

PART I: SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH MUSLIMS

Beyond Drinking Tea: Moving from Chit-chat to Soul Talk with Muslims

by Joy Loewen

Joy, along with her husband Ed, have been involved in ministry to Muslims for more than 20 years—first in Pakistan and then in Canada. Joy wrote the highly recommended book: Woman to Woman: Sharing Jesus with a Muslim Friend (2010). Check out her excellent blog: <http://joyloewen.blogspot.com>.

As Dunya prepared tea, my eyes surveyed the living room. Her interior decorating really shows an artistic flare. I noticed that the large beautiful wall-hanging carpet of the Ka'aba was no longer in its place. It had been removed and another picture hung. As I waited, I quietly prayed for our visit to be productive. She graciously served me tea and fruit. We chatted about her children and her busy life as a soccer mom. Our conversation turned to fashions, hairstyles, and the recent party she had attended. Dunya loves the things of the world and her husband indulges her expensive tastes, trying hard to make her happy and satisfied. A second cup of tea was drunk. I longed for our conversation to move into deeper issues. However, it seldom does on our visits, and I often leave disappointed. How I wish to speed things up and get beyond drinking tea and having just a social visit. There is much more I want to talk about than fashions and food. I long to talk about eternal issues of the soul.

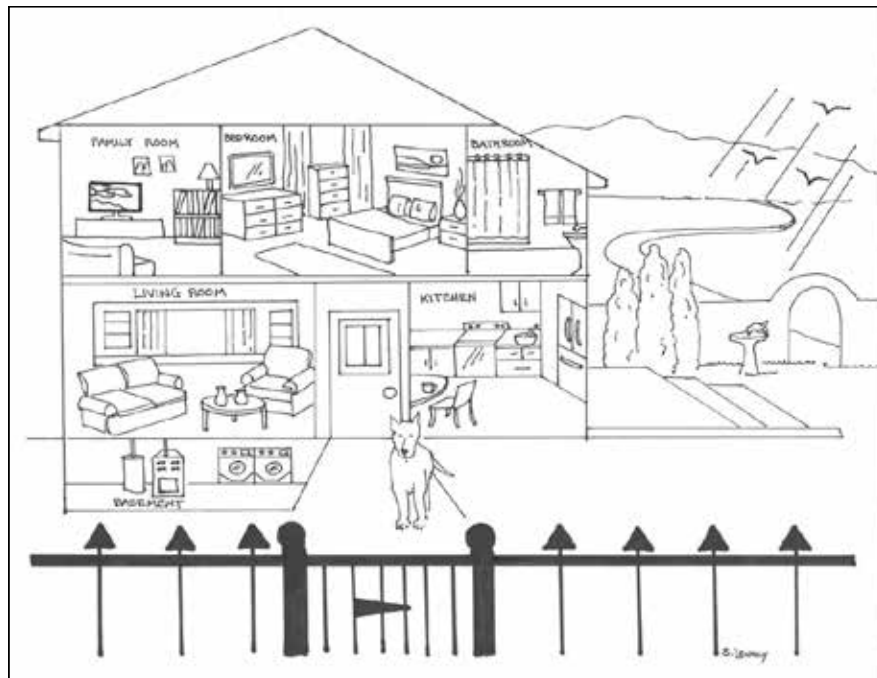
Perhaps you can identify with my experience with Dunya. You have drunk your fair share of tea or coffee, too, as you have been faithfully ministering to Muslim women or men. However, you feel like all you are doing is drinking cup after cup of tea with your Muslim friend and nothing is moving ahead spiritually. You desire so much to go beyond drinking tea and having social chitchat. The good news is that we can go beyond drinking tea, but it takes time.

Symbolic House

To move beyond drinking tea will take us on a unique journey. This journey beyond can be seen as similar to moving through our Muslim friend's house. The house is a symbol of her life; each different room serves a unique purpose in ministering to her. We need her permission to move from room to room. We can expect a lengthy journey when going beyond drinking tea, but it does not always prove to be so. Sometimes the Lord works quickly and bypasses the normal time-consuming route, but generally speaking, the Holy Spirit takes his time revealing the Good News of

Jesus Christ to our Muslim friend.¹

What might we encounter on this journey through the symbolic house of her life? Some of the stages will be; getting acquainted, participating in joyful events, hearing sad stories, encountering crises and disasters, and occasionally participating in the spiritual birth and growth of our friend. Come join me in exploring what this journey of going beyond drinking tea can look like.



The Gate

The first thing we encounter in evangelism among Muslim women is the gate. We aren't sure we can gain entrance into their lives. The symbolic house of her life is protected by a fence and locked gate. I met Sadia, a woman from Libya and newcomer to Canada, at her friend's house. Though professionally skilled, she had not started employment yet. Sadia spent most of the evening just watching me while her friend

1. Even though this article is written primarily to give Christian women a picture of evangelism with Muslim women, men can also identify. All the names used are pseudonyms, but the stories are based on experiences I have had during my twenty-five years of ministry among Muslim women in Canada. Some of the stories are composites of a few individuals.

and I chatted away. The observation with no interaction made me uncomfortable, and I was cognizant that she was sizing me up. Sadia and I were strangers to each other. Finally, after being carefully observed during the whole visit, I was surprised when Sadia requested my phone number! We exchanged phone numbers, and a short time later, I gave her a phone call. When I took the initiative to visit her, I wondered what I would encounter.

When we come to the symbolic gate of a Muslim's life we may be confronted with fear, suspicion, prejudice, misconceptions, ignorance, guardedness – or perhaps we will encounter openness, friendliness and curiosity. It is only by prayer and God's power that the gate will open into her life. By the authority and power of Jesus, the guard on duty (which is Satan, *not* Sadia) is removed and the gate is opened. I am reassured by Revelation 3:7b that says, '...He opens doors and no one can shut them; he shuts doors, and no one can open them.' We are not the one who opens or shuts the gates. It is God Himself. We simply follow Him around and go where He goes.

When I made the initial visit to Sadia's house, I found there was no doorbell. After knocking repeatedly on both her front and back doors and getting no response, I resorted to tapping on a window. There was still no response. Finally, as I stood shivering in the cold outside her house, I called her on the phone. At this point, I would have loved to have been offered a cup of warm mint tea. I could hear her phone ring inside and her husband answered. At last, the door was opened. It seemed so symbolic of how difficult and long it can take to see the spiritual doors of our friends' lives open to allow us entrance. In Sadia's case, I immediately observed shyness, fear, anxiety, stress and a measure of curiosity in her. She was new to our country and had only conversed with Muslims. She had never been in a church, seen a Bible or met a Christian. She didn't know that the English name of *Isa al Masih* is Jesus Christ nor what the English word *church* meant. She had never been exposed to life outside of her country before. She would have been aware of the verse of the verse in the Qur'an that says, 'Believers, take neither the Jews nor the Christians for your friends. They are friends with one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall become one of their number. God does not guide the wrongdoers' (Surah 5:51). I was so excited to be able to gain entrance into the gated house of Sadia's life, yet she was still reserved, cautious but curious. I felt a strong mysterious heartbeat of love for Sadia even before I arrived at the gate, but her love for me had not yet begun. We were strangers who had just met. We hadn't even enjoyed a cup of tea together.

Standing waiting at the gate is not easy. Sometimes the gate is opened wide for further visits – or just for one time. With Sadia, it was open for about two years and then suddenly banged shut. I don't know why. Though I can guess, I have given up analyzing why this sometimes happens. I have discovered over the years in ministry that my analysis is usually incorrect. Reluctantly and sadly, I moved on to the next

gated house, disappointed but thanking God for the two valuable years I got to know Sadia. I cried because I had grown to love Sadia dearly. God is not finished with her. Sometimes the gate reopens after years have passed. I heard Sadia's gate bang shut and the dreaded bolt being locked. Access to her was over. God alone opens and shuts doors, and he has his reasons if a door should shut. There are times I wonder if the primary purpose of the gate being opened into her life was simply to teach me more about evangelism among Muslim women. My understanding expanded immensely. I learned so much from Sadia, but soon I found myself walking away from her gate, through another opened gate, and right into Fatima's kitchen.

Kitchen

It was such a happy moment when I walked through the gate into Fatima's life and into her kitchen. Everything seemed surreal because I hadn't been very acquainted with a conservative Saudi woman up to that point. Like Sadia, she was cautious but curious while I was overflowing with excitement. We would drink tea and chat about cultural things like fashions and her *niqab*, discuss exotic recipes and taste samples of food, and look at many photos of her children and scenic sights on her laptop. Once she showed me her wedding pictures on her laptop. They were most interesting, but I kept waiting to see what she looked like as a Saudi bride. I never did see such a picture. It was the first time I saw wedding pictures where the bride was absent. I had lots to learn as we became acquainted with each other. There were many fascinating new cultural things to absorb, but eventually our talk felt trivial, partly due to her limited English and my almost non-existent Arabic. A language barrier certainly slows the development of a relationship. Nevertheless, Fatima and I, once strangers, had now become acquaintances.

We could stay a long time in the kitchen drinking cup after cup of tea. Taking this time is necessary to connect and develop a trusting relationship with a Muslim woman and learn about her culture. It is the first stage of showing the love of Jesus to her. Showing a genuine interest in her life and in her culture breaks barriers down. It is not wasted time.

Unfortunately, Christians often don't get past the kitchen. It's not always easy to know how to move to the next room, and either party can lose interest. We question whether we should continue a relationship with a woman if it goes no further than cultural talk, and especially if it goes on at this level for years. We really want to move to the living room and go deeper. With Fatima, I wondered if I should try to take the initiative to move that direction or wait for her to take that step. I prayed earnestly for direction and listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit. All my directions

come from Him. I made a few efforts, but it became clear that she preferred just to drink tea and talk about recipes and fashions. There have been other Muslim women, however, who have let me in their gate, chatted in their kitchen for some time, then allowed me to move with them into the living room.

Living Room

I love being in the living room, where it feels comfortable and there is little stress. There have been many Muslim women who have led me into the living rooms of their lives. It is in this room we begin talking about our extended families, communities, places of worship and religious books and practices. Occasionally non-threatening religious conversations open up. They will bring up objections to the Trinity and deity of Jesus or say that the Bible has been changed. I try to answer them briefly at this stage. More can be elaborated on later when a true spiritual hunger is more evident. I always desire to communicate my love for God and the Scriptures. In the meantime, a friendship develops.

In this stage, we will be invited to women's parties, baby showers, and other joyful fun times. We will be introduced to belly dancing and lots of laughter and high spirits, and have intricate henna designs drawn on our hands. We are warmly hugged or kissed when we arrive and leave. A sisterly closeness starts to develop. Each woman extends hospitality to the other. It is fun to relate to the children of these women and cuddle their adorable babies. In the living room, we may discover that our new friend needs practical help conversing in English, learning how to drive, preparing for her citizenship test, or being taken to an appointment. We are delighted to be of practical help, and she appreciates it. It is in the living room that we discover our Muslim friend is just like us – a human being. She has a story, longings, needs, desires and fears, and is surprisingly easy to love. We are no longer strangers or acquaintances but have become friends. We could stay in this room forever – it is fun and there are no significant stresses – but deep down we know there must be more to discover.

Bedroom

Occasionally I come to the symbolic bedroom of a woman's life, the place where I find her soul sleeping. Naheed's soul seems to get sleepy every time we visit. I can't do much about it. No matter how much I try to instigate spiritual discussions with Naheed, she shuts down and begins to get that sleepy look. We drink tea together but usually do not go beyond that. Seldom are there any spiritual questions. There is little curiosity or interest. She is content, satisfied and secure with Islam because her life is going smoothly overall. I always know when it is time to leave. I have to let her sleep until she has had enough.

One time, however, it was different. Naheed was a student living on the university's campus, and a flood developed at midnight in her residence. It was wintertime

and she needed a place to sleep. Naheed came to stay with us for the next few days until it was safe to return to her residence. I found her soul unusually awake during these days. Every night she wanted to hear something from ‘the Book’, as she called the Bible. I seize every opportunity when I find Naheed spiritually awake. But most of the time I just have to wait, pray, and watch until she awakens.

Family Room

Conversations become more personal when we enter the family room of a woman’s life. I entered this level with Tahareh from Iran. By God’s power, the gate had been opened and I was led into the kitchen. For a long time she shared mostly about cultural things and we drank lots of tea. Then she walked out of the kitchen and motioned for me to join her in the living room. I really started enjoying Tahareh, as we became friends. She initially needed help with conversational English, so we had weekly visits, which helped develop a strong relationship. I didn’t catch any

I found myself doing a lot of listening. I had moved from being a stranger to an acquaintance, then a friend, and now a confidante. That progression of our relationship did not happen overnight. It had taken considerable commitment, investment and intercession.

hint of trouble in her life until we moved to the family room, where she started sharing about her struggles and problems within her marriage – but not deeply. I had a sense she was holding back her whole story. She still needed to know if I would really understand her and if she could trust me not to spread information to her community. I found myself doing a lot of listening.

I had moved from being a stranger to an acquaintance, then a friend, and now a confidante. That progression of our relationship did not happen overnight. It had taken considerable commitment, investment and intercession.

We can see that each room has a progressive level of engaging with our Muslim friends. We cannot speed up the process, although we can try to steer things into a God-talk direction. It is in the family room that we probably will get a chance to pray for our friends or read relevant Scriptures and start sharing about a strong and living Saviour. Many enjoy viewing the Jesus DVD at this point. Over the years, I discovered that I had often given the Jesus DVD or a Bible to my acquaintances prematurely. I have learned to wait longer. If given too soon, it will not speak as powerfully.

Our love grows deeper in compassion and mercy for our Muslim friends in the family room. We could stay here a long time simply giving a listening ear. It is in this room that I become honest, transparent and vulnerable with her as she shares of herself. I no longer let myself appear untouched by trouble but a fellow pilgrim in this life on earth, one who is also acquainted with suffering and sorrow. It took many years for me to learn to disclose my sinful nature and shame issues, the mistakes I’ve made and the hurts I’ve experienced. I wrongly assumed that a Muslim friend would reject me if I shared transparently. Then a significant shift took place in me. Instead

of projecting an image of strength, I noticed that the more transparent I was the more it freed her to be the same. When I share some of my failings, she is initially shocked, but also relieved, and she is very interested in what I have to say. At this stage, we are not drinking as much tea as before. The formalities have been lessened. We are starting to go beyond drinking tea.

Bathroom

Karima was a graduate student in whom I invested over a period of ten years. She had acquired her PhD but found it difficult to assimilate and cope with teaching in a university in the West, so she moved to the Middle East. God had opened the gate into Karima's life. I spent some time in the kitchen, living room and family room with her. Then I faced many uncomfortable conversations with her that turned volatile, confusing and overwhelming for me. Karima talked angrily about the Crusades, Israel and the plight of the Palestinians. She obviously resented America, past colonization, and present-day superpowers interfering around the world. American drone attacks especially made her livid. 'Muslims aren't safe anywhere!' she would fume. At one time, I warned her that she would self-destruct if she didn't stop obsessing over them.

At this stage, my love was tested, and I was tempted to walk away from Karima. There was no longer an appetite to drink tea. It had grown cold. I had entered the bathroom, feeling I was being contaminated by Karima's unbridled rage. I only wanted to be washed clean from those negative conversations. I didn't feel at ease talking about politics or justice issues and didn't know how to respond. I hate to admit it, but it felt like she had become an enemy.

Perhaps you have entered this room and you want to run far away. If the Muslim with whom you are building a relationship is obsessed with these subjects, you may have to leave them for a while, get some space and come back if the Spirit leads. Not everyone enters this particular room, but if it does happen, the experience can be so unpleasant that it can terminate our relationship. At this point, we know we are getting very close to the basement, and we're not sure we want to go any further. It is at this point we may wish to return to the most pleasant room, the living room, where it is fun and not so serious – and drink more tea.

Basement

A finished and decorated basement can be a nice room to visit, but if improvements have not been made, the basement is not an enjoyable place to be. When engaging with our Muslim friends, we will find ourselves entering the symbolic unfinished and unfurnished basement of their lives. I have found myself entering the basement lives of Amal, Aida, Jamila, Farahea, Sahar, Fatuma and a host of other dear Muslim friends. Their gates had been opened. We had shared our cultural distinctives and

exchanged recipes, drunk a lot of tea together, enjoyed fun times together, and gotten to know about each other's families and communities. Practical help had been offered and Scripture read; we had prayed together and had some significant spiritual discussions. We had moved from being strangers to acquaintances to friends, and now I had become a confidante. The women were gradually opening up to me and our relationships were strong and trusting. However, I sensed each was keeping a lot inside of her, and now it became obvious that each was moving towards the basement, where even she was afraid to go.

The cold and dimly lit basement doesn't seem like such a welcoming place. However, Jesus goes to the basement before us. He is there waiting, so we are not alone. Here the women begin to pour out their deep-seated fears, gender brokenness, stress,

We may never have witnessed an oppressed person before. Our heads spin from hearing about crises, imminent disasters, and even domestic violence and we wonder if we need to recommend a women's shelter, legal action or possible separation or divorce. We don't know what to advise. It is new territory for us to walk through.

guilt, shame and helplessness. We may discover our friend is into folk Islamic activity, seeking to manage her fears with deception, because Allah is unknown to her and she doesn't know if he loves her or not. Folk Islamic beliefs and activity might be unfamiliar to us and give us discomfort. We may never have witnessed an oppressed person before. Our heads spin from hearing about crises, imminent disasters, and even domestic violence and we wonder if we

need to recommend a women's shelter, legal action or possible separation or divorce. We don't know what to advise. It is new territory for us to walk through. Our friend may be facing the possibility of sharing her husband with a second wife, emotional or sexual abuse, depression, suicidal tendencies, or addiction to porn, whether it be in her husband's life, in hers, or in their life together. We are not experienced enough to discern whether it is mental illness or demonic. She may have a severe victim mentality, and we feel we are talking in circles.

We've gone well beyond drinking tea. This is no longer a social activity. We have forgotten that there is tea in front of us at all. Her family is broken. She is broken. It is like a war zone at home. A son could be in a gang or in jail and she might want us to accompany her to juvenile court hearings. Perhaps she is damaged from war, a kidnapping or the disappearance of her husband and she is full of anger and revenge. It is all too much for us to cope with. It appears that sin or sickness is running wild. And we can't figure out what is mental sickness and what is sin or whether it is both! We are not counsellors or social workers. Nevertheless, we are bearers of the Light. We can't carry others' sin, sorrow or sickness. If we try, the pain and sorrow will lodge itself in us and we will carry things much too heavy for us to bear. However, we *can* listen to them carefully and compassionately, and then transfer their burdens upon our sin-bearer, Jesus Christ. We will talk much about the cross in the

basement. We will turn our eyes upon Jesus and look in His wonderful face. We will talk about a living Saviour who can conquer every mountain and forgive every sin because of his resurrection, the one who is making us more and more whole every day until the time comes when we will be made whole in every way.

When found in the basement, we would like to either fix everything or run back to a safer room and drink tea. Everything is so messy, exhausting and complicated in the basement, and she seems stuck and unable to change or understand. Some women need information; some need confrontation, and some need to be rocked and soothed like a baby – but each needs a strong Saviour. We could stay in the basement forever listening to the same story over and over. But we know that we want to go out to the deck to get a breath of fresh air! We enter into a deeper level of intercession than we have ever experienced before. We are introduced to the meaning of spiritual battle. We reflect on the journey we have taken from being strangers to acquaintances, friends, then confidantes, and now we feel like we have become mothers who are in labour and giving birth. The labour is long and strenuous. At some point, she will stir up the courage to voice scary questions about Mohammed and the Qur'an. Objections and arguments will return. We so much wish we could skip this difficult part, but we must walk through this for her to find life and victory. It will take her some time to understand who Jesus really is, the work accomplished on the cross and the empty grave, to understand sin and be convicted of it and to take steps of faith to call upon Jesus, the Saviour. Some, but not all, will finally arrive at that place, and we will find ourselves walking out of the basement and on to the glorious light of the deck. That is where we are now headed. A baby has been born and we are rejoicing! Hallelujah!

Deck

Now I can breathe more relaxed. What a relief to get out of the basement and sit on the deck! When I first met Jannah, I never imagined she would be the type who would come out onto the deck. She looked like she wanted to stay enclosed and confined inside her familiar house. But God is full of surprises. He drew her to Himself even before I stood at the gate. I had no idea she had been waiting for someone to approach her gate, come into her house and drink tea with her. I spent considerable time in her kitchen and moved quickly through the living room and family room once solid trust had been built. I never did enter the bathroom or the bedroom of her life. However, we did spend a long time in the basement. A big dark cloud of self-inflicted condemnation sat heavily on her and would not lift. It was a stronghold that caused spiritual oppression.

Jannah has a debilitating disease and she interpreted it as a sure sign from Allah that either he was punishing her or she was being tested. She condemned herself as bad and unworthy and was convinced everyone else thought so, too. It bothered her for at least a year to see her neighbours sitting on their balcony across from her

building. She was convinced they were watching her and could tell she had a disability. Surely that meant they were condemning her as having done something bad. It took a long time to teach her that this was a lie and a strategy from Satan. We wrestled through many lies she had been brought up to believe. Over and over, I gave her new information from the Bible. Working between the language of her Bible and my English Bible was a huge challenge. Many words and concepts were difficult for her to comprehend because of the language barrier. Sometimes I confronted the lies head on and rebuked them. Other times I rocked and soothed her like a distressed baby. Never had I imagined that someone could be so bound by oppression, lies and condemnation. As we worked through her struggles, she desperately desired to go out to the deck and made a few feeble attempts to do so. At this stage, she didn't even think about offering me tea.

Finally, Jannah left the cold, dark basement and embraced the Light and Truth of Jesus Christ. Now she victoriously walked out on to the deck. She was completely enthralled with the fresh, gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit on the deck. We had truly gone beyond drinking tea and chitchatting. We were now drinking of the peace, comfort, freedom and healing found in Jesus. We sat there together soaking up the sunshine of the glory of Christ. Our prayer and Bible-reading times were precious. She still wrestled with the fact that her husband was not in agreement with her becoming a Christian. 'I remember, Joy, the time you told me that an Afghan lady told you that her body belonged to her husband but her soul belonged to God', Jannah relayed to me. Somehow, that kind of compartmentalization helped Jannah sort out the difficult challenges.

Out on the deck, Jannah and I were now sisters in Jesus. Amazing!

Gardens

What an arduous journey it will be for our Muslim friends as we move with them through the kitchen, living room, family room, the bathroom and then the basement. Nevertheless, when we come out on the deck it will be worth all the time and effort. And the journey does not end even with the joy of the deck. There are still better places to go!

Jannah is enjoying the private flower garden near her deck. But over the wall is a public garden that she has never seen – fellowship with others. That is where I long to take her, but I have to wait until she is ready or her husband will either allow her or join us. I do not want Jannah to become dependent on me. She needs the fellowship of other sisters in Christ, and they are waiting for her. In the meantime, most of her fellowship and teaching come from me.

Baby Christians need to move from the deck to the public garden where more growth will take place, but this doesn't always happen easily. It proved easier for Rania to

visit the public garden; she didn't have Jannah's restrictions. Today Rania loves the worship, singing and the preaching from her pastor. She was baptised on a day of victory and celebration. Rania and I drink from another cup now – the Cup of Communion. It is what truly unites us. We will always drink tea together, but we have gone far beyond that now. There are things she doesn't understand in the public garden because everything is so new, but she feels loved and she is making friends. I have to supplement her teaching, as there are many issues not addressed for Rania in the public garden. An ethnic fellowship would be beneficial for Rania to join, but in its absence, she must make major adjustments to fit in with western Christians. She is doing amazingly well; not all women from Muslim backgrounds successfully navigate the foreign garden. Rania and I still sit on her deck, just her and me, to pray and read the Word. What a joy to hear her pray for me now and share her own insights from the Word. I begin to dream that maybe one day we can actually minister together!

Today Rania loves the worship, singing and the preaching from her pastor. She was baptised on a day of victory and celebration. Rania and I drink from another cup now – the Cup of Communion. It is what truly unites us. We will always drink tea together, but we have gone far beyond that now.

Over the past three decades, I have walked through these symbolic rooms many times in my relationships with Muslim women. It has not always been possible to move from room to room. I have made mistakes, felt inadequate, been overwhelmed, wanted to quit and run out of my own love – only to discover God's unlimited reservoir of love that I can be filled with. I have enjoyed the process and been thrilled with the opportunities to share God's love with Muslims. So, enjoy that first cup of tea with your Muslim friend. And one day you might find you are drinking together from another uniting Cup!