

Caravans

Winter 2015

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,

“As I get older, it seems my inner life simplifies,” wrote Fr. Dave last summer. “Creating beauty, planting, pruning, and landscaping feel like prayer to me. The land becomes a reflection of the gratitude and grace that shape my life.” We both spent last summer landscaping around our hermitages. The weather was exceptionally good: not too hot and not too dry. It rained often, and for the first time in years, we did not fear wildfire or have to move treasured archival photos and files to Denver and out of danger.

Summer: “Karl’s” and Quail

The low-water garden outside Fr. Dave’s hermitage is very Zen-looking. He did minimal planting: two Russian sage and helianthus with several grasses called *calamagrostis acutiflora* “Karl Foerster.” He brought in a few large rocks and added a family of metal quail from his mother’s garden in the Sonoran Desert. Mercifully, no deer have destroyed his hard work. In contrast, I hauled in hundreds of rocks I gathered from our land and planted more flowers with a variety of color and texture: purple salvia and catmint, bright yellow yarrow, gaillardia and red valerian. When autumn arrived and the deer came down from their summer pastures in the mountains, they found a lavish feast and devoured many of the plants before I could protect them. It was another heart-breaking lesson in what Buddhists call “impermanence.”

St. Teresa and Holy Daring

St. Teresa of Avila understood impermanence this way. Her famous “Bookmark Prayer” begins “Let nothing disturb you,” and ends with “God alone suffices.” In the middle she writes, *todo se pasa*, “all things are passing.” In 2015 we celebrate the 500th anniversary of St. Teresa’s birth. To honor this sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, whose paternal grandfather was Jewish, Albion-Andalus will republish my second book on St.



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.

Teresa, *Holy Daring*, in an updated edition with a new introduction for the 500th anniversary. You'll read details next spring on our website and also hear directly from the new publisher.

Autumn: "All Things Are Passing"

During this autumn season, flowers die naturally (and as deer fodder), leaves fall from the trees, lemon and gold in Colorado, red in other parts of the world, and we remember our own mortality, our own passing from this world. This past year we experienced the passing and death of many friends, more than at any other time in our lives. It began with Marilyn Denny, Fr. Dave's mother, in December 2013, and continued with Gilmory Cardinal, Barb Hayden, Russell Schreiber, David Crawford, Jesse McNamara, my cousins Norris and Sr. Hedwig Owsiak, and several others. Some of the deaths were due to aging and illness. But two young men died under tragic circumstances, one from drowning and one from a shooting. We grieve all these absences. As Fr. Dave writes on our web site, "The inner desert arises primarily from grief: the universal desert of loss that grinds the soul to dust and bears within it the threat of despair as well as hope for transformation and compassion." In July we lost our mentor, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, father of the Jewish Renewal Movement and an innovator in ecumenical dialogue. A special memorial service will be held in March 2015 at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, where Reb Zalman held the World Wisdom Chair until his retirement in 2004. Part of this celebration will include an inter-spiritual dialogue. I'm glad to be invited to participate, having met Reb Zalman initially at such an event on "Living Fully, Dying Well." Check our web site next February for details on this memorial as well as our own tribute to our beloved Rebbe.

Winter: From Shovel to Pen

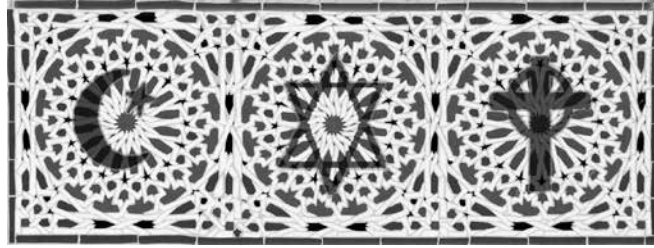
With all the outdoor work this summer, our writing life suffered. But now, with the colder days and longer nights, we lay down our shovels and take up our pens again, beginning with this Winter *Caravans*. In this issue we present a new feature and respond to questions you ask us in your letters. In "Circle of Friends," we give another sampling of your many thoughtful responses to our contemplative eremitical life and our Abrahamic work in the world. Notice Roger Brown's challenge to Fr. Dave, and his response, "Season of Tears."

Don't miss Donna Couch's enthusiastic review of *Season of Glad Songs: A Christmas Anthology* on page six. The enclosed "bookmark" is our colorful Christmas greeting to you as well as a suggestion for meaningful Christmas gifts. As Donna writes, "*Season of Glad Songs* is aptly titled because these readings, like music, uplift and transport us to both a transcendent and immanent place in the soul. Savor it or give it away, this book is a gift for all time."

*Happy Thanksgiving, Tessa
P. S. Next year is our 10th anniversary!*

Tessa lays pavers near her "Casita." Fr. Dave admires his grasses and Arizona quail. Yes, Tessa hauled all these rocks!





Circle of Friends: Responses from our Readers

Thank you for your wonderful writing and all the work and time you both put into your new web site. I immediately found it awesome! It is so beautiful to look at. I love how things are laid out so that one can see all the various articles and topics in the same place. You have really met the challenge you set yourselves.

SM, Philadelphia, PA

With your entry and skill in joining the world of the internet, you have certainly given a new dimension to the role of "hermit." Now, pilgrims will have easier access to your wisdom by traveling the electronic highway [at www.sandandsky.org].

MD, Mimbres, NM

Thank you for the work of The Desert Foundation. I could spend hours reading about the Palestine-Israel war and then, if you asked me to explain what I just read, aside from the killing and human suffering, I couldn't explain the conflict. I don't have a solid grasp of the history and world politics. I appreciate the time, effort and HEART you both pour into this call for peace and justice. *Caravans* is well written and nicely formatted.

MVP, Alamosa, CO

I know you have a lifetime of experience of the Islamic faith, Fr. Dave. You also have years of quiet time to absorb God's wisdom in the face of struggle and human frailty. Maybe it's time in the face of today's world events that you offer your distilled wisdom to those of us following the news on cable networks. I've no idea how you would be received, but I at least would highly respect your point of view.

RB, Visalia, CA

Please accept our continuing modest support for your inspiring efforts. Although our contribution is without strings, I can't help imagining some of it going toward the "chain saw chaps" and the "pruning loppers," essential to our wilderness life also. *Glad Songs* is my bedside reading before sleep; a sort of familiar vespers prayer.

JU, Amherst, MA

Dear Joel,
Thank you for your generosity
and my cool "chaps"!
Fr. Dave

Fr. Dave won't be posing for GQ anytime soon, but these chaps make him safer .



Season of Joy

If you live in Colorado, please join us for one of the following events.

Saturday, November 22, 8:30 am – 12 pm

Pilgrimage of the Heart: Wisdom from Christian Contemplatives

First Congregational Church, 20 E. St. Vrain St., Colorado Springs, CO 80903

Saturday, December 6, 2 pm

Readings from Season of Glad Songs: A Christmas Anthology

Tattered Cover Bookstore, 9315 Dorchester St., Highlands Ranch, CO 80129

Sunday, December 14, 10:30 am

Season of Glad Songs: Celebrating Winter Solstice and the 12 Days of Christmas

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 330 San Juan Ave., Alamosa, CO 81101



Season of Tears

David Denny

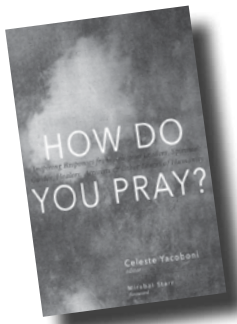
Roger Brown recently asked me to comment on the chaos and destruction in the Middle East this summer. For me, it was a season of manual labor, but of course I followed events in Syria, Iraq, and Israel/Palestine. It has been deeply disturbing. We saw plenty of “breaking news” reports and immediate reactions this summer. Eventually I hope to give a more reflective, radical response.

For now, I offer two points. First, I refuse to listen to anyone who generalizes about a religion. As we know, practicing Christianity in the U.S. may be very different than in India or Colombia. And within these countries, Christianity takes many forms. The same for Islam. So I try not to pay attention to folks who may assert that Islam is “inherently violent,” unless they are ready to say the same about Christianity and Judaism and are willing to look for a cure, not through violent elimination of the “infidel,” but by personal transformation and the search for non-violent teachings that lie at the heart of these “violent” traditions. As many historians note, Christianity and Islam make “universal” claims that have been wedded to political imperialism. We need to acknowledge this dark legacy.

Second, I believe that conflicts between Abrahamic populations are rarely “religious.” They are political and economic. Destitute people who may have been oppressed, not only by their poverty but by political corruption, are often driven to extreme and violent behavior. What breaks my heart is that new oppressors arise who offer huge amounts of money and arms to “empower” these desperate populations. “The great divide,” wrote Nicholas Kristof in the October 9 *New York Times*, “is not between faiths, but one between intolerant zealots of any tradition and the large numbers of decent, peaceful believers likewise found in each tradition.”

Autumn reminds us of our mortality. It is also the harvest season. Netanel Miles-Yépez from Albion-Andalus Books encourages us to “harvest” our writings from the past four decades. *Season of Glad Songs* is our first effort, and we are thrilled with this fruit. In 2015, Albion-Andalus will reprint an updated version of Tessa’s *Holy Daring*. This harvest is deeply satisfying to our souls. But as most writers will tell you, it is not lucrative. Our books sell slowly.

We hope we can count on you to continue **your invaluable support**. If each of you gives just fifteen dollars, we would meet our budget for the next six months. *Or buy five books as Christmas gifts!* Two generous friends contribute ten dollars each month. If giving a larger sum once or twice a year is difficult for you, please consider the monthly approach. Help us make this a season of glad harvest. And thank you for your faithful support over the first nine years of the Desert Foundation.



Cross-fertilizing Voices

A Review of *How Do You Pray?*, edited by Celeste Jacoboni

Softcover: Monkfish Book Publishing, 2014

Reviewed by David M. Denny

When I was a young monk, I read many excerpts from classic texts, from the Desert Fathers up through the Counter Reformation. These works were often didactic. The author knows how to pray, and tells you how to. Some were poetic, like Guigo the Carthusian, who compared spiritual reading to tasting a grape. Some developed elaborate schemas, such as Richard of St. Victor's Four Degrees of Passionate Charity.

Some of these old texts' authors are saints, such as Bernard of Clairvaux or Teresa of Avila. I felt a sense of awed distance from them, due to separation in time and culture, awkward translations, and their revered reputations. But sometimes they struck timeless chords that helped me see that human life is human life, in all times and places.

Celeste Jacoboni's collection is like sitting down with a friend who is not "teaching," but sharing a practice, an attitude, an approach that makes sense here and now, in contemporary English. It is doubly delightful because some of these authors *are* friends, such as Tessa Bielecki. Suddenly "holiness" and "enlightenment" are not the property of medieval saints or *bodhisattvas*, but of friends and friends of friends, witnesses of the Vietnam War or Rwandan genocide who respond with their whole hearts.

These voices testify to the likelihood that the age of divergence, of religious traditions developing in relative isolation from each other, is passing. Ours may become an age of convergence, in which we listen to neighbors instead of walling them off, in which we may move from the fear of contamination by the "other" to the hope of cross-fertilizing communion.

An Excerpt from "How Do You Pray?"

Q: How do you pray?

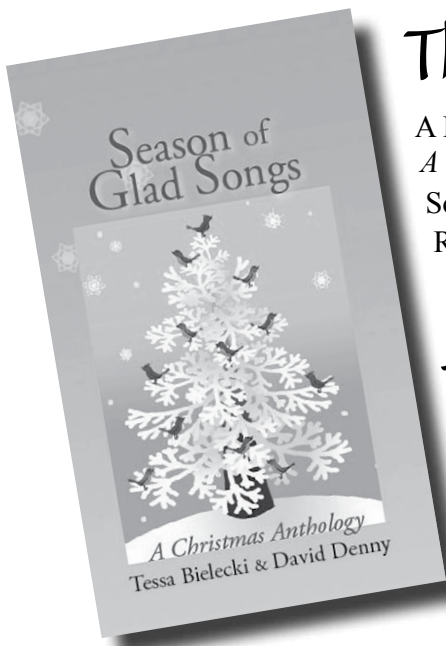
A: I pray best looking out my west window. A candle burns on the windowsill if it's dark, throwing shadows on the exquisite Mexican *latilla* ceiling of my log cabin. In the daytime I can see fifty miles away across the San Luis Valley to the San Juan Mountains. Sometimes there are coyotes, elk, or antelope. There are always deer, ravens, and piñon jays. Day or night, I sit in silence, looking out the window, basking in the Presence.

My favorite description of God comes from William McNamara, the Carmelite priest who taught me so much about prayer in my forty years of monastic life. (I am no longer a monk.) Calling God *Personal Passionate Presence*, he said that the only response to Personal Passionate Presence is our own personal passionate presence. So I have learned to sit in silence, passionately present to the moment, in the fullness of my unique personhood, as who I simply am: Tessa. In the silence I feel the Presence surrounding me. I am immersed in Presence and one with it. The Presence fills me and "speaks" to me, but not in words.

I name this Presence "God," having no trouble with God-language. Sometimes words come to mind, arising from my heart. They seldom move to my lips. Still in silence, I thank and praise God, and above all, love God. Sometimes there are tears, sometimes laughter – yes, out loud. I'm grateful for the day and night, the sun and snow, the animals and birds, the hard work and good play, the comedy and tragedy, the joys and sorrows that fill my life and the life of the whole world.

The world is always present in the silence of my hermitage and the stillness of my heart. For although there may be no one else sitting embodied with me in the solitude, the whole world is present to me in the Presence there.

Tessa Bielecki



The Wonder of Incarnation

A Review of *Season of Glad Songs: A Christmas Anthology* by Tessa Bielecki and David Denny
Softcover: CreateSpace/Sand and Sky Publishing, 2013
Reviewed by Donna Erickson Couch, M.A.

Just when you think that quite enough has been written about Christmas, along comes *Season of Glad Songs: A Christmas Anthology*, a book that beckons and bedazzles, gifts and graces, and invites the reader into a deeper understanding of the familiar. Opening up spaciousness, far from the cultural trappings of seasonal consumerism, authors Tessa Bielecki and David Denny communicate the primordial sense of wonder that naturally erupts from the incarnation. This unique collection of earthy wisdom, unusual poems, novel rituals, and just plain beautiful prose, floods the soul with new appreciation for the fullness the season offers.

“This anthology helps you celebrate a soulful season of glad songs, from the dark stillness of Advent and Winter Solstice through Christmas, the New Year and Epiphany, on to the welcome light of a candle for a cold February night,” write the authors in the introduction. A little flavoring of what they mean: Advent, according to Tessa Bielecki, encompasses “The Mystery of Darkness and Light,” the “descent” that accompanies all the rhythms of day, season, and interior places. Pulling in images from the mystical writings of Saint John of the Cross, she bids the reader to “leave behind whatever little fires are keeping us too warm and comfortable” in order to find the Source of our longing. Bielecki not only makes the seeking seem doable, she also makes it sound like a Narnia adventure, not to be missed!

In Part 2, “Winter,” David Denny’s poetic “Stillness, Stars and Motion” gives the reader a unique gaze into the dimensions of time and space that stir the heart with immense cosmic awe. He talks about his fascination with the powerful language of the winter night sky, a catalyst for starting the spiritual journey. Part 3, “Christmas,” brings together a myriad of effervescent images and words that even the Scroogiest among us will find hard to resist. This is no sentimental walk down 54th Street, rather, the readings address new viewpoints seldom found in other collections. Bielecki writes, “Christmas helps me trust that terror may be transfigured by someone who appeared in a starlit cradle.” From “The Unicorn Christ” to “Feasting Around the Globe,” our spirits shine brightly after reading these selections.

The powerful rituals of “Walking Through the Door” and “Following the Star,” from the New Year and Epiphany sections, inspire the reader to gather friends and do something besides watch the countdown or sing “Auld Lang Syne.” Beautifully crafted, the words alone are lovely symbols of the sublime that dwells just beneath the surface of the ordinary. *Season of Glad Songs* is aptly titled because, like music, these readings uplift and transport us to both a transcendent and immanent place in the soul. Spiritual directors will appreciate a fresh insight to share with spiritual directees, inviting ritual and poetic experience to ripple deeply into the seasons of Christmas and beyond. Savor it or give it away, this book is a gift for all time.

Donna Erickson Couch, MA, is the director of faith formation at St. Edward the Confessor Catholic Church in Dana Point, California, USA. A spiritual director, she also has many years of experience as a retreat guide, master catechist, and college professor. She is the author of Together but Alone: When God Means Something Different to Your Spouse. Contact her at dcouch@stedward.com.

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