



Caravans

Winter 2016

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 cottonwoods on San Isabel Creek have shed their golden leaves. We've put our luscious summer flower beds to sleep and covered them with pine boughs to protect them from freezing. And we've cut and stacked our firewood and kindling. Another winter is upon us.

We wrote you earlier about our challenging cold and heavy snows last winter. Then last spring we had so much rain when the snow melted that Crestone experienced major flooding. In only six months, we got more rain than we normally do in a whole year. San Isabel swelled to over ten times its size. The raging flood washed down big boulders and created a "dam," which made the banks overflow and threatened to topple the stately old cottonwoods along the edge. The good news is that the long drought here in the San Luis Valley is now officially over. Our friend Will Pascone, on retreat from Providence, Rhode Island, waded into the creek with us to move rocks and reroute the water flow, as you see in the following photo.

Will also rebuilt the damaged porch of Tessa's hermitage, while Denny Ertle built us a new storage shed: not to accumulate more "stuff," but to provide indoor space for garden tools and building supplies. As befits our age and commitment to simplicity, we continue to downsize and give more away. We've begun culling our library books again. Do you find it as hard as we do to let go of treasured reading?

Spiritual Overflow

Our lives overflowed in more "spiritual" ways this past season as well. Tessa updated her book, *Holy Daring*, for a new readership and the 500th Anniversary of the birth of St. Teresa of Avila. You can read Adam Bucko's Foreword to the book on page five, learn how to order it, along with *Season of Glad Songs*, on page six, for the kind of Christmas gifts that "keep on giving." (Ordering our books is a good way to help support us and hopefully enrich your own lives as well.)



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.



Tessa and Fr. Dave wade into San Isabel Creek to reroute the flood waters; Tessa and some of the New Monastic women.

Holy Daring is dedicated to an inspiring group called the “New Monastics,” who “strive to live a life of contemplation and sacred activism in the world.” (You’re probably one of these.) Tessa helped mentor them in a pivotal meeting in August and reviewed *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*, published by Orbis Books earlier this year. According to co-authors Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko, “Many people today are feeling the same deep calling as the monks of old, a calling of complete commitment to the transformative journey,” yet are “not drawn to a monastery, or to celibacy, or to disengagement and liberation *from* the world. They instead feel a radical urge to live out this calling *in* the world.”

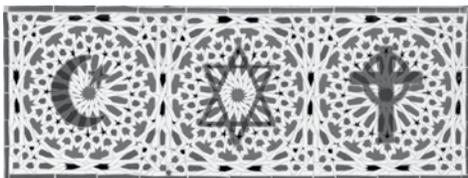
In October we both teamed up at the Creative Life Center in Boulder for a workshop entitled “The Mystical Seasons of Our Lives.” Tessa helped give a Women’s Retreat on “Something Healing” in southern California, blessed her great-nephew in a special ceremony she created for his first birthday in northern California, and attended the World Parliament of Religions in Salt Lake City. She collaborated with seven other women there for a workshop on “Embodied Service: The Wholeness of Women’s Spiritual Leadership” and joined Celeste Yacobani, Imam Jamal Rahman, and Rabbi Rami Shapiro for a panel on “How Do You Pray?” We don’t have the space here to tell you more about these events, so please visit our web site, www.sandandsky.org, for more on these wonderful spiritual journeys.

Sounding the Silence

Last spring Fr. Dave once again served as chaplain for Seattle Pacific University’s MFA writing program. Then he focused more on his aging father in Arizona (in and out of the ER for dehydration and more), on support for the family of a close friend with cancer, and on *Desert Voices: Sounding the Silence*, a compilation of writings to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Desert Foundation. (More news on *Desert Voices* in the next *Caravans* and on sandandsky.org.) On page four he reflects on the silence and solitude of our contemplative life and the value of “slow thought” instead of the “present shock” of a “digitally-mediated now.”

Next year we’ll travel less and accept fewer speaking engagements in order to stay home and focus more on writing. Too many emergencies this past year slowed down our memoir-writing. We look forward to a quiet winter of starry nights and frosty days, creatively writing beside our crackling woodstoves. Blessings on the sacred season ahead for you, too.

Gratefully, Tessa + Fr. Dave
P.S. Please help us write the memoirs?



Circle of Friends: Responses from our Readers

You make the world a better place from your hermitages.

JL, Berkely, California

Thank you for holding and sharing that space of peace and borderlessness so needed in this world.

GF, Crestone, Colorado

Congratulations on the tenth anniversary of the Desert Foundation! Yours is a welcome voice of peace and friendship between the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. I'm looking forward to reading *Desert Voices*.

GM, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Cheers for *Holy Daring!*

RD, Bozeman, Montana

I am always heart-warmed when I open *Caravans*. The summer 2015 issue brought good memories to mind because of the photos of Tessa with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Fr. Dave with Jamal Rahman. One of Reb Zalman's books inspired a recent painting that I call *Neshamot Klaliyot* or *Soul Clusters*. I wish I had met him. It was wonderful to read about his personal caring towards Tessa. Fortunately I have spent a bit of time with Jamal Rahman. He asked me to speak briefly at a service of the Interfaith Sanctuary when they hosted an exhibit of my Al-Andalus paintings. His family's commitment to women's education helps me understand the source of his wisdom and compassion.

AB-S, Silverton, Oregon

Starry Night Memoir Fund

Thanks to all of you who contributed to our "Snowy Day" funds! We have expanded our shed and paid for Tessa's new generator. We are also grateful for your donations to help defray our health care and snow removal costs.

Donations from our Summer *Caravans* newsletter, however, were not enough to cover all our costs over the second half of 2015, so we ask you to consider contributing even more generously to help us into 2016. We look forward to finishing *Desert Voices* and getting well along in our memoirs this winter. To do this, we are gambling. Or should we say "making a leap of faith"? We will travel less, give fewer presentations, and spend "frosty days and starry nights" writing from our hearts to share a harvest of words reflecting on our graced and unusual lives in the wilderness. Tessa will focus on her nearly forty years as co-founder of the Spiritual Life Institute's ecumenical Carmelite community of apostolic hermits, while Fr. Dave reflects on formative encounters between 1968 and 1975 that continue to enrich and inspire him: first love, Afghanistan, Mexico, and the Buddha.

As autumn turns to winter, as we face friends' and families' illnesses and deaths, we are acutely aware that the autumn of our own lives arrives, and we feel a burning need to create something beautiful to pass on to you, and to a new generation hungry for the harvest we hope our "seed words" may help generate. Please help us pass on our vision of peace and cross-fertilization, of a desert that will blossom in a new spring.

I Got Lost

David Denny

At a recent Desert Foundation board meeting, I joined my friend and colleague Tessa Bielecki in raising questions about how often we should post on our Sand and Sky web site. We have always been committed to finding a balance, to rooting ourselves in contemplative silence, solitude and simplicity, *and* to sharing the fruits of that life. That's the vision espoused by the Carmelite tradition in which we were formed.

To our surprise, the board encouraged us not to feel pressed. They said we ought to post when we have something to say and share, not according to a rigid schedule. I recently found an article that helps me understand this tendency, which I'm calling "slow thought." We have a slow food movement to challenge the fast food industry. So why not slow thought?

Last June Amy Julia Becker published "Why Bloggers Are Calling It Quits" in *Christianity Today* online. She notes that some renowned bloggers have backed off from the rapid-fire pace considered normal, in order to withdraw from some of the vitriol they encounter in online comments, and to recover the habit of long, slow, deep thought. Andrew Sullivan, for example, wants to "absorb a difficult book and walk around in my own thoughts with it for a while."

Present Moment or "Present Shock"

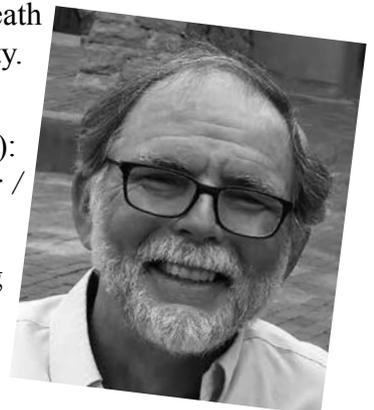
Becker mentions a notion I had never heard of: "present shock," a phrase coined by media theorist Douglas Rushkoff. I remember hearing about Alan Toffler's *Future Shock*, which came out when I was in high school. And I remember the motto that affected many in my generation: Ram Dass's "Be here now." According to Rushkoff, the "present" that shocks many of us today is not the hard-earned entrance into the deep stillness of the present moment through the discipline of meditation, or the disciplined compassion that allows us to notice and to act on the present needs of others, but an orientation to a digitally-mediated "now." "Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It's not a mere speeding up... It's more of a diminishment of anything that isn't happening right now—and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is."

At our Sand and Sky web site we haven't encountered much online vitriol. Thank goodness! But I see how the speediness of mass media, including social media, can lead to debate, to "culture wars," instead of to the wonder of real, mutually respectful conversation. "Debate," according to Irish poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, "doesn't really change things. It gets you bogged in deeper..." Heaney sought a new language that would create new possibilities, what he called a "diverting newness ... something that takes the eyes away from the obsession of the moment" and offers hope.

So while the world debates, I hope to ponder, to ruminate. I am trying to slow down. I am being helped by a wren couple who decided to nest in a little birdhouse friends gave me a few years ago. Simple. But not always easy. By slowing down, I have more time to look beneath the surface. Take my shower drain, for example. I just cleaned it out. Not pretty.

St. John of the Cross addressed this dilemma of being engaged, yet taking time to be with his Beloved in solitude. He wrote (in my irreverent translation):
If I'm not seen again / In the old places, on the village ground, / Say I got lost; / Floundering around, / I lost myself, and was found.

I'll be back in touch when I know the fledgling wrens are safe, after reading a book, and listening to thunder, maybe even giving birth to a new language. Then I may have something to offer.



Falling in Love with Life

A Foreword to Holy Daring

Adam Bucko



It is an honor to write the Foreword to this important book on the spirituality of the Wild Woman of Avila.

I originally came across the author of this book in 1995. I was a young emigré, studying theology, spending my summers at a monastery, and trying to live the ascetical path of emptying and detachment in the urban wilderness of New York City. My understanding of detachment at that point in my life was a bit misguided. I practiced what can more accurately be called disengagement and, as a result, spent years separated from feelings, my self, and ultimately life itself.

One Friday evening I went to a talk offered by a Carmelite hermit. Walking into the venue, I spotted her, dressed in her Carmelite habit. The space was immediately infused with aliveness. In her I could feel a deep prayerfulness that was wild and earthy, completely different from what I was familiar with. She was there not to deny life but to maximize it and turn into something worth living.

Her name was Tessa Bielecki, and that night she talked about St. Teresa of Avila. It became immediately clear that St. Teresa is among Tessa's best friends and an intimate companion. That evening Tessa said something that completely changed my path and my life. She said that "falling in love with life is the first step on the mystical path." I remember hearing those words and feeling confused. My ascetical discipline had not led to a love of life. In fact, I wasn't even really alive.

Self-Spending Service

It took me many years to unpack exactly what Tessa meant. Her work took me from a desire to find God in the silence of the Himalayas to finding God in the broken bodies of children living on the streets of New York City. Ultimately, that statement called me from a detached and disengaged state back into life: life that calls us to demanding and "generous, self-spending service," life that asks us to be who we were born to be and offer that in service of God's dream of compassion, non-violence and justice.

The book that you hold in your hands is truly extraordinary. The woman who wrote it is the best guide I know to the beauty and wildness that is the earthy and mystical St. Teresa of Avila. After living 50 years as a hermit monk, building monasteries in three different countries, and, not unlike St. Teresa, developing a new format for a more feminine form of monasticism, Tessa continues to speak to us from her desert hermitage where she now lives as a lay hermit, sharing the gift of her life-long friendship with St. Teresa with all of us.

At a time when patriarchal models of unhealthy disengaged spirituality are failing to equip us with tools for life in a world dominated by ecological and economic injustice, this book does just that. It will help us all discover our true aliveness in God and offer it in service of a world awaiting our caring response.

May the words of this book become your prayer. May you pause often while reading it and delight in the gift being shared with you. May you develop a new friendship with St. Teresa and be changed by it. May you begin to live with holy audacity and holy daring!

Adam Bucko is an activist, spiritual director to many of New York City's homeless youth, and co-author of the award-winning Occupy Spirituality: A Radical Vision for a New Generation and The New Monasticism. The photo with Tessa Bielecki was taken last August near Seattle.

Give Good Reading for Christmas!



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 or Amazon.com. All proceeds support the Desert Foundation.

Sand & Sky
Publishing

The Desert Foundation • PO Box 1000 • Crestone, CO • 81131

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 outrageous 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 republished by Albion-Andalus in honor of the 500th Anniversary of St. Teresa's birth.

To 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.

