going to not do what my family did or what my mom did. I'm just going to ride the wave or we're just totally unconscious to it. We're just doing the same thing over again, good, bad, or indifferent. This just empowers us so much more. And then we see ourselves in the picture in a whole different way.

And then we can also, we're going to get a lot of outside judgments, no matter what choices we make as a woman. Choosing to have children...

Meagen Gibson

Literally doesn't matter what you do.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

There's just a tremendous amount of judgment, criticism, ways it should be done, the right way to do any of this, all of that. So if we're going to navigate those waters, unless we've set, as best we can, a vision for ourselves, how do we want it to be and what's the standard I'm measuring myself against? I'm still going to have feelings about somebody criticizing the way I'm doing things, particularly family or friends, people whose opinion really matters to us.

And how, everything we talked about before that, the staying present with myself and then assessing from a little bit of a distance. I can then have some distance to it instead of defend or like, you know, and have this reactive moment when that comes our way.

Meagen Gibson

It sounds like what you're saying is bringing what's unconscious into what's intentional and having a base for... And also I'm just moved by how once those things become conscious and intentional, you also have an opportunity to easily cocreate with other people in your lives and the people that either you work with or that you're in a family arrangement with, if you will. But if you don't have those conscious intentions in yourself, how are you supposed to cocreate that environment with other people?

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

And then I'm just living in reactivity or responding out of reactivity versus creation. It's just bringing to mind for me a quality that, I can use the term masculine feminine, but I mean it more yin yang.

Meagen Gibson

Polarity not gender.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Such that in that creation mode, that's where the feminine thrives. And we have, in our culture, and this is where we look at things as the culture, are overvaluing the masculine. And so we have a lot

more questioning of ourselves when we're in the feminine, but this creation place. And once we're cocreating, it's kind of unknown. We may have a vision, we may have set stuff out, but we're stepping into new territory.

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And that's one of the benefits of doing this that also seems a little scary, or we're definitely not used to it because the more masculine value is the known what's in our purview, order, logic. And this is a little wilder. The space for creation takes place, has a lot more unknownness to it till we're there, until we step into it. And I think once you've tasted that, it's like, oh, okay, but it can feel a little threatening.

And I think one of the reasons we may, as women, know that intuitively, and it's like our brain wants to keep us safe. So it sometimes puts a lot of what seemed like reasonable barriers to us stepping into places like that.

Meagen Gibson

And one of the words that comes to mind when you talk about creativity is play. And I live in a household with one grown man, two growing men. And recently had it reflected to me that I was not as engaged in play as they would like me to be.

I was like, so let's cocreate something different here, because my duties during the times that you would like me to engage in play are these. So if you want me to be more playful, perhaps we can pitch in with all of these other things. I would never say masculine feminine and things like that, but I was just like, I would love to play more. That sounds awesome. How about you do your own laundry?

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Yes. Or we do it together and make it play.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. We haven't gotten quite there yet. Goals.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

I know, I have to get there myself, but we could do that together.

But I love that. You want more of me, then there's some exchanges that need to be made here, and I'm there in a second. I love that.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, exactly.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

And I love bringing up play because I think it's a value, even an existential principle. And we think it should just be so easily accessible like, yeah, of course, I'd love to play. But if we didn't grow up, again going back to why, if we didn't grow up in a playful environment, or when I played I got reprimanded.

So sometimes I think as moms or women, we think we're just supposed to be able to do those things. We're just supposed to nurture, we're just supposed to be this playful being. And so, when our family gives us to, hey, we'd like you to play more, I might be able to step right into that but if I find myself not immediately accessing that, that's just feedback to me. I have some work to do in that area. And thank you, family, for bringing that up.

Meagen Gibson - [00:20:57]

You think it's something so easy to engage, but a lot of times it's the last thing on the list of what we feel like our obligations are like, oh, and by the way, be playful and play. Incorporate play into your day. It's like, oh, great, another thing to do. Now I've got to be playful. It feels like the thing on the to do list that's burdensome.

But, you just said, incorporating, and that's I think the work that I do now, is trying to incorporate a playful attitude into everything. Easier said than done. We're all work in progress over here in that regard. That's a powerful part of it.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

And seeing play as full engagement. Play isn't always just like, haha fun. Let's play a board game. I feel like I'm playing with you right now. And we talked about this before we were on. We really enjoy this part of our job, and it's playful, but it doesn't mean I haven't had fear or some anxiousness or anxiety and excitement, like a roller coaster. But it's totally play from that regard and getting to engage and play with you and think about an audience that's going to listen to this and hopefully make a difference. That's meaningful play.

And I think sometimes we don't expand enough to see where our work is play or where I am feeling burdened by something and just like, oh, that's grunt work. Well, maybe is there any way I could make this playful? And if not, okay, just understand that it's something I'm going to just muscle through but I'm conscious of that.

Meagen Gibson

And attunement is what I hear you're saying, too. Attuning to the person that you're in conversation with or in relationship with in that moment.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Yeah, because it could be a really hard or meaningful or moving conversation with somebody, we can put it in the play category. And I love that you brought up attunement. Resonance and attunement can really bring that fulfillment or nourishment in our play.

Meagen Gibson

Well, I want to change the subject just a little bit because, you're so intriguing to me because I believe that you started your career in the business and maybe accounting world. Do I have that right?

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Pretty close. Well, my undergraduate degree is in finance and accounting and my job out of college, and what I did for my first 10 years, actually 12 years out of college was, I was an economic analyst in a litigation consulting firm.

Meagen Gibson

Riveting relationship work.

Talk to me about that transition and the story here of how you got in this work.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Yeah, because it's so interesting to look at journeys and how... If you just see on paper, it's like, oh, the resume like here to here. It's like what? What happened? But there were very interesting connections that led to where I am now, which I'll name a couple of them.

[00:24:19]

So I was at a big consulting firm first out of college. Good experience. I met my husband there so I had a huge benefit from that. But then I met someone who was doing his own private practice but still in litigation consulting. And it was risky but I was still in that mindset of like, oh, there's a potential of making more money here.

So that was my main lure to go to him. But also I was honestly intimidated, I really didn't see how I was going to thrive in a big corporate environment and found it pretty restrictive. And I was also scared of it. So I'm not necessarily putting that down.

Meagen Gibson

All those things can be true at one time.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Exactly.

But when I went to him he was doing personal growth work himself. So he's talking about some of that stuff. And then when I got engaged, he was the one to say, hey, the best advice I can give you is to do premarital counseling. I was like, I'm just 23 years old and I was like, what? Back in the day it wasn't coaching. Coaching didn't even exist. It was therapy or counseling. So we did and that changed the whole trajectory of my life. So I started engaging, embarking on my own, first as a couple, then my own growth and development.

But then interestingly enough the economic, personal injury and wrongful death work he was doing had a whole psychological aspect to it. So when somebody was in a personal injury framework, he was the first economist to quantify those damages and say, what is the value of life? So he was doing something out of the box but to do that you had to interview the client. And we had a whole psychological assessment that was done, that we then interpreted for our number crunching framework.

But I was finding more and more like, I really like talking to the clients. I'm learning this personal growth stuff. And I'm finding I'm practicing it on them or bringing them up to date with some of the stuff I'm learning. And yeah, I could do the number crunching, but if I was going to go forward in that, I'd have to get a PhD in economics and the thought of that was really not remotely appealing to me.

And then kids came into the picture. So when I left his organization, I left thinking, well, maybe we could start and when I come back, we'll start an arm where we have a counseling aspect to the people we're working with. But then the organization that I was getting all my coaching from, The Wright Foundation for the Realization of Human Potential, as I was getting my degree, he was like, well, why don't you just do some part time coaching here and start practicing that? So I stayed there.

Dan is still part of my life, that's his name, but I never went back in a work capacity with him. But it was this progressive thing, the path was there and as I was in my own work, the events presented themselves. I knew I was going to go in that direction, it just was a matter of where.

So then I was coaching and facilitating and doing that all for general personal growth and development. But as I had kids and in my relationship, that's when I focused my academic work on maximizing the potential of family and mothering, and my Masters and doctoral degrees. So that's when I narrowed in.

Meagen Gibson

I'm so glad I asked because it brings up such an important point, which is the importance of modeling. So you had this mentor in your chosen career who said relationship work and premarital

counseling is the most important thing that you could possibly do for your future relationship. And so just the importance and the gravity of modeling.

[00:28:34]

And that's why I think the work that people do in personal development and the work that you're doing with the Mother Code is so important because modeling this work for the people in your circle, whether that's at work or your own family, is the way that people... You can self help lecture people until the end of their days and they won't hear a word you say, but if you show the work and reflect how it's working in your life, that's how people take notice.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Thanks for underlining that, because I had goosebumps when you said, you brought up him modeling this for me and naming that this is the most important thing you could do because I'm eternally grateful for him.

He wasn't very nice about it, honestly. I came in all excited like, I just got engaged. And he's like, well, honestly, some unsolicited advice, but the best thing I could tell you is to definitely do premarital counseling. Now, he was in the midst of a divorce, but he was also doing his work. So both of those collided into him delivering that message.

And I heard it. It got me to think and wonder like, well, why would I need that? I just found the man of my dreams, and he was amazing. We're going to conquer all. But then I was like, if I look at his family, his mom's in a second marriage to an alcoholic. My parents, I think I knew were on the brink of divorce and did get divorced and I didn't really have a great model there, and alcoholism in my family. It's like, yeah, maybe there are things I could learn about relationships and how to navigate this, and not just keep one.

And I think that's probably where I was then, I was like, how do I keep this guy? And it was maybe even more primitive. I don't even want to say I had such high level thinking, but enough to get me in, and that's all it takes. And then if you stay with it, the rest opens itself up to you for sure.

Meagen Gibson

And what you're speaking to, really, it goes to what I was going to ask you next, actually, which is about transitions. And so often we think about relationships in transactional terms where we get engaged, we get married, we have kids, and then we die. And I guess these are very transactional moments, but there's so much change in the middle and one relationship can go through so many transitions in a lifetime.

So I'd love it if you could talk a little bit about what you've learned about transitions in relationships and how they grow and how the work really never stops, does it?

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

No, it doesn't. And we fight that. And I can't say I haven't had my moments of fighting it. Aren't I done? Haven't I learned enough? Haven't I done enough? Haven't I dug in enough? And then if you have children, your child, I'll speak for myself, gets engaged. Now I'm going to take on new roles, and our kids have left the house, and here we are back alone.

And I think to understand what I mentioned at the beginning around vision and setting a vision for myself, saying, at that moment I was saying as a mother, but overall as a woman, but also in relationship and in our most important relationship. So as a couple or partnership, we have where we started as a vision and those words may never change, but how we are engaging with them.

[00:32:33]

For example, in our vows, my husband and I had that we're going to be partners, lovers and best friends. And we did the partner really well. Raising kids, creating a home, creating our wedding. We found that we really partnered well in the doing.

Lovers, that was, through the transitions, a big one that we would keep coming back to. But best friends, we just thought was there but when our kids were leaving and stuff, what does it really mean to be best friends? And if we think of it we're at this third third of our life and if we did our job, we created independent beings that go off on their own, and I hope to see them and have them be in some semblance of our life, but we've given them space to be themselves, and it's you and I, and what does it mean to be best friends? So I think when we have created that in the beginning that helps us navigate, we can go to that in these transitions.

And we've had couples coaching and been part of a couple groups for our entire... We've been married 32 years in June, and we've always had that just be a part of our life. And I can't say it was always like, wow, we're using it to its fullest. Sometimes it was just a safety net to keep us in bounds. And then other times, at rocky times or challenging times, it was great to have that support, but it was always coming back to our vision and remembering.

And now we're looking at what's our purpose as a couple? How do we want to create meaning? What's the difference we want to make? You think that's happening when you're having kids or your career, and that's so much the focus, but now we don't have kids and my husband sold his company. Yes, I'm still very involved in my work, but you start looking at it differently. And how are we going to do this together? So hopefully, does that cover, how does that sound?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. It just really acknowledges and validates what I was saying, which is that there are so many transitions, and in all of your relationships and when you've got parents, aging parents, or whether you have children. I'm in that tender stage right now, obviously you're in a tender stage as well, but I'm in that tender stage of moving from very hands on, not controlling mother, but very hands on mother to consultant.

And one of my kids is not ready for that yet and so I'm taking that information. He's like, no, stop pushing me away. And the other one is like, I don't need you. In every individual relationship, those transitions can be tender and fluid. No two relationships are going to be the same in that regard.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

No, not at all.

I love that you named that, because they aren't. And sometimes we want them to be but they're just very distinct beings.

Meagen Gibson

Yes.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

Unique.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Well, Gertrude, it's been wonderful talking to you. How can people find out more about your work and your coaching work?

Dr. Gertrude Lyons - [00:35:58]

Sure. Well, there are several ways. The three I will name is, I have a podcast called *The mot(HER) Rewriting The Mother Code with Dr. Gertrude Lyons* and that's at, I think, most places that you can find podcasts but certainly on Apple and Spotify.

I'm on Instagram [@drgertrudelyons](#) and my website, drgertrudelyons.com

So I think those are the three best ways. And I'd love to find you in any of those spaces and connect.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic.

Thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons

It's been such a gift and pleasure. Thanks Meagen.