

The House That Tenderness Built



by Heather Plett

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Welcome to The House That Tenderness Built!

Imagine living in a house that Tenderness built specially for you. Imagine that Tenderness arranges the furniture just right to suit your taste, makes the rules that help protect you, and teaches you how to treat yourself in that house. Imagine that Tenderness is careful about who she allows in, and you can always trust her to keep you safe in this beautiful home you share.

This little book emerges from exactly such a flight of fancy. After having had times in my life when there didn't seem to be a lot of tenderness available to me (not from outside sources and not from myself), I wanted to know what it would be like to let Tenderness call the shots in all parts of my life, so I started to play with the idea in my journal. It was revolutionary.

A few things, in recent years, have led me to this book.

1. Several years ago, after my divorce was finalized, I decided that my first priority was to create a safe sanctuary where my daughters and I could heal. I spent nearly a year cleaning out anything that cluttered our space and/or triggered us back to old trauma, re-painting the walls, tearing out the old carpeting, and building shelves and rudimentary pieces of furniture (as much as my skills would allow) to help us make the space cozy and conducive to healing and growth. The last thing I did was put a blessing on the wall, inviting in possibility and hope.
2. In my book, [The Art of Holding Space: A Practice of Love, Liberation, and Leadership](#), I invited people to hold space for their own emotions by imagining that they have rooms in their hearts where each emotion can feel safe and welcome – where no emotion is considered wrong or unworthy. When I teach this concept, I also invite people to hold 'circle counsel' with their emotions, giving each a voice.
3. After a challenging year, that included launching a new business, supporting three daughters as they did their best to launch into adulthood, walking with my daughter through complex health challenges and many surgeries, and having some old trauma surface in the middle of a period of burnout and conflict – all while a pandemic was thrusting us all into a global liminal space - I committed myself to a new round of therapy and healing. With my therapist's help, I learned to reclaim and re-parent the parts of myself that I had abandoned, I experimented with healthier boundaries, and I was inspired to start an intentional practice of tenderness.

Together, those three things have been life-changing for me and now I want to share the essence of them with you. I wish everyone could find or create a safe sanctuary where they can heal and grow, learn how to tend their own emotions without shame or judgement, have access to therapy to be able to heal the parts of themselves that they might have abandoned, and know what it's like to have an intentional practice of tenderness – and so I've built you a virtual house.

I can't build each of you a REAL house, get you out of unsafe environments, offer you therapy, or teach you how to hold yourself with tenderness, but I can share my dream of what a House that Tenderness Built would be like, and I can share pieces of my own journey to inspire you. I

can help you imagine life in that house, and hopefully that will help you find your way toward a new way of holding space for yourself.

What I value most about a practice of intentional Tenderness is that it is not a practice of “doing”, it is simply a practice of “being” and “receiving”. Unlike self-care, where you have to initiate the care (which can be really hard to do when you’re burnt out, depressed, or feeling a lot of shame), this is a practice of simply opening yourself up just enough so that Tenderness can find some space to be with you. There is nothing to judge yourself for, as some of us are inclined to do when we’re afraid we’re not doing self-care right, there is only Tenderness.

What’s contained in this little book emerges from my own life and my own evolving practice of Tenderness. What I’ve found most helpful in this practice is to write little snippets of poetry and dialogue, inviting Tenderness into my journal so that she can teach me how to hold space for myself. I’ve found it meaningful to imagine what it would be like if Tenderness invited all of my emotions and the exiled parts of me to have a space in the house she built. I’ve also been intentional about inviting a response from Tenderness whenever I have a particular emotion and/or memory that feels troublesome or hard to hold. Those are the pieces I’m sharing here with you. (When I first started writing, the words emerged as poetry, but then they morphed into dialogue and prose... and back to poetry. I considered giving the pieces more consistency and polish, but then Tenderness told me to leave each piece as it evolved. If journaling helps you, I invite you to write whatever evolves in response to what inspires you here.)

These pieces may not all resonate, because your experience and emotions will be different from mine, but I hope that they will at least open your imagination so that you can experience your own Tenderness practice.

Each piece is also available as an audio recording, in my voice. I recorded them for two reasons – to make them more accessible for differently-abled people, and so that you can use them as guided meditations if you wish. Find a comfortable chair with your favourite blanket and relax into tenderness. I hope my voice helps with that!

After each piece, I’ve offered some suggestions for ways that you can integrate the piece into your life – through journal practice, body practice, art practice, etc. Nothing I’ve offered is meant to become a task list, simply see it as an offering that might help bring your own Tenderness practice to life. Take what has meaning for you and leave the rest.

If there are things that come up when you read through these pages that feel big and important and too much for you to handle on your own, please find someone who can support you. (Tenderness does NOT expect you to do this all alone.) That might be a therapist or coach, or it might be a family member or friend – just make sure it’s someone who knows how to be tender with you and who won’t leave you feeling judged or inadequate.

Note: I have been influenced by a few books as I developed this, including (in no particular order):

- [*Internal Family Systems Therapy*](#), by Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy

- [*Discovering the Inner Mother: A Guide to Healing the Mother Wound and Claiming Your Personal Power*, by Bethany Webster](#)
- [*The Body is Not An Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, by Sonya Renee Taylor](#)
- [*The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions*, by Christopher K. Germer](#)
- [*You Belong: A Call for Connection*, by Sebene Selassie](#)
- [*My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, by Resmaa Menakem](#)
- [*Permission to Feel: The Power of Emotional Intelligence to Achieve Well-Being and Success*, by Marc Brackett](#)
- [*The Book of Delights*, by Ross Gay](#)

A note about pronouns: Because I go by she/her pronouns, I have used she/her pronouns for my own Tenderness and all of my emotions. Feel free to adjust as you read so that you can see yourself more fully.

Tenderness Offers You a Blessing

Dear one, I see you.
I know how hard you work to hold yourself together
In a world that so often wounds you,
Ignores you, silences you, or laughs at you.

I know how deeply you feel.
I know you've learned to mask those feelings
And stuff them down deep
Where nobody can see them.

Perhaps, dear one, you've stuffed them down so far
That you don't know how to feel them anymore.
Perhaps you've stopped trusting them
And they scare you when they come to the surface.

If you keep them stuffed down too long, dear one,
They become like monsters in your basement,
Threatening to crack your foundation and wreak havoc in your life.
They only want to be free.

It's time to invite them back upstairs, friend.
It's time to let them back into your heart.
They are not really monsters – they are your beloveds, the deepest parts of you,
And they don't belong in the basement.

Fluff up the pillows and boil water for the tea.
Allow me, Tenderness, to be your host
As you make room for the emotions
You've sent down into the dark shadows.

I will help you hold the space.
I will make soft places ready
So that even the darkest emotions
Can emerge into the light.

I will guide you as you learn to be in relationship
With all of the parts of you that were abandoned for the sake of your survival.
I will help you find a way to host yourself again,
And to re-integrate whatever was lost
While you were on the journey here.

Reflections:

Write a letter to Tenderness. What do you want to ask for?

Begin to explore which parts of you might have been “abandoned for the sake of your survival”.

How can you ritualize tenderness? Consider creating a spot in your house that represents tenderness (a comfortable chair with a cozy blanket, perhaps), and/or setting aside a time each day when you will entertain Tenderness.



Tenderness & Tea

I am sitting with Tenderness this morning.
Tenderness filled my teacup with green tea
steeped to just the right amount of strength,
and then she added honey for the sweetness.
Tenderness invited me to sit near the window
where the sun shines in.
“You need the vitamin D,” she said. “And the warmth.”

Tenderness gently reminds me what today is -
the anniversary of the day I became an orphan.
(Tenderness knows even adults become orphans
when they lose their mothers.)
She lets me feel all of the feelings I need to feel
and she expects nothing in return.

Tenderness invites me to bring my journal
to my seat by the window, to linger a little longer
before I start my work.
She knows I need extra time this morning,
and she’s spent many years teaching me
to guard spaces on my calendar for times like these.

Tenderness was there with me, two days ago,
when a beloved friend
told me that he’s dying.
She held my hand when I committed to that friend
that I’d be on the hard and holy journey with him,
no matter how much it hurts.

She was also there with me, a few days before that,
when another dear friend told me
about the layers of pain she’s unraveling
as she prepares to free herself of a story that
has long kept her chained to shame that shouldn't be hers to hold.

And she was there on Sunday night
when I couldn’t be in the emergency room
with my faraway daughter,
and had to sit
and wait for news.
Tenderness knows a lot about mother love.

Tenderness reminds me that these stories -
dying moms, dying friends, wounded friends, sick daughters -
need slowness, spaciousness,
and hearts that have enough room to be open.
She knows they need green tea with honey
and a leather-bound journal with a favourite pen.

Tenderness doesn't give two hoots for productivity.
She's not fond of timelines or to-do lists.
She has a habit of pulling me away from computer screens
and sending me into the woods
or under the thick blanket made by my mother's hands
from the wool of my father's sheep.

Reflections:

What would Tenderness gather (i.e. green tea with honey, leather-bound journal) to help you feel loved and supported? What are your favourite tenderness objects or rituals?

What beverage most represents Tenderness for you? *(For me, it is green tea during the day, and mint tea in the evenings when I get cozy with my book.)*



The House that Tenderness Built

“I’ve built a house for you,” Tenderness said, and then she threw the door wide.
“All parts of you are welcome.”

I watched as she gathered my parts into her beautiful space.
The infant, torn first from the womb and then from the arms as her mother lay bleeding nearly to death.
The little girl who learned about hell and was afraid she might be sent there some day.
The teenager who cried alone when nobody seemed to see the world the way she did.
The college student who was ashamed of her body and afraid nobody would ever love her.
The young woman who cowered in her bed while her rapist threatened to kill her.
The new bride who quickly learned to soothe others and put her needs last.
The lonely young mom who didn’t have a roadmap or guide and didn’t know who to confide in.
The young wife whose husband tried to kill himself. And then the older wife whose husband tried again.
The labouring mom who knew her baby would be born dead.
The daughter whose dad died suddenly under a tractor. And then the older daughter who watched her mother’s final shuddering breath.
The writer who struggled to have her voice heard. And then the entrepreneur who risked it all to follow her dream.
The woman who finally stopped struggling to save her marriage and let it go.
The single mom who supported her daughters through mental illness, therapy and healing.
The seasoned woman who finally chose to put her needs and desires at the centre.

Each of those parts of me, and more, filed in the door as Tenderness held it open.
They settled into the comfortable furniture,
Relieved to finally find their way home.

I marveled to see them all there, together, finally.
No longer in exile. No longer alone.
Tenderness is teaching me to love them all again.

Reflections:

Which parts of you would Tenderness invite into the room? Write a list of the people you have been at pivotal points in your life. Invite them into your house.

Are there parts of you that you've abandoned? Parts that bring up shame, fear, trauma, etc.? Parts whose emotions feel too big and overwhelming? Parts that are/were too needy? Parts that aren't acceptable by the dominant culture?

How can Tenderness help you invite the abandoned parts of you back in?

What does the house that Tenderness built for you look like? Draw it, collage it, or paint it.



When Longing Comes

“How do I hold this ache of Longing?” I asked Tenderness.

“Tell me more about it,” Tenderness said.

“There are so many things that feel just out of reach, especially during this pandemic. I long for companionship, for touch, for community, for travel, for work that energizes me. I long to be in circles of people again. I long to experience spaces other than my own home. I long to be hugged and I long to share food and laughter with people who aren’t on the other side of a computer screen.”

“Yes, I hear that, and I feel it with you.”

“Some days I can hold it well and other days Longing overwhelms me.”

“What makes it feel overwhelming?”

“Well, sometimes Longing doesn’t come alone. Sometimes she’s joined by Impatience who tries to tell me I need to fill my longing RIGHT AWAY or it may never be satisfied. And Scarcity tells me that there’s not enough of what I long for in the world and I have to grab what I can or others will grab it first. And Loneliness, Abandonment and Despair tell me that it might be hopeless and I’ll always be disconnected from people and I might as well give up.”

“That’s a lot of complicated feelings,” Tenderness said, “especially if you’re feeling them all at once and Impatience is creating urgency the way she tends to do. Impatience never seems to understand that Longing, on her own, doesn’t ask for immediate resolution.”

“It’s true. When Longing comes alone, it can be a comfortable feeling, like there’s something to look forward to in the future. I don’t mind that feeling.”

“Maybe you could ask your feelings to help you understand a little more about what’s beneath them. I have a feeling that Fear is hiding there somewhere, nudging them forward to convince you that you’re doomed and hopeless.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. How do you suggest I hold that Fear so that she doesn’t try to overwhelm the Longing?”

“Just the same as you hold any emotions – with Empathy and Non-Attachment. Let Fear make an appearance, acknowledge her, ask curious questions about what messages she brings, bring Love and Patience into the room to keep her company, and then let her leave when she’s ready.”

“I guess I need to keep learning and relearning that.”

“None of your emotions are problematic emotions. It’s only problematic when you get attached to them, give them too much power, or try to stifle them.”

“Right. I get that.”

“It’s hard to remember, though, when you’re in the middle of this pandemic that feels impossibly long. Hope is having a harder time than usual making an appearance around here and sometimes that makes the other emotions feel restless.”

“I guess that’s what’s so hard. When there are things to look forward to and life feels normal and purposeful, emotions come and go and I don’t get as stuck in them. In this long and nebulous liminal space, the emotions don’t know what to do with themselves and they poke me more often.”

“It’s times like this when the House that Tenderness Built is more important than ever. We’ll just keep trying to do our best around here and we’ll forgive ourselves when we fumble.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Reflections:

What are you longing for?

What other emotions does Longing bring with her?

What colour and shape is your Longing? Paint or draw it.

A Car Ride with Joy

I didn't expect Joy to come today
In the middle of this week spent mostly with Melancholy,
But there she was, tapping on my car window,
In the Shoppers Drug Mart parking lot.

The sun peeked from behind the cloud and lit her face
As she climbed into the passenger seat of my car.
"You don't have to go back to work just yet," she said.
"Let's go to the beach and play."

Reason tried to convince her there were Important Things
That I needed to do, back at the office,
But she laughed at me and said,
"Well, I have Important Things to do at the beach."

"Your work can wait for another day.
The beach, though? It can't wait," she said.
"The days will get colder soon,
And then you'll be sorry you missed it."

I turned the car toward the beach and she squealed her delight.
But then, because I let her have that one win, she started getting bossy.
"You let Melancholy pick the playlist," she said, with a grimace.
She grabbed my phone to load her own playlist and
I knew there was no point in arguing.

We car-danced our way to the beach.
Once there, Joy insisted that I play in the waves with her,
Even though the water was cold.
We waded in until our rolled-up pants were soaking wet,
And then we talked to seagulls, wrote our names in the sand,
And gathered shells and bits of sea glass.

"These are the Important Things
We needed to do today," Joy said,
Because life is better with sea glass and sandy toes."
(She's a bit obnoxious when she's right.)

At the end of the day,
The sun winked at us
And then settled into the trees at the edge of the beach.
Once her painted pinks and oranges
Had faded from the sky,

We turned back to our car and headed home.

“You were good company today,” Joy said softly,
As she snuggled into my passenger seat,
Closed her eyes,
And drifted off to sleep.

Reflections:

Do you let Joy ride in the passenger side of your car? Does she get to pick the music?
What gets in the way of Joy? Are you ever resistant to Joy?
What can you do today to invite Joy in?



Back From Exile

“I think it’s time to stop gaslighting yourself,” Tenderness said. “Whenever you do that, you send parts of yourself into exile.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, genuinely puzzled.

“You often downplay the pain that you’ve experienced in the past, or you tell yourself not to take things so seriously, or you internalize a challenging situation and assume it must be your own fault.”

“But... I don’t understand what this has to do with sending parts of myself into exile.”

“When you do that, you silence the part of you that is feeling pain or betrayal or disappointment or anger. You tell that part that those feelings aren’t valid and that you’re not willing to hold space for them.”

“I’ve never thought of it like that before.”

“Remember yesterday, when your friend asked you about that hard time when your daughter was in the hospital, and you brushed it off and didn’t admit how afraid you were at the time?”

“Yes. I guess it was making me feel vulnerable to admit how scary that time was.”

“I understand that, but what about the part of you who lived through that time and needs to be witnessed? What about *her* feelings? You’re pretending she was fine, and in the meantime, you’re brushing her aside and gaslighting her for having so many complicated emotions at that time.”

“I guess that’s true. I never thought of it that way before.”

“Imagine if a member of your family told you about their pain or disappointment or fear, and you said those feelings weren’t welcome in your house and they had to either shut them down or leave. That’s what you’re doing to yourself on a regular basis.”

“I’m... I don’t know what to say... I guess I’ve been cruel to myself.”

“Dear one, it’s what you knew how to do. It’s what you’d seen modeled and it’s what you were taught in childhood. You were just trying to survive. I’m not telling you this now so that you’ll criticize yourself for doing it – that will just be more gaslighting. I’m telling you so that you can welcome those parts back.”

“How do I do that?”

“Listen to them. Let them tell you how they felt. Believe them. Bring them back into the circle of your heart. Witness the full range of their emotional experiences if they feel the need to express them.”

“Some of them are pretty deeply hidden by now. It might take awhile.”

“I know. They probably won’t trust you to keep them safe, at first, but you can take the time that’s needed. That’s what this house was built for.”

“Also... sometimes I get scared that if I give them too much attention, those big emotions I was feeling at the time will overwhelm me and I’ll get stuck in them.”

“Remember that you have the tools to hold and witness them without being consumed by them. Remember what you’ve learned from having a mindfulness practice? Notice, label, be curious, let pass. You’re not going to cling to those emotions – you’re going to let them pass. They don’t have control over you.”

“Right. I think I can do that.”

Reflections:

Which parts of you are you most inclined to gaslight? In other words, which emotional experiences do you downplay, stuff down, or shame yourself for?
Is there a ritual that might help invite those parts of you back from exile?
Have a conversation with a former version of yourself in your journal.

Hello Grief

Today I will greet Grief
When she comes.
I will meet her at the door,
I will say “Come in, old friend.
Take off your shoes.
Settle into this comfortable chair.
Make yourself at home
In this messy, humble space.”

I will pour tea for Grief
And I will sit with her
Sipping slowly as we
Stare out the window at the passing clouds.
I will listen to the
Hard stories of loss
Grief wants to tell.
I will breathe deeply into the ache
Grief lays before me.

I won't say much –
Grief doesn't ask for many words.
I will mostly sit in silence
And I will let the tears flow
When Grief nudges the
Tender places in me.

When Grief is finished speaking,
I may invite Grief
To come to the canvas with me
To feel the ooze of paint
Between our fingers.
I may also invite Grief
To walk by the river with me
So that we can watch
The water flow past.

I won't ask Grief to leave,
But when Grief is ready to go,
I will open the door and bid farewell.

Then I will put away the teacup,
Clean the paint off my hands,
And carry on.

Reflections:

What is your relationship with Grief? Do you welcome it or chase it away?

How can you hold Grief with more Tenderness?

What colour is your Grief? Paint it.



The Loops in my Head

“I noticed you’re spending a lot of time with Shame today,” Tenderness said.

“Yes, it seems I can’t shake her today,” I said. “I asked her to leave, but she wouldn’t go. I tried silencing her, or burying her under work or food. Nothing seemed to work.”

“Did you ask her what she came for?”

“No. She’s not very good at expressing her intentions. She just runs endless loops in my head and I try to stay busy enough to shut her out.”

“What’s the loop about? Maybe there’s a clue in there about why she came.”

“I hurt someone yesterday – someone I care about – and now that person won’t talk to me. Shame keeps reminding me of it, running through the scenario over and over again, as though somehow that will fix it.”

“Tell me more about what happened,” Tenderness said.

“I made a mistake. I said something that was rooted in a bias I didn’t know I had, and that bias was hurtful to my friend.”

“Did you apologize? And did you try to make repairs?”

“Of course! But the person’s still not ready to talk to me.”

“And that makes you feel rejected? And ashamed?”

“Yes. Shame keeps telling me I’m a bad friend and I deserve to be rejected and I’m always failing people and I’m unworthy of love.”

“Is that true?”

“No, I don’t think so. But Shame can be very convincing.”

“Yes, I know. She has a way of showing you only the bad things you’ve done. And she keeps a scorecard and adds it all up whenever something new brings her to the surface.”

“I’m trying to remind myself that I apologized and I’m trying to make repairs and I’m trying to learn how to be a better ally and friend, but Shame just reminds me that unless my friend forgives me, I’m still a horrible person.”

“Is there anything else you feel you should have done for your friend after hurting them?”

“No, I can’t think of anything.”

“And yet Shame is convinced that the only way you can return to worthiness is through that person’s acknowledgement of your goodness?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“Do you see how that insistence that your friend forgive you and give you your goodness back is putting unfair pressure on them, when they should be allowed to hold their hurt however they need to hold it? Do you see how you might be hijacking their space and their process by making it about your own needs?”

“Well, ummm..... maybe?”

“Your friend is on their own journey and needs to make their own choices about how they hold this pain,” Tenderness said, with both firmness and gentleness in her voice. “If you’ve done reasonable repair, then you need to release attachment to the outcome. You need to set them free and you need to set yourself free.”

“But... I hate being responsible for their pain. And I don’t want them to reject me.”

“I know.”

“It will make me feel really sad if they don’t forgive me and our relationship doesn’t recover.”

“I know. Maybe Grief is also making an appearance here, hiding behind Shame? Maybe you’re grieving the fact that you might lose a friend?”

“Yes. Grief, and maybe Loneliness. And Fear. I’m afraid that if I’m the kind of horrible person who makes this kind of mistake, then I will be abandoned.”

“I know. Shame never comes alone. She always brings a few companions.”

“What should I do?”

“Perhaps start by sending your friend some love. And then extend that love to yourself – especially to the part of you that has been rejected in the past. And then maybe shed a few tears so that Grief feels safe. You are not a horrible person. Don’t attach yourself to those emotions trying to convince you of your badness. You are human, you made a mistake and you will try again tomorrow. Your goodness is still intact.”

“Thank you. I will try to believe that.”

“What’s Shame doing now?”

“She seems to be settling some, like maybe she’s gotten what she came for.”

“Good. She doesn’t mean you harm. She is just trying to protect you and make sure you find belonging in the world. Let her know that you’re safe and loved and that you won’t abandon the part of you she’s trying to protect.”

“I’ll try.”

Reflections:

What brings Shame to the surface for you?

How do you respond to Shame when she puts your mistakes on endless loop in your brain?

What other emotions does Shame bring with her?

How can your body help you release Shame?



What Tenderness Needs

“There’s something I need to speak with you about,” Tenderness said, interrupting my train of thought.

“Yes? What is it?” I was distracted and she knew it.

“I need to know you’re giving me your full attention first,” she said. “Why don’t we wait until you can be more fully present?”

“Okay,” I said, with some irritation in my voice, and then I turned away from her. There were more important things to do with my time.

Later that day, when I was finished my work, she asked again. “Can I have a bit of your time?” I was tired, so I pretended not to hear her as I flicked on the TV.

It took four days before I finally made time for her. She waited patiently, but there was sadness in her face as I ignored her again and again.

“I’m ready now,” I said finally, at the end of the fourth day, as I settled into my favourite chair by the window. “What was it you wanted to talk about?”

Before she spoke, she lit a candle on the small table between us.

“Well... I want to be in your life,” she said, once she’d settled in her chair and pulled a blanket over her lap. “I believe your life is better with me around, so I built you this house and invited you to live here. But I don’t always feel safe when I’m with you. I’m afraid you won’t protect me or stand up for me. Sometimes when you see people make fun of me or bully me, you pretend I don’t exist.”

I could feel my jaw tighten with Resistance and Self-justification, but I knew that she was right. Many years of valuing toughness over softness have taught me to brush aside Tenderness when it gets in the way. It doesn’t always feel like a natural fit to live in this house with Tenderness.

“It’s been hard to make a place for you in my life,” I said, my voice softening. “I’ve gotten hurt so many times, and I’ve had to learn to be a warrior on my children’s behalf, and... well, it just feels easier to pretend I don’t have any tenderness left – that I am tough and thick-skinned.”

“I know,” she said, “and that makes me sad. I could help you heal that hurt, but you first have to let me in.”

“It feels risky to let you in. I’m always afraid I’ll get hurt when you are too exposed, so I pretend you’re not there and I ignore you when people make fun of you. It’s a survival strategy, I suppose. I hardly know I’m doing it anymore.”

“Do you think we can be friends now?” Tenderness asked. “Can you let down your guard and let me in, now that you’re healing some of the scars that brought that toughness into your life?”

“Yes, I think we can,” I said, as tears puddled in my eyes.

“There’s something I need from you, though, in order for me to feel safe with you,” she paused, staring at the candle. “I need to know that you’ll protect me. I need to hear you say that you’ll put up boundaries that won’t let anyone hurt me or make fun of me. I need to know that you value me enough for that.”

I was quiet for awhile, pondering what was being asked of me. “I will try,” I said. “I’ll do the best I can.”

“Perhaps you don’t see that when you abandon me, you abandon yourself,” Tenderness said, kindly but firmly. “I am part of you and you’re cutting me off in order to survive. But I don’t think you want to abandon yourself anymore.”

“No,” I said, in barely more than a whisper. “I’ve done enough of that. I need to reclaim myself and I need to reclaim you.”

“It will be good to be your friend again,” Tenderness said, touching my hand.

“Will you be my teacher?” I asked. “Will you help me learn to love myself more deeply?”

“Yes,” said Tenderness, “but you’ll need to be willing to practice being with me, every day. You’ll need to make me a priority, or you’ll slip back into old patterns.”

“I will do my best,” I said. “These old patterns are hard to break, but I will try.”

Reflections:

Are you “tough and thick-skinned”? Why?

Do you feel free to reveal your tenderness to others? Is there any shame attached to this part of you?

How well do you erect and hold boundaries around your tenderness?

Tenderness told me to

I need a haircut.
I need to lose weight.
I keep forgetting to re-book that appointment that I missed.
I should keep the house cleaner.
The stuff I just wrote really sucks.
I don't know why I bother trying.
I'm wasting a lot of time today.
I should be doing something more productive.
Why haven't I put away my laundry yet?
I should reach out to my friends more so they don't think I'm a shitty friend.
I shouldn't spend so much time on social media.

Shame can find a hundred reasons to run me down today,
Self-loathing can find a thousand reasons why I'm probably not worthy of love,
And Envy can find a million reasons why everyone else is more accomplished than I am.

But Tenderness tells me that I've been doing some really hard work this week.
I've been unearthing some big Grief and stirring up old Trauma.
And I've been trying to make meaning out of Pain so that I can hold it as gift.

Tenderness cups my face in her hands and says,
"This self-criticism shit you've been doing all day?
It's a trauma response. You're trying to protect yourself,
In the only way your wounded self knows how to.
Cut yourself some slack now
And don't go further into the loop by criticizing yourself for the criticizing
Or you'll get stuck in a vicious cycle that will be hard to get out of."

I'm getting off the computer now and going for a walk.
Tenderness told me to.

Reflections:

What things does Shame often beat you up for?

What are the messages Envy brings you?

How does Tenderness respond when you're in a self-criticism loop?

Is there a special object (a plushy toy, perhaps) that can help remind you of the presence of Tenderness? (*I have an extra-soft pillow I like to cuddle with.*)



Entertaining Fear

Tenderness looked around the room and saw Fear hovering in the corner.

“Why is Fear over there in the corner?”

“I sent her there,” I said. “I don’t like having her around.”

“Did she do anything to harm you?”

“No, she was just getting in the way.”

“Getting in the way of what?”

“I have a lot to do today. I don’t have time to entertain Fear.

“I wonder... do you have some old stories about Fear?” Tenderness asked. “Is it possible that those old stories don’t allow you to show kindness to Fear when she shows up?”

“Ugh. Are you going to bring up old stories AGAIN?! I just want to get stuff done today! I don’t have time for this.”

“Maybe if you gave Fear a little attention, she could help you get stuff done instead of getting in the way.”

“But... Fear is useless. She’s annoying and a waste of time and she blocks me from having clear thoughts and... she always makes me feel weak.”

“It sounds like you’re inviting Shame into the room whenever Fear shows up.”

“It’s true. I don’t want to be afraid. I don’t want to feel weak.”

“Who told you that Fear is something to be ashamed of?”

“Well... I’m not sure. I guess it’s an old family or cultural story. I’ve just never felt very comfortable showing fear because I thought I would be laughed at.”

“So you’ve tried to be fearless to convince people you’re strong?”

“I guess. I haven’t really thought about the reasons why.”

“I know you might get tired of this question, but I’ll ask it again... Is it possible you’ve been abandoning parts of yourself?”

“Yes, perhaps. People have always told me how brave I am, and that’s where I’ve gotten some of my self-worth, so to reveal Fear makes me feel like I’m worth less.”

“And in those moments, you’ve sent a part of yourself into exile.”

“I suppose I have.”

“Maybe you could invite Fear to sit with you for awhile and invite her to tell you why she’s come. Listening to her doesn’t mean attaching yourself to her – just allowing her to be present for awhile.”

“Maybe. But that takes TIME! You always want me to do all of these things that get in the way of my productivity! Why can’t you help me get stuff done sometimes instead?”

“I guess I just don’t value productivity the way you’ve been taught to value it in this capitalist system you live in. I am more ancient than capitalism and I exist outside of it, so I don’t have the same baggage. I value your wholeness more than the things you get done.”

“Are you saying I’m measuring my worth based on a capitalist yardstick and that gets in the way of how I hold space for myself and my emotions?”

“Yeah, that sounds like what I’m saying.”

“And maybe capitalism has taught me to ignore my own Fear in service to Productivity?”

“I think you’re onto something.” Tenderness had that smile on her face that always means she’s proud of me for a new awareness.

“That feels important,” I said. “I wonder what other emotions capitalism has taught me to stifle.”

“That seems like a thought worth exploring further. How have your emotions been suppressed by the systems that have shaped you? And what might those emotions have been like in a time before those systems existed?”

“Right... now that I think of it... I could probably add patriarchy and white supremacy to the list.”

“Yup,” Tenderness nodded. “None of those systems are friendly to your emotions. They function better when emotions are stifled. It’s why people have a hard time embracing me when those systems have the power. To truly learn to live in the House That Tenderness Built, you need to begin to divest yourself of those systems.”

“Whew. This is bigger work than I thought! It takes some divestment and dismantling in order to really be in touch with how I feel. Wow. That’s a new thought.”

“A new thought that brings new possibility.”

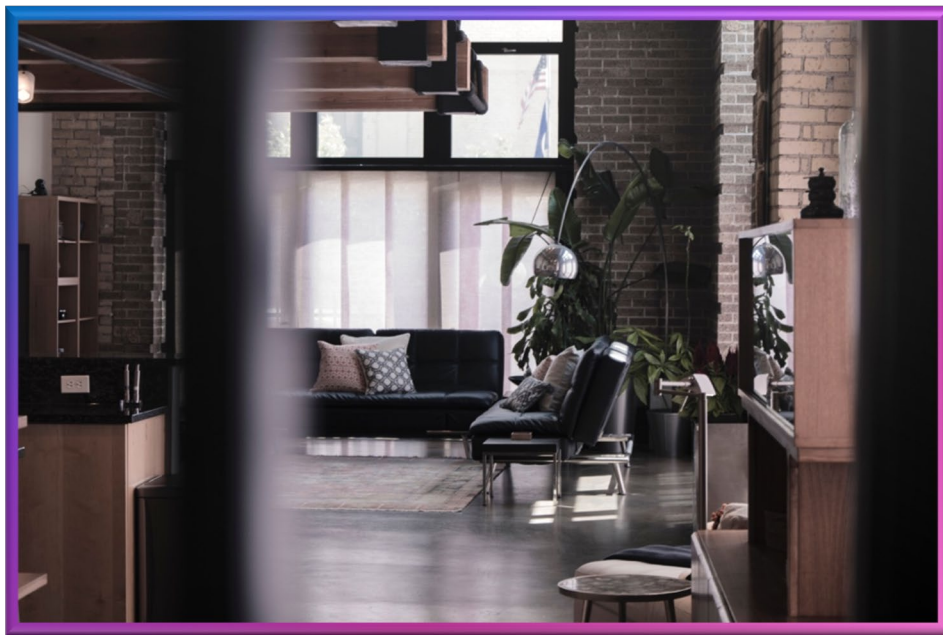
Reflections:

How do you respond to Fear when it shows up?

How do you feel when Fear gets in the way of your productivity?

What are the messages you carry about productivity?

What systems are you beginning to examine because they stifle your emotions?



Badass Boundaries

“Yesterday, when your friend ignored your boundary,” Tenderness said, “you said nothing. Why was that?”

“I didn’t want to hurt their feelings.”

“So... their feelings are more important than yours?”

“Ummm... well... now that you mention it...?”

“How did you feel when you walked away from that conversation?”

“Hurt. Sad. Angry. Betrayed. Frustrated. Disappointed.”

“Seems like those feelings are worth paying attention to. What if you stand up for yourself next time?”

“I don’t know if I can. I get all tongue-tied and anxious.”

“I get it,” Tenderness said gently. “That’s your nervous system taking control of the situation. It’s afraid that you’re at risk, so it goes into fight, flight, freeze or fawn mode. Your body holds some old stories about what happens when you stand up for yourself. And some of those old stories are reinforced by the systems you live in.”

“So... how do I retrain my nervous system so that I have the courage to hold my boundaries?”

“With a whole lot of practice. Start with tenderness.”

“That’s where YOU come in!”

“Yes, that’s what I’m here to teach you – that you can find courage when you start with tenderness. First, forgive yourself for those times when you responded differently than you wish you had.”

“That’s hard. I always end up beating myself up for being weak.”

“I know,” Tenderness said softly. “But you’re not weak – you simply have a highly active nervous system, well-trained by times in your life when you weren’t safe. It’s trying to protect you. It will take some time and lots of self-compassion to retrain your nervous system so that it’s not so quickly activated. And it may also require that you step away from the systems and/or people that benefit from its activation.”

“Where do I start?”

“Start with a pause. Next time you notice your nervous system being activated, bring your awareness to that activation, and then find a way to pause before you respond to whatever stimulated it. Do a few things that let your body know you are safe, like slowing down your breath, drinking a glass of water, going for a walk, or reaching out to someone who helps you feel calmer.”

“And then what? How do I communicate my boundary?”

“Take a deep breath,” Tenderness said, demonstrating it for me. “Soothe the parts of your body that are activated. Bring Kindness into the room to look after Anxiety, Trauma and Doubt. Ask Courage and Resilience to stand beside you. You have all of these internal resources available to you and they want to help you. Let them.”

“I guess I have to work on not letting Anxiety and Trauma take control in those moments.”

“Right. Once you’ve paused to soothe those urgent emotions, you’re better able to see who’s at the reins and then you can make a different choice. Once you’re ready to communicate, Courage and Love will help you to be clear and direct without over-explaining yourself.”

“Maybe I could carry something in my pocket, or wear something on my wrist, especially when I know I’m going to have a conversation that scares me? I could reach for that thing to help remind me which of the emotions I want to call in to help direct that moment.”

“Great idea! A touchstone that might help Anxiety settle and invite Courage and Love to take over. What if you wore a bracelet that says something like ‘courage, resilience, and love’ on it?”

“Yes! I think I’ll do that!”

“One other thing... remember that you are not responsible for the reaction of the person with whom you’re setting a boundary. They have their own emotional house to look after and can call on their own Tenderness if they need it to process what you’re asking for. You can’t do that for them.”

“I’ll try to remember that. Thanks. Also... For someone named Tenderness, you’re pretty badass about not putting up with hurtful behaviour!”

“Tenderness doesn’t make me soft! And also... I’m YOUR tenderness, so you’re my first and only priority. I’m here to help protect you from harm and to teach you how to treat yourself.”

Reflections:

What happens when someone ignores your boundary? Do you stand up for yourself, or let them get away with it?

What touchstone could you wear or carry to remind yourself which emotions you'd like to have in control during difficult conversations?



Anger, Why Have You Come?

Anger visited me yesterday.
She stormed around my house
Intent on breaking things or hurting someone.
She threatened to be mean to my friends and insult my children,
Determined that something needed to be destroyed.

I asked her what she'd come for,
But she wasn't ready for conversation right away.
She needed to rage and flail and storm
Before she could settle in.
(Perhaps she was afraid that slowing down
would make her disappear.)

Anxiety whispered in my ear, "Banish her!
She's dangerous and doesn't keep us safe!"
Anxiety always does her best to protect the little girl in me
Who believes Anger brings nothing but harm.

I was tempted to give in to Anxiety.
I wanted to lock Anger in the basement
Like I've done so many times before.
But then Tenderness tapped me on the shoulder and said,
"Even Anger deserves a place here."

"Let's ask her what she's come for," Tenderness said.
"Perhaps if she's heard she won't be tempted to do harm."
"But," Anxiety shrieked, "we can't trust her! She doesn't belong with us!
She'll get us into trouble!"
"Everyone belongs," Tenderness said,
Extending a gentle hand toward Anxiety.

With her other hand, Tenderness reached toward Anger.
"Tell us why you've come," she said.
"We won't send you away,
As long as you promise Anxiety
That you won't harm the little girl she's protecting."

Anger, surprised at the kindness being offered to her,
Put down the plate she was about to throw at the wall.
She turned to look at the hand extended to her.
"Nobody ever listens to me around here," she said,
With a little less rage in her voice.
"I have important things to say too."

“I know you do,” Tenderness said.
“And we are doing our best to make this home safe for you too.”
Anxiety whimpered next to her but didn’t say anything.
“If you trust us,” Tenderness continued
We might be able to help you.”

“I’m angry about the way people have hurt us,” Anger began.
“I’m angry about the way we’ve been pushed into the corner.
“I’m angry that we’ve done so little to stand up for ourselves.
“I’m angry that Anxiety and Reason get to call the shots so much more often than I do.
“I’m angry that we’ve stood by as other people got hurt too,
Because we always try so hard to be Nice.”

By this point, Anxiety was spinning around the room, out of control,
But Tenderness touched her shoulder, whispered in her ear.
She calmed a little and tried to listen.

“Thank you for telling us this,” Tenderness said to Anger.
“You’re right, we’ve overlooked you in the past
Because you scare some of the residents of this house.
Perhaps we can find you some allies, though?
Determination, would you come stand next to Anger?
And Resilience, Courage and Love – can you come too?
Gather round and let’s see if we can find a way
To address the things that Anger is bringing to our attention.”

Determination, Resilience, Courage and Love
Gathered in a circle with Anger,
Held at the rim by Tenderness.
They bent their heads together to listen to the messages
That Anger brought into the room.
Each offered their perspective,
And then they began to formulate a response
To the injustice that Anger had helped them see.

Reflections:

How do you respond to Anger when she enters the room?

What does Anger reveal?

Try having a conversation with Anger in your journal.

When Anger comes, what other emotions could you gather to respond to what's been revealed?



House Meeting

Tenderness gathered all of the emotions into the living room. “Now that you’ve all settled into your new rooms and gotten used to the house,” she said, “it’s time for our first house meeting.”

“House meeting?” Skepticism scoffed. “What - you’re going to make us all gather on mats on the floor like a bunch of kindergartners?! What’s the point of *that*? I can only see this going badly.”

“This sounds like FUN!” Joy bubbled “I like together time!”

“I’d rather stay in my room,” Loneliness whimpered. “Nobody likes me anyway.”

“I’m not interested in hearing from all those cheery emotions with their can-do attitudes,” Stubbornness balked.

“But we *have* to hear from everyone,” Compassion insisted, trying to coax Reluctance into the room. “If we want to live together in this house, we have to figure out how to get along.”

“But I CAN’T sit still and listen if Anger or Frustration or Misery are in the circle with me!” Anxiety wailed. “It makes my body feel all jittery and I want to run from the room!”

“What if I sit next to you,” Peace said, leaning toward Anxiety. “You can reach for my hand any time you feel like running.”

“There’s no point,” Disgust said from the corner where she huddled with Frustration and Loathing. “Some of us get silenced every time we try to talk.” Anger grumbled in agreement.

“Maybe it’s because you use your outside voices too much?” Gentleness said, eager to calm the voices in the corner.

“Yeah, I get overwhelmed when the yelling starts,” Confusion mumbled.

“I know this might be challenging,” Tenderness said firmly but kindly, “but in this house, we do things a little differently than you might be accustomed to. In this house, where I am in charge, we listen to all of the voices and nobody gets pushed into the corner.”

“But... how will you manage so many of us all at once?” Doubt asked, standing next to Skepticism.

“We’re going to use circle counsel,” Tenderness said, raising her hand to convey that she needed everyone to be silent and listen. “Come sit in this circle where we can all face each other and listen to each other. We’ll pass a talking piece around and everyone gets a chance to speak. Nobody interrupts or tries to fix anything for anyone else. And we all take responsibility for what we bring to the circle.”

“I’m still not sure...” Doubt and Resistance said, nearly simultaneously.

“That would be the first time nobody in this house interrupts me or tries to fix me,” Despair said, still in the corner. “Me too,” Anger nodded.

“Look... I don’t often get bossy,” Tenderness said. “But this time I’m going to insist that you all trust me and at least find a chair in the circle. Nobody has to speak if they don’t want to, but I need you to make this one small step to show your commitment to our shared experience in this space.”

The group in the corner continued to grumble, but they made their way to the circle anyway.

“It might take awhile for us all to learn to trust each other,” Tenderness said, once everyone had settled into the circle, many still looking uneasy. “This isn’t utopia. But at the very least, we can decide, together, that in this house, everyone is worthy of respect. Do I have agreement on that?” Several heads nodded around the circle.

“Okay, here’s where we’ll begin... We’ll pass this talking piece from hand to hand and if you want to speak about anything that’s important to you right now, you can. If you’d rather not speak, you can remain silent. We’ll start by simply listening to you without interrupting. Everyone is responsible for what they contribute to the circle, and nobody gets to project their stuff onto others. Understood?”

Not everyone nodded, but at least they were there, in the circle.

Reflections:

Imagine you gathered your emotions into a circle. Which emotions would grumble the most? What might be gained if you learned to listen to all of your emotions? Create a visual representation of your emotions gathered in circle.

Monsters Under the Bed

“I want to tell the truth,” I said. “I want to be more free to share my stories and speak up for what I believe in.”

“I know,” Tenderness said, sitting next to me at the kitchen table. “I want that for you.”

“I don’t know why it’s always been so hard. I like to think I’m a courageous person, but there are so many times I just clam up when I feel like I should speak.”

“What risk do you think Anxiety is trying to protect you from?”

“Maybe she thinks that I’ll get hurt if I speak the truth? Maybe she thinks I’ll be abandoned?”

“That sounds true. Your body probably has a memory of the consequences of saying something that makes others uncomfortable or that contradicts what they believe. What happens in your body when you try to speak?”

“My throat starts to close, my heart starts beating quickly, there’s a buzzing in my ears, and my legs get restless - like I want to run from the room.”

“Your nervous system has done well all of these years, trying to protect you from what it perceives will be harmful.” Tenderness reached for my hand as she spoke.

“I guess that’s true, but I’ve always been annoyed with myself when that happens. Why can’t I do better?”

“Consider this... there’s a scared little girl inside you who’s directing your nervous system, telling it how terrified she is that she’ll be punished for telling the truth. You don’t want to be cruel to that little girl, do you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Maybe the little girl first needs to know that she is safe, that you won’t abandon her anymore. Maybe she’s never had anyone stick up for her before. Maybe the only way she knows how to get your attention is through those sensations you feel in your body.”

“But... what can I do to let her know she’s safe?”

“Well, what would you do if one of your daughters was scared of a monster under the bed?”

“Probably crawl into bed with her. And maybe, once she’s brave enough, I’d crawl under the bed with her to help her see there are no monsters. Or I might help her turn the monsters into friends.”

“Maybe the little girl inside you needs the same. Keep showing her that your body is a safe place for her to live. Demonstrate for her that you’ll stick around to defend her against monsters. And then when she believes that she has grown-up you as an ally, she’ll be ready to crawl under the bed with you to test her theory.”

“How do I do that?”

“Start by acknowledging her and believing her. Stop telling her she’s ridiculous and childish and overly emotional. Soothe her fears instead of dismissing them. You’ve been so hard on her before because you’re expecting her to be a grown-up.”

“I guess I keep thinking that by now I should be over all of that stuff. It’s foolish for a grown woman to behave this way.”

“There’s a part of you that’s not a grown woman, though. There’s a part of you that stayed the same age you were when those hard things happened to you. That little girl doesn’t need to control your life the way she sometimes tries to do when she’s scared, but she needs to know she matters and that you’ll keep her safe.”

“If I’m more kind to her, she’ll let me be more courageous when I need to speak?”

“I expect so,” Tenderness said. “She doesn’t want to hold you back - she just doesn’t want to be abandoned.”

Tenderness started to smile as a new thought formed. “You might discover, in fact, that once you reclaim her and help her feel secure, she’ll teach you how to play again.”

“Hmmm... That’s an interesting possibility!”

“And when the little girl in you is soothed, Courage has an easier time showing up to guide you into the next step.”

“Playfulness and Courage – that’s a great combination!”

“Those are both things that the little girl in you has oodles of when she feels secure. Your job is to help her feel secure.”

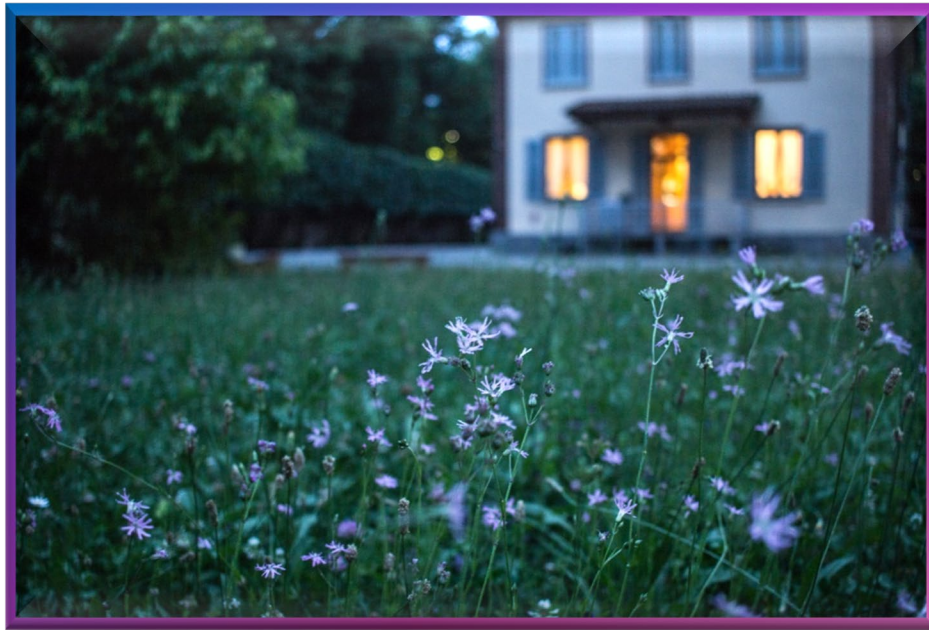
Reflections:

What keeps you from telling the truth?

How do you respond when Anxiety shows up?

How can you help your inner child crawl under the bed to check for monsters?

What does the monster under your bed look like? Draw or paint it.



Walking With Melancholy

Melancholy must have snuck through the door
While my daughter was leaving.
I was busy tidying up so I didn't notice her at first.
But then she plopped down beside me
When I paused from the work.
"Loneliness will be here again this weekend," she reminded me.
"And you have so many more lonely days ahead of you,
When the last of your daughters moves away."

I wanted to chase her away with a long to-do list,
Or smother her with food and Netflix,
But I'd done that often enough to know
That would only prolong her visit.
Instead I sat down with her for awhile
And listened. I let her remind me of
How quiet it is in the house when there are no other voices but mine.
I let her spin through the reels of memories
of this house filled with the sounds of growing children.

I didn't stop her until she wanted to open the door
To let in her frequent companion, Self-pity.
I could hear the two of them whispering through the crack in the door
About how nobody would ever love me
and I would be forever lonely.
"Divorced and unlovable," Self-pity hissed through the crack,
But I turned away, determined not to get attached to the story she brought.

"Let's go for a walk," I said to Melancholy, rising from the couch.
"I promise, I won't send you away – I would just rather
Be with you outside in the snow."
It was strategic - I knew Self-pity preferred to be sedentary
And wouldn't bother with the effort it would take to follow us.
Begrudgingly, Melancholy pulled on her boots and parka
And we headed outside, just as the sun was beginning to set.

"Twilight," she said, looking around at the empty sidewalks and quiet homes.
"It's the perfect time for me, Sadness and Solitude.
It reminds us of the way good things always end."
"Yes," I said, "Like the ending of this era of my motherhood."
Then I added, to remind her I hadn't abandoned her,
"You're an easier companion to me out here
Where I can move and breathe, and the walls don't
Threaten to close in and trap me in a

Never-ending waltz with you and your less enjoyable friends.”

We walked to the nearly frozen river,
We watched as the sun tinted the edges of the sky into
Hombre shades of oranges and pinks,
And we crunched through the glowing snow.
She stayed with me, stubbornly insisting I not leave her behind.
Gradually, though, she became quieter and less insistent
On holding all of my attention.

Further down the path, where fewer footsteps had flattened the deep snow,
A deer scrambled up the embankment by the river.
I stopped with Wonder to watch it, as I always do.
That’s when I noticed that Melancholy was turning away
And preparing to slip into the woods behind me.
“I think it’s time for me to go,” she said gently, and then waved farewell.
“Thanks for spending some time with me.”

Out from behind a tree peeked Contentment,
Who smiled as she pointed toward the other three deer,
Joining the first one on the embankment.
We stood together for awhile, watching the deer as they watched us.
And then, when they had tired of us,
Contentment and I walked further into the snowy woods.

Reflections:

How do you entertain (and then release) Melancholy when she comes?
How does your body and/or nature help you to not get too attached to emotions?
How can you invite Wonder into your life?

Bringing Ecstasy Back

“I haven’t seen Ecstasy make an appearance for awhile, Tenderness said. “Anyone know where she is?”

“She’s been hiding in her room,” Compassion said. “Shame told her she wasn’t welcome here.”

“Shame, can you tell me why you sent her away?”

“She’s too dangerous,” Shame said. “She does things that embarrass the rest of us. And she has these big desires that are just wrong.”

“What’s wrong with her desires?”

“They go against the rules of the church. And they’re looked down on by our family of origin. And Fear keeps telling us they’ll put us in danger.”

“But this is MY house,” Tenderness said. “It’s not a church and it’s not controlled by our family of origin. Or the patriarchy, or any of those other rule-makers. Those old rules that were part of your childhood home are not what guide us in this space.”

“Well, they SHOULD be,” Shame retorted. “Those rules are dependable, and they give my life meaning. In this house, I hardly ever get to make an appearance because your rules are so wishy-washy.”

“Shame, those rules gave you an over-inflated view of your own importance. I’m not saying you have no value here, because sometimes you can help us see if we’re taking a wrong path and need to double back, but it’s time for you to take a step back and stop trying to silence those like Ecstasy who have so rarely had a voice.”

“But... I’m comfortable with the old ways!” Shame protested, turning toward Anxiety for reinforcements. “Why do you have to go and change things around here?”

“The old ways keep us stuck in old bondage, attached to harmful systems, and I’m afraid you helped wrap the chains around our feet, Shame, together with your friend Anxiety. You were being heavily influenced by the patriarchy and the church, which I know you were trying to protect us from, but that’s not necessary anymore. Now it’s time for you to serve the future, not the past.”

“But...” Anxiety and Shame sputtered together.

Tenderness raised a hand to silence their protests. “In this house,” she said firmly, “we are creating a sanctuary for healing and growth and you are no longer allowed to get in the way of that. You can have your say, but you don’t get control of the room. You will be expected to listen

to the others instead of chasing them out of the room.” She strolled down the hallway and knocked on Ecstasy’s door.

“Ecstasy,” she said, her voice gentle now. “Please come out now and tell us what you’re dreaming of. I promise I won’t let Shame and Anxiety silence you any longer.”

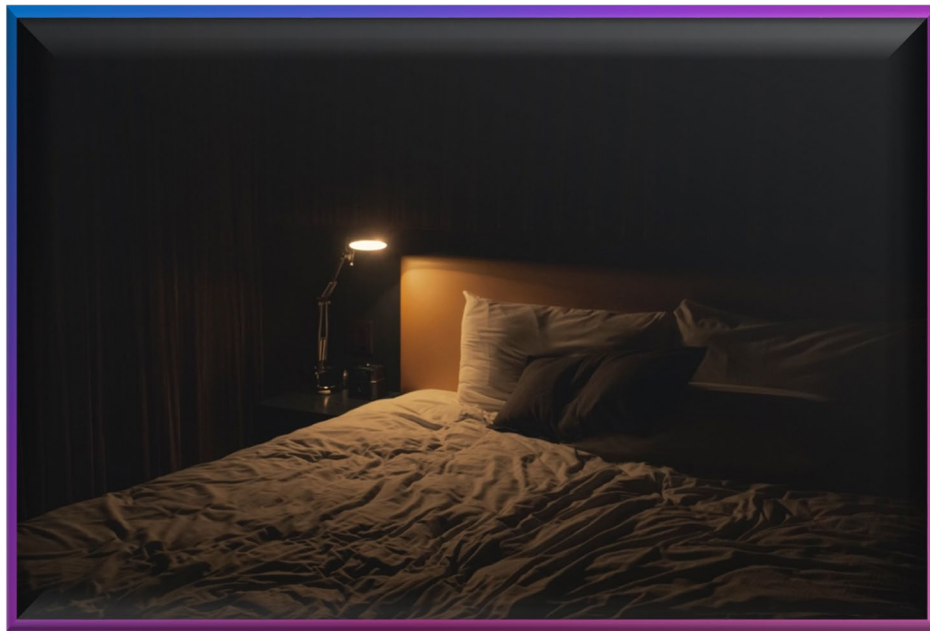
Reflections:

What are you dreaming of?

What role does Ecstasy play in your life?

Which parts of you are being silenced by old rules?

What colour is Ecstasy? Paint it.



Self-love

“I notice Agitation has joined you today,” Tenderness said. “And there seem to be some other emotions hiding behind her. What’s going on?”

“A friend of mine shared a fat shaming post on social media,” I responded.

“And what did that bring up for you? What came along with the Agitation?”

“I felt Shame, because I felt like she was judging my body. And Frustration was present too, because she should have known better. And I guess there was also Betrayal, because she’s a friend and I trusted her to treat this fat body better.”

“That’s a lot of feelings about a social media post. I’m sorry that it made you feel that way.”

“I guess I also have some Irritation that it made me feel that way. I shouldn’t let it bother me so much.”

“Tell me... does your beautiful body need her approval to make it feel worthy?”

“No, I guess not. Or at least it *shouldn’t*.”

“And do you love your own fat body even if she’s too blinded by the systems that oppress fat bodies to see the value of your body?”

“Yes, I try to. Sometimes it’s hard.”

“I get that. You’ve gotten a lot of messages about the value of a body like yours. It’s hard to give it radical self-love. And it’s hard not to measure it by the kind of yardstick your friend doesn’t know she’s attached to.”

“I never thought of it that way before. I suppose I’m giving her and the systems she’s attached to too much power when I let them measure the value of my body.”

“It’s true. It’s a system that doesn’t love your body and you have, unfortunately, been trapped in it for too long. I love your body. And I won’t stand by and allow you to treat it in any way that’s not loving – not in MY house.”

“Thank you. I’m trying to love it too. It takes a lot to unlearn the messages and dismantle the yardstick I carry around in my own head.”

“Yes, but here in the House That Tenderness Built, we don’t have any such yardsticks. They’re not allowed in.”

“I appreciate that. I’m not used to being so unconditionally loved and accepted.”

“Around here, we think your body is AMAZING! And now I want to know... what are you going to do to give your body some love?”

“I think my body wants to go for a walk. And then after that, I’m going to nourish her with good food. And maybe a nap.”

“That sounds like a great idea. And maybe for now, if your friend is choosing to post things that don’t help you love your body, you could silence her posts for awhile? At least until you feel strong enough to not be bothered by them?”

“I think I might do that.”

“Someday, she might be able to let Tenderness build her a house too, so that she can give her own body the kind of self-love that is not dependent on whether or not it is thin.”

“I hope so. Now that you mention it, I feel sad for her that she’s still using an old measuring stick to determine the value of her own body.”

“It’s good to witness that, but don’t get too attached to your own interpretation of what she needs and what she’s missing. She has her own path to walk. And... speaking of walking... it’s time to get your beautiful body out the door!”

“Yes, I’m going.”

Reflections:

How do you feel about your body?

How is your body treated by the systems that dominate your culture?

What would Tenderness say about your body?

What can you do to treat your body with love this week?

Come Play With Me

“Come join me!” Playfulness said as she spread paper, paint, scissors, and old magazines all over the kitchen table.

“What’s this?” asked Skepticism. “Is this house turning into a daycare or something? First we have circle time and now you want me to play with *art supplies*?”

“Oh Skepticism,” Joy laughed, plunking herself down at the table and picking up a paintbrush. “Why is the world always so serious for you?”

“Skepticism has a point,” Apprehension said. “The world’s a serious place. It seems like Joy, Playfulness, Delight, and Wonder are getting far too much space in this house lately. I miss the good old days when Anxiety, Fear, Sadness and Pessimism were making most of the rules. It felt more safe then.”

“It wasn’t safe for *us*,” Silliness said, joining Joy at the table. “There were far too many rules, and Shame kept punishing us if we stepped out of line. I like it *so much* better now that Tenderness is in charge.”

“But... you’ve created a whole lot of chaos on the table!” Fear shrieked. “I don’t know how to handle myself when there’s so much chaos!”

“I know it’s hard,” Compassion said. “Playfulness is asking you to step out of your comfort zones and that’s scary.”

“Yeah!” said Sullenness. “I’m going to go to my room. This isn’t a space that works for me.”

“It’s okay,” Tenderness said as she stepped into the room with a plateful of cookies. “Nobody has to be here if they don’t want to, but nobody gets to chase Playfulness away. If you’d rather have some quiet time in your room, you’re welcome to do that, but if you want to try something new, Courage is making some space at the table for you.”

“I’m going to try,” Restlessness said, stepping close to Courage. “It might calm my nerves if I have something to do with my hands. But nobody gets to judge me if what I make turns out ugly.”

“We don’t care what it looks like,” Delight said. “We’re here to have fun and try new things and the product isn’t the point.”

“Heads up!” Playfulness shrieked as she splashed paint on Delight’s face. Delight giggled.

“Maybe we should take this outside?” Attentiveness asked, afraid the walls might soon be covered in paint.

“A little mess won’t kill us,” Tenderness said. “Once we’re done, we’ll make the clean-up part of the fun. This is a home, not an art gallery.”

Reflections:

What’s your relationship with Playfulness?

What gets in the way of your Playfulness?

What can you do today to invite Playfulness in?



Sitting With Disappointment

“I see you’re sitting with Disappointment this evening,” Tenderness said as she lowered herself into the chair next to us.

“She came to visit when I found out that I didn’t get into that writing residency program I applied for.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You were really hopeful about it.”

“Yes, Expectation and I were spending some time together dreaming about it, and those dreams didn’t come true. Now Disappointment has come to replace Expectation.”

“I’m sorry. Would you like me to sit with you for awhile? I can make a pot of tea.”

“I’d like that. Thank you. I could use the company.”

Tenderness ducked into the kitchen. Awhile later she returned with tea and a snack.

“I see that Self-Doubt, Fear, Abandonment, and Despair are hanging around just outside the room. Do you want to tell me about that?”

“When I got the email, Self-Doubt, Fear and Abandonment rushed in next to Disappointment, followed closely by Despair. They brought all kinds of stories with them about how this rejection must mean I’m a failure, I’m not a very good writer, people will reject me, I’ll never have another book published... stuff like that.”

“And yet... they’re outside the room now. They didn’t stay long?”

“No, I managed to gather all of the resources you’ve been teaching me about. I allowed them all to make an appearance, and then Mindfulness helped me not get attached to any of them. I noticed, labeled, got curious, and then released each emotion as it came. They increased their persistence and chatter, trying to hook me in and hold my attention, but I brought in reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements? Say more.”

“Well, when Self-doubt tried to tell me I was a failure, I called on Resilience to remind her of all of the times I’ve failed and still gotten up and tried again. When Fear tried to tell me I’d never get published again, I brought in Hope to help her see that that had never been true in the past and wouldn’t be true in the future. When Despair and Abandonment reminded me of all the past times I’ve been rejected and then invited Self-Pity to wallow with them in their stories, I invited Love to let them all know my worth is not based on whether or not I got into this program.”

“Well done! You’re learning.”

“You’re a good teacher.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Tenderness said with a smile. “I see that there’s some snow on Disappointment’s feet. What’s that about?”

“Oh yeah... I almost forgot... there was one other thing that helped... Disappointment and I went for a walk. I remembered what you said about how movement helps remind my body not to get too stuck in an emotional state. There were big, gentle snowflakes falling while I walked through the trees, and as we were walking Wonder showed up to remind me how beautiful the world is, even with Disappointment in it.”

“I love that. And now it looks like Disappointment might be ready to leave the room too.”

“Yeah, I think I’ve spent enough time with her. And Hope and Resilience keep nudging me about another possibility that this rejection has opened up.”

“Nicely done.”

“Thanks!”

Reflections:

What other emotions tend to make an appearance along with Disappointment?

What reinforcements can you bring in when your emotions try to suck you in to a loop of old stories?

What movement helps your body to not get too stuck in an emotional state? Do that!

Tender with my Body

I scroll through my social media feed
And am confronted by a hundred ads
Each one telling me that this body is not good enough.
Each one telling me that they have the answer
That will finally make this body acceptable.
“Trust us,” they say, “and entrust your body to our diet, exercise program, machine, or
Magical foods so that this can be the year you can be found worthy. “

I look down at this body
And I hear Self-Loathing in my ear
Berating my generous curves and wobbly bits.
Shame chimes in with “You should do better. You should look better.
You should eat better.
You should trust all of those advertisers over your own body.
Your body is not good enough.”

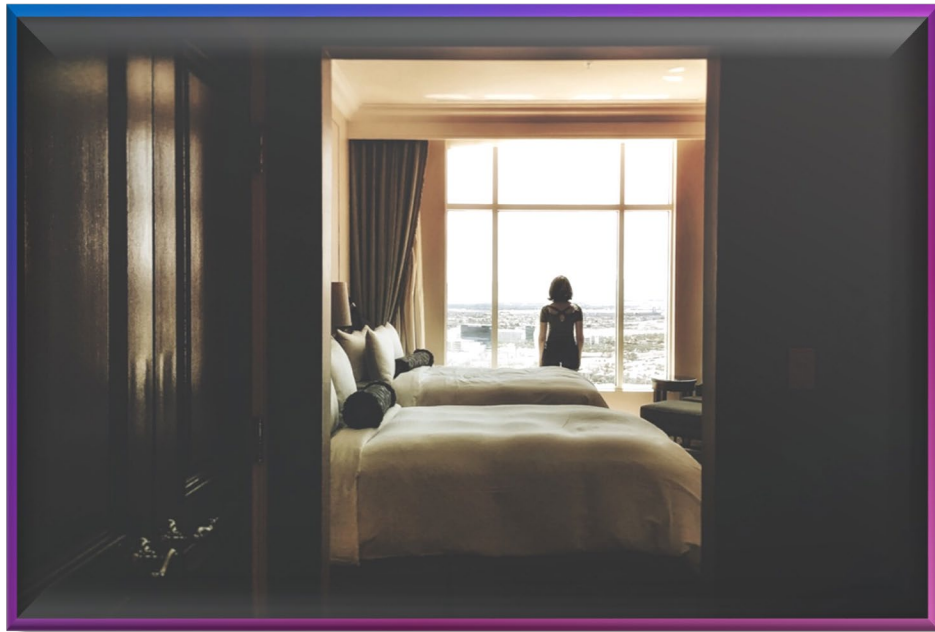
“But how could this body not be good enough?”
Tenderness asks, touching my shoulder.
“When she has birthed four babies
And buried one?
How could this body not be good enough
When she has carried you to mountain peaks
And splashed in wild oceans?
How could this body not be good enough
When she has found the resources to fight
Diseases and heal wounds?
How could this body not be good enough
When she has known and given love, ecstasy, and comfort?
How could this body not be good enough when she has survived rape and abuse,
And still found the strength to get out of bed the next day?
How could this body not be good enough when she has done so much
To protect you
To carry you
To teach you
To love you
To heal you?”

“I am your beloved” my body whispers,
Not clamouring for attention
Like those loud ads
Or the Shame or Self-loathing that comes with them.
“I am your beloved” she whispers again and again.
And I turn from the ads

To offer my trust
To my own body
And to Tenderness.

Reflections:

How do you feel about your own body?
Write a letter to your body. Let Tenderness be your guide.
How can you show love to your body this week?



Unraveling Memories

Tenderness tapped on my bedroom door. “Come in,” I said. In the corner, Self-pity made a face because she wanted more of my attention, but I knew Tenderness would be a better companion.

“I just wanted to check in on you,” she said. “I noticed you pulled out your memory box today.”

“Yes, I wanted to revisit some of my old journals for the writing project I’m working on.”

“How was that? I expect some emotions showed up to join you as you were doing it?”

“Well, at first, it was mostly Nostalgia and Comfort, as I pulled out my tiny baby shoes and that doll blanket my Grandma made for me. But it got harder when I got to the layer of the box where my journals were.”

“There are lots of old parts of you tucked away in those old journals.”

“Yes, I usually avoid encountering those old parts of myself because they bring up too much Pain. I poured a lot of Grief, Fear, Trauma, Frustration, and Anger into those old journals and I don’t always know how to hold that for the younger parts of me.”

“Were you feeling more ready for it now?”

“Mostly. I’ve had some really good therapy sessions lately and that’s helped. And living in this house helps. I can see now how some of those parts have felt abandoned because I haven’t always been truthful about the Pain they carried. So I invited Courage and Love to join me as I held space for them.”

“What did you learn about yourself as you did it?”

“When I was visiting the parts of me that survived my twenties, I really heard the Longing and Loneliness in her voice. And one of the things that came through really strongly was how she never really had an ally, champion or protector whom she could count on.”

“She was experiencing all of those big things and nobody stood up for her, protected her, or kept her safe?”

“Right. Some people tried, but they weren’t always people she felt safe with. She tried so hard to fulfill her dream of becoming a writer, but there wasn’t anyone who helped open doors for her or champion her writing. And when she got hurt, she tried to find a place where she could feel safe and protected, but she didn’t find it. So she figured out how to survive on her own, she became guarded, and she let go of some of her dreams in the process.”

“So... some of your Resilience is actually a way of coping with trauma and covering up your real needs and desires?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“It sounds like she needed a secure attachment – both the safe haven and the secure base. She didn’t have that so it was hard for her to thrive.”

“That’s right. She was a courageous young woman, and people always told her how brave and strong she was, but that was the only way she knew how to survive. What she didn’t have, and didn’t know how to ask for, was a place where she felt unconditionally held. I guess she didn’t know how to access Tenderness back then because it wasn’t modeled well for her.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been hard. And how does it feel to witness all of this now?”

“Well, at first I felt resentful on her behalf, but Resentment and I had a conversation and I realized she was just doing her part to help mask those deeper feelings that I didn’t know how to hold space for back then – Abandonment, Fear, Insecurity, and Grief.”

“And you gave those feelings a space to express themselves without getting too attached to them? And without imposing the yardsticks you’ve been handed by the systems with power?”

“Yes... just the way you’ve taught me to do.” As I spoke, Pride snuck into the room and sat on the bed next to me. I let her.

“Do you see what you’re doing right now?” Tenderness asked.

“No – tell me.”

“You’re giving that young woman what she needed and didn’t know how to ask for. You’re providing that safe haven and secure base. You’re re-mothering yourself.”

“I didn’t think of it that way before, but you’re right.”

“And do you feel stronger now, and more able to hold space for those big emotions?”

“Yes! I do! I feel like I can be my own ally and champion. And I have you, Tenderness, and this house you built.”

“Yes, and you always will. I’m sorry nobody taught you how to access me back in those days when you needed me. But I’m glad I’m here now.”

Reflections:

Are there parts of you from the past that you need to hold space for?

How can Tenderness help you hold space for the pain of your past?

Are you able to give yourself a secure base and safe haven (language that comes out of attachment theory)? If not, do you need a therapist or other professional who can help you?



Snow, Sushi, and Ordinary Happiness

I didn't expect Happiness
To meet me here
On this snow-covered street.

I didn't expect she'd come after dark
To find me in these puddles of light
On this deserted suburban street.
Where my daughters spent their early teens
Delivering flyers.

It was just an ordinary evening
At the end of an ordinary January day
While I was wearing my ordinary parka
and my ordinary boots.

I have traveled the world
Always looking for Happiness
In the Extra Ordinary.
On an Australian beach.
In a museum in Amsterdam.
Among the Redwoods in California.
On a safari in Kenya.
And I have found her in those places,
Sometimes.

But today she came to me
While I was tromping through fresh snow
In my woolen hat and woolen scarf
Not looking for anything but fresh air.

It was such a random moment
In which she found me.
There was something about the snow
And the frost on the edges of my scarf
And the cozy feeling of my fingers in their mittens
And the shadows along the path
And the voice on my AirPods
Announcing text messages from my daughters
About what kind of sushi they were ordering for supper.

Why would that be the moment Happiness
Would choose to intrude on my thoughts?
I wondered. And yet

Suddenly she was there, beside me
And the only thing I could do in response
Was smile.

Reflections:

Where do you find Happiness?
Does Happiness ever show up in unexpected places?
What colour is Happiness? Paint it. Or dance it. Or sculpt it.

