

Advance Praise for *Change of Heart*

“*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.”

—Best-selling author John Grisham

“*Change of Heart* is a powerful story of faith, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This is a painfully honest account of a remarkable and courageous journey from the tragedy and pain of the murder of family members to a place of freedom and grace.”

—Maurice Possley, Pulitzer Prize-winning
journalist and author

“A person is more than the worst thing he or she has ever done. God loves all human beings and endows them with dignity and worth. Juvenile life without parole sentences tell people who committed their crimes as juveniles that they are human garbage, to be thrown away into the maw of prison until the day they die. The criminal justice system in the United States, which deems some people unworthy of redemption—even children who commit serious crimes—urgently needs to hear voices that speak for mercy and restoration. Jeanne Bishop’s is such a voice.”

—Sister Helen Prejean, activist and
author of *Dead Man Walking*

“There is a lot of grace in Jeanne Bishop’s elegant, elegiac book *Change of Heart*, but it is not a wimpy hearts-and-flowers kind of grace. Instead, it is a heartfelt, gut-wrenching kind of grace. Powerful grace. Transformative grace. This is an utterly surprising story of redemption. It is an unflinching look at the very real cost of blessing—truly blessing—someone else. Jeanne’s story of restorative justice haunts me. The stunning letter she wrote to her sister’s murderer still lingers. And the story of the grace of the gift of two quarters is one I will retell and retell again. *Change of heart* is what happens when someone, in the depths of despair, cries, ‘This is too much for me. God, take it and redeem it,’ and believes . . . no matter the cost. Please read this book.”

—Robert Darden, Associate Professor of Journalism, Public Relations and New Media at Baylor University and author of *Nothing but Love in God’s Water: Black Sacred Music from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement, Volume I*

“Jeanne Bishop’s words have the power to heal the hearts of the grieving, convict the hearts of the judgmental, and liberate the hearts of a nation hardened by fear, vengeance, and excessive punishment. *Change of Heart* is a must-read for pastors, social workers, caregivers, and all who seek to build community with people relegated to the margins.”

—Greg Ellison, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling, Emory University, and author of *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men*

“When I commuted the death sentences of everyone on Illinois’s death row, I expressed the hope that we could open our hearts and provide something for victims’ families other than the hope of revenge. I quoted Abraham Lincoln: ‘I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.’ Jeanne Bishop’s compelling book tells the story of how devotion to her faith took her face-to-face with her sister’s killer and changed her mind about the sentence he is serving—life in prison without the possibility of parole. She reminds us of a core truth: that our criminal justice system cannot be just without mercy.”

—Gov. George H. Ryan Sr., Governor of Illinois
1999-2003

“Every murder involves two people: the murderer and the victim. Most of us want to remain as far as we can from either one. The chasm between the two is immense, with darkness in between. But occasionally someone comes along who attempts to bridge this divide at tremendous personal risk, putting the victim’s life into the killer’s stare, in the hope that some light might emerge. Such a person is Jeanne Bishop, whose sister was brutally killed. She has written a mesmerizing book, *Change of Heart*, describing her difficult journey through loss to confronting evil. Reading this book takes you to places you’d rather avoid, but you may come away treasuring life even more.”

—Richard C. Dieter, Executive Director,
Death Penalty Information Center

“This book is an extraordinary witness for survivors of crime and all of us who seek a more compassionate, thoughtful, and responsible way to manage the tragic ways we hurt each other. Courageous and honest, Ms. Bishop’s compelling story is a gift for anyone seeking a way to think about punishment and reconciliation in a society where families are too often burdened by violence *and* the avenging politics of fear and anger.”

—Bryan Stevenson, Founder and Director of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*

“As a reporter in Arkansas covering Governor Bill Clinton in the 1980s and ’90s, I watched the state murder three men, including a cop killer named Ricky Ray Rector, whose execution helped elevate Clinton to the presidency. I heard Rector moan for twenty minutes before witnessing his death. As the son of a Detroit cop, I was tangled in emotions after that experience—until I read Jeanne Bishop’s extraordinary book, *Change of Heart*, and, through her painfully personal storytelling, I felt the soft power of mercy, forgiveness, and grace. Bishop’s sister Nancy now lives in me, alongside the killers I watched die.”

—Ron Fournier, Senior Political Columnist and Editorial Director, *National Journal*

CHANGE of HEART

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

JEANNE BISHOP

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

© 2015 Jeanne Bishop

First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Book design by Erika Lundbom

Cover design by Lisa Buckley

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bishop, Jeanne.

Change of heart : justice, mercy, and making peace with my sister's killer /
Jeanne Bishop. — First edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-664-25997-6 (alk. paper)

1. Forgiveness—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Reconciliation—
Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Restorative justice—Religious aspects—
Christianity. 4. Biro, David. 5. Langert, Nancy Bishop, 1964-1990. 6.

Langert, Richard A., 1959-1990. 7. Murder—Illinois—Winnetka. I. Title.

BV4647.F55B57 2015

241'.4—dc23

2014031554

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements
of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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post-consumer waste.

Most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity
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SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com.

For Nancy

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Prologue	xi

Part 1: What Comes Before

1. The Murders	3
2. The Arrest	18
3. The Trial	30
4. Learning Curve	43
5. <i>Kairos</i>	57
6. The Gifts	69

Part 2: What Comes After

7. David	81
8. Change of Heart	89
9. The Letter	98
10. The Visit	111
11. The Cost	126
12. Learning from My Saints	138
13. Restoration	150
Appendix: Resources on Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Restorative Justice	156

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS STORY COULD NOT HAVE BEEN TOLD WITHOUT THE help of others. Some were part of that story; they were there. Others gave me critiques, encouragement, language, and ideas.

My two sons, Brendan and Stephen, gave me love. Their wise observations opened windows of understanding for me. When they were kicked out of the house so I could have a quiet place to write, they let me know that they understood and forgave. Their goodness and generosity overwhelm me.

People who were part of this story allowed me to tell their part of it: John Buchanan, John Boyle, Mary Pike, Randall O'Brien, Mark Osler, Hulitt Gloer, Bernardine Dohrn, Robert Gevirtz, Bud Welch, Renny Cushing,

Delbert Tibbs, Marietta Jaeger, Sister Helen Prejean, Larry Marshall, Hank Shea, Bill Pelke, Susan Stabile.

Joy Tull and Audrey Telfer dug up facts about restorative justice resources. Sara Sommervold gave helpful suggestions on my book proposal. Craig Anderson lent his keen eye and deep wisdom, challenging me to explain things in a clearer way.

David Dobson got this story from the start and helped me tell it better.

I worked on the book in some serene, beautiful places: libraries in Winnetka, Boston, and New York; an upper floor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago; the library at Northwestern University School of Law, overlooking Lake Michigan. I'm grateful for those places and the people who opened their doors to me.

Rob Warden, champion for justice, was also a champion of this book, for which I am forever grateful.

My parents, Joyce and Lee Bishop, read to me and took me to church and sent me to good schools, including Casady School in Oklahoma City. There, my tenth-grade English teacher, the inimitable Margaret Tuck, taught me how to write.

PROLOGUE

*O then come hither,
And lay my book, thy head, and heart together.*

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

GRAVEL CRUNCHED UNDER THE TIRES OF MY CAR AS I drove into the visitors lot at Pontiac Correctional Center on a cold Sunday morning. I rolled down my window, eyes squinting in the sunlight, to read the warning sign posted at the entrance: No weapons, no contraband, no cameras.

I pulled into a vacant spot and gathered up the few belongings I could take inside: car key, ID, two quarters to put in the locker that would store the key during my visit. I checked my coat pockets to make sure they were empty of forbidden items: cell phone, pens.

A guard in a watchtower high above a corner of the lot looked down as I opened the car door and stepped into the crisp March air. I breathed in that air, a long, deep

breath. I worked in courthouses as a public defender. I was used to guards. But this felt different: I was coming not as a lawyer to see a client, but as a civilian to see a prisoner. I glanced up at the guard: Did he know who I was? Why I was there?

A long sidewalk led to the guardhouse. On my right, from a massive gray-brown stone edifice, I could hear the voices of men shouting, a melee of noise muffled by the prison's thick walls, distant and unintelligible.

I squared my shoulders, held my head up as I walked up the ramp to the guardhouse doors. Inside, two guards in dark blue uniforms, one man, one woman, sat impassively behind the counter where visitors sign in, their faces a blank. "Who are you here for?" the man asked in a bored tone.

I said the inmate's name. It felt strange on my lips, like a first cigarette or a word from another language. It was a name I had refused to speak for more than twenty years, a name I had wanted to be forgotten, consigned to a place where only God goes: the name of the person who had murdered my younger sister, her husband, and their unborn child some twenty-three years before. It was a name I'd sworn never to speak.

But God had other plans.

The guard handed me a pen, pushed a sign-in sheet across the counter, and told me to fill it out. The sheet had a series of boxes calling for information that visitors must provide: name, address, driver's license number, and so on. I was doing fine until I got to the last box: "Visitor's Relationship to Offender." I stopped, paralyzed. My pen hung in the air.

Relationship to offender? What *was* my relationship to the man whose name stung my lips? Until that moment, I would have written this: Him, murderer. Me, murder victims' family member. That was where the relationship ended. But now I would have a different one, one in which we were not categories, but human beings. I would meet him face to face. I would look into the eyes that stared down my sister in her last moments. I would hear the voice that ordered her into the basement of her comfortable suburban home, just before he put his gun to the back of her husband's head.

I would shake the hand that held that gun.

Helpless, I scanned the entries above mine searching for clues. They read, "uncle," "mother," "girlfriend," "friend."

He and I had never met, never spoken. He was not my friend.

We were not family, either. What should I call myself? Finally, I wrote the only true word I could think of: "visitor."

The guard scowled at my entry. "Are you a family member?" he asked.

"No."

"*Friend*," he muttered, writing in the word.

I locked my car key in a small metal locker to the left of the counter, dropping into the slot the two quarters the prisoner's father had given me when he learned I was going to visit his son. He had put the two coins in my palm, then taken both my hands in his and said, "*God bless you.*"

The female guard motioned me into a small room across from the lockers and shut the door. "Take off your

shoes,” she told me, inspecting the inside of each one. “Turn around.” She ran her hands firmly over my arms, legs, torso, in a pat-down search. “Have a nice visit,” she said flatly, motioning toward the door.

The guards buzzed me through a heavy steel door that led to the building where the visit would take place. I stepped into a waiting room that had been scrubbed of personality: linoleum floor, plastic chairs, vending machines, water fountain.

I took a seat to the left of an elderly couple in wind-breakers and jeans. The man was gray-haired, his face lined and creased like the folds in his jacket. He leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees, silent. The woman’s hair was coiled in a tight perm around her pale face. Across the room, as if in a mirror, sat another older couple: the man’s head slightly bowed, eyes on the floor, the woman staring off into the distance. From their expressions, a mixture of pain, stubborn dignity, and hope, it was clear: those couples were there to visit their sons.

No one spoke. We were waiting for the moment when names are called—not ours, but the names of the inmates we had come to see. Taut with anticipation, I fixed my eyes on the door through which the guard would come. Finally, after the parents had been called for their visits, a female guard appeared and shouted an unfamiliar name. At first I didn’t respond; then I realized she had mispronounced the prisoner’s name, the name I’d waited so long to speak. I jumped to my feet.

This was it. I followed into the corridor where I knew we would meet. The prisoner’s father had told me the drill: guards bring the inmate out, you have an

opportunity to greet one another, then you are taken to opposite sides of a thick wall of glass, a desk on either side. Those instructions gave me some comfort as I waited, heart thumping, for the prisoner to appear. At least I knew what would happen first; I had no idea what would follow.

A door at the far end of the corridor buzzed open and a tall, wiry man stepped through. He wore his brown hair short in a crew cut. The blue and white prison garb hung loosely on his frame. He looked in my direction and broke into a nervous smile. His face flushed slightly.

I walked toward him and extended my hand.

“Hello, I’m Jeanne Bishop. . . .”