



**YWCA**  
EDMONTON

A TURNING POINT  
FOR WOMEN

## Remembering Valentina

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An oncologist had predicted that Valentina had two weeks to live, a prognosis based on her prolonged history of metastatic breast cancer and her immediate symptoms. When I first met Valentina at the hospice where I worked, it was not reasonable for her to think she would live to see the new millennium, to hear about the birth of her sister's first baby, or to celebrate her thirtieth birthday. Rational or not, during the first autumn following her prognosis, Valentina bought a winter coat. A *new* winter coat. Red. More expensive than she and her husband could really afford. At the time, I wondered if I, in Valentina's situation, would have bought a new coat. Would I, instead, have borrowed a coat or shopped at a thrift store, hesitant to spend a lot of money on something I would not get to wear much? Her purchase of that coat had a profound impact on me as I witnessed Valentina's ability to hope for a future even when she had been told she would likely die before the first frost arrived.

Author Viktor Frankl notes in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, how even in the horrific environment of a concentration camp, some individuals survived by holding on to their free will to make choices. "And there were always choices to make," writes Frankl. "Every day, and every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom." Although suffering and starving themselves, Frankl recalls those who walked through the huts of the concentration camp comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. He writes, "They offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man (*or woman*) but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

This brings me back to Valentina. She could have focused on the sad fact that she had only two weeks to live. She could have become embittered, self-centered and apathetic. Instead, Valentina claimed her inner freedom to bear her particular suffering with hope and courage and dignity. One of the choices she made was to live fully while she was alive. She took lessons in painting with watercolours from a hospice volunteer. On days when her strength permitted, I witnessed how Valentina, the most seriously ill of the patients attending the hospice day program, would rise from her seat, greet the other patients and welcome them to the new day with an encouraging word and often with an embrace.

Valentina lived for two *years*, not two *weeks*. She wore her new red coat through one entire winter and part of the second. She lived to see the new millennium, to find out that her sister gave birth to a healthy baby boy, and to celebrate her milestone birthday.

I will always be thankful for the opportunity I had to journey with Valentina at the end of her life. I had the privilege, as Frankl did, of becoming acquainted with a human being whose behavior, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. To rephrase Frankl, "The way Valentina bore her suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom – which cannot be taken away – that makes life meaningful and purposeful."

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<sup>1</sup>Frankl, Viktor (1984) *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press.

