



*Skyline, Spring - 2013*

## Earthlines

©By Diane Pendola

### *From Margin to Center*

*When did you know that we weren't on the margins but at the center?*

The question felt poignant. It came from one of the women in our LiT-uPP core group as she looked up from reading a book that held a chapter on The Lioness Tale Prison Project. I knew the lines she was referring to because I had written them, they read: *I am confident that these women are not outside this [harmonious nature of] reality. They are not on the margins. They are at the very center. And in the midst of an inherently violent and dehumanizing system that would relegate them to the status of non-persons, they can claim their personhood...they become not the victims of a degrading system but the very instruments of its transformation.*<sup>1</sup>

The name of the book she was looking through was *Dreaming a New Earth: Raimon Panikkar and Indigenous Spiritualities*. I had the opportunity to present a paper about the prison project at this conference honoring Panikkar in Australia in June of 2010. Before I went, I had gathered letters from LiT-uPP participants and here they were, represented in this beautifully published book.

I looked at her searchingly. The realization that women like her, serving life prison sentences, are not on the margins but at the very center of reality, is a core principle, a deeply felt conviction that had led me to the prison and to this moment. And I also knew, that in this movement from theory to practice, this conviction had become something more. It had become a knowing. In India, people greet each other with that beautiful gesture of hands prayerfully folded at the heart, and with a slight bow say *Namaste*, which means *the divine in me greets the divine in you*. What for me might have begun as a theological conviction was now an experiential knowing. The light looking through her eyes testified to the light alive at her core.

But the journey to the center within is not a given. In a way, we all live on the margins. Rather than living from the core of our humanity, which is also the place of our divinity, we live on the surfaces of our lives. We look for satisfaction outside of ourselves. There is an ancient saying that is probably familiar to you: *God is a circle whose center is*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dreaming a New Earth: Raimon Panikkar and Indigenous Spiritualities*, "LiT-uPP: The Lioness Tale Prison Project: Symbol of the *cosmotheandric* reality, by Diane Pendola, ed. Gerard Hall and Joan Hendricks, Mosaic Press, 2012, Australia

*everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.* I like to think that center is me and you, and it is incumbent on each of us to make the journey from the margins to the center of our being.

So this journey is a very personal one for each of us. And yet, when we come into the center of ourselves this is not the end of our journey, because there at the center, is the entire reality. If indeed this is the place where our humanity and our divinity meet, then my “I” becomes a “we” and we learn the meaning of compassion, (*com* means *with*; *passion* means *to suffer*). We learn that compassion compels us to accompany people, and the entire planet, in our suffering until the roots of suffering are exposed; until the sources of suffering are healed; until our unity at the center in Being is realized; until Christ is “all in all.”

It is from the center that we see our responsibility to those who have been forced to the margins. But the surprise is that when people from the margins move to the center the healing reverberation through our communal body is even more strongly felt! Why? Because until the entire body is involved in healing, the entire body continues to suffer! Both the Jewish and the Christian traditions intuit the imperative of widening our circle in such a way that those on the margins can participate at the center. *Is not this the fast I choose*, asks the prophet Isaiah, *to undo the thong of the yoke and let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry and shelter the homeless poor?* And Jesus, good Jew that he is, echoes the same: *The spirit of the Lord has been given me, has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free.*

There is a new religious consciousness emerging along an entire spectrum of authentic connection to this *center which is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere*: from Liberation theologies to engaged Buddhism; from the New Story emerging from quantum physics to the rise of indigenous voices on behalf of the planet. This realization that we are all connected, that we rise or fall together, that *everything is because of everything else*, is now giving voice to the voiceless, connecting the disconnected and widening our circle to include those who have been excluded.

Yesterday when I was walking in this beautiful place of forest and meadows where I am so privileged to live, feeling the warmth of the sun and a slight breeze that made me want to lift my arms as though in flight, I sensed my friends in prison. I thought about the question:

*When did you know that we weren't on the margins but at the center?*

I knew when you looked into my eyes and I saw myself reflected in yours. Because you have allowed me to accompany you to the center of your freedom, I more deeply live my own. When I think of you, I lift my wings in flight.