

# Fall 2017 ~ A New Story



*Skyline*

## *EARTHLINES*

*By Diane Pendola*

Working with women serving very long prison sentences has changed me. *I try to imagine waking up each morning on a thin mattress atop a metal bunk bed. There is someone else on the bunk above me, others stacked beside me. I turn my head to the grey, cold concrete wall and am startled to find I am waking to a nightmare rather than from one. I wonder where I am, and how I came to be here. And then the realization wells up in me like bile. I swallow hard and prepare to meet the battles of the day. I'm living in a warzone. The battleground is littered with the walking wounded and the living dead. I am a casualty, but I refuse to surrender my humanity or my compassion— though I am war weary and I feel my heart can no longer break because it has already been shattered.*

These women are teaching me about living life in a crucible, in a microcosm mirroring the macrocosm of massive suffering happening across the planet. They cannot change their context. They have no power over their external environment. Others literally hold the keys to their prison cells. And yet...

I'm reminded of a story from the gospels. A woman is caught in the act of adultery. Within her cultural and religious context the men hold all the keys. In the time of Jesus women had no rights. They were considered property, like the goats and the sheep, and like the goats and sheep were dependent on the protection of others. In the case of women that protection came from husbands and male relatives. And if there were no male relatives, or if the husband decided to abandon her, prostitution might be her only means of self-support, of literal survival. And here are these men. They hold stones in their hands, ready to heave them at a woman who has transgressed the law, the rules— all forged in the context of male power and privilege.

Jesus then says these famous words: "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." And one by one the men drop the rocks from their hands and turn and leave Jesus alone with the woman. Jesus says to her, "Has no one condemned you?" She replies, "No one, sir." And he says, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

My first response is to cheer Jesus for allowing the men to see the proverbial log in their own eyes. Perhaps they will recognize their own participation in this social "sin" (which can also be read as brokenness, fragmentation, separation from essential being and wholeness). If any of them allow this recognition of culpability to be faced within themselves, it is a transformational moment, (you might even say salvific). But if we remember how the Jesus story ends, the men most bound to their cultural and religious privileges were least ready to shed them.

My second response is to question Jesus for putting the sin on the woman. After all, she is a victim of oppressive forces over which she has no control. How dare he blame an oppressed woman for her oppression!

But looking deeper, Jesus, well aware of the social context and the larger cultural dynamics at work, sees something more, something deeper, something intrinsic to this unique person before him. He sees her dignity and her capacity to make a free decision.

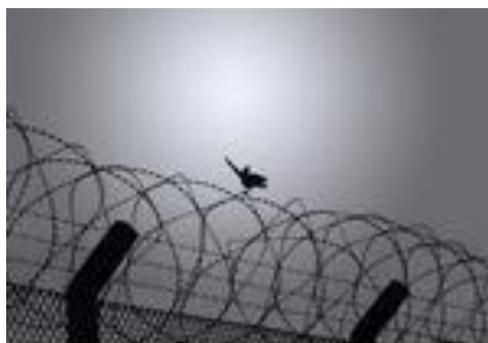
This quality of seeing is urgently needed in our time. We need to open all of our senses: the senses of our physical body and the felt knowledge of how we share this body with the body of the whole earth; the sense of our intelligence and how our minds reach out to understand ourselves and our relationship to this world; and this spiritual sense, this organ of perception that “sees” the Whole in the parts and the part in the Whole, the eye that weds knowledge with love.

I know I am not alone in our time, feeling the constraints of external forces that appear beyond our control. Our planet is being ravaged by a fragmenting consciousness that does not want to admit its culpability in the destruction unfolding before us. I feel at once victim and perpetrator. Caught between these two poles I am imprisoned: angry on one hand and numb with denial on the other.

From within the crucible of a life time in prison, these women have helped me to reconcile this inner tension, this inner polarization that is also painfully reflected in our outer world. They have taught me how to forgive injustices. They have taught me how to forgive myself. Though evil and hatred and cruelty exist, I am more. Every time I walk into that prison, they reveal to me the immensity of the freedom that lives at the very core of our shared humanity. They heal me. And yes, I also heal them.

Healing and forgiveness seem to share the same essence—the same source. Our world is in desperate need of healing. Walking into the prison I continue to recognize the injustices surrounding me, but I do not need to wait for the injustices to be remedied before I am liberated to walk into a new life.

Just as they wake up to the grey walls of a prison cell, we also wake to the stark reality of a world at war with itself. The incarcerated have shown me that none of us need to let external circumstances define who we are. We no longer need to perpetuate the old story of victim/perpetrator. At the center of our being is freedom. And as a free person each of us is the new story that is even now being written through our lives.



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