

to tend & to hold

Honoring Our Bodies, Our Needs,
and Our Grief Through
Pregnancy and Infant Loss

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Contents

A Moment of Silence	xi
Introduction: Your Loss Is Our Loss	1
Terminology: A Softer Shared Language	12

PART 1: Our Loss

Chapter 1: Learning About Your Loss	23
Chapter 2: Birthing Your Loss	43
Chapter 3: Enduring Your Loss	68

PART 2: Our Grief

Chapter 4: Grief in the Postpartum Time	95
Chapter 5: When Grief and Trauma Intersect	114
Chapter 6: Our Loved Ones and Their Grief	130
Chapter 7: Mourning	147

PART 3: Our Healing

Chapter 8: Postpartum Care After Womb Loss	167
Chapter 9: How to Support Survivors	187
Chapter 10: Returning and Becoming	203

Letter from the Author	219
Letter from the Artist	221
Meaningful Dates	223
A Closing Blessing for the Postpartum and Bereaved	225
Acknowledgments	226
Resources	231
Notes	235
Contributors	242
About the Artist	248
About the Author	249

Introduction

Your Loss Is Our Loss

*I am so sorry for your loss, and all you've had to endure.
And all you continue to endure.*

As I write this, I am feeling into my own losses, and even years later, the feelings that overwhelmed me then are with me now, just beneath the surface. Less intense, yet ever present. The body remembers those experiences that leave such deep impressions.

Whether your pregnancy was wanted, unwanted, or somewhere in between. Whether the pregnancy ended in the first trimester, second, or third, or if your infant was born alive and died soon after. Whether you have children who are living or only across the veil. And whether your loss was recent, in the last few years, decades ago, or has yet to transpire. However you came to hold this book in your hands, I am sorry for the pain that brought you here, and I offer you my heartfelt sympathy. For your loss is real. Your grief is valid. And you deserve the deepest of condolences. No matter how much time has passed between my writing these words and your reading of them, know that my heart aches with you.

A Story of Comfort

In the summer of 2017, just a few weeks after experiencing my second pregnancy loss, I found myself walking down the hall of a small, single-story office suite in Redlands, California. I felt a little anxious as I followed the

massage therapist, despite her coming highly recommended by my chiropractor. The space was unfamiliar, the massage therapist was new to me, and I was feeling tender physically and emotionally.

In our text exchange before my appointment, I felt an intuitive pull to share that I had just experienced a pregnancy loss. In addition to being a massage therapist, Heather was a birth doula and in training to become a midwife. I wanted her to know that I was in a fragile state and figured she, of all people, would understand how to care for someone like me—someone who was both postpartum and bereaved.

The moment I crossed the threshold into her space, my body felt at ease, and I knew I was where I needed to be. The small room was bathed in a welcoming darkness save for the peaceful glow of candlelight and a salt lamp. The sounds of soft instrumental music added to the sense of calm, and the walls were decorated with artwork celebrating pregnancy and motherhood. While seeing this could have easily been a painful reminder of my no longer being pregnant, I instead felt reassured that I was with someone who would understand my postbirth body.

Left alone to undress, I sighed as I settled in between the soft sheets warmed by the heated massage table. Then, after gently knocking on the door and hearing I was ready, Heather approached with a tiny bottle in hand. Uncapping it, she brought the bottle closer and asked if I'd like her to use this essential oil she had picked out with my pregnancy loss in mind. I was surprised by the thoughtful gesture and said yes to the floral scent.

She added a few drops to the carrier oil in her palm, and as soon as her hands pressed onto my skin and I inhaled the sweet aroma of ylang-ylang, my eyes filled with tears and my body softened to her firm yet reverent touch. The intention infused into the essential oil and Heather's deferential mien deepened the experience from a massage to a moment of witnessing. And though I lay quiet, my tired body told her its story, relieved to have someone who could understand, each knot of tense muscle testifying to all that I still carried despite my womb being empty.

As Heather's hands glided, kneaded, and pressed deeply into each of these knots, I breathed into the discomfort and the pain until together we helped my

body release what it had been holding. It was as if my body had stored some of my most difficult emotions and memories until I had the capacity and support to face them. As if my body, wise in and of itself, knew I couldn't face the entirety of my grief all at once nor on my own. I found the relief I had been longing for, and with that relief, my postbirth body was finally able to rest.



It has been many years since that initial session with Heather. Still, whenever I smell ylang-ylang, I return to that morning. My mind remembers the details of a room that felt like a sanctuary. My body remembers how it felt to be tended to with such care. At a time when it was so hard for me to be in my body, the site of my trauma, Heather helped me know relief was possible.

This is what I wish for you, dear reader, that you too may know what it feels like to be seen, heard, and held with respect and reverence. And that you may feel moments of relief even amidst your pain. You are deserving of such felt experiences. And they are essential to grieving and postpartum healing alike.

Not one person or thing can fully ease or take away the thoughts, feelings, and sensations you are experiencing. Such healing is yours to tend to, in your own time and in your own way. But you don't have to do it alone. Nor should you have to. You have been through so much already.

So, whether you offer yourself a massage or other acts of care, know you are worthy of feeling comforted and worthy of feeling relief. So that you may rest. So that you may have the fortitude to face each moment as it comes.

It Began with a Vision

A year after my session with Heather, a vision came to me, one that was as detailed as it was powerful. In it, I saw a group of women gathered around a small body of water, the night simplifying their surroundings with a blanket of darkness. Some stood with their arms wrapped around themselves. Others stood arm in arm with a neighbor, gently leaning into one another for warmth and support.

Their solemn expressions were illuminated partly by moonlight, partly by starlight, and partly by the soft glow of numerous candles floating on

the water before them. As the candles gently swayed, the women stood still, looking at and through the flames into memories—some recent, some more distant. The silence was heavy with all that was felt but unsaid.

I carried an intuitive knowing that these women had gathered to honor their pregnancy losses and the babies they could not hold. Just as importantly, they had come to honor themselves, what they had experienced, and the fact that they had survived.

There was a candle for each of them and a candle for each of their womb losses, flames testifying to deep wounds otherwise unseen, to hard-earned resilience unacknowledged until then, and to an invisible community of grievers.



After receiving this vision, I began to long deeply for such a gathering for myself and others who had survived pregnancy and infant loss. To acknowledge our shared pain, to mourn openly and honestly without inhibition, and to honor what we and our bodies had gone through. All without feeling the need to explain or justify ourselves. The universe seemed to agree as things fell into place with extraordinary ease, and I hosted my first event that fall.

The first Our Womb Loss dining event was an elevated, intimate gathering I will always remember. Held in a stunning home tucked away from the busy streets of West Los Angeles, my guests and I sat around a dining table beautifully set with earth-toned linen, stoneware plates, tea lights, and flowers. Menus resting on our napkins gave us a preview of the delicious postpartum food being carefully prepared by the head chef of MotherBees (a Los Angeles-based postpartum food delivery service turned global motherhood support platform) just a few feet away. I gazed at my guests through teary eyes and shared why this event came to be—that our womb losses were important enough to recognize and that we who carried such loss with our bodies deserved to be honored with intention, beauty, and love. Each person shared their name and what brought them to the table that evening. We listened to stories of loss as well as current struggles. And we heard many repeat the desire to finally make time for themselves. We listened, and we witnessed, holding space by giving our full attention to every speaker without

interruption. Later, as the chef introduced each finely plated dish, Heng Ou, founder of MotherBees and author of the seminal postpartum book *The First Forty Days: The Art of Nourishing the New Mother*, explained in detail how each was deeply nourishing for the postpartum body, including our bodies that were postpartum after womb loss.

After dinner and under the light of a full moon, we walked in shared silence to the pool in the backyard, where we placed floating LED candles into the water—one for ourselves and one for each of our losses. As the last candle was set into the water, the scene in front of me merged with the one I had seen in my mind and carried close to my heart: a group of women standing around a small body of water. Some stood with their arms wrapped around themselves. Others stood arm in arm with a neighbor, gently leaning into one another for warmth and support. Their solemn expressions illuminated partly by moonlight, partly by the pool's lights, and partly by the soft glow of numerous candles floating on the water before them. As the candles gently swayed, the women stood still, looking at and through the flames into memories—some recent, some more distant. The silence was heavy with all that was felt but unsaid.

By the time I hosted my third Our Womb Loss event a year later, I knew I wanted to capture the essence of these gatherings in a book that could help others feel the way my guests felt: seen, heard, held, and honored. I said as much at the dinner table that memorable evening in October 2019, knowing that speaking it aloud could help bring it into being. And it did.

A Soft Place to Land

To Tend and To Hold is a refuge for all who have experienced loss during or after their pregnancy, as well as those who are currently pregnant and anticipating loss or are living through it in this very moment. For all who feel grief for the womb loss they've endured, may this book be a soft place for you to land.

This may include those who experienced loss before or during birth or those who experienced loss after birthing a living child. This may include those whose bodies released the pregnancy on their own or those whose bodies needed medication or a procedure to do so. This may include those whose pregnancies did not lead to a growing embryo or fetus or those whose bodies could conceive

and carry a pregnancy only with the support of fertility treatment. This may include those who also have living children or those whose only children are beyond touch. This may include those whose pregnancies ended with the birth of living, thriving children *and* loss, such as in adoption (the baby going to a foster or adoptive family), surrogacy (the baby being united with their intended parents), or pregnancy with multiples (as with vanishing twin syndrome). This may include those who have experienced womb loss once or those who have known it many times over.

There are so many manifestations of pregnancy and infant loss, and truly no right or wrong way to feel about your lived experience of it. Whatever you are feeling is valid. What matters most is what your womb loss means to you. Maybe you carry multiple, seemingly contradictory feelings about your experience. Maybe you're not sure how or what to feel. For some, the experience may be more about the physicality of healing their postpartum bodies, while others may feel the need to process the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or relational impact of their womb loss. For some, it is but one part of their lives; for others it is life-altering.

However womb loss looks and feels for you, this book is meant to meet you where you are. To welcome and hold space for you. With kindness. Without judgment or expectation.

There is room for all of us to be named and to be known.

How to Use This Book

I bring myself to these pages in the midst of my fifth postpartum season. Writing this book as I am acutely postpartum has been difficult. It is hard to do much of anything after conceiving, gestating, and birthing. No matter the length of gestation, all these processes take a toll on the body, and for many of us, on the heart. And yet, such timing has allowed me to write about postpartum needs from a deeply embodied place. It has also allowed me to better access the depths of the grief and trauma I still carry from my womb losses, despite the years and the living children who have come since then. The result is a book that holds space for the tender intersection of postpartum care, grief, and trauma. One that meets you where you are with the

deepest compassion—whether years, months, weeks, or days from your loss, or whether you are still pregnant—and honors that we are all postpartum when our pregnancies come to an end at any point in gestation.

To Tend and To Hold is divided into three parts: “Our Loss,” “Our Grief,” and “Our Healing.” Part 1, “Our Loss,” invites you to consider three significant, though often overlooked, thresholds: when you learn about your womb loss, when you birth your loss, and the time immediately after when you begin to endure your loss as both postpartum and bereaved. Part 2, “Our Grief,” is dedicated to addressing grief in the context of womb loss, including the intersection of grief and trauma, our loved ones and their grief, and mourning our loss and ourselves. Part 3, “Our Healing,” delves deeper into long-term postpartum care after womb loss, how to support survivors of such loss (yourself and others), and what you might consider for life ahead.

Each chapter contains a carefully curated collection of stories, essential information, nourishing postpartum recipes, and gentle embodiment practices. The stories shared are meant to offer comfort and show you what is possible for your healing process. You will not find traumatic stories of pregnancy and infant loss detailed here, for in my grief, I found it too hard to read such accounts. My trauma felt like enough to carry. However, if you feel drawn to read other stories of womb loss, you will find a list of thoughtfully chosen memoirs in the resources section.

The information shared here is meant to help you make informed decisions when it is so easy to feel adrift, alone, and unsure. This is information I and many other womb loss survivors wish we had. We want so much for you to know your options, to choose what best serves you and your needs, and to live lives that are meaningful to you—lives that integrate your grief rather than lives constrained by it.

Each chapter shares a postpartum recipe I personally love and prepare for myself, friends, and my postpartum doula clients. It can be hard to tend to our basic needs when we are exhausted from pregnancy and birth, overwhelmed with grief, and burdened with trauma, so I have chosen simple recipes with few ingredients and easy-to-follow steps. They are also

nutrient-rich to aid in your body's transition from pregnancy. Even if it has been many months or years since you birthed your loss, know that your body is forever postpartum and can benefit from food and drink that support it and your well-being.

Each chapter offers several embodiment practices. They are gentle invitations to connect intentionally with your breath, mind, body, spirit, and relationships. If it ever becomes difficult to be with thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations that arise, these simple practices can help you feel grounded and more able to endure moments of struggle. They are practices you can take with you and turn to long after you've closed this book.

You will also find a special section entitled "Offering from the Collective" toward the end of each chapter. These are loving contributions from health professionals and healing arts practitioners, many of whom are beloved friends who have supported me through my fertility journey. Each offering briefly describes a particular healing modality, how it can support survivors of womb loss, and a simple self-tending practice that you can add to your repertoire. These practices were created specifically with you in mind, dear reader, so that you may feel seen, held, and honored. For you are deserving of all these things. Know that you can turn to these self-tending practices whenever your body longs for well-deserved tenderness.

Finally, each chapter concludes with a short reflection on the content we covered and a closing verse that is repeated throughout the book. This verse is an invitation to acknowledge where and how you are in that moment with compassion and to feel held by the collective response that follows.



In the spirit of being trauma sensitive, as womb loss can feel incredibly traumatic for many, this book acknowledges that you are the expert of your body, and as such, you know best what is needed for your healing—though coming to such a place of self-awareness may take time, effort, and the support of others. Know that everything here is an invitation. The following are a few such invitations to support you as you read on:

Go to what calls you. This book does not need to be read in any particular order. Allow yourself to go to what feels most resonant in a given moment.

Honor your own pace. If at any point you feel overwhelmed or notice your body responding in a way that feels uncomfortable or even painful, consider taking a moment to pause and do something that feels grounding before moving on or put the book down and take a break.

Choose what feels right. We can so often feel helpless amidst womb loss, when our ability to choose is taken away, when what choices we do have don't feel like choices at all, or when it's not clear what our options are and no one is there to guide us. This book is designed to honor your agency by using invitational language and offering options.

Notice what feels resonant. This may feel like an internal “YES!”—a sensation of being pulled toward the page or a desire to underline or highlight what you just read. It can be tearing up or crying. It can feel like a softening of the shoulders, a sense of affirmation when something on the page speaks to a deep truth within you. You might give yourself a moment to stay in that response and allow what is emerging to express itself more fully.

Make it yours. While ancestral wisdom and modern guidelines for grieving and postpartum care do exist, both are processes with no definitive course or clear end. Let your process of grieving and your process of postpartum healing be just that: *yours*. Draw inspiration from what already exists and also allow yourself to follow your intuition.

Honor your innate resilience. At the heart of *To Tend and To Hold* is a foundational belief in your innate resilience—your capacity to endure and adapt after experiencing hardship. In moments of struggle, simply allowing yourself to take your next breath is a powerful act of resilience. It truly is. So know this and call on the resilient part of you when you are in need.

If You Are in Crisis

It is natural to long for relief from the pain of womb loss, to be utterly desperate for it. How can we be in this world if each day, each moment, feels unbearable? And yet, relief can come. And it can manifest in many different forms.

Sadly, death by suicide is the leading cause of maternal mortality during pregnancy until one year after birth (also referred to as *perinatal suicide*), with most deaths occurring in the postpartum period. Globally, perinatal suicide accounts for up to 20 percent of postpartum deaths, and in the US, rates of suicidal ideation during pregnancy increased by 100 percent from 2008 to 2018, with Black birthing people experiencing the largest increase in rates by 700 percent.¹ Despite such dire statistics, research on the topic is nascent, and there is an urgent, unmet need for evidence-based strategies to prevent it.²

If you have intentions or actionable plans for self-harm or suicide or have already made attempts, please know there is support for you. Self-harm or death by suicide is not the only way to find the relief you seek. I encourage you to put this book down for now and call your local emergency number, a national crisis and suicide hotline, or someone in your life you can trust to be of help—be it a therapist or other health-care professional, a partner, a friend, or a family member. Consider creating a safety plan to clarify what would feel truly helpful to you, and keep it on the fridge or another place that is easily accessible. You don't need to endure these moments of struggle alone. Nor should you have to. You have been through so much already.



The following three embodiment practices were shared with me when I was writing from the desert lands of southern Utah en route to a run/walk for pregnancy and infant loss in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. As it happens with souls you feel like you were meant to meet, Teána and I felt an instant connection, and our conversation deepened into talk of her struggles, including with fertility and suicide. It was clear she had worked hard to gain the peace and clarity with which she spoke of such hard things. She also listened with a generous heart as I read aloud the passage above, and shared practices she wished someone had given her for her greatest times of need. I offer them