



Skyline, Spring - 2014

Earthlines

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The Eye that Pierces the Darkness

You who read EARTHLINES, who know about our work with women in prison, might ask the question, “What do you actually DO inside?”

The last time I was at the prison there was an attack in the yard that houses three members of our core LiT-uPP group. (There are four yards containing a number of housing units per yard). Of course my group knew the two women involved: both the attacker and the quiet, non-disruptive victim of the attack. Two of the core group had roomed with the attacker. Each had been threatened by her. Each of them had reported to the Correctional Officer (prison guard or C.O.) responsible for their housing unit that she had been threatened with violence and that she had reason to fear this woman. The C.O. had been told that home-made weapons, made from the lids of tin cans, were hidden in the room, and where they were hidden! Perhaps he passed this information up the chain of command, but for whatever reason, nothing was done.

The women were late arriving for group that morning. We were fortunate that they were able to come because often, when events like this happen, the yard is locked down and the women are unable to show up for scheduled programs. The attack happened fast. The Correctional Officer, the one who had been forewarned, seemed to know it was coming because he responded quickly.... *after the woman was slashed*. As one of my core group said: “The people who are supposed to protect us, don't.”

“The people who are supposed to protect us, don't.” The pain was palpable in our small circle: the pain, the horror, the rage, and the sadness. Which brings me back to the question we started with: “What do you actually DO inside?” I will share with you what we have learned to do together, and what we did following the slashing. We took a breath together. And we took another breath. We touched what we were feeling with breath and awareness and as much kindness towards ourselves as we could muster. I felt the statement: “The people who are supposed to protect us don't,” like a punch in my own gut. I also knew this dark hole in the pit of my stomach from the wrenching stories I have heard from so many imprisoned women about the abuse, abandonment, neglect, and/or indifference they had experienced as children at the hands of the adults who were supposed to care for them. But the real impact for me was the visceral experience of this indifference and abuse now institutionalized within the very prison whose walls and razor wire surrounded us. What struck me most deeply was the full realization that we are a society that punishes pain: the pain of the hurting inner child seeking relief through drug or alcohol addiction; the pain of an abused spouse and mother attempting to defend

herself and her children against unremitting violence; the pain of mental illness unseen and untreated in the dark corners of our society. And what intensified that pain was the realization that I am part of this society.

I invite you to do with me now, what we did together then. I invite you to contact what you are experiencing: feeling what you feel; seeing what you see; hearing what you hear. Whatever judgment you may have about what I have just written, whatever outrage or sadness or despair, whatever you may be feeling or sensing, I ask you to become aware of that now. This is what we did. We touched a spectrum of feelings with awareness, bringing not only breath but a quality of kindness that could touch even our hate, even our horror, with a compassion for ourselves and for each other and for those who hurt us.

Often when we are in the grip of strong feeling, of strong reaction like fear or rage, helplessness or hopelessness, our attention narrows so that we are only aware of this intense energy moving within and through us. So what we did next, and what I invite you to do now, is to expand our field of awareness. Note that we are not pushing away feelings but rather expanding our awareness so that we can begin to draw on the support that is always available but forgotten in the intensity of moments like these.

Once again we brought our attention to our breathing, noticing it is inside us as we inhale, and it is outside us as we exhale. The air we take in is the air others breathe out. The air we breathe out is inhaled by trees and moves the clouds. Breath is inside and outside and between. Breath can enter the tightest knot, the most narrow crevice. Breath is spirit; it is light. It is sky and the spaciousness of the sky. You can bring breath as your ally. You can open up to this spacious breath, this spacious spirit.

And then also feel your feet; sense your feet on the ground and sense the ground extending out in all directions. Allowing your breath to descend through the trunk of your body, down into your legs and feet like roots in the earth... breathing down through your roots into the nurturing mother which is the earth, which is the energy of life. And drawing this life force up through your roots through every cell of your body.

So that now you feel, sense, know the support of the life force of the earth and the light of the spacious sky. You feel, sense, and know the support of the heavens and the earth. You experience this vertical axis of connection between heaven and earth, with your body the connecting channel.

Now breathing into your heart space, breathing life-force from the earth and light force from the heavens directly into the love force of your human heart: the life and the light meet in you as love. Breathing love into your heart and breathing out healing, strength and support to the woman injured; to her attacker and for release from what demons torture her... to the C.O.... to yourself... Continuing to breathe life and light into the heart space and breathing out compassion to everyone in the prison... prisoners and staff; breathing in the support of the earth and the spaciousness of the sky and breathing out compassion to people in prison everywhere, whether those prisons be external or internal... May all beings be free of suffering. May all beings be free of fear. May all

beings have protection. May all beings know kindness. May all beings be happy. May all beings know peace. May all beings be free.

The energy flowing in the room at the prison after this meditation was powerful. We all had tears in our eyes. It opened a profound conversation which was for me a deeper initiation into what they live with every day. For example, they told me their understanding of the “policy” of the institution. They said if you are attacked you cannot defend yourself. If you do defend yourself you will be seen on the same level as the attacker. You will *both have a fight on your record* which will effect you negatively in many ways, including your parole date. Even simply pushing your attacker away is considered entering the fight. This is anti-instinctual for any human being. You’re supposed to hit the ground, curl into a ball until a C.O. can arrive to pull your attacker away. This when the lid of a tin can is being aimed at your eyes! Not to protect yourself. Not to defend yourself. And wait for the C.O. you have already gone to countless times for help who ignored you, ridiculed you and diminished you.

What am I feeling now? And you, what are you feeling?

This brings up a sense of hopelessness in me as I contact the violence that has been institutionalized within our prison system. I don’t blame the inmates, or the correctional officers or any of the individual players in the system. Blame is not the answer. This violence is bigger than its parts. St. Paul might have named our Correctional Facilities as one of the “powers and principalities.” Theologian Walter Wink, in his book *The Powers That Be*, says: “The Powers That Be are not then, simply people and their institutions, as I had first thought; they also include the spirituality at the core of those institutions and structures. If we want to change those systems, we will have to address not only their outer forms; but their inner spirit as well.”

As we came together that morning, a small circle of women caught in the net of one of the Powers, we contacted something greater than that Power. We were addressing the inner spirit of that institution and initiating a seed of change that begins in a very subtle way within each of us but over time can be observed in real, palpable change all around us. We expanded our field of awareness to know that such Powers as the prison system rise and fall. We contacted love for ourselves as well as the others; compassion towards our attackers as well as our friends. It might seem a small thing, bringing this light of awareness to the violence that feeds the underbelly of our prison system. But this is the light that Nelson Mandela brought with him into his prison cell. This is the light that illumined the inner spirit of the institutional form of Apartheid that sent him to prison. And this was the light with which he returned to liberate his country of South Africa.

That day in our LiT-uPP circle we opened what intercultural philosopher Raimon Panikkar calls the “third eye,” the eye of the spirit, the eye that pierces the darkness with light. And in that seeing all things change.

I invite you to open your eye of spirit because the change that is asked of us needs all of us. We need no longer to punish pain, our own or each others. We need to heal the pain: to make the parts whole again.

For more information about how to support women inside: www.thelionesstale.org

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