Mary Daly
1928—2010
A Biographical Sketch

By Mary E. Hunt

For the Mary Daly Memorial Gathering
May 1, 2010, at Episcopal Divinity School
in Cambridge, MA

Mary Daly, in her own words, “threw her life as far as it would go.” On November 1, 2002, with Mary Daly at my side in Cambridge, I gave an introduction to her life at a conference on the history of women and American religion that Ann Braude organized through Harvard Divinity School. Mary vetted the bio before I uttered the first word, so I feel on solid ground to share parts of it as we remember her and her remarkable life.

What Mary Daly called the First Spiral Galaxy began before she was born in Schenectady, NY, on October 16, 1928, the only and deeply-desired daughter of Anna and Frank X. Daly, themselves children of Irish immigrants. She was educated at St. Rose College in Albany, NY, then went on to pursue three doctorates both in the U.S. and in Europe (Fribourg, Switzerland), where she spent seven years teaching and writing. She liked that one of the doctorates was a pontifical degree, the Doctor of Sacred Theology, in case she were elected pope!

Mary called it her “self-conferred diploma” granted upon her successful completion of the requirements for graduation from the Catholic Church. Indeed, she had already passed the comprehensives, I would argue, in her successful tenure battle in 1969 at Boston College. Boston College was her longtime academic home and her longtime nemesis. BC, which finally forced her into retirement thirty years later, gave her a terminal contract in 1969. More than 1500 male students (in those days BC’s student body was almost entirely male) demonstrated on her behalf. Perhaps calculating that several of them would...

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Editorial

If the universe had not created Mary Daly we would have had to invent her! Her influence on the field of feminist studies in religion remains enormous. She created space where none existed before, sort of like someone coming along and creating another island like Manhattan.

For countless people, women and men, Mary Daly “changed my life.” Prudent friends are quick to point out, “You changed your own life. Mary Daly just sparked you to do so.” What they mean is that Mary’s fearless following where the data led her—out of the churches, away from patriarchal influences, beyond tired expectations—meant that the rest of us could inhabit the spaces between here and there.

WATER and other feminist religious organizations owe our existence in part to Mary Daly. We may not have agreed with everything she said, nor did we think she was without failings, intellectual and otherwise. But across the field, around the world, there is an indebtedness to Mary Daly for her critical intellectual leadership, her personal courage, her boundless humor, and her oft-passed-over mysticism.

This special issue of the WATERwheel celebrates her good Irish self.

Mary Daly was a major donor to WATER. We would like to invite you to continue her legacy by making a donation to WATER in memory of her.

...Mary Daly

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turn out to be rich donors, the college changed its tune and granted her promotion and tenure.

The famous walk-out from Memorial Church took place in this same period, on November 14, 1971, part of what Mary called the Second Spiral Galaxy of her life. As the first woman in 336 years to be invited to preach at a Harvard Sunday service, Mary wasn’t about to let the occasion pass unnoticed. The actual sermon, like most sermons, has largely faded into oblivion. But the action of lots of women, and a few men, marching down the center aisle of Memorial Church, urged on from the pulpit to leave behind the gods of their fathers, left an indelible stamp on the Christian Church as a whole. I suspect it sent shivers down the spines of many a preaching patriarch who feared that his words might be greeted with the same voting by feet. Many women realized they could live quite handily without benefit of clergy.

Indeed, leaving patriarchal religions, or at least “defecting in place,” as some came to see the efforts to transform from within, became quite common for many feminists. The mass exit from Memorial Church was a source of inspiration during a period of high energy, collective actions, and bold moves to illustrate the intimate relationship between patriarchal religious claims and a society in which women and children were marginalized. If the First Spiral Galaxy was lived within, albeit against, patriarchal institutions, the Second Spiral Galaxy was clearly beyond them.

The Third Spiral Galaxy, 1975-87, was a move beyond the beyond, or what Mary called “spinning,” when she published some of her most widely-discussed work. She was denied promotion to full professor by Boston College in 1975 on the grounds that she had not produced “substantive work,” a claim so absurd on the face of it as not to require comment. Mary held a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Grant that year that freed her from the confines of “academia,” as she so fondly referred to the academy. A teacher at heart, she turned her full attention to writing that was for her both pedagogy and politics.

Mary Daly published Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism in 1978, cataloguing atrocities against women and urging, through “exorcism and ecstasy,” moves to overcome them. While critiqued for essentializing, perhaps homogenizing what were different women’s experiences, Mary Daly trained a bright light on injustices in need of eradication.

In 1984 she published Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy, a logical extension of Gyn/Ecology, detailing philosophical delicacies like the courage to sin. Pure Lust, she explains, “is not primarily a work of feminist eroticism, although it hardly excludes this from its range of concern. Chiefly, it is a work of Feminist Erraticism” (PL, p. x).

Such linguistic creativity demanded its own wordbook, hence her Websters’ First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language, conjured in cahoots with Jane Caputi in 1987. The Wickedary offered strong feminist definitions of words like “crone,” “lesbian,” and “witch,” epiphanies hurled at women now hurled right back with fresh meanings.

Yet another Boston College promotion debacle took place in 1989. Despite her many publications and her influence, not to mention petitions signed by several hundred colleagues in the American Academy of Religion, Boston College’s committee wrote, “the Committee recognized the contrast between your works and the more typical demonstrations of scholarly methodology in publications by which candidates for promotion to Professor are judged” (Out, p. 389). This is a typical case of what Mary Daly has called a “reversal.” While on the face of it the statement is true, it is true for reasons opposite of those for which it is used. So many scholars plod along in boring repetition of their mentors that Mary Daly’s bold efforts to spark new thoughts do indeed stand in sharp contrast. If the economic and cultural consequences of being denied promotion were not so unjust, the matter would not merit mention.

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...Mary Daly

(Continued from page 2)

Then it was on to the Fourth Spiral Galaxy, 1987-1998, when she spun Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage, published in 1992. This marvelous philosophical autobiography leads the reader through events, ideas, and places that shape a vision of global and planetary plenty.

Mary Daly moved on to the Fifth Spiral Galaxy, beyond the Fifth Dimension, in 1998 and following. She wrote Quintessence: Realizing the Archaic Future—A Radical Elemental Feminist Manifesto (1998) in which she cast the story fifty years hence, as told by Anonyma, or Annie, who pulls the author into the future that is as present as past.

The land is threatened by horrific wars and ecological disasters. The biophilic possibilities are endless but require a steadfast response to the “Call of the Wild.” These themes take on new intensity in Amazon Grace: Re-calling the Courage to Sin Big, which was her last book published in 2006.

In her final skirmish with Boston College in 2000, Mary Daly defended her choice to teach men separately from women. Her efforts garnered major media attention and helped women to understand and clarify just how patriarchal institutions work and how tenuous academic freedom really is. In the thick of the battle, Mary appeared on “The Roseanne Show,” a daytime TV talk show watched by millions. I remarked at the time that more people than have read all of our books in feminist theology combined watched that half-hour segment.

Mary continued lecturing and writing until about three years ago when debilitating illness ended her public work. But to her death she was, as I said in her presence in 2001, courageous and creative, hopeful and humorous, political and planetary.

Mary had the courage to push horizons others have only glimpsed from afar. It was her courage to more than be, to be more, that inspired so many of us to move ahead in our own sometimes-small steps. She paid a price, but I know that she would not have had it otherwise.

She created new words, new models, new ideas, new methods (not all of them equally convincing, but so what?), inventing as she went to unearth and reground concepts that can help women and other sentient beings, as she once described her audience. Her most creative work was literally making room, new space, in the discourse. Many people defined themselves in relation to Mary, usually putting her “out there” so they could be more acceptable. But it is the space in between that she created for which few paid her any rent. We remain in her debt.

The cosmic hope she manifested in women, “joyful message and Memory of the Future” sent to “sisters of all kinds and all times” (Quintessence, p. 237), showed an optimism that one might have expected to have been extinguished long ago. But the ecstatic roots of Mary’s work seemed only to deepen and strengthen.

Irish humor infused her work and life. Mary’s fanciful imagination—for example, her insistence on the uselessness of “Dic-tionaries,”—was full of puns and jokes, to the delight of readers. She laughed at herself, and let Annie and her feline familiars have some of the best lines. While I accused her of a certain “peeping Thomism” in the structure of her ideas, there is no doubt that she enjoyed the universe in all its irony.

Finally, Mary Daly’s work was explicitly political, always connected to the atrocities de jour and grounded in the need to transform systems and situations of injustice. This is why so many people beyond the field of religion and philosophy read, discuss, and rely on Mary Daly as the feminist’s feminist.

Her work was also planetary in scope, focused as much on Earth itself as on its human inhabitants. Animal well-being, genetic manipulation, and wars in all of their ecological and human tragedy were the canvas of her concern.

Mary moved from her Newton Centre apartment to Allen House in Jamaica Plain in 2008 and eventually to a nursing home in Gardner, MA, where she died on January 3, 2010. We buried her ashes at the historic Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MD, in the company of distinguished women.

Long may her ideas spark generations to do justice and long may her spirit inspire us to throw our lives as far as they will go.

MAY E. HUNT is a feminist theologian and co-director of WATER.

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To watch the Webcast of the service go to http://edx.adobeconnect.com/920465442

For more on the life and work of Mary Daly, see “A Feminist’s Feminist: Remembering MARY DALY, 1928-2010” by Mary E. Hunt, Ms. Magazine, Winter 2010, pages 52-53.
Rejoicing in Mary Daly
A Celebration of Her Life and Work
By Diann L. Neu

Mary Daly died on January 3, 2010. For her memorial service, Mary wanted women to gather in small groups around the world to remember her. We gathered at WATER on February 23, 2010, as she wished. We invite you and your community to do the same. We offer the following as a guide to your remembering and reinventing the magic of Mary Daly’s extraordinary life.

Invite participants to bring stories or remembrances of Mary Daly, a favorite quote from Mary Daly’s writings, finger food to have with tea.

Welcome
Welcome to this gathering celebrating Mary Daly, Her Life and Work. (Use the biography information about Mary Daly from pages 1-3 in this WATERwheel that is appropriate for your group.)

Introductions
Why did you come to this celebration? Did you know Mary Daly? Have you read one or more of her books? Share your name and tell us your connection to Mary Daly. (Sharing)

Song: “You Can’t Kill the Spirit” by Naomi Littlebear Morena ©1975

You can’t kill the spirit.
She’s like a mountain.
Old and strong,
She goes on and on and on.

Selected Words of Mary Daly
(Invite participants to choose quotes from Mary Daly’s books to read. Here are some that could be used.)

“If God is male, then the male is God.”

“Courage to be is the key to the revelatory power of the feminist revolution.”

“Courage is like—it’s a habit, a virtue: you get it by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.”

Song: ”You Can’t Kill the Spirit”

“We will look upon the earth and her sister planets as being with us, not for us. One does not rape a sister.”

“It is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God.”

“Women who are Pirates in a phallocentric society are involved in a complex operation. First, it is necessary to Plunder—that is, righteously rip off—gems of knowledge that the patriarchs have stolen from us. Second, we must Smuggle back to other women our Plundered treasures. In order to invert strategies that will be big and bold enough for the next millennium, it is crucial that women share our experiences: the chances we have taken and the choices that have kept us alive. They are my Pirate’s battle cry and wake-up call for women whom I want to hear.”

Song: ”You Can’t Kill the Spirit”

“Crones are not afraid to be Alone. We cherish the solitude in which we can Spin. ‘Isolation’ can Now be seen as insulation from a world of babble and compromise—the endless lies—that would hold us back from Hearing.”

“Why indeed must ‘God’ be a noun? Why not a verb—the most active and dynamic of all!”

“You guard against decay, in general, and stagnation, by moving, by continuing to move.”

Song: ”You Can’t Kill the Spirit”

Reflection/Sharing
How have you changed your life because of Mary Daly’s writings and teaching?

Song: ”Song of the Soul” by Cris Williamson from The Changer and the Changed, Bird Ankle Music, Olivia Records ©1975

Open mine eyes that I may see
Glimpses of truth thou ask of me
Open mine eyes illumine me
Spirit Divine.

(All circle and spiral together.)
(Chorus) Love of my life I am crying,
I am not dying, I am dancing
Dancing along in the madness,
there is no sadness,
Only a song of the soul.

And we’ll sing this song,
Why don’t you sing along
And we can sing for a long, long time
Why don’t you sing this song,
Why don’t you sing along
And we can sing for a long, long time.
(Chorus)

What do you do for your living?
Are you forgiving, giving shelter?
Follow your heart, love will find you,
truth will unbind you,
Sing out a song of the soul. (Chorus)

Come to your life like a warrior,
nothin’ will bore you,
You can be happy.
Let in the light, it will heal you
and you can feel you
Sing out a song of the soul. (Chorus)

DIANN L. NEU is a feminist liturgist and minister, spiritual director and psychotherapist who is codirector of WATER.
Note: When Mary Daly visited the WATER office, she inscribed some of her books to the WATER community. We quote her words after the books she autographed.

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"For Mary Hunt, Wishing you continuing Quintessental Courage and Fantastic Luck—with thanks for ever-thing—Mary Daly"

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"Wicked Wishes to WATER, Mary Daly"

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"To WATER—Courage! Mary Daly"

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"WATER—Onward! Mary Daly"

"Lusty Wishes—Mary Daly"

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"To WATER—Wild Wishes! Mary Daly"

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"To WATER—in Sisterhood! Mary Daly"

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"To someone who will remember the contents! Mary Daly"

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Source: WATER 2010
In Memory of Her

From Kay Eaton of Cleveland, OH: In honor of Program/Artistic Director, Cece Miller...for midwiving SacredSpace with her creative imagination and tenacity.

From Patrick and Rosalinda Raher and Julie Anne Hudman of Washington, DC: In memory of Elaine Sonosky.

From Margee Iddings of Alexandria, VA: For my dear friend, Kathy Spitzer, a Methodist clergywoman in WV, who turned the magical 60.

From Nancy Adams-Cogan of Iowa City, IA: In memory of my mother, Eva Holton Adams.

From Carolyn Farrell, BVM, of Dubuque, IA: In honor of BVM 25th & 50th Jubilarians.

From Richard Blanchfield of Oceanside, CA: In honor of Lucy Chu.


From Peter J. Henry of Alexandria, VA: On the occasion of her 80th birthday, Patricia Kearns Henry [of Lewes, DE] requested that a donation be made in her honor to WATER.

From Mary F. Mason of Round Hill, VA: In honor of Carroll Saussy.

From Jacquie D. Hoffman of Fairfax, CA: In honor of Lucia Conforti.

From Mary Meyer Neff of Clinton Township, Mi: In memory of Sr. Jean Meyer.

From Cheryl Nichols of Hyattsville, MD: In memory of Deb and Betty.

From Janet E. Garrow of Bellevue, WA: In memory of Robert Bouyeds.

From Fred Percival and Margaret Barnicle of Hartford, CT: In honor of Fred & Pat Percival.

From Genevieve P. O’Hara of St. Louis, MO, in loving memory of Walter F. Brueggemann [her husband], whose long life reflected his compassion for needy and oppressed people, and his great love for the gods in his life.

From Carolyn Farrell of Dubuque, IA, on behalf of the BVM Network for Women’s Issues: In honor of the late Mary Daly.

From Sr. Marie Therese Martin, CSJ, of Worcester, MA: In memory of Sharon Smith, PBVM.

From Rev. James L. Meyer of Detroit, MI: In honor of Rev. Dena O’Callaghan’s recent ordination into the Catholic priesthood.

From Bernard Schluger of Berkeley, CA: In honor of Mary E. Hunt.

From WATER: In memory of Dorothy Height, civil rights and women’s rights leader. Her life stands as testimony to the power of one woman to

A Mary Daly Reflection: From Another Perspective

By Anna Beth Roeschley

Many knew her as a radical, as a rebel, as a heretic. They knew her as a professor, as a writer, as a thinker. They knew her as stubborn, strong, bold. They knew her as one who shook foundations and forged new ways—in feminist theology, in the re-imagining of God, in the role of women in religious academia.

Countless people have reflected on the life and work of Mary Daly since her recent passing, and no doubt will continue to shine on her legacy. I, too, could speak to the lasting impact of Mary Daly on my feminist theological understandings. I could remark on the voice I found upon reading her, the shape taken by my atonement theology when pushed “beyond god the father.”

And yet, in these days since her death and in the wake of her tributes, my reflections have tended toward a different nature, a perspective drawn from interactions with Mary Daly in the past couple years of her life while I was at WATER.

These were not her flourishing years. These years held the last of her public lectures; the end—not the advent—of her many great works; the loosening of a mind and body wound fiercely around the convictions for which she stood. These are not the years for which she will be most remembered. But I share the grace of having these years by which to remember her.

One might have memories of a grandiose first encounter with her. Mine entailed sitting across from her on a hotel bed, a TV table between us bearing scrambled eggs and home fries, at which she was poking before a speaking engagement at Goucher College. She wore a maroon sweatshirt. Baltimore was gray and rainy, nothing but ordinary. Almost too ordinary, I later thought—the day I met the famed Mary Daly.

I would speak with her from time to time when she called the WATER office, or hear her voice on the answering machine. Her messages were sometimes unclear, increasingly so as time went on. The stark contrast struck me—hearing the decline of an elder’s senses, while volumes of her keen intellect stood tall on the shelf within eyesight.

One might be tempted to stay sad or sorry, having witnessed, albeit from a distance, the “losing” of a foremother such as Mary Daly. But her death, as death does, confirmed the simple and universal truth of mortality—it is something shared by all. Bodies thrive and age, survive and suffer. We create and engage and achieve, and in time, come to rest. What we do counts. She made her life count.

Of the many who read and learned from her, most did not experience the most mortal side of Mary Daly. This mortal side inspires as much as her mind does. Even the greatness we so respect in Mary Daly is subject to the complications of being human. Recognizing this, we carry on believing that we also share something of her greatness. For this we must humbly aspire and give thanks.

Anna Roeschley and Mary Daly before Mary spoke at Goucher College in 2007. Photo Credit: WATER.

ANNA BETH ROESCHLEY worked as a WATER Associate from 2007-2009.

The subtitle says it all. With essays by Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz on Hispanic women, Rosetta Ross on Rural Southern black women, Mercy Oduyoye on African women theologians, and others, this collection is a history worth using widely.


This collection is dated now but no less important as a chapter in women’s religious history. In fact, in late 2009 women braved rain to make their presence felt at the wall despite great odds. The authors struggled with integrity and brought attention to a difficult problem which continues to be unresolved.


The Anna Howard Shaw Center at Boston University presented these essays by prominent feminist scholars as part of their series on multiculturalism. Reading each one scholars as part of their series on these essays by prominent feminist scholars would be a rewarding work of one stalwart colleague.

Chung, Meehyun and Elisabeth C. Miescher, Editors. WEAVING DREAMS—TRAEME WEBEN. Berlin: Frank&Timme GmbH, 2009 (374 pages, 39.80 euros plus shipments. Contract: c.2rnfltlv@fraktimme.de or buchstelling@fraktimme.de).

This Festschrift for the 90th birthday of Ruth Epting is a rich and insightful volume. Essays in honor of this highly respected and beloved feminist religious leader span the breadth of her interests: Bible, social justice, women’s well-being, church community, and the nature of the divine. Libraries will want to have it as a historical record of European women’s theological journeys as focused through the work of one stalwart colleague.


This book should be on every reading list of groups that struggle with heterosexism and homosexuality as Christian religious issues. The editor is a reformed gay-basher, a Baptist minister, who gathered a wonderful group of scholars including Marvin Ellison, Irene Monroe, and Mona West. Their collective insights and passion shine the light where it belongs.


A first in the field, this study helps orient readers to how “lesbian” is understood in biblical interpretation and especially how to handle it in terms of the ubiquity of queer theory. Happily, the author is not trying to do the “same old same old,” fitting “lesbian” into the hetero-determined package. Rather, she seeks to destabilize all the categories and still keep “lesbian” as a meaningful signifier.


Though the editors could have entitled it “Daughters of Sarah,” the essays are a nice introduction to an increasingly complex field. Useful for study groups and inter-religious dialogue partners.


Women ministers are still feeling their way through their vocations and the salaries and working conditions they deserve. This is a primer for those who follow. What remains to be written is WHEN THE MINISTER IS A FEMINIST.


A lovely collection of prayers from Toni Morrison, Sojourner Truth, Paula Gunn Allen, Marian Wright Edelman, and many others (including Diann Neu) whose spiritual wisdom endures.


The texts find their way into daily life in subtle and powerful ways. This study aims to bring a multitude of current scholarly perspectives into a coherent whole. The task is almost impossible but the effort is illuminating.


Losing a spouse is never easy but this account of the first year after her husband’s death shows how one woman handled it. Dolores Leckey writes persuasively as she outlines in journal entries how she coped with the challenges to her faith and daily life.


The many and unsung ways women express their spirituality are amazing. This author works with Sudanese refugees and sees the world through eyes other than her own. Simple, spiritual, powerful.


This is an important labor of love that tells the story of a remarkable woman who gave her life for those whose land was taken from them in the Amazon rainforest. Dorothy Stang, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, was shot because she stood with the peasants against rich farmers. Hers was a life of service and strength, like so many women whose commitments to the world are concrete and, in many cases, dangerous.


Time to learn from colleagues whose voices are so vital to the interreligious conversation. A helpful primer on beliefs and practices.


Both the content and method of feminist interreligious dialogue are outlined in this compact text. It can be used as a springboard for such work and/or as a companion to beginning discussions on how women handle challenging questions with style and substance.


Pauli Murray’s life and work continue to bear fruit in the Episcopal Church where she foresawed contemporary conflicts by her commitments to racial and sexual justice. She was a precursor to womanist theology in her emphasis on African American women’s contributions to the world. In short, she was ahead of her time but now her insights are needed more than ever.


Based on the methodology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, this is one of the highest North American scholar’s efforts to learn from Latin American women on how to understand a complex and difficult aspect of Christianity. With an emphasis on life, not death, the author seems to have learned a great deal.


The journey from traditional patriarchal Christianity through goddesses to ecofeminism and a creation-focused future make for fascinating reading.
In Memory of Mary Daly
October 16, 1928—January 3, 2010