



The Rev. Loey Powell
Executive for Administration
& Women's Issues

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110
Phone: 216.736.3700
Fax: 216.736.3703

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Pushing Forward

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March is designated as Women's History Month, following right on the heels of Black History Month. There are many, many women who deserve to be lifted up and honored for their leadership, ingenuity, being the "first at" something, courage, and impact on history and I hope that we all are learning about them during these weeks.

I want to lift up just one such woman, someone whose death this past January received little notice outside theological circles but whose influence on religion has been extraordinary. Born into an Irish Catholic family as the only child of older parents, Mary pursued doctorates in theology and philosophy from universities in Switzerland during a time when American universities were not granting women such degrees.

But Mary Daly's progression in academics and in the church (which in her case was the "Big C" church, Catholicism) was not the typical trajectory. She taught at Boston College in the 1960's and 70's but was eventually forced to retire when she refused to teach men in her classes and this was challenged by an intentional right-wing effort to get rid of her. (Little known is the fact that she mentored many male students and conducted independent studies with them.)

I was in seminary in the early 1970's when I first read Daly's second book, "Beyond God the Father." In it, Daly put forth the basic proposition, "If God is male, then the male is God." Her work, her thinking, her genius fostered a vibrant feminist theological movement within Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and other major religions as women realized instinctively that she was right. How very limited is the Divine if we can only image the male, can only speak about God as "he" and "Father."

Dozens of women scholars began investigating sacred texts, probing translations and metaphors, reclaiming the unnamed and named women within those texts who presence affected tremendous change (like Miriam and Deborah of the Hebrew Scriptures). Christian scholars emphasized the fact that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection and that Jesus trusted women and included them in his inner circle. Around the theological and religious globe, new gender-inclusive translations of Holy Scriptures and hymns were being developed.

Mary Daly is not responsible for all of this by herself but she was on the leading edge of radical theological thought. She understood the connections between racism, sexism, heterosexism and colonialism. She invented new words ("gyn-ecology," "wickedary," "academia") to get her pointed points across, pushing us into new territory of thought.

Major movements in social and cultural change happen because there are the Mary Dalys out there forging ahead, way ahead, of most of us. But in their wake they have made space for the rest of us to realign our thinking, consider old paradigms that are outdated and outmoded, sometimes even harmful. We are different because they have been outrageous and creative and bold.

So I give thanks for the life and legacy of Mary Daly and lift her name in honor.

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