"Gifts are never earned"

by Sister Mary Ellen Nolan, RSM

It is Tuesday, August 7, the fourth full day of retreat. The weather is overcast, humid, still, except for an occasional breeze which comes as a special grace from a God who knows what it is to be hot. A heavy fog, mist smog —as we honest Chicagoans say — hangs over the water, blocking out even the nearest boat. It could be a depressing day, if one had such a bent? A good day — and a long stretch of time lurks out in front of me — to try to put this year in perspective.

If one word were called for that might best capture the year just ending, I guess it would be "blessing". It was a year of great blessing, which is to say, it was a year of great pains and great joys, poignantly experienced. The arrival of cancer on the scene, the surgery, the long grueling night of chemotherapy, lifted ever so briefly, a veil from before not my eyes, but my heart. I experienced, for the first time perhaps — love, . .the love of others for me. Many barriers were knocked down, dismantled, ignored, climbed over. People came rushing into my life; rushing quietly, respectfully, lovingly. People I might have expected came; many I would never have expected came; some never appeared, never spoke, and I held and hold no judgement against them. The overflowing gratitude I knew left little room for anger or hurt feelings. In the midst of pain there is much understanding, compassion, forbearance.

In addition to being loved, I experienced, again perhaps for the first time, at such a deep level, what it was to love others. I realized how much people meant to me. I probably did not express my feelings as well as I would have liked in the day-to-dayness of things, because I am so ill practiced in showing love. It gave me cause to reflect on length of years so cerebral in tone. No judgment to be placed on those years. They were, they are the past, God saw fit to intercept that direction in my life with an abrupt and shocking "lift to the heart",
What a Blessing.
What could I have done to deserve it?
Nothing. Gifts are never earned.

This is not to say that I handled this year so well; that each day was wrapped in sunrise, sunset. But I was alive to my experiences, in touch daily with where I was. My emotions were never more than a pin prick away. Each day I had to push myself out of bed, and push myself through a routine of work, meals, prayer, only to collapse, often in despairing tears, in the early evening that marked all I could do with that day. And all too soon the next day was set in motion, and the next, and the next. For many weeks, indeed, for many months there was little sleep. Propelled by medicine from one activity to another, I was unaware of the cumulative fatigue building

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Sister Mary Ellen Nolan died on September 27, 1985, after a long struggle with cancer. In this article, written several weeks before her death, she reflects on her experience of the past year.

up in my body, or the disintegrating spirit the drugs masked. This time was brought to a crushing conclusion with four long days of excruciating depression. Sleepless, mealless, peopleless, workless, lifeless days that seared mind and heart and body, the scars of which are easy to scratch open even to this day.

Those days taught me so much. They taught me to understand suicide — for there can come a moment when nothing more can be endured. They taught me compassion for those burdened with chronic depression — what a deadening cross they carry. They taught me that all is Gift; the simplest of acts, getting out of bed —Gift.

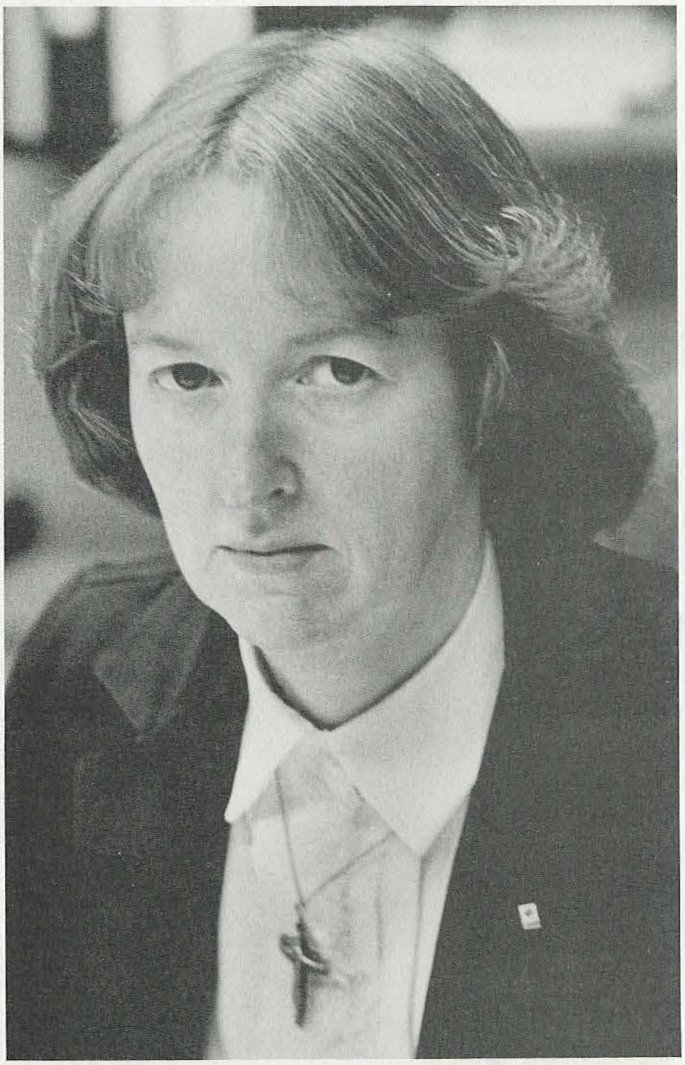
The year has also been filled with too much self-pity; too many tears for myself. Wasted.

How do I know it was wasted?

When such moments did not find Jesus the center but made me the focus. When Jesus wasn't part of an experience, it was very empty, shallow, of little worth. I realized that so much of my past did not have Jesus at the center, and now I see, what then I sensed only in part, that so much of my life was without meaning.

Now each day has such great value.

There may not be another August 7 for me. So I want to be sure that Jesus is the center of this one. I don't want it to be empty and shallow. I don't want it to be wasted.



Sister Mary Ellen Nolan, RSM, 1936-1985

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Since I stopped chemotherapy in May, I have felt myself growing a little stronger each day, and paradoxically, as I moved away from the experience of the year, I find a great deal of the "old self" coming into the fore. Too much to hope that it was dead, and that a new chastened holier person was on the scene. Not the case the old pride-filled, judgemental, compulsive, self-righteous, self-centered individual is rising from sleep, wounded, but on the prowl; longing to take over. I think I'm ready to do battle. I've got in a couple of good whacks already.

One worry haunts me: that this year would be in vain; that the blessing would be forgotten, compromised, traded off for pieces of silver; that breathing strong, heady air, I could push Jesus to the side again, and proceed on my not-so-merry way.

BLESSING! My sinfulness is ever before me. In place of what should be unending gratitude, I daily sense my pettiness, sharpness of tongue, the many deeds of good undone, the hurt to others; and in all the weakening of the Body because of me. Such moments bring me to my knees; salt my face with the tears of those I help torment in nameless hamlets across this earth.

But I am invited to be reconciled. I am invited to bring peace where I have brought pain. A sacrament is born anew for me. How can the hurt I send ricochetting through the Body of Jesus be soothed, understood, accepted, forgiven, but by the sacrament wherein Jesus allows me for a moment to look into his pain filled eyes to sense the pain I have caused, and says to me, even as he embraces me: I understand you. I accept you. I forgive you.

BLESSING: Each day is a thank you — not a thank-you just for my life — although that is included ——but a thank you for BEING: a thank you for God's life flowing through me, a life that will never be taken from me. A thank you for love, that is the air I breathe, and will breathe everlastingly. Each day is a thank you for bread and wine, body and blood, for Jesus, in whom, through whom, with whom we are one, and always will be one. Each day is a thank you for Gifts-Blessings.

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