



C a r a v a n s

Summer 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,

The Desert Foundation is ten years old!

We remember that June morning in 2005 in the welcoming basement study of our friend Judy Maselli in Denver. We pushed a button on the computer and received confirmation that the Desert Foundation had been incorporated in the state of Colorado. Ten years later, we sit in our neighboring hermitages on San Isabel Creek outside of Crestone, gazing out at the chartreuse cottonwood leaves, thanking God and each one of you for the blessings of the past decade.

These years have introduced us to new friends in the three Abrahamic traditions and allowed us to travel to Israel and Palestine to witness the pain and promise of peacemaking efforts there. We have enjoyed learning more about our Abrahamic communities and our common history, especially in medieval Spain, and sharing that learning with you, students, and retreatants.

Desert Voices

To commemorate this 10th anniversary, we are choosing selections from our web site, sandandsky.org, and ten years of *Caravans* and compiling them into a book tentatively called *Desert Voices*, which we'll publish later this year or early in 2016. We are both committed to writing our memoirs this year as well. We can't possibly finish them, but at least we can make a good beginning.

This past year Tessa was invited by the University of Colorado Boulder to organize her personal archives, archives from the Desert Foundation, and also from the Spiritual Life Institute to be preserved in CU's Norlin Library as part of Colorado's "spiritual history." This is a great honor and a dream come true, since she has kept all these materials in her own hermitage for decades, longing to make them accessible to researchers.



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.



Fr. Dave and Tessa celebrate the birth of the Desert Foundation in June 2005.

St. Teresa of Avila: 500th Anniversary

This year is also the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Teresa of Avila. Tessa spent the winter revising her book, *Holy Daring: Conversations with St. Teresa, the Wild Woman of Avila*, to be republished this summer by Albion-Andalus. (See page six.) “I couldn’t be more pleased with the book,” said publisher, Netanel Miles-Yépez. “It’s a fresh new approach, with a sharp and clear presentation. Based on Carmelite ideals, it’s relevant to where people are today, addressing those who call themselves ‘spiritual, not religious’.”

Winter Troubles

We loved speaking on Christian mysticism at the First Congregational Church in Colorado Springs and Sivananda Yoga Ashram in the Bahamas last November. We spent a quiet Christmas at home, a welcome break from autumn travels. But we had a very cold winter with more snow than usual, and it brought some challenges. Tessa lost her solar electricity due to unusually cloudy weather around the winter solstice. Her old and damaged batteries gave out, and it took several weeks to repair and expand her system. For the first time in years, we needed a bulldozer to clear the road to our hermitages. Then Tessa’s computer crashed. At the end of January, Fr. Dave had a health emergency that put him in the hospital for two days. It was a fluke. While preparing for a routine colonoscopy, his sodium level plummeted. He was close to incoherent as Tessa bravely drove him to the ER at 2 am. It was simple enough to restore his sodium level, and he has been well ever since.

Farewell to Two Mentors

At the beginning of March, Tessa was invited to speak at a memorial for Rabbi Zalman Schachter, who died last July. She was the Christian representative on a panel that included a Muslim sheikh and a Jewish rabbi. It was a beautiful demonstration of what is possible when people listen to and respect each other. The panel was not a theological discussion, but reminiscences about Reb Zalman and reflections on what the panelists learned from him. A month later, William McNamara, our mentor during our monastic years in the Spiritual Life Institute, died in San Diego. You can read more about both these men on pages four and six.

October Retreats

October 9-10, 2015, please join us in Boulder, Colorado for a contemplative weekend sponsored by the Creative Life Center. Page three gives you more details and tells you how to register. October 15-19 Tessa will also attend the World Parliament of Religions in Salt Lake City. She has been invited to participate in a women’s leadership circle with Mirabai Starr and a panel with Imam Jamal Rahman, Arun Gandhi, and Celeste Yacoboni, editor of *How Do You Pray?*

A Still, Small Voice

From the beginning, we have wanted the Desert Foundation to harmonize with the “still, small voice” that spoke to the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:12) and that whispers to each of us in the depths of our hearts. We live in desert stillness, with copious amounts of silence and solitude. We are deliberately a small “operation” because we agree that “small is beautiful.” And we aim to speak out of stillness. According to Spanish-Indian theologian Fr. Raimon Panikkar, the Word is the ecstasy of silence.

Thank you for helping bring the Desert Foundation to birth, and for your sustaining support and inspiration. Yes, we want to remain small, but not too small. Tell your friends about us!

Gratefully, Tessa + Fr. Dave



Seasons, Saints, and Mystics

A Contemplative Weekend
with Tessa Bielecki and Father David Denny
Creative Life Center, Boulder, Colorado
October 9-10, 2015

Celebrate autumn and awaken to the divine nuances of all the seasons, both in the outer landscape and in our inner soulscape. Explore the sacred in the ordinary, the role of poetry, and the diverse weather you encounter throughout the mystical seasons of your life. This interspiritual retreat draws on the wisdom tradition of the Christian saints and mystics. Come to either or both events.

The Mystical Seasons of Our Lives: Wonder, Shattering, Glory

Friday, October 9, 7:00-9:00 pm

Tessa's talk begins the weekend experience. A reception with Tessa and David follows.

Admission at the door: \$20 (\$10 for students)*

Wisdom of the Seasons, Saints, and Mystics

Saturday, October 10, 9:00 am – 4:00 pm

A day with Tessa and Fr. David, weaving together lecture and discussion, silent meditation, journaling and personal sharing.

Early registration rates: \$90 (\$60 for students)

*Admission for Friday night is free with registration for the Saturday workshop.

Pre-registration required for the workshop on Saturday.
Register online at www.CreativeLifeCenter.org/events

A "Snowy Day" Fund

Last winter's challenges reminded us how flexible we have to be here in the wilderness. We planned to embark on writing projects, but when that rare string of cloudy days during winter solstice caused Tessa's batteries to fail, it took several weeks to reconstruct the system. That severely limited her computer use. Thank goodness our nearby heavy equipment contractor bulldozed the road (another unusual expense), so that Tessa could drive Fr. Dave 50 miles to the ER in Alamosa on a late January night.

Now we need to expand storage space near Fr. Dave's hermitage, but we diverted the shed funds to the photovoltaic electrical upgrade. We have no garage, and Fr. Dave's 8' x 8' storage shed doesn't allow us to store tools, supplies and equipment that need protection from the elements.

We need a "snowy day fund" to help us prepare for next winter, in case Mother Nature again buries our road in snow or freezes our pipes. To maintain Tessa's new batteries, we burn more gas running her new generator. Fr. Dave's old generator may not make it through the winter. Thank goodness Fr. Dave qualified for the Affordable Care Act, and at last Tessa receives Social Security and Medicare. Still, as you know, out-of-pocket costs can be high, and our monthly stipends don't support such expenses.

Thank you for the generous support that has allowed us to send down roots in the wilderness while reaching out to the world with a desert voice of hope, peace, reconciliation, and understanding between world religions, especially between the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah.

A Tribute to My Rebbe

Tessa Bielecki



Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was born August 17, 1924 in Zholkiew, Poland and died in Boulder, Colorado on July 3, 2014, almost reaching his 90th birthday. I first met my “Rebbe” in July of 2004, when we both spoke at a conference on death and dying in Aspen. I was “dying” myself at the time, an excruciating interior death from post-traumatic-stress disorder as a result of leaving the Spiritual Life Institute community after almost forty years (a story for another time). Reb Zalman called me regularly

for over a year, simply to ask how I was feeling. Then he invited me to his home to celebrate the Jewish Passover and my own personal Passover from death to new life. When my father died in 2008, Reb Zalman visited my hermitage in Crestone and said special blessings in both Hebrew and Polish.

The Rebbe had a Prayer Room in his basement: a true “Holy of Holies,” small, dark, mysterious, and filled with what I affectionately called “Jewish stuff.” I loved to pray there together with him. We usually sat in silence, in the deep contemplative Presence where all religious traditions meet. He’d end by singing in Hebrew. I didn’t know the words in that ancient language, but my heart soared, and I understood the meaning behind the words.

One morning, at the discussion group Reb Zalman gathered weekly in his library, I spoke about Mt. Carmel, outside of modern Haifa in Israel, a site sacred to both Jews and Christians. The prophet Elijah, who lived on Mt. Carmel, is the “spiritual father” of all Carmelites. Sixteenth-century Carmelite, St. John of the Cross, describes the whole spiritual journey as an “Ascent of Mt. Carmel,” also the title of one of his great mystical works.

That day the Rebbe asked me to talk instead about a deeper and more interior connection between Christians and Jews, the mysterious realm of “bridal mysticism” described in the *Song of Songs*, where we experience God not as Lord or Creator, not even as father, mother, or brother, but as our Divine Spouse. (I have written extensively about this in *Holy Daring*, to be republished later this year. See page six of this *Caravans*.)

Reb Zalman was the visionary father of the Jewish Renewal Movement, holder of the World Wisdom Chair at Naropa University, author of numerous books, including *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, an innovator in ecumenical dialogue, and a spiritual revolutionary who infused religion with new vitality and depth.

But I remember “my” Rebbe most for his simple loving kindness, the sign of spiritual authenticity in any religious tradition.

Reb Zalman preferred the vocation of the cobbler to the vocation of the prophet. He spent his days stitching the sandals of broken souls and stitching together the shards of misunderstanding that lay scattered around our post-Holocaust world.

Rabbi Shaul Magid

Do All Lives Have Equal Value?

Christians Facing Persecution

David Denny



Fr. Dave Denny and
Jamal Rahman

“Worry” seems too shallow a word for what I have felt over the last few months. I expressed some of these concerns in recent posts on our *Sand and Sky* web site: the Charlie Hebdo Paris shootings, ISIS depredations, and anti-Islam reactions. I also wrote about my time with Jamal Rahman, a wise, kind, radiant Muslim friend. If you haven’t had a chance to read these posts, I hope you will, and I hope you will comment on our web site. You can find them at <http://sandandsky.org/?author=1>.

I believe in freedom of religion, and I believe that the deepest and most constructive criticisms come from within one’s tradition. So I have concentrated on encouraging Christians to be more open to and appreciative of Muslim wisdom in order to be better Christians. But belief in freedom of religion also compels me to express concern about the persecution of Christians.

John L. Allen, associate editor of *Crux: Covering All Things Catholic* (<http://www.cruxnow.com/>), writes regularly about worldwide persecution of Christians. His 2013 book, *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*, includes descriptions of appalling treatment. More recently, he reports that in 2014, twenty-six Catholic pastoral workers were killed in the line of duty. This number may sound low. But it is the tip of an iceberg that includes Christians of all denominations as well as imprisoned Christians enduring fates worse than death.

In *Global War*, Allen wrote that an estimated two to three thousand Christians languish in what amount to Eritrean concentration camps. The evangelical group, Open Doors (opendoorsusa.org), publishes an annual World Watch List detailing persecution. Their 2015 report estimates that 100 million Christians face possible persecution. They point out that the worst offender for the past thirteen years is North Korea. But then the list shifts to the Middle East and Africa, with Somalia and Iraq as the world’s second and third worst persecutors.

Whereas Open Doors emphasizes the role of Islamist extremism in persecution, Allen notes that in the Catholic list of twenty-six deaths in 2014, only two were at the hands of Muslim extremists. The most dangerous country for Catholic pastoral workers in 2014 was Mexico.

Christian leaders are crying out for support. After the recent massacre of Christians in Kenya, Bishop Anthony Muheria of Kitui lamented the lack of response from the rest of the world. In a recent visit to Rome, Muheria noted how passionately the world responded to the Charlie Hebdo shootings and the German plane crash in the French Alps. His question to us is, “Do all lives have equal value?”

In another recent article, Allen notes that “Kidnapping Christian clergy has become a cottage industry among armed factions in Syria.”

By the grace of God, we have ways to help. I have always appreciated the work of Catholic Near East Welfare Association (cnewa.org). You may also be familiar with Aid to the Church in Need (churchinneed.org).

Historically, Christianity has had a powerful influence on our culture, and many of us may find it difficult to imagine a powerless or persecuted Christian community. But in places as far away as Egypt, Iraq, and Myanmar, and even in traditionally Roman Catholic countries such as Mexico, Christians are suffering. Let us pray for them and find ways to reach out to assure them they are not forgotten.



Death of an Earthy Mystic

William McNamara, better known as “Abba Willie” for the past decade, died on March 31, 2015 at age 89. The *Meditations for Lent* from his essay on “The Desert Experience,” which Tessa Bielecki edited again last spring for Facebook and our web site, serve as a farewell to the man who was our mentor during our monastic years in the Spiritual Life Institute.

You may read the obituary written by his older brother at http://www.boyleandsonfuneralhome.com/fh/obituaries/obituary.cfm?o_id=3023731&fh_id=10264.

The quotation from Fr. Dave Denny is taken from an essay he wrote in 2001, commemorating Abba Willie’s 50th Anniversary of ordination to the priesthood. You may read that full article at <http://earthymysticism.com>.

For many years, we lived at the Spiritual Life Institute’s Nova Nada Hermitage on three beautiful lakes deep in the woods of Kemptville, Nova Scotia. Every spring, sometime during Lent or Easter Week, pairs of loons returned to nest on the lakes. Abba Willie often said that when he died, he would return as one of those loons. In 1987, Fr. Dave drew this loon for the cover of our magazine, *Desert Call*. It’s a good symbol for the resurrected Abba Willie, for the Resurrection we celebrate at Easter, for the resurrection that awaits us all.

Holy Daring

Conversations with St. Teresa, the Wild Woman of Avila

by Tessa Bielecki

This fresh, upbeat, and deftly profound book joyfully reconnects the fullness of our lives and the depth of our prayer. Much more than yet another book *about* a great saint who once *was*, it actually *rekindles* something of St. Teresa’s unique spiritual impulse for contemporary readers, especially those who describe themselves as “spiritual, not religious.”

Tessa Bielecki shows how Teresa’s vibrant natural life was the foundation of her mystical one, then sympathetically explores the captivating sensuousness of her mystical growth. She presents Teresa’s “bridal mysticism” – a powerful approach to experiencing God as spouse – in a way that inspires both men and women, and concludes with practical advice on how the contemplative life ripens into “the ultimate ecstasy” through service in the world.

With a foreword by Adam Bucko, co-author of *Occupy Spirituality* and *The New Monasticism*, *Holy Daring* will be an abiding source of inspiration to all who want a fuller, deeper, meaningful, and balanced life.

Originally published by Element Books in 1994, *Holy Daring* has been revised and updated for new readers and will be republished in late summer 2015 by Albion-Andalus in honor of the 500th Anniversary of St. Teresa’s birth.

To pre-order your copy, send a check for \$17.00 made out to “Albion-Andalus” to Albion-Andalus Books, P.O. Box 19852, Boulder, CO 80308, or visit www.albionandalus.com and ask them to let you know when *Holy Daring* will be available.

