

**Spinning, Sparking, and Spirit: A Tribute to Mary Daly**

**A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist**

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*I just don't think that way, see, about guarding against. I'm thinking about plunging ahead. ... I think you guard against decay, in general, and stagnation, by moving, by continuing to move. And with courage. And courage is like -- it's a habitus, a habit, a virtue: you get it by courageous acts. It's like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging. I often draw the Spiral Galaxy on the blackboard, and instead of stars there are Moments. So each Moment, a real Moment, is an act of courage, and that means that the world will speak back to you -- and that Moment speaks to the next one, and the next one, and the next one. OK, take the labrys: everything is double-edged. You "guard against" best by not even guarding -- just by risking tremendously, and then you jump -- Leap -- into another sphere, or dimension.*

~Mary Daly (1928-2010)

## Readings

from The Church and the Second Sex by Mary Daly:

In theology, at the root of such distortions as antifeminism is the problem of conceptualizations, images, and attitudes concerning God. Many intelligent people are not aware of the far reaching consequences of this problem. It appears to such persons that an image of God as “an old man with a beard” who lives “up in heaven” is too childish to be taken seriously by any adult. They feel certain that their own belief is on a level far above these notions, and that the same is true of every educated adult. In actuality their confidence in themselves and in others like them is groundless. They fail to realize what a powerful grip such images have upon the imagination even after they have been consciously rejected as primitive and inadequate. Indeed, shades of the “old man with the beard” – his various metaphysical equivalents – continue to appear even in the most learned speculations of theologians. What does the abiding presence of such images have to do with the problem with which this book is concerned? On one level the answer to this question may be glimpsed when one considers that the image in question is, obviously, of a person of the male sex. Of course, no theologian or biblical scholar believes that God literally belongs to the male sex. However there are bits of evidence that the absurd idea that God is male lingers on in the minds of theologians, preachers, and simple believers, on a level which is not entirely explicit or conscious. One has only to think of the predictable and spontaneous reaction of shock and embarrassment if a speaker were to stand before a group and refer to God as She. Indeed, many would find it unfitting, not quite normal .. and chances are that if forced to choose between “she” and “it” to refer to the divinity, many would prefer the latter pronoun, which although unsatisfactory would appear to them as less blasphemous than the feminine.

These are the words of Dr. Mary Daly in Beyond God the Father:

The history of anti-feminism in the Judeo-Christian heritage already has been exposed. The infamous passages of the Old and New Testaments are well known. I need not allude to the misogyny of the church fathers – for example, Tertullian, who informed women in general: “You are the devil’s gateway,” or Augustine, who opined that women are not made in the image of God. I can omit reference to Thomas Aquinas and his numerous commentators and disciples who defined women as misbegotten males. I can overlook Martin Luther’s remark that God created Adam lord over all living creatures but Eve spoiled it all. I can pass over the fact that John Knox composed a “First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women.” All of this, after all, is past history.

Perhaps, however, we should take just a cursory glance at more recent history. Pope Paul VI, assumed his place as champion of “true women’s liberation,” asserting that this does not lie in “formalistic or materialistic equality with the other sex, but in the recognition of that specific thing in the feminine personality – the vocation of a woman to become a mother.” Theologian Karl Barth proclaimed that woman is ontologically subordinate to man as her “head”. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his famous Letters and Papers from Prison, in which he proclaimed the attack of Christianity upon the adulthood of the world to be pointless, ignoble and unchristian – in this very same volume, insisted that women should be subject to their husbands. Theology and ethics

which are overtly and explicitly oppressive to women are, by no means, confined to the past.

## Sermon

I have been told many times not to apologize for what I preach -- so take this not so much as an apology as a plea. You might hear words today which are shocking or even annoying -- words like feminist, witch, patriarchy. I beg you to bear with me as these are important words -- sign posts on a journey. Please allow the annoyance to pass through you and remind you that what annoys us is often something from which we can learn. You may be surprised to hear me saying these things and wonder...so let me set your wondering at ease now -- I have faith in women and faith in men. I have learned from women and learned from men. And I value a world of women and men -- in fact -- it is our only hope.

Around 1976 I was still at college and one of my closest friends who was also a major in Philosophy, came to me boiling with anger. He'd gone to attend a talk by a visiting speaker -- one Mary Daly -- a philosopher and theologian. She was critical of the way that society treated women -- and while that had only bothered him a little -- he'd wanted to ask her a question when she invited questions and she hadn't called on him. He'd been persistent and finally she'd explained that she wouldn't be answering questions from the males in the audience. He was outraged. How could she espouse freedom for women and discriminate against men. I was pretty new to the feminist scene. I'd never heard of this woman. I thought she sounded pretty wild. I suggested -- perhaps there'd been some misunderstanding. But my friend was adamant. What she'd done gave me a lot to think about. I was one of only a few women in the philosophy department. I'd begun my major with enthusiasm but I felt far more comfortable in my independent study classes than in the larger class room. The worst had been during Plato Seminar -- 8 students -- seven guys -- and me. It seemed as though the guys all had volumes of opinions and shared them freely. In fact it was hard to get a word in edgewise and I spent most of the semester in silence or terrified that I would be called on and unable to offer some brilliant thought. In class after class, I noticed that guys were far more willing to speak, ask questions and opine about weighty philosophical questions and I felt fairly certain that we were all a little too green -- too young, too new to philosophy to have truly fresh ideas or valuable thoughts. Having attended a girl's school for high school I hadn't had that experience so clearly. As I reflected on how hard it was to speak up in those classes, I wondered if that had anything to do with why our visiting speaker had been willing only to hear the questions of women. I found myself thinking about how much more comfortable I would be in a setting where I knew I would be heard and taken seriously. I found myself a few such settings over the next year before graduating. But it wasn't until after college that I finally opened Mary Daly's book *Beyond God The Father*. It was written in 1973. A long time ago and in some ways

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When she died on January 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year the New York Time gave biographical information: she was born in Schenectady, N.Y., on Oct. 16, 1928. A self-described "radical lesbian feminist," Professor Daly maintained a long, often uneasy relationship with Boston College, the Jesuit institution where she had taught theology since 1966.

Among the first American women to train as a Roman Catholic theologian, Professor Daly challenged orthodoxies from the start. Formerly a practicing Catholic, she came to regard organized religion as irreparably patriarchal... After earning a bachelor's degree in English and Latin from the College of Saint Rose in Albany in 1950, she earned a master's in English from the Catholic University of America and a Ph.D. in theology from Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind. She later earned two more doctorates, in philosophy and theology, from the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. In 1999, Professor Daly left Boston college after a male

student threatened suit when he was denied a place in her class on feminist ethics. She had long limited enrollment in some advanced women's studies classes to women only..."

It was just after college in 1977 that I got around to reading *Beyond God the Father*. It explored every nook and cranny of that idea and the work of that idea in shaping the world. Where, in *The Church and the Second Sex* Mary Daly had hoped for a joint venture between men and women to find a sense of the divine beyond gender – in *Beyond God the Father*, she was ready for women to revolt against all religion – to abandon every religion – for as she said it was not just one religion or another that oppressed women – but every religion that had, seated in its center, a masculine sense of the divine and a strong edict to keep women as second class citizens. Certainly she was not alone in this assertion – she was looking back at pioneer thinkers such as Mathilde Jocelyn Gage who lived from 1826 -1989. She wrote on and was an activist for Native American Rights as well as an hard worker for women's suffrage. Her most influential book was *Woman, Church and State*, and it was this book that Mary Daly drew inspiration from. Gage said in a speech at the Woman's National Liberal Convention in 1890, "The stronghold of the church has ever been the ignorance and degradation of women. Its control over woman in the two questions of marriage and education have given it keys of power more potent than those of Peter. With her uneducated, without civil or political rights, the church is sure of its authority; but once arouse woman to a disbelief in church teachings regarding her having brought sin into the world; once open to her all avenues of education, so that her teaching of the young in her charge will be a broader, more scientific character than in the past and the doom of the church is sealed."

It's amazing to think that such radical women were speaking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to think that their words – except for a few safe snippets have been largely forgotten and disappeared from the pages of his-tory. Women like Gage knew what they were up against – she wrote in 1881, "To those who fancy we are near the end of the battle or that the reformer's path is strewn with roses, we may say them nay...Neither shall we who carry on the fight, reap the great reward. We are battling for the good of those who shall come after us; they, not ourselves, shall enter into the harvest." By the time that Daly was writing, while the vote had been won the real struggle was long from over.

Mary Daly argued that the structures of religion – with God above all as well as gendered, engendered a hierarchy and was intended to. Not only the structures, but the myths underlying them. She wrote: if God is male then male is God. She looked further at images of evil portrayed as female and feminine. One does not need to look far to find such images – Eve as the temptress and downfall rather than the savior of human history is only one such image. Eve – which means the mother of life – could have been like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and bringing it to earth. Instead she was the one who took the forbidden fruit and was not seen by Gods or men as heroic – though what she stole was the fire of the mind. Daly looked at church history --- and while she pointed her heaviest criticisms at the Catholic Church, she also took a stance in universally condemning religion. Instead, she offered, there was a divinity – beyond gender -- free from the constraints of our conventional thought – a Divinity that bestowed freedom because that Divinity unfolded in and through freedom. It could not be imagined in the ivory tower of what she called academentia – where she was writing nor could it be found in any house of worship – but somewhere outside the bounds. She'd looked back at that record of oppression of women by the church and had seen the indifference of men to the history of that suffering. The Church was unmoved, most men were unmoved, and she knew too much about women's history to wait as patiently as had Ms. Gage. By the time she wrote *beyond God the Father* she was seeing the clear ways that masculinist religion and the powers that be in high secular office worked together to continue to oppress women. In

1973 she wrote: “How this God operates is illustrated in contemporary civil religion. In one of the White House Sermons given during the first term of Richard Nixon, Rabbi Louis Finkelstein expressed the hope that a future historian may say that in the period of great trials and great tribulations, the finger of God pointed to Richard Milhous Nixon, giving the vision to save the world and civilization... Thus Nixon is his Anointed One.” And, as it depressingly has come to pass – this merging between the civil and religious sphere has intensified until it is a scandal if the president does not invoke the word and blessing of God upon this nation. Mary Daly was suggesting that women – for their own survival – for freedom and to help to create a new world of liberation – needed to step aside from the ritualized and sanitized forms of religion and into the wilds of the spirit. Women needed to gather and imagine a new divinity – living – embodied. A divinity only encountered in the wild but not alone -- women needed one another – to generate friendship and defy the isolation of individual households – to inspire one another and to encourage one another to think freely.

Thousands perhaps millions of women read the book and their minds flew open and their souls felt free. Her words were daring, angry, and – to be honest – rightfully angry. For there were and are countless women who sit quietly in churches trying to be the obedient, subservient characters that the church asked them to be. Or the mosque. Or women who were unable to gather in a minyan – the number of men needed to form a formal prayer group in Judaism. Or women who longed to give the sacraments or to preach... or to experience something completely different. But, as they read the pages of *Beyond God the Father*, new possibilities began to open up against the sharp edge of Mary Daly’s anger and even more against the sharp edge of her wit. She encouraged women to truly see – see what had been happening disguised as sacred doctrine – but which was, in fact, not a reason but a justification for oppression.

She offered tools to see and more – she suggested that, while it’s dangerous to see – it is, ultimately life-giving. Most of us have had something of that experience – of seeing beyond formal lessons to deeper truths – beyond enslaving ideas to new freedom – but, as Daly was writing, these aha’s were largely still the ahas of men. Daly knew that it cost men to be a part of patriarchy but she’d made the invitation in her first book and it had not been taken up by men. So she forged ahead inviting women to do the work of our own liberation.

She reminded women of the words of Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One’s Own*, “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” Daly reflected – that women, “having learned only to mirror... looking inside there, they would be confused by what at first would appear to be an endless Hall of Mirrors.” She ended *Beyond God the Father* with these words: “We have been locked in this Eden of his far too long. If we stay much longer life will depart from this planet. The freedom to fall out of Eden will cost a mirror shattering experience. And then she summons us to respond to the creative drawing power of the Good Who is Self-Communicating Being, who is the verb from whom, in whom and with whom, all true movements, move.”

She encouraged women out of Eden and out of religion, with some unexpected results – while there were many women who left organized religion – many women who sought circles in the woods to dance and to drum and to sing and to experience their own world on their own terms – many women turned to theological schools to more deeply understand the weapons that had been used against them and to see, of the messages that had positively touched them whether there was anything worth reviving.

A few years later Mary Daly published what was, likely her most radical book – radical in its honesty and its rigor of research and background. It was *Gyn/Ecology: the MetaEthics of*

Radical Feminism. I can't do it justice here in this time – but it was a work of pure courage. Daly moved from the myths to the harsh, harsh realities of women's lives. She was shocking in her detail and the thoroughness of her work. She was trying to pull together the myths, realities, and the connections in a way that would be an unmistakable trail out of that Shirley Partridge household and into the hard light where women's oppression could be seen and addressed. Again she was fair in handing out condemnation. She covered Indian Suttee – or wife burning. Chinese Footbinding. African Genital mutilation. The Widespread burning of witches in the middle ages. The cruel record of American Medicine toward women and women's bodies. In each instance she taught a method of looking and seeing. This was a far cry from the cultural relativism that had been a hallmark of modernity. Instead she asked us to see – not in pictures but in words – the tortured feet and the women indoctrinated to endure them and to pass the torture on to their own daughters, the mutilated bodies of girls, women dying of sepsis and disregard. She awakened an awareness of the witch burnings with stories, numbers, sources, and the reality that strong and gifted women were often accused of witchcraft and then murdered for challenging the authority of men and the church. Not hundreds but thousands of women. It was hard to look at the history of women and to realize that it was not a case of few bad laws – but of centuries of brutality and suffering. She invited you to look at the background – what is hidden or in shadow – who speaks and who is silent. A simple example – if I say that book has been read – you don't know who read it. If I say – I read that book you know. If I say – women were killed as witches it sounds as though there was a vague threat from somewhere --- but if I say the church used dogma written by Sprenger and Kramer in the *Maleus Maleficarum* in 1486... to vilify women –and then torture them to death – you get a clearer picture.

Daly stripped away the illusion of good old days. And at the same moment reminded women that there were new ways to look at the world and see and to be hope. She wanted our minds, bodies, lives to be whole – not broken into false dualisms – heaven and earth, lower/ higher, matter/spirit, body/ mind – not blinded by false stories – like Samantha and Darrin Stevens or the green hook nosed Halloween witch – and able to see the beauty in plain women and the power in everywoman. She used language in a marriage of poetry and prose that kept logic and yet produced a sort of ecstasy – the way that good poetry builds a picture that suddenly creates in the mind and heart an idea and a feeling. She took the word Spinster and made it new – so that women felt free to choose their own lives without shame – she reminded us that spinsters were spinners, creators, she wrote: “Spinsters unsnarl, unknot, untie, unweave. We knit, knot, interlace, entwine, whirl, and twirl. Absorbed in Spinning spinsters span the false dichotomies of false consciousness and break its mindbinding combinations.” And that Crones were not abject aged creatures to be pitied – but elders and survivors. She said that the history of women that we could reclaim was Crone-ology. It was serious and playful. She wrote: “the play is part of our work of unweaving and part of our weaving work. It whirls us into another frame of reference.” She took the word Hag and made it sing. She took the etymology of the word hagiography – the stories of the lives of the saints and said that hag-ography was the story of the lives of free thinking women. And since she was engaged in revolting against oppressive forms and was accused of being revolting – she was the first to call herself a revolting hag. And those of us who gathered to read her books and spin and spark together were changed and passed through anger and sorrow and into action and a new sort of freedom – the freedom to imagine ourselves in new ways.

Her poetry and play invited skeptics such as myself into a place where vision could happen-- where the world was alive with spirit – and in the spinning ecstasy of her words my

own yearning emerged from a hidden cocoon and unfolded. She helped women to remember dismembered selves – beyond forgotten -- and to become something new.

Mary Daly changed philosophy and theology. She wrote and practiced the idea that women – that we each men and women really – need space need a room of their own – a place where each one can see herself himself. Where we can feel and think our way to freedom – which is not the freedom to do anything – but the freedom to do the creative thing. Because of her women who, like me, had felt shy in philosophy classes found their voices and began to study and preach. Because she blazed such a radical trail other women could take up the work of reclaiming spirit.

I saw her speak twice – in my mid twenties in Pittsburgh. Once again she did not take questions from men. And yet her teaching created a brand new space for women at a time when it was hard to find a space and harder to keep the courage to hold the space when you carved it out. But in her talks women felt that space and expanded into it – mind, body and spirit.

It was Beacon Press – our own Unitarian Universalist publishing house that had the wisdom to publish Mary Daly's books. In the 37 years since the appearance of *Beyond God the Father* our Unitarian Universalist ministry has grown to include as many women as men. Our religious vision is freer for men and for women. Men who hungered for liberation and for a fresh world apart from the life crushing forms of patriarchy realized they needed their own space to reinvent themselves and formed men's groups. And new generations of men are able to see themselves and women as they really are – whole beings becoming new beings in every moment.

In the beginning was not the word. In the beginning was the hearing. Spinsters spin deeper into the listening deep. We can spin only what we hear, because we hear, and as well as we hear. Spinsters spin always, all ways.

Let us Spin Onward together.