



C a r a v a n s

Summer 2014

The Desert Foundation
PO Box 1000
Crestone, CO 81131
www.sandandsky.org

*Come, come, whoever you are...
Ours is not a caravan of despair.*

Jalal al-Din Rumi

Dear Friends,

The landscape around us is lush and green after late spring snows and thunderstorms with heavy rains. We've never seen the native grasses so tall and such a profusion of wildflowers. We've done hard manual labor this spring, pruning trees, not only for aesthetics but for fire mitigation, and digging out desert shrubs dangerously close to our hermitages. We hauled slash, washed windows, and stacked firewood for the winter. It feels good to be a year ahead.

Then we decided to landscape more around our hermitages, so we researched "waterwise" xeriscape plants that are both deer and rabbit resistant. We built a block wall around Tessa's porch for flowers, and she gathered orange lichen rocks to make additional borders.

Our inner landscape is also lush and green this season. We're excited about our new web site, *Sand and Sky: Desert Voices*, because of the new look and lavish photos, and because we designed and executed the site ourselves.

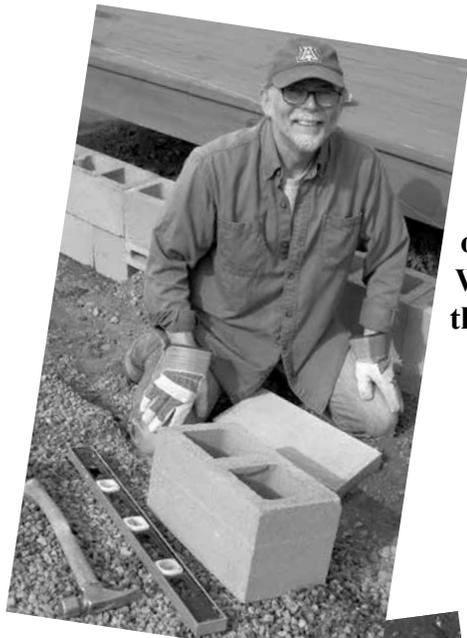
We're grateful to those of you who have already responded, including Mara Goldstein from an Art in the Desert project in Israel's Negev and Alan MacKenzie from New Zealand who described his own desert experience and also wrote: "Congrats to the circle of friends who dreamt and created this wonderful initiative! In the native tongue of our indigenous peoples, 'TUMEKE!'"

Retreats on the Christian Mystics

"Pilgrimage of the Heart," the April retreat we gave in Dana Point, California, was rich and rewarding. Every morning and evening, almost 200 people came to explore the wisdom of the Christian mystics. We have been invited to represent the Christian mystical tradition again on November 26-28, 2014 at Sivananda Ashram



The Desert Foundation is an informal circle of friends exploring the spirit of the desert: landscape and soulscape, including the inner desert of loss and grief. We encourage peace and reconciliation between the three Abrahamic traditions, which grow out of the desert: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. *Sand and Sky* is our web site and publishing outreach, *Caravans* our biannual newsletter. We are a 501 (c) (3) non-profit founded in June 2005 by Tessa Bielecki and David Denny. Contributions are tax-deductible. Contact us at info@desertfound.org or Box 1000, Crestone, CO 81131.



Yoga Retreat in Paradise Island, Bahamas. The ashram's "Thanksgiving Symposium: Walking with the Mystics" features several presenters from a variety of backgrounds who will speak to the mystical practices of their traditions. To register, email Nassau@sivananda.org.

If you would like us to come to your community and lead a retreat or workshop on "The Christian Mystics," "Desert Spirituality," "The Wisdom of the Seasons," "The Inner Desert of Loss and Grief," or a theme of your choosing, email info@desertfound.org.



Sand and Sky: Desert Voices Our New Web Site

We are launched! Visit our new site, www.sandandsky.org and leave a comment. We hope you enjoy our new look and the opportunity to dialogue more with us. The learning curve is steep, so please be patient with us? It will take us most of 2014 to migrate all the material from our original site to the new one. This will introduce us to new readers and give regular readers a chance to review earlier material in more depth and respond.

Navigating the site is simple. Notice the major category tabs on the blue bar above the slide show and the subjects listed under "Tags" on the right side bar. **Reflections** is our largest category. Here you'll find most of our posts on a broad range of topics.

Tent of Meeting offers human interest tales and spiritual reflections about the Abrahamic traditions. We look for significant and hopeful stories that may not be widely reported, introduce you to our partners in this Abrahamic work, and also review relevant books, movies, and the occasional art exhibit.

Thank you for your patience with us as our first site lay fallow while we conceived and crafted the new site. Our first posts feature Tessa's reflections on falling in love with the desert and an interview with Fr. Dave about the meaning of the desert, especially the inner desert of loss and grief that touches all of us at some seasons of our lives.

Gratefully, Tessa
and Fr. Dave

P.S. Please visit sandandsky.org
& leave a comment!
and tell your friends
about it!



At top, Fr. Dave lays a cinder block base for Tessa's new wall. Center: Tessa adds decorative blocks to the planter. Bottom: Fr. Dave sends a message to Desert Tracks subscribers, informing them that Sand and Sky is launched.

Pope Francis at the Wall

"Bethlehem look like Warsaw Ghetto"

Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

Another wall made news this spring. On his recent trip to the Holy Land, Pope Francis stunned the world in an "unscripted moment" by asking his driver to stop at the contentious concrete barrier separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem, where he touched his head against the graffiti-covered wall and prayed. Perhaps he'd been drawn by the spray-painted pleas, "Pope, we need some 1 to speak about justice" and



"Bethlehem look like Warsaw Ghetto." Abe Greenhouse from Jewish Voice for Peace reported that the words had been written only moments before. "One day earlier, young Palestinians had also covered the gray behemoth with messages to the Pope, only to find the wall painted over just hours later. Until the moment the Pope arrived, it seemed that Palestinian voices were once again to be silenced."

Francis had already made history by traveling to the Holy Land with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim imam, longtime friends and collaborators from his days as archbishop of Buenos Aires. Then he became the first

pontiff to fly directly into the West Bank and refer to the Israeli-occupied territory as the "State of Palestine," spotlighting the Vatican's support for the 2012 United Nations resolution that upgraded the Palestinians' status to observer state.

Palestinians and friends of Palestine loathe the wall, which President Mahmoud Abbas has called "monstrous." Israel insists the wall is essential to its security. But according to Sydney Levy, also from Jewish Voice for Peace, 85% of the wall's planned 400 mile route is on confiscated Palestinian land. "It enables the annexation of land for illegal settlements and separates Palestinians from their land, teachers and students from schools, and families from each other."

"As Jews," Greenhouse says, "we find walled ghettos uniquely disturbing. As human beings, we find the Pope's decision to draw the eyes of the world to this reality profoundly moving.... In the moment Pope Francis stood for all the cameras to see, the wall became more than a prison wall. It became a message to the outside world showing clearly the reality that Israel tries to hide."

Jewish Voice for Peace, one of our Abrahamic partners, asked us to join over 10,000 others around the world and sign a petition thanking Pope Francis to help inspire other leaders "not to look away." The petition was presented to the Pope in early June. For more information visit ThankYouPopeFrancis.org or jewishvoiceforpeace.org.

On June 6 the Israeli and Palestinian presidents responded to the Pope's invitation to join him at his simple Vatican apartment in prayer for peace. According to Oded Ben Hur, a former Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, by personally inviting the presidents to a prayer summit, "Francis eschewed Vatican protocol and tradition while showing atypical boldness. Most pontiffs don't rock the boat." This Pope does.

Give "Glad Songs" for Christmas!

I am grateful indeed for your Christmas Anthology. It has kept me buoyed up over the commercial suction of our era. Its lessons, I realize, go on through Epiphany and Candlemas (which I learn, in my Protestant ignorance, falls on February second.) And, I am sure I can turn again to it any day of the year for further revelation of Christ the Tiger. Thank you for all the wisdom you compact here; for your own poetry and insights; and for glimpses of your personal religious experiences.

Theodore Friend, Villanova, Pennsylvania

I am loving the Christmas book and taking it in small morsels, like good chocolate!

Leslie McNamara, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Different from other Christmas books because it includes a great variety of cultural and spiritual traditions. Also these authors are amazing!

Sandy Grundy, Westminster, Colorado

Just when you think that quite enough has been written about Christmas, along comes a book that delights the senses and draws you into a deeper level of meaning about the seasonal celebrations of Winter. Opening up a spaciousness at the heart of humanity, far from the cultural trappings of consumerism, the authors communicate a primordial sense of wonder that stares at us every day from the human experience. From Advent to Candelmas, the authors weave their unique "earthy mystical" perspective into each chapter, inviting us to see the ordinary and familiar with new eyes. A collection full of wisdom, unusual poems, hymns, rituals, and just plain beautiful prose, *Season of Glad Songs* floods the soul with illumination. This book is essentially a gift, to give and to savor, for many years to come.

Donna Couch on Amazon.com



Tessa and Fr. Dave see Glad Songs for the first time!



Season of Glad Songs

A Christmas Anthology

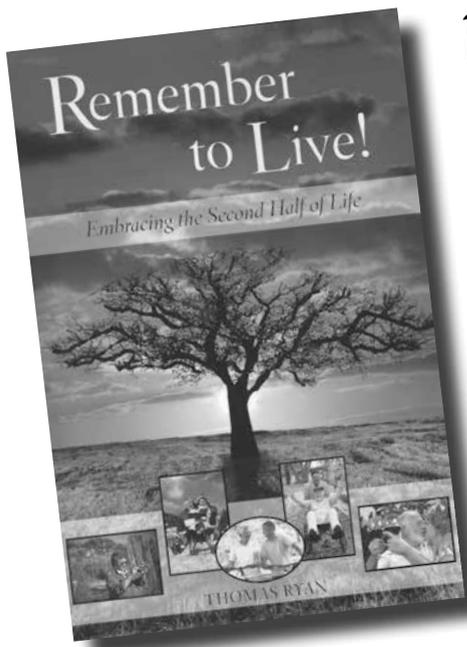
by Tessa Bielecki & David Denny

\$20.00

Imagine a quiet Advent sitting beside a crackling fire preparing for a festive and sacred Twelve Days of Christmas. The authors take you there and beyond. There's something for everyone: young or old, whether you go to church or not. The tone is mystical *and* down-to-earth. Poetry, illustrations and essays, rituals and blessings, prayers and practical advice, even book, music and movie reviews help you celebrate a soulful season of glad songs, from the dark stillness of Advent through Christmas, the New Year and Epiphany, on to the welcome light of a candle on a cold February night. Order from CreateSpace.com. All proceeds support the Desert Foundation.

Sand & Sky
Publishing

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Remember to Live!

Embracing the Second Half of Life

Thomas Ryan, CSP

Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012

Reviewed by Tessa Bielecki

Death is an inescapable part of the desert experience. Thomas Ryan guides us through the second half of life, which involves loss and grief, aging, illness, preparing for “a good death” and life after death, with radical implications for living fully now. He addresses these areas both poetically and practically and opens each chapter of his book with one of his own poems, quoting amply from other spiritual writers, including the Beatles. He enriches his work with testimonies from family, friends, and participants in his retreats on “Savoring Life by Facing our Mortality.”

Every chapter concludes with suggestions for personal reflection, exercises, and discussion questions. I was charmed by his multiple numbered lists: five dynamics of aging, seven ritual elements for healthy grieving, ten ways to have more fun, five things God won't ask us on Judgment Day, four stages of forgiveness, six words to say to one another in order to die in peace or allow another to die peacefully.

Three outstanding exercises include looking at all your reasons to be grateful, then creating a litany of blessings; working through the Wheel of Life to find balance between key areas such as physical well-being, personal development and creativity, and spiritual attunement; and writing “A Testament” as though you only had a short time to live: What did you love most in life? What ideas brought you liberation? What sufferings seasoned you? Who is enshrined in your heart?

The second half of life becomes more peaceful when we plan ahead and take care of important documents: our will, power of attorney, and health care directives. It helps to write our own obituary and plan our funeral. Then we are free to age more creatively, to focus more on the inward than the outward journey, rereading our personal histories and sharing our stories. We may need to deal with unfinished business or downsize according to energy levels and needs, practicing letting go in little ways to be ready for the “big” letting go.

These topics are not morbid. Addressing them early in the second half of life helps us to live more vibrantly and consciously. We “sort out our priorities and realign the use of our time and energy and material resources to keep first things first.... We stop taking things for granted and putting things off for ‘someday’.”

Ryan's fine volume addresses our Western discomfort with dying, distinguishes between sorrow and grief, stresses the importance of going to God the way God came to us: “in and through a body,” and beautifully describes how “death and life touch each other at every moment of our existence” – “like lovers kissing.” In the end, the author insists, “there's no getting around it: the best preparation for a good death is a good life. The work of dying well is, in large part, the work of living well.”

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Are Muslims a Threat to Us?

Listening to John Esposito

David Denny

The Desert Foundation has been concerned about the rise of Islamophobia in the United States and Europe especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Last June I heard a news report on a Tennessee town in which a young Muslim expressed her fear and sorrow after an attack on her mosque. I heard attendees applaud and cheer the attack rather than the woman's courage for speaking up. "Hundreds of activists heckled a U.S. Attorney who was making a speech on hate crimes," NPR reported, "and cheered as Muslims described the firebombing of a nearby mosque." In response to a recent painful experience of anti-Muslim rhetoric in nearby Alamosa, Colorado, several local organizations sponsored a lecture by John Esposito, a world authority on Islam.

Esposito is Founding Director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. For years I have used his *Oxford History of Islam* as an excellent reference. Dr. Esposito has served as a consultant for the U.S. Department of State and for other governments and corporations in Europe and Asia.

Given his academic credentials and my own prejudices, I was prepared for the possibility of a calm-to-boring lecture full of stats and short on brio. Wrong. Esposito grew up in an Italian Catholic Brooklyn working class family and has the humor and smarts to match. Tessa and I had heard he spent ten years in a monastery. We met him before the talk and asked about it. He confirmed that from age 14 to 24 he lived in a Franciscan community, and his mom loved it because it increased his chances of being a virgin when he married! Esposito's light heart allows him to present troubling material in a spirit of hope. Read Fr. Dave's post on the lecture on our web site: sandandsky.org.

Help Us Stay Green through the Dry Summer!

Our Desert Foundation budget is modest: \$26,000 annually. We have no endowment, so your generous gifts support our operating costs. These include all the basics: propane, cell phones, internet access, office supplies, web development, printing and mailing *Caravans* twice a year, firewood to supplement what we cut ourselves and yes, the monthly stipends for Tessa and Fr. Dave: \$650 each. We are blessed with free housing, but still, \$650 does not allow us to retire! Our supportive board of directors would love to give us a raise, but that's up to you! Your donations are always generous, and your winter gifts usually provide more than 6 months' expenses. But just as summer weather here is dry and water levels drop, so does our summer bank account balance. Can you help?

Expenses range from "high end" needs such as a heavy duty garden cart for \$229.99 to smaller expenses: \$49.99 for chain saw chaps, \$32.47 for pruning loppers, or \$16.99 for a new saw chain.

We have another wish that we have not realized. We are dedicated to a life of silence, solitude and simplicity, and we are especially grateful for your supporting our "praise of God in solitude." We are *also* dedicated to peacemaking. Peace begins within, but contact between peoples and communities also promotes peace. We would love to travel on rare occasions to meet, interview, and learn from other Christians, Jews, and Muslims dedicated to peace between Abrahamic communities. Our encounter with John Esposito is an example of an invaluable exchange we then share with you. Can you help us expand this outreach?

Thank you!