

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 24, 2008 at 9:50am

The last six months

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Recently I picked up a time

management book and it asked me to make two lists: the first, a list of what I would like to accomplish by the time I reach the last decade of my life; the second, a list of what I would like to accomplish if I were given six months to live. Two days later, I visited my doctor for my three-month cancer check. How timely.

Even though I haven't had cancer for more than three years, I still think of the potential lethal consequences every now and then if my doctor were to discover some cancerous cells at an advanced stage. I joked with my doctor after he took a biopsy, saying that I would expect my usual "It's atypical cells" call in two weeks. Although not happy with atypical cells, I was always happier with these results rather than with more ominous ones. He looked at me and said, "Well, it could be something else, but probably not." He normally doesn't raise the specter of that "something else."

Earlier that same day, I had heard from three different women who mentioned that they or someone they love has cancer. More and more, I meet people who are living with the disease --some passing through it and others passing through into the arms of God.

By the end of the day, I had thought about this disease far too much. I worried. And I wept.

And then I thought of Jesus who also wept when faced with the possibility of his own death. He must have known his radical actions were catching the eyes of authorities who could end his life. Did Jesus ever make anything resembling a six-months-to-live checklist, I wondered? What would have been on his

list? How did he spend his final days?

Looking at Scripture, I am reminded that Jesus spent his last days with those close to him. In fact, it is in these last days that we find Jesus not just working with his friends, but warmly reclining in the company of those he loved. In a beautiful King James translation, John 13:23 says, "Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved."

It seems in the context of death that we hear from Jesus the most about love. As he nears his crucifixion, Jesus speaks of love to his disciples over and over: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" and "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:9 & 12). Isn't it true that most of us would put time with loved ones on the top of our six-months-to-live checklist? Wouldn't we, like Jesus, want to express our deepest love for the beloved ones in our lives?

The poet Mary Oliver also speaks of this desire to love in the final days. In her poem, "In Blackwater Woods," she says that each year's ending brings her thoughts to the threshold of life "whose other side/is salvation,/whose meaning/none of us will ever know."

She continues:

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"To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

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against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go."

We, too, are living in the final days of another year. In this time of passing from one year to the next, unsure if we will reach our final-decades list or need to fall back upon our six-months-to-live checklist, how will we choose to live? My vow this year is to continue rejoicing in this world that is always dying and rising, bringing us face to face with life's threshold and deep Mystery. This year, I hope to hold life against my bones, "knowing [my] own life depends on it." And I pray that when it is my time to let go, that I will be ready to let go and fall into the arms of God.

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