

For Mary Daly: in memory of courage walking

Joan Chittister | Jan. 13, 2010 From Where I Stand

I did not know Mary Daly personally. I never met her professionally. I never heard even one of her public speeches. My concern for women's issues did not come from Daly. I got that from my mother.

My sense of Daly's impact on history comes from every discussion of women's issues in which I ever participated. The impact Daly's ideas and courage was having on other women was palpable. In those living situations, then, I learned a lot from Daly. Most of all, I learned how to look newly at things I'd looked at for so long that I was no longer really seeing any of them.

Recently I heard a commentator remark on her role in the development of thought in our time that "when the theological history of the period is written, Mary Daly will, at most, be only a small footnote in the study." That depends, I would argue, on who is doing the history. Women, I think, will have a great deal more to say about Daly than any amount of footnotes can possibly hold.

Remote as my own associations had been, for instance, when the word of her death came I realized instantly that women in general, whether they knew it or not, had a great deal for which to thank her.

Women need to thank Daly for raising two of the most important theological questions of our time: one, whether the question of a male God was consistent with the teaching that God was pure spirit, and two, whether a church that is more patriarchal system than authentic church could possibly survive in its present form. These two questions have yet to be resolved and are yet rankling both thinkers and institutions.

Women need to thank Daly for bearing the rejection that too often comes to those who say a new insight first and say it consistently and say it in the face of the very system in which they themselves have been raised.

For example, in later years, Daly refused to accept men in some of her classes, forcing men to experience the exclusion that women had endured for centuries. As a result, she lost her tenured position at a Catholic college for allegedly failing to offer equal service to all students, both men and women. But at the same time, no one else in Catholic colleges ? or elsewhere ? lost their jobs for excluding women from access to theology degrees or various medical specialties, among others, on the grounds that women, as women, were unfit for such programs.

Nor did anyone ? now that men had finally experienced what it felt like to be made invisible in the public arena ? officially apologize to women for having kept them out of schools, offices, work, leadership positions, discussions and decision-making in both church and state for two millennia. However much theology claimed we were all equal.

Women need to thank Daly for modeling the adulthood, the psychological maturity, the strength it takes to accept the social isolation and loneliness that comes with refusing to agree that just because we have never questioned a thing that it is, therefore, unquestionable. Thanks to her relentless questioning of women's social circumstances and theological exclusions everywhere, the woman's question became a major and profound

theological question. It is thanks to Daly and the myriad of women theologians after her that "Because we say so" is no longer either a logical or an acceptable explanation for the exclusion of women anywhere.

Women need to thank Daly for exposing to us a whole new way of being alive. She freshened thought about the role and place of women by using language to show us what we could not see. She dug into history to trace the original meanings of words like *hag* and *witch* ? once terms of reverence for the spiritual qualities and feminine wisdom of women, but now used to reduce them to the level of the malevolent.

She forced us to think newly, to think creatively. She called on women to Re-member themselves, to put themselves together differently than they had been taught was right for a woman. She talked about Gyn/nocide to make us understand that the infamous centuries of witch burnings were really the genocide of women practiced long before this century's Holocaust and under the guise of holiness.

Indeed, Daly's work is an icon to women. She was a groundbreaking thinker, a threat to any patriarchal institution, a creator of an entire new way of seeing life, of being alive, of celebrating life. She touched a culture deeply. Indeed, we owe her thanks.

From where I stand, a person's influence is measured, not so much by virtue of their effect on the institutions that bred them, but by their influence on those who never knew them at all. It is the women who never knew Daly but now know the things she knew that are the real evidence of her legacy, her impact, her meaning not only to this generation but to generations to come. As in "all generations shall call her blessed."

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