

## Mommy's Gardenias and Almost Discarded People

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### Today's Treasure

*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. For the Scriptures declare, "Rivers of living water will flow from the heart of anyone who believes in me."*

*John 7:37-38 NLT*

"Should we schedule the funeral right now?" My startled response to Chuck's question lasted only a few seconds. He had just bought me a large gardenia tree for Mother's Day. Gardenias are one of my favorite flowers. Their beauty and scent are comfort food for my soul because of my mother.

I can't remember a time when my mother did not have a gardenia bush in the sunniest window of the house. No matter how small the gardenia started out, once it entered her home, it grew to need a huge tub. As a mother of seven children, I'm pretty certain Mommy didn't baby them. I'm also pretty sure she didn't spend money on fancy plant fertilizers or bug sprays. Yet somehow, they thrived under her care. Perhaps it was the summer vacation plants experienced when my father planted them in the yard each spring in a bright sunny corner, where no one had to remember to water them. But sometimes those gardenia plants succumbed to apparent neglect. One year a tub ended up in a damp, dark basement because, well, it looked like a pot of dirt filled with dead sticks. The gardenia bush was dead. That spring my father pulled up the tub into the sunshine because he saw a few green leaves trying to break out. By the end of the summer, this gardenia bush was in full bloom. When we asked my mother how this resurrection took place during the winter months, she responded, "Every time I was in the cellar, I just threw water on it whenever I passed it by, hoping maybe there was still some life left."

The scent of gardenias takes me back to those childhood days and more times than I can remember, I have succumbed to the temptation to give one a home. But alas, Chuck was right. My success with gardenias was zero. This time, I was determined to succeed. But oh my, Chuck's question wasn't too far off the truth. This poor plant, it has gone through haircuts that left only the main stem in place - causing Chuck to shake his head in dismay and ask, "Can we throw it out, now?" And then the black sooty stuff and the little bugs... the year the leaves turned yellow and many, many buds fell off just before bursting open. But bury it, throw it out? No way. My mother's history with gardenias gave me hope - there's still some life left in this stick!

## LIFE-GIVING ENCOURAGEMENT

Today I began to see Mommy's care of her gardenias and especially her strategy for bringing back to life a dead-looking gardenia is a glimpse into the way she handled "discarded people". My siblings and I often smile and shake our heads in wonder at the broken people who found their way into her heart and home. How she cared for them by finding a "sunny window" where they could feel the warmth of God's love or maybe threw some water on them as she passed by - drops of life-giving attention... not much, but just enough to communicate, "You're important to me." She wasn't your stereotypical mushy, gushy, lovey type of spiritual mother I sometimes think we try to emulate. She had her own style and it worked. I don't even think she had to try - she just was herself. Even when my friendship with a particular girl cooled, the girl kept stopping by - not to see me but to talk to my mother. There Mommy sat in her sunny kitchen, swinging her leg, listening, listening, listening... but it wasn't just teenage girls. Somehow she engaged people and entered into their lives. My father recently told me about a young pastor who often stopped by when my mother suffered congestive heart failure. I said how nice it was for him to shepherd her as a shut in. My father chuckled and said, "He wasn't coming to be her pastor. He was coming to be mentored by her. She counseled him and encouraged him. They were real friends." I imagined a picture of this then-young man, sitting at her kitchen table, talking, laughing, and leaving refreshed and energized for God's calling. What was her secret magnet that caused a busy young pastor to sit at her feet every week? Whenever Chuck faced a huge obstacle in ministry or life, he relished time with my mother. When he faced a painful ministry crisis, she regularly sent him handwritten scriptures, encouraging him to resist the urge to fight back or defend himself. My family is filled with men, young and old alike, who highly regarded her wisdom. Perhaps one of her secrets is that she respected my husband and all of her sons-in-law and her sons. And they knew it.

Perhaps that's why they enjoyed not only her wisdom but her ability to find laughter even in hard places.

Back to my gardening, I'm happy to report my gardenia tree has never looked healthier. This morning I discovered one of the most beautiful, largest gardenias I've ever seen.

The scent took me back to our old kitchen once more where I saw Daddy pull that big tub up the steps of our old, dark, dank basement and heard him ask, "El, look. There's a few green leaves, what do you want me to do with this?" I remembered how my mother instructed him to take it out back into the warm sunshine where she could easily throw water on it when she stepped outside to hang up the tubs and tubs of wet clothes. Suddenly vignettes of "her broken people" sitting at her kitchen table, chattering away and the young pastor, visiting under the guise of shepherding her but really coming for

help and hope from an older woman flashed across my mind. And then I flash forward to how much I miss seeing her leg swinging back and forth while I chattered on and on, confident I had her full attention and that she was fully engaged in my concerns and suddenly I realize - I was one of those "broken people". Just time with her was like a drink of cool water that would help heal the broken places in my life or help me process a difficult relationship or know the next step to take in raising our children. Oh, how I miss her. The treasure of this lone gardenia, bursting forth from the only bud on my large gardenia bush, today of all days, her birthday, turns my thankful heart toward God, thankful for all those mothering moments that continue to help shape me into the woman I am today. What was her secret? What was the magnet? In her later years especially, Living Water from Jesus flowed from her life, sprinkled as she walked by or listened, listened, listened, listened, when a thirsty soul stopped by, under the guise of encouraging her.

How I long to know when to throw His Living Water on others as I pass them by or they stop by, just to chat. Who needs Living Water from the heart of Jesus today?

*Originally posted on Treasures of Encouragement blog, 2008*

