

Change of Heart, by Jeanne Bishop

reviewed by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

In Review

"*Change of Heart* is a tragic story of senseless violence, horrific loss, and, in the end, forgiveness that is astonishing. I kept asking myself, 'As a Christian, could I be as strong and merciful as Jeanne Bishop?' I have my doubts."

— JOHN GRISHAM

CHANGE^{of} HEART



Justice, Mercy, and Making Peace
with My Sister's Killer

JEANNE BISHOP

Change of Heart

By Jeanne Bishop

Westminster John Knox

Nancy Langert dipped her finger in her own blood and drew a heart on her basement floor next to the dead body of her husband. Then she traced the letter "u": *love you*. She died soon after from loss of blood. She and her husband had been fatally shot

by a local teenager in their townhouse in an affluent Chicago suburb. It was April 1990.

Author Jeanne Bishop was Langert's older sister. When Bishop learned at a police station that her pregnant sister had been murdered, she found herself saying aloud, "I don't want to hate anybody." Weeks later, still reeling with emotion, she prayed, "Take this from me, God. Do something with it. Bring good out of this evil."

Change of Heart may therefore seem like a misleading title. From the moment Bishop learned of the murder, her heart was set on her intent to choose love. But God transformed that intent in a way beyond what she ever imagined. Later, as she describes it, "I felt my heart, hard and rigid, cracking open."

I wonder if her title was inspired by the Greek word *metanoia*, often translated "repentance" but meaning, in fact, "change of mind" or "change of heart." Bishop's change of heart was not only a shift in her perspective or an enlargement of her compassion. It was repentance. This is not what we expect from someone recovering from the murder of family members. But Bishop's memoir is also the story of how she came to have a deeper understanding of herself as a sinner: "I had always made a divide between Nancy's killer and me. Him: bad murderer. Me: innocent victim's family member."

It was the Baptist theologian Randall O'Brien who said to her, "We are all murderers. We are all responsible for the death of the sinless Son of God. We all crucified him. On that, there is no distinction between you and your sister's killer." Bishop found that she could no longer draw that divide. Messenger after messenger arrived in her life—"my saints," she calls them—bearing a real but painful gospel call for reconciliation with enemies, for love and mercy even for those who have committed the most heinous crimes.

By telling her wrenching story, Bishop invites readers to travel with her as she seeks to forgive and reconcile with violent criminals. I was continually flabbergasted and inspired by her faith and courage. Every time I thought she had summited a pinnacle of spiritual maturity I could never reach, she would climb even farther. She has spoken all over the world about murder and forgiveness and against the death penalty and the sentencing of juveniles to life without parole. She not only forgives David Biro, the man who shot her pregnant sister and her brother-in-law, she begins to pray for him by name. She sees her own culpability in the murder of Jesus Christ

and understands that God loves her and her sister's killer the same. She resolves to try to see Christ's face in him. Then she writes to him, to tell him she has forgiven him and to ask if she may visit him. And to apologize to him for not writing before. (His letter back to her is a revelation.) She writes caring, thoughtful letters in response to the angry ones she receives from families of other murder victims, who feel betrayed and affronted by her public speaking and activism. She learns what it means to turn the other cheek, to "absorb another's anger and respond with love." This woman both baffles my mind and inspires me to grow.

Bishop may sound like a deluded, starry-eyed innocent, but she's not. She does not gloss over the horrible details of her sister's murder or those of other terrible murders committed by the criminals she advocates for as a lawyer and activist. She sees the world and its underbelly all too clearly, but she also sees, very clearly, the cross of Christ. Her journey is a classic story of Christian conversion. Her journey is biblical; she reflects on murderers God loved: Cain, Moses, David, and Paul. She believes that "nothing is impossible with God." She is deeply moved by Jesus' own execution and by his cry to God at the last, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Her journey is framed in traditional spiritual disciplines: prayer, study, and spiritual direction. She is no Pollyanna or naif. She is simply a Christian who has been taken, or dragged and wrestled, to the fullness of what Christ asks of all of us.

In O'Brien's words, "No Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one or wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation." Bishop balked when she first read these words, offended that anyone could suggest she had an obligation to reach out to a killer who wasn't sorry. Readers may be repulsed by or recoil at her message as well, perhaps thinking, as one person said to her, "You must not have loved your sister very much." (Much worse things have been said to her.) But the discomfort is worth the spiritual and moral stretching Bishop offers us in her very personal, complex, and sometimes brutal book.

Restorative mercy is probably not the answer for all victims of crime or abuse—for instance, survivors of domestic violence or rape. Victims of hate crimes or terrorism might have an especially difficult time imagining a relational forgiveness or reconciliation like this. Bishop's book does not address the added complexities that race, class, ideological belief, or fundamentalism can add to violent crime, and therefore to any reconciliation between criminals and victims. Biro is white, grew up in an affluent family, and had no religious upbringing or ideological motive in killing

the Langerts. This book does not address racial or class disparities in sentencing or administration of the death penalty.

Nonetheless, *Change of Heart* is a theologically rich page-turner, an engaging and spiritually challenging read for Christians wanting to stretch their faith, learn to forgive, and move beyond the very human desire for anger and revenge.