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## Lesson from a Dahlia

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

I grew up wishing I had known my great-grandfather, Thomas Fontaine Bullock. As a child, my great-grandmother was in my life regularly, and how I loved her! But my great-grandfather died several years before I was born. My grandmother, Dorothy, always spoke fondly of her dad, and I knew she continued to miss him throughout her adult life. His oldest daughter, Aunt Mildred, continued his professional photography studio in Oakland, California, and I had many photographs taken in that studio while growing up.

Recently, I learned a little more about my great-grandfather — a lesson from one of his other daughters, Hazel. My great-grandparents raised their five children in a house close to his studio and, after his death, she continued to live there until the end of her life. I spent happy childhood hours in the very backyard where the following event took place so many years ago.

Aunt Hazel, born in 1909, recalled an experience she had with her dad when she was eight or nine. “I don’t know what I did, but I know I had been disobedient. Along our fence grew tree dahlias, and they were staked. So he took me out there and said, ‘I want you to look at that row of tree dahlias. Is there anything different about any one of them?’

“‘Yes,’ I said.

“‘Why is it different?’ he asked.

“‘It has broken away from the stake.’ I responded.

“‘Now, the plant is you; and the stake is an aid to what is keeping the plant straight. We will tie rags around it to accomplish this. The rags of life are the rules. The rags are around to keep the plant growing straight. The rules are there to keep you growing straight. Now, at any time of your life you break away from the family, you can go. You will continue to grow’ (he was holding my hands in his); ‘but, as you grow without your rules, this is what can happen.’ (There was this dahlia just lying on the ground with leaves



and covered with mud.) ‘The dahlia will be dumped in the trash, but it is your decision what you want to make of your life. You watch this and think about it,’ and he went into the house.

“‘I don’t know if it was minutes or half an hour, but he came out and asked if I had thought about it. He never referred to it again, but, wow, the lesson he taught. It made perfect sense! That kind of teaching is so powerful. We were all so lucky!’”

Powerful teaching, I agree! He took the time needed. He approached her gently. He gave her a tangible object lesson she could relate to. He made meaningful physical contact with her. He let her decide for herself what was right. I believe he had the confidence that she would make the right decisions in the future. He built the relationship, and he respected it.

My great-grandfather serves as an example of the type of father Ellen White wrote about when she said, “The father may exert an influence over his children which shall be stronger than the allurements of the world. He should study the disposition and character of the members of his little circle, that he may understand their needs and their dangers and thus be prepared to repress the wrong and encourage the right” (*Review & Herald*, August 30, 1881).

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