

Chapter 2 - Rediscovering Nine Relational Practices of Jesus¹

By Mary Schaller and John Crilly

This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing. —Matthew 10:42 (MSG)

We don't change markets, or populations, we change people. One person at a time, at a human level. And often, that change comes from small acts that move us, not from grand pronouncements. —Seth Godin

The 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations

Looking at the behaviors and practices of Jesus, we have identified nine practices that we call The 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations. These nine simple practices provide a pathway for you to engage people in your life in ongoing spiritual conversations. They are building blocks of an incarnational lifestyle—a way of life that brings Jesus into the lives of people because he is in you and you are with them. They are simple, doable behaviors for an ordinary Christian that get you on the journey of making disciples. They are skills that help you move from a lifestyle of few (if any) spiritual conversations to ongoing spiritual conversations. Just like learning how to drive, anyone can learn and practice these Arts. It doesn't take a lot of upfront training; you can practice as you go. In fact, it's likely that you are already doing some of them.

It's easy to feel intimidated, inadequate, and ill-equipped to get on mission with God and make disciples. But the book of Acts tells us that Jesus' disciples were just like us. Look at what Acts 4:13 says about them: "When [the Sanhedrin] saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

These were ordinary men and women who became world changers because they went through Jesus' training school. He took them with him and, along the way, they gained real experience in these nine simple Arts that lead to disciple-making.

Like learning how to ride a bike or drive a car, getting good at spiritual conversations with those who believe differently from you takes practice. Learning how to relate to people, especially those unlike you, calls for a change in your perspective. You need to experience it—not just learn about it, hear about it, or talk about it. These nine practices will help you begin. We have broken them down into three categories:

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Arts for Getting Ready for spiritual conversations:

Noticing
Praying
Listening

Arts for Getting Started with spiritual conversations:

Asking Questions
Loving
Welcoming

Arts for Keeping It Going:

Facilitating
Serving Together
Sharing

With practice, these 9 Arts become building blocks of a trustworthy relationship with almost anyone, no matter what they believe about God. And anyone can do them. Whether you are introverted or extroverted, gifted in evangelism or not, you can put these 9 Arts into practice. We can be ordinary people in our ordinary days doing little things but having extraordinary impact—because We have "been with Jesus."

Notice that the Art of Sharing—as in sharing your faith with others—is the last of the 9 Arts on the list. Christians have historically considered this to be the exclusive practice of evangelism and have often bypassed normal conversational decorum to leap to the action of telling the gospel. However, the other eight Arts not only count; they lay a significant relational foundation and create a safe environment for sharing the good news about Jesus. By following the Holy Spirit's lead in noticing, praying, listening, asking questions, welcoming, loving, facilitating, and serving together, we can be respectful of the relational process and will earn the trust to share our story and Gods story.

Ordinary folks like you and me can purposefully practice these simple Arts, which are small, incremental steps to building relationships with people who believe differently. These relationships could eventually lead to ongoing spiritual conversations resulting in a life-changing decision to follow Jesus.

One important caveat: These 9 Arts are intended to make it easier to engage with people who believe differently, not add eight additional steps that you have to climb in order to have a gospel conversation. Please do not view these as an order or formula to be rigidly followed. View the Arts more as nine tools in your tool belt that are at your disposal to use when needed. Maybe in the past you have operated with one gospel tool—the hammer. This book hopes to provide you with a variety of relational tools to help you get on mission with God in his Kingdom expansion.

Practicing the 9 Arts

I (Crilly) met Ed after he had turned eighty. I had recently moved into a townhome, and Ed was my neighbor. Ed lived independently and was full of life, still dancing, dating, and driving. When I noticed him sitting on his back patio, I would intentionally go out to sit with him and chat. Over time, we established a warm friendship, despite the fifty-plus-year age difference. I grew to love Ed. We enjoyed walks in the park, parties, holidays, and birthdays together.

Ed's life story captivated me. Often in our conversations I would find myself asking him about his youth, his war experience, his marriage, his adventures, and his career. Ed shared that he was a teenage Ping-Pong champ, a successful lawyer, a ballroom-dance instructor, and an adventurer who once rode horseback across Cuba. I found out that Ed was a courageous war veteran who had defended his country in the Pacific theater during World War II. His life was rich and deep and abundant with experiences—and the only way I discovered his story was by being interested enough to ask questions. Sixteen years later, when Ed was ninety-six years old, I had built the trust to ask him other meaningful questions, resulting in a spiritual conversation that impacted Ed's relationship with God for eternity. For some reason I'll never understand, God wants ordinary men and women in their ordinary day's to make an extraordinary impact with an extraordinary message. What's the message? *God is madly in love with all people!* With an awesome message like that, how can we all get in the game? Where do we practice?

Getting in the Game = Making Disciples

We have all heard Jesus' command to *go and make disciples*. But *go* where? I didn't know, so I tried all kinds of different opportunities. I went into the big city to serve the urban homeless at a soup kitchen. I connected with suburban under-resourced folks at a care center. I tutored kids in a struggling part of the city an hours drive from my home.

All of these experiences were formative and powerful, yet none were sustainable activities I could integrate into my daily life. I didn't want to do 'hit and run' disciplinemaking only a few days or weeks of the year. I wanted to follow my Master's command right where he had placed me. I wanted an opportunity to foster relationships, engage with people, and create a longer-term connection I could build on.

It seemed to me that God's plan for his Kingdom to come meant I had to *go*. As I prayed that God would reveal to me where I should go, I began to desire a greater understanding of different people in our pluralistic, melting pot of a society. I felt like the world was getting smaller and God wanted my heart for the world to get bigger. I specifically prayed for a chance to engage with people of different races, colors, and

religions. That prayer seemed unreasonable. How would I, a white suburban guy, have that prayer fulfilled without traveling somewhere far away? But I prayed anyway. During that time, my wife, Danielle, and I volunteered for a local service project through our church to help clean up a low-income apartment complex in a nearby town. As we were picking up trash and sweeping the sidewalks, the children from the complex came out to see why we were there. Many of the people living in the apartments were refugees from Africa. Almost immediately, I was drawn to two adorable little girls—sisters from the same family who were Muslim Bantu refugees from Somalia. We got to know them a little, played games together, and met their sisters, brothers, and mother. After that day's experience and relational connection, Danielle and I decided we would return to visit the family—and we did. We came to see them every month or so and began a friendship with the whole family, especially the oldest son.

Around the same time, Danielle joined a new women's group in the area and met a woman who worked for World Relief, a refugee placement agency. In conversation with her, Danielle found out that she also coordinated tutoring for Bantu refugees on Saturday mornings at a church five blocks from our home. Danielle mentioned that we had recently met a Bantu family from Somalia, and we discovered that the two little sisters and their siblings actually attended this tutoring! We felt like pieces were coming together and we were in the midst of God's activity.

Curious about this opportunity, Danielle and I showed up one Saturday morning and were quickly put into action. I was assigned to the older boys and Danielle to the younger girls. In talking with the kids, we found out that several of the refugee families lived in an apartment complex only two blocks away from our house! We knew that only God could pull off a global intersection like this. That was in 2005, and Danielle and I have been involved with these refugee families ever since. The close physical proximity has allowed us to deepen relationships with a family of twelve and many of the older boys over time. As an added bonus, we found rich friendships with the teacher and the couple who founded this ministry.

Because these children live nearby, we have been able to sustain the relationship over the long haul, connecting on a consistent basis outside of the regular tutoring time. We have learned together—math, science, reading, and writing. We have had fun adventures together, like taking the kids to their first baseball game. We have experienced deep sorrow together, like the death of one of the younger boys after a struggle with leukemia.

Now, as the children have transformed into young adults, we are able to have meaningful spiritual conversations with them—to seek to understand their culture and religious perspectives, to ask questions about their beliefs, to answer their questions about our faith, and to challenge them to seek truth for themselves, not blindly embrace the faith of their fathers.

Cultivating the friendship naturally, over time, we have earned the mutual trust to speak openly to each other about God, our faith, and our questions. In friendship, we can engage in spiritual conversations without hostility as we try to love and understand each other. As the older boys have now turned into young men, we have been able to do many more social activities with them, including inviting them to attend special Christmas services with us. The past three years, they heard (and some even sang!) some of the great incarnational carols and listened to the story of Christ's birth with us. This sparked wonderful conversations.

Our friend Hugh Halter has said, "When I start a relationship with a seeker, I plan on a five-year commitment." Well, I knew when we began this journey that it would be a long-term investment. Discipleship works that way. The relational capital invested has begun to take root in the hearts of my young friends as they are slowly discovering *Isa al Masih* (Arabic for *Jesus the Messiah*). It has been wonderful to watch God's Spirit reveal truth to these young men. In response to one year's Christmas service, one of them wrote a poem about what he experienced entitled "Love and Praise the Lord." Here are a few lines he shared:

*All the poetry ever written
Every verse and every line
All the love songs in the world
Ever melody and rhyme,
If they were combined.
They would still be unable to express.
What I want to define
When I try to describe my love for you.*

It all started with praying for God's direction, noticing the children around us, and asking questions as we sought to get to know them. And because of that, I am experiencing the joy of discipling young men to Jesus and seeing God's power and truth revealed to them. It is a long walk in the same direction—but it is worth every step. What about you? Where will you *go* to live out the Great Commission? Where will you practice these 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations?

Recently, I drove past a familiar corner in the town of Wheaton, Illinois. Yes, Wheaton—the home of Wheaton College, with its beautiful Billy Graham Center, which chronicles the wonderful history of the Billy Graham ministry and of evangelism in America. In fact, Trivial Pursuit claims that Wheaton has "more churches per capita than any other town in America."

I knew this corner because it was the site of a once-thriving church. The church had come on hard times and had foreclosed, leaving the property inactive for the previous year. As I drove by, I noticed new activity in the parking lot. I was surprised to discover that a new church had not moved into this foreclosed property, but a mosque—the first mosque in Wheaton.

It hit me again that the world—all colors, religions, ethnicities—is already right in my neighborhood. It also revealed to me in a graphic way how important it is for me to *go* into my own community.

When you look around, you may be surprised at just how close *all the nations* already are. You may also be surprised by how spiritually hungry and confused people are right where you live. Most of us don't have to *go* too far. You can go to the office or cubicle next to you. You can go to your neighbor or roommate. You can go to the park or to the pub. You can go and walk alongside your own son or daughter. Disciples are waiting to be made all around us.

I'm reminded of what Jesus said to the man from the region of the Gerasenes. The man, whom Jesus delivered from demon-possession, begged to go with Jesus away from his home. But "Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return home and tell how much God has done for you.' So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him" (Luke 8:38-39).

We can all make disciples of Jesus, but we will have to put one foot in front of the other and *go*. Many of us will find that we don't have to go very far. As you pray and discern where God is leading you to go, your next questions may be *How? How will I do this? How will I take a next step?*

With a fresh perspective and simple everyday practices, any Christian can engage in the Great Commission. To do it, we need memorable skills that can be done by ordinary people as part of our normal routine, and that will be positively received as good news by everyone.

Mary and I will spend the rest of this book providing you with simple, practical ways to develop those skills. We'll incorporate many more of our stories along the way. We hope you'll also see how God has used these simple practices to help us relate with people around us, and how God is really the one doing the powerful work all the time. He is in the business of making disciples, and he wants to work through you, too.



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As a writer, poet, and certified professional life coach, John led the development of the Q Place training curriculum, *The 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations*. John is passionate about loving, inviting, and welcoming people onto God's team—and encouraging and equipping others to do the same. He has been married to Danielle since 1990. They live in the Chicago area, where they love their neighbors.

