

# C a r a v a n s

Summer 2016

The Desert Foundation  
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*There is hope after despair  
and many suns after darkness.*

Jalal al-Din Rumi

Dear Friends,

How dare we hope? Anger runs high among many Americans as we approach the summer political conventions and November's presidential election. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, almost 59.5 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide. Many clashes within or between nations involve religious conflict. The complexities of Syria's war, the depredations of ISIS, and the shocking instances of "collateral damage" on all sides are boggling, and our plight can seem hopeless. But as poet Jalal al-Din Rumi reminds us, real Hope arises *after* despair. Hope is a resurrection.

### *Encounters with Hope*

Efforts such as the Parliament of the World's Religions, Tucson's Food Justice Forum, and the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha fill us with hope, which we want to share with you. Even an action as simple as a young American Muslim woman offering coffee, doughnuts, and conversation on a sidewalk in Cambridge, Massachusetts can effect a "trickle up" of trust and understanding. Mona Haydar was on a panel with Tessa at the Parliament last October, and she appeared in *People Magazine's* April 2 edition, simply because she was willing to answer questions about Islam from passersby.

Of course we cannot live on doughnuts alone! No matter what language we speak or religion we practice, we need adequate, healthy supplies of "daily bread." This means we need a healthy planet, too. This is one theme of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, his encyclical on the world's environment, published last summer.



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](mailto:info@desertfound.org) or Box 1000, Crestone, CO 81131.

*Fr. Dave on Whidbey Island, where he serves as chaplain for Seattle Pacific University's writing residency.*



*Tessa with Imam Jamal Rahman at the Parliament of the World's Religions.*

### ***Food Justice and Faith***

In February 2016, we attended the Food Justice, Faith and Climate Change Forum at the University of Arizona, prompted by the pope's encyclical and realized through the creative energies of Fr. Dave's old friend Gary Nabhan, the W.K. Kellogg Endowed Chair in Sustainable Food Systems in the U of A's Southwest Center. We offered reflections on how social activists can deepen their humanity and contemplative focus as they struggle to correct injustices in our food industries. Fr. Dave prayed the *Fatiha* from the Qur'an in Arabic, and we both offered a prayer-poem that begins, "Our Mother, who art in the kitchen."

We were deeply inspired by urban efforts to encourage healthy, sustainable agriculture such as Faith in Place in Chicago, and rural efforts to help farm workers become farmers themselves. José Oliva recounted how his Food Chain Workers Alliance has improved the lot of restaurant workers in the United States (28% are on Medicaid and 38% earn a "poverty wage"). The forum embodied a central tenet of the Desert Foundation: deserts are fertile, whether they are literal, such as Arizona's Sonoran Desert, or figurative, such as injustice, irreverence or ignorance. These desert deprivations do not destroy hope but cry for resurrection and healing.

### ***Creative Work***

Other signs of hope and vitality include the re-publication of Tessa's *Holy Daring: Conversations with St. Teresa, the Wild Woman of Avila*, by Albion-Andalus, which will be reissued in the fall by Adam Kadmon with a new subtitle, *The Earthy Mysticism of St. Teresa*. Tessa also published two book reviews for Spiritual Directors International on *Breast Cancer: A Soul Journey* by Patricia Greer and *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living* by Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko. Her review of *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma* by Teresa B. Pasquale will appear later this year.

Fr. Dave enjoyed his annual chaplaincy for Seattle Pacific University's MFA writing residency on Whidbey Island, where he led prayer services based on Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*. Tessa has made great progress beginning her memoir and organizing her archives for the Norlin Library at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Fr. Dave has devoted less time to his memoir due to commitments to Cross Catholic Outreach, the MFA writing program, and his 92-year-old father. But we both aim to publish our memoirs in 2017, the fiftieth anniversary of Tessa's embracing a "desert life" in the Spiritual Life Institute in Sedona, Arizona. By December 2016 we hope to offer you *Desert Voices*, our reflections on the first ten years of the Desert Foundation. We are almost finished with our first draft.

### ***Looking Ahead***

Adam Bucko invited Tessa to participate in this summer's Wild Goose Festival, an annual gathering "for courageous, imaginative, and participative social justice work, creative expression, spiritual practice, and astonishing music" July 7-10 in Hot Springs, North Carolina. (The Wild Goose is a Celtic symbol for the Holy Spirit.) Tessa will be part of a panel on "Elder Wisdom" with Matthew Fox and give a presentation the next day on a down-to-earth contemplative ecological spirituality.

We both will return to Sivananda Yoga Ashram November 5-8, 2016 and focus on "Living Life to the Hilt." We'll explore the sacred in the ordinary, the sacrament of the present moment, the power of poetry, and stages

along the mystical path from wonder and shattering to glory. Through the universal indigenous practice of the Medicine Wheel, our participants will have an opportunity to map their personal stories, dream new beginnings, and celebrate life's polarities: darkness and light, work and play, contemplation and service.

Our lives are so rich and full of hope, we can only give you brief reports here in the six pages of *Caravans*. Over the coming months, please visit [sandandsky.org](http://sandandsky.org) for our expanded hope-engendering reflections.

*In Hope,  
Fr. Dave & Jessa  
may these signs of hope  
encourage you!*

## Abraham's Tent

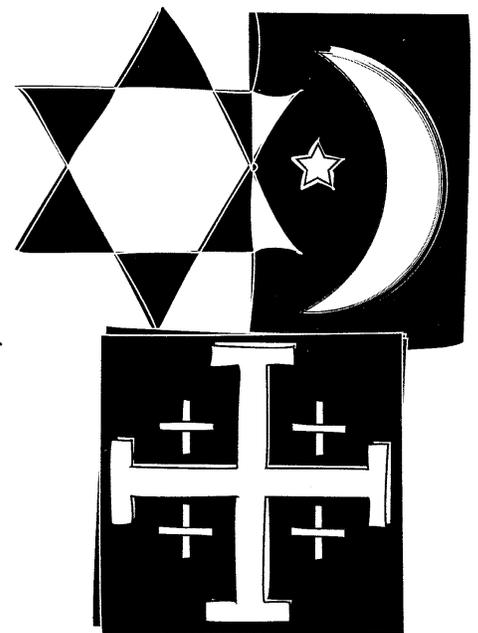
David Denny

**T**here is bad religion that incites anger, violence and hatred, and good religion that incites the gifts of the Spirit—charity, peace, patience, kindness and joy,” insists Mercy Sister Maryanne Stevens, who chairs the board of Omaha’s nonprofit Tri-Faith Initiative. “All the major religions can turn bad and have at certain times in history.” Since the majority of people in the world are Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, she believes that “peace is dependent on the understandings fostered among and between them.”

The new Tri-Faith Center in Omaha will include a synagogue, a church, and a mosque. “It’s not just important to build the buildings for each faith community to remain in their buildings, secluded almost like a fortress,” according to Aryeh Azriel, senior rabbi at Omaha’s Temple Israel. “The idea is to create a space in between that will engage all of the faith communities into work, social justice projects, celebrations and holidays.”

This creative American solution reminded me of another hopeful sign in Berlin. According to writer Tom Lawson, “plans are under way to build a new house of worship that will host three religions: ‘We want to show that faith doesn’t divide Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but instead reconciles them,’” proposes Markus Dröge, a Protestant bishop in Berlin. The new House of One will be built on the site of a 12<sup>th</sup>-century church that was destroyed in World War Two.

These Abrahamic efforts at reconciliation remind me of the late theologian Ewert Cousins, who believed that the task of the world’s religions today is to direct believers’ energies away from the exclusivist divergences that established our identities toward a sense of convergence and common ground, that reduces hostility and increases collaboration and dialogue while preserving and advancing each community’s unique, graced integrity. As Rabbi Marc Gopin claims, it is time for Abrahamic believers to trust that Our Father’s heart is big enough to love more than one child with equal love, and to bless the children’s effort to build bridges and extend the love we enjoy within our families to neighboring families.



# The Parliament of the World's Religions

Tessa Bielecki

“Religion may be the problem,” said Rabbinit Hadassah Froman from the Holy Land, “but it’s also the solution.” I agree, and I suspect, so do the other 9,805 people from 80 countries and 300 religious denominations who also attended the sixth Parliament of the World’s Religions in Salt Lake City October 15-19, 2015. The first Parliament was held in Chicago in 1893, the second a hundred years later in 1993, again in Chicago. Three subsequent Parliaments took place from 1999-2009 in South Africa, Spain, and Australia, with the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr. Jane Goodall, and President Jimmy Carter.

Plenary sessions in Salt Lake focused on War, Violence, and Hate Speech, Climate Change, Emerging Leaders, Indigenous Peoples, Women’s Dignity and Human Rights and Income Inequality. Oxfam International recently issued a report warning that as of 2016, the world’s wealthiest 1% control as much of the planet’s assets as the other 99%. This means that 67 people own more than half the world’s population does.



*Tessa, fourth from the left, seated beside American Muslim Mona Haydar.*

Only nineteen women addressed the first Parliament. Over half the presenters at the sixth Parliament in Salt Lake were women, and over 60% of the registrants. I was part of an intergenerational panel of women ranging in age from 20 to 72, representing a variety of spiritual traditions. Our theme was Embodied Service: the Wholeness of Women’s Spiritual Leadership. I also joined Imam Jamal Rahman and Celeste Yacobani for a session on How Do You Pray: Celebrating the Spirit that Unites Us.

## *Sacred Action*

The theme of this Parliament was *Reclaiming the Heart of Our Humanity: Working Together for a World of Compassion, Peace, Justice, and Sustainability*. Speakers clearly exhibited “faith in action,” offering concrete and practical strategies for such issues as Turning Hate Speech into an Opportunity for Bridge Building, Preventing Genocide and Atrocity Crimes, and Raising a Prejudice-Free Child.

One workshop used the experience of St. Francis meeting the Sultan of Egypt as a model for peacemaking. Another used lessons from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement as a way of combatting Islamophobia, anti-semitism, and racial violence. Dr. Shaik Mohammed Ubaid’s session showed how “every major religion is struggling to contain and defeat violent extremism within... violent extremists share commonalities such as ultra-nationalism and *distortion* of their religious teachings.” A Saturday workshop offered Smart Strategies to Diffuse Terrorism, another addressed Freedom of Speech and Respect for the Other: Looking for Balance, yet another the generational effects of war in Trauma, Death and Dignity: How Faith is a Source of Strength.

## *Hope in the Holy Land*

The Parliament gave considerable attention to grassroots work for peace in the Holy Land. Hope for Jerusalem outlined a vision for a Center of HOPE, a House of Prayer and Education where people from all faith traditions can learn from one another and pray side-by-side. NewGround, a Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change, promoted Relationship Building as an Antidote to Hate. “The media is full of examples of conflict and tension between religious and cultural communities,” the group points out. “Our world needs more examples of Muslim-Jewish cooperation.” An example of such cooperation is the Healing Quilt hung in the Exhibit Hall at the Parliament. It features 72 hands created by 72 Palestinian and Israeli women: Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The quilt is just the beginning, each hand, a typical Middle Eastern symbol, representing one woman envisioning a better future for her children.



*Tessa with Haji Ibrahim Abu El Hawa.*

## *The Abrahamic Reunion*

I was particularly moved by twelve members of The Abrahamic Reunion, the largest interfaith peace organization in the Holy Land, bringing together hundreds of people: men and women, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Druze, to pray, walk, eat, and study their scriptures together. The group was founded in 2004 and includes Hadassah Froman and Haji Ibrahim Abu El Hawa, who runs a “peace house” on the Mount of Olives.

Froman brings Israeli settlers and Palestinians together in dialogue. “I live in the eye of the storm,” she told us. “This is frightening, but the best place to be. Pain comes up, and we deal with it.” Her question to non-Jewish neighbors is, “How can I join you on the path you are taking?” She and other Jews help Palestinians through the bureaucracy of the checkpoints set up by the Israeli Government at the monstrous wall which virtually imprisons the Palestinian people. She told a touching story of making a phone call and getting a pregnant Palestinian woman through a checkpoint quickly in the middle of the night; otherwise she would have died.

Members of the group see greater common ground in their *religious* identities than they do in their ethnic or national identities. So they make interfaith peace journeys together, “walking arm in arm, providing an example of love on a small scale.” (Doesn’t all great change begin in small ways?) The Reunion is convinced that “the political peace process in the Holy Land meets only impasse, whereas [their] faith-based approach builds a lasting foundation for peace” because it opens hearts and creates friendships, trust, and understanding.

## *Commitments to Peace*

These peacemaking efforts in the Holy Land are only a few of many hopeful movements around the world. Why don’t we hear more about them? The Parliament helped counter the media’s negative mentality (“If it bleeds, it leads”) by giving ample time and space to non-violent movements.

The Forgiveness Project collects stories of forgiveness from around the world into an exhibit called “The F Word” to explore how storytelling, conflict resolution, and dialogue can be used to break cycles of violence and restore hope. Each day of the Parliament I meditated on one of these stories in the Exhibit Hall, inspired by the traumatized men and women who see forgiveness as a heroic act of defiance and a “way to live with the past without being held captive by it.”

I was inspired by the Salt Lake Interfaith Roundtable: “You may not be responsible for world peace, but you are responsible for your piece of world peace and your own inner peace.” The Roundtable outlines ten foundational principles for a global Culture of Peace and encourages us to spend just one

week looking at life through the peace-builder lens.

You may want to investigate International Peace Warriors, Compassion Games with its “11-day Kindness Challenge,” The Charter for Compassion International and the Compassionate Listening Project, which reaches into the heart of discord and gets underneath triggers and wounds, helping us avoid the Drama Triangle of victim-perpetrator-rescuer and humanize, not demonize the other.

### *Islamophobia*

I was glad to see the Parliament countering worldwide ignorance of Islam with workshops such as The Qur’an: Proclaimer of Tolerance and Lenience, Why Islam is Not Threatening America, and Clarifying Misconceptions about Islam, Muslims, and ISIS. In our post-9/11 world, many Americans conflate the mainstream Muslim majority with the beliefs and actions of an extremist minority. Explaining Why ISIS is Not Islamic, Hamid Hai said: “ISIS has vitiated the very foundations on which Islamic Law is based. Prophet Muhammad had specifically warned against the rise of such extremist groups which, while having the veneer of Islamic identity, will abrogate the very principles he enunciated.”

### *A Sabbath of Music and Dance*

Of course I didn’t attend all the workshops I describe! There were over 600 of them, so it was mind-boggling to read the catalogue, let alone decide which programs to attend. After a while my head ached, so I took a break on the Sabbath. On Sunday evening I enjoyed a concert of Sacred Music from around the world at the Mormon Tabernacle, which was far smaller than I expected. I was thrilled to hear a shofar, a Northern Ute flute, and the Muslim Call to Prayer in that space. The Youth Multi-Faith Choir from Salt Lake was a bit chaotic, with all those little Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Jain, and Baha’i children trying to line up on stage, but they were irresistible in their native dress, singing “We’re One Family.” I was stunned by the Cambodian Blessing Dance, the “Whirling Dervishes” from the Mevlevi Order of America, and the refugees from Burundi, whose drumming made my heart soar.

The next Parliament is in 2017, location yet to be announced. Will I see you there?

## *Here's Hoping*

**T**hank you for generously supporting the Desert Foundation, especially for contributing to our “Starry Night” memoir writing fund. Last winter allowed us to make progress on the memoirs and our *Desert Voices* anthology, collecting ten years of *Caravans* and web site reflections.

Summer is always our financial lean season. Our savings account is diminishing as we prepare for summer work projects that include staining our hermitages. The deck outside the old log Hogan that serves as Tessa’s writing studio needs repair. Fr. Dave’s aged generator finally “died” in February, and replacing it is expensive.

Our writing projects and web site depend on reliable computers. But Fr. Dave’s laptop spent time in the shop in March, so we need to invest in new ones for both Fr. Dave and Tessa. By pruning and thinning our piñons and junipers, we get some firewood and kindling from our land. But we need to buy some in order to make it through the coming winter and minimize our propane costs.



Thank you for helping us live this “desert” life, full of meaning and dedicated to peace through understanding and transformative prayer. You give us hope and we are grateful. Here’s hoping you can continue to invest in this desert voice.