



C a r a v a n s

December 2016

The Desert Foundation
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www.sandandsky.org

*The earth woman wears a necklace of corn;
Her body is a planted field, a reaping ground;
"Learn," she says, "the patient way of seeds."*

—Catherine de Vinck—

Dear Friends,

Native American corn grows in the desert without irrigation. Hopi corn, or maize, may be planted as deep as eighteen inches, where the earth harbors just enough moisture to trigger germination. These seeds have enough energy to travel a long way to sunlight. The plants are short and far apart. But the yield is nutritious.

Desert Voices: The Edge Effect is similar. Our newest book gathers the harvest of the Desert Foundation's first decade of writing. At the end of every year, we start to think, "We haven't done much." But then we look back and are surprised by how far the few seeds we plant travel and bear nutritious food for thought and prayer and contemplative action in the world.

Our harvest in *Desert Voices* appears in four parts. In "Desert Love Affair," we reflect on our falling in love with the geographical desert and on the experience of the earliest monks, known as the "Fathers and Mothers of the Desert." The desert traditionally fosters a spirit of hospitality and dialogue with the "stranger." In our own experience, the "desert" life includes a dedication to humble interspiritual dialogue and simple sustainable living. We believe that silence, simplicity, and solitude are not obsolete in a digital world of speed, sound bites, and social media and hope you will agree.

"Tent of Meeting" takes its title from the Hebrews' portable desert sanctuary, erected during their flight from slavery in Egypt in search of the Promised Land. Beneath that canopy, the Jewish people encountered Yahweh on their way through the desert. We interpret the Tent as a sacred "place" where the descendants of Abraham and Sarah may meet one another and the One in whose image we are created.



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 works on Desert Voices on his iPad, and Tessa is delighted to receive her first copy of Holy Daring.



Spiritual growth involves humble listening to the “stranger.” If religion strays into ideology, it provokes violent resistance to “contamination” from the “other.” But if our tradition nurtures a transformative, divinizing humility, then we may find that contact with the “other” becomes *cross-fertilization*.

Ecotones

“Ecotone” is an ecological term which describes an area where two communities overlap, as in marshes where land and water meet. An ecotone creates an “edge effect,” where life flourishes. Some species find these places ideal for courtship, foraging for food, or nesting.

This leads us to Part Three of *Desert Voices*, “Walls and Bridges,” perhaps the most discouraging and yet hopeful part of our reflections. It includes our grappling with the notion of “political holiness” in the context of heartbreaking conflicts between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel-Palestine. We admit that it is at least cheeky, if not absurd, to encourage peace between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Holy Land when we Christians suffer chasms of mistrust and suspicion within our own flock. But this is our vocation, and we’re sticking with it.

Part Four, “The Inner Desert,” arises from the universal human experience of grief: the desert of unchosen loss, death, and exposure to pain that grinds the soul to dust and bears within it the threat of despair as well as the hope of transformation, compassion, and mercy. If you have little interest in the geographical desert or feel overwhelmed by the difficulties of interspiritual dialogue and the search for justice in the Holy Land, you may wish to begin reading this final section of *Desert Voices*. No one evades this inner desert. And if we learn to embrace it, then we may discover it as a land of manna or maize and a birthplace for freedom.

Glad Songs and Holy Daring

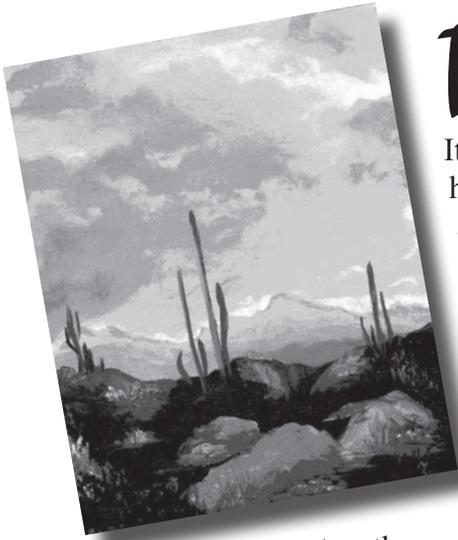
Desert Voices was our major work this past year, but we also cut and stacked all our firewood for the winter. After San Isabel Creek flooded our road again when the snow melted last spring, we also dug a ditch and built a dam to reroute the water back into the creek. Together we hosted vibrant Colorado College students in our hermitages and gave a workshop on “Living Life to the Hilt” at the Sivananda Yoga Ashram. Tessa was part of an interspiritual dialogue in Snowmass, Colorado and spoke on Christian mysticism at the Wild Goose Festival in North Carolina. *Holy Daring: The Earthy Mysticism of St. Teresa of Avila* was republished yet again with wider distribution. Now we settle in at home again to work on our memoirs for most of the coming year.

Some years ago, a friend told us our writing vocation “demonstrates... that a call to the desert is also a call to the world, that an earnest seeking after God in silence and emptiness is the natural corollary to a profound, intimate love of the created order, and that the beautiful work of human hands is not an impediment to the soul’s stillness but a pathway to it.” We hope that we live up to this vision through thoughtful writing that may encourage not only contemplation, but compassionate action in the quest for justice and peace.

*P.S. gratefully, Fr. Dave + Tessa
Thank you for your generous support!*

The Edge Effect

David Denny



D*esert Voices* is an attempt to write, even sing, from the edge, the frontier, the ecotone. It celebrates the amorous border between two “desert rats” and an arid landscape of sand, sky, and giant cactus. It celebrates friendships between Abrahamic brothers and sisters who have spent too much time demonizing each other. It mourns the lives lost along the border of Israel and Palestine and honors non-violent sowers of hope. And it sings from the death bed, from the poverty of the Cross, the universal desert of impermanence that just may be the shadow of eternal life.

I was nineteen when I learned about “ecotones” from ornithologist Dr. Amadeo Rea, who taught ecology at Prescott College. Even at that young age, I had already experienced the notion, not as a biological phenomenon, but as cultural and religious experience. I spent my seventeenth summer in Afghanistan and my twentieth birthday in a Buddhist retreat center. Both adventures were disturbing and wondrous. They took me to “edges,” to encounters with the unknown. My childhood frames of reference shattered.

A Frameless God

But a new intuition dawned, a hunger and taste for the vitality I found in these unsettling frontiers, a wonder at the possibility of a “frameless” God in whom everyone lives and moves and has being. From this divine abyss, our lives, cultures and spiritualities blossom through encounters with the “other,” the “alien,” who turns out to be human. This neighbor may know, feel, and understand aspects of life unknown to me and uncharted on my little globe, my American-European Christian map of the world.

In these years, the nineteen sixties and seventies, I also saw the mirror image of the ecotone: race riots, political assassinations, and that indelible magazine photo of a naked Vietnamese girl fleeing her napalm-burned village, her terror-stricken face streaming with tears. I was haunted: what is the face of America for Afghans? The face of American Christians for Vietnamese? The face of Christianity for Jews or Muslims?

Now we have arrived in the twenty-first century, and it is autumn for Tessa and me. We have only recently begun the Desert Foundation and remain full of creative energy. But we are at a new “edge,” a change of seasons, as we approach the last years of our lives. We have more to harvest, but in *Desert Voices* we offer some “first fruits” from our little garden on the fecund edge. The violent tragedies with which we grew up, and the hope and hunger for a transformation in Christ, for a wisdom that may go deeper than the political and religious thought and practice that led to bloodshed, drove us to the desert. We believe something beautiful and nourishing has bloomed there.

My Mother’s Painting

As I sit in my living room, I admire a painting my mother created when she was about the age I am now, the painting on the cover of *Desert Voices*, which you see here in black and white. It depicts the Sonoran Desert with which my mother, too, fell in love. It is sunset. The desert sky includes some thin gunmetal grey clouds but is mostly aglow with red, orange, and yellow on the horizon above the chalky blue mountains of the Santa Rita range east of our home in Green Valley, Arizona. In the foreground, stones reflect the glowing sky in their subdued, grave, stony way. In the near distance, three elongated saguaros rise out of a patch of darkness, silhouetted against mountain and sky. It is the radiant edge of day and night, mountain and desert, earth and sky.

I also think of the painting as a love letter from my mother. She was not a big talker or writer. And in the final years of her living with Alzheimer's disease, she didn't even know she had sent this "letter." She is gone now, but her dark patch, her glowing sunset, and the tall, thin saguaros between them suggest to me that there is more to earth, love, and our lives than time.

Her message means that sunset here is sunrise elsewhere, that there is another side to her glowing painting and her mortal life. The dark desert patch may be a seedbed, a womb. Divinity has become flesh and stone, and all of us on this little planet are sticking together forever in love. So let's go to the edge of our territory, bury the hatchet, erect a tent, plant some corn in the desert, listen to each other's voices, stay the night, and wait for sunrise.

Give Good Reading for Christmas!



Desert Voices

The Edge Effect

by Tessa Bielecki & David Denny

\$19.95

Desert Voices is a song from the edge. It celebrates the amorous frontier between two "desert rats" and an arid landscape of sand, sky, and giant cactus. It celebrates friendships between Abrahamic brothers and sisters who have spent too much time demonizing each other. It mourns the lives lost along the border of Israel and Palestine and honors non-violent sowers of hope. It sings from the death bed, from the poverty of the Cross, the universal desert of impermanence that may be the shadow of eternal life.

Now available from Amazon.com. All proceeds support the Desert Foundation.

Sand & Sky
Publishing

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 recommendations 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.

Available from Amazon.com. All proceeds support the Desert Foundation.



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Retreat in the Sonoran Desert

Tessa Bielecki

“Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” I am “listening” with the “ears” of my heart, as St. Benedict said. Exhausted from the busyness of the past weeks, I walk at dusk in the desert and then sleep nine hours. I begin my first full day of retreat with a visit to the Blessed Sacrament chapel. I take a morning walk through the desert, listen to the mourning doves, and watch the abundant wildlife: big fat lizards, pairs of quail with their funny “top knots,” and scampering cottontail rabbits. I remember that I often pray best with a pen in my hand.

After lunch I return to the tiny chapel to read and pray. But I begin to fall asleep, so I stretch out on my bed for a quick nap. My fatigue is so great that I sleep over two hours and wake disoriented by strange but healing dreams I cannot remember. Ice cold water to revive me, then out again to sit by Our Lady of Guadalupe and enjoy the lovely breeze under the cottonwoods.

Another walk at sunset along the oleander hedges, past the elegant eucalyptus and the creosote bushes, at this time of year in their fuzzy “cotton ball” stage. After quail couples all day long, this evening I meet a covey of babies scurrying under the bushes. I sit where I can see the western sky glow and the colors change on the mountains. I have been outdoors all day, except for meals and the nap. I love communing deeply with this patch of desert, the landscape nourishing my soulcape.

It’s soon too dark to read, so I rest my head and watch the stars “come out,” surrounding the waxing moon. I remember my first moonlit night in the Sedona desert almost fifty years ago when I was awestruck by its brightness and “heard” my Indian name: Moon Shadow. (Then Cat Stevens wrote his famous song!) I sit so still, such a part of the desert, a kangaroo rat almost walks over my foot.

After a hot still morning, the wind begins to stir. I sit in the shade of a gorgeous palo verde tree: leaves small and waxy to prevent the evaporation of moisture, with green branches and trunk. The yellow blossoms have a stunning orange center. I spook myself thinking about rattlesnakes but see none. I wonder about the purpose of the quail’s floppy top knot and love the russet color of the male’s head. And then I see what I’ve longed for: a roadrunner! I follow him till he disappears in the dried and rattling brittle-bush.

I woke at 5:30 A.M. on my third day, a sign of how rested I felt, and went out immediately to enjoy the desert. In the cool of morning, I couldn’t get over the different feel on my skin. I watched a dove perched on top of the lavish creamy blossoms of a saguaro cactus and then saw something I’ve read about for years but never observed in the wild: a cactus wren nesting in a hole in the saguaro. Now if I could only see a furry black tarantula, my desert menagerie would be complete.

I felt my energy shift this morning and knew I was ready to go. I finished reading Jean Houston’s *Search for the Beloved*, checked out of my room, and made a last visit to the Blessed Sacrament and what had become “my” beloved patch of desert. As I was leaving, I saw an old Franciscan brother raking leaves and had to speak to him and thank him for the witness of his silent prayerful presence. He said he loves to be outside doing manual labor in the desert garden because he can “stop, look, and listen.” Otherwise he gets caught up in superficial talk and loses his recollection.

I had no agenda for these days and no expectations. The retreat was exactly what I needed: stillness and simplicity, rest and reflection, a profound reconnection with the Sonoran Desert, and most important of all: deeply living in the present moment.



Starry Night Memoir Fund

Thank you for your continued generous support. It helped us finish summer outdoor projects, including a roof over Tessa's generator and a dam to prevent spring snowmelt from flooding our road. We have enough firewood from our own land, so we will not purchase any this year. We finished *Desert Voices: The Edge Effect*, our anthology of writings from the Desert Foundation's first ten years. It is now available, and will make a great Christmas gift, along with our Christmas anthology, *Season of Glad Songs*, and the new revised edition of *Holy Daring*.

Completing *Desert Voices* energized us to harvest more seeds of insight for our memoirs. In order to complete them, we continue our "Starry Night Memoir Fund," asking your support as we again dedicate ourselves to writing through winter's frosty days and starry nights.

Our computers still serve us, but their days are numbered, and we have not received enough donations to purchase new ones yet. Please consider helping us invest in reliable computers for publishing and our web site, sandandsky.org.

We are grateful for your support as we live into the autumn of our lives and the "edge" of a New Year.

Now Available

Holy Daring The Earthy Mysticism of 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.

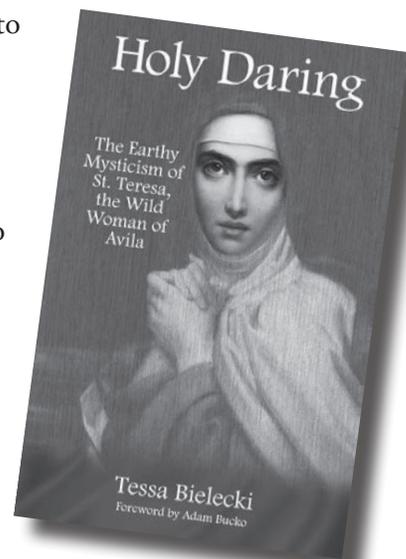
With a foreword by Adam Bucko, co-author of *Occupy Spirituality* and *The New Monasticism*, *Holy Daring* will be an abiding source of inspiration to all who want a fuller, deeper, meaningful, and balanced life.

Now available from your favorite bookseller.

Published by Adam Kadmon Books, c/o Monkfish Book Publishing.

"Tessa's deep intimacy with Teresa of Avila permeates this beautiful book and creates an invitational space for readers of any tradition (or none) to enter into their own transformational relationship with the 'wild woman of Avila.'"

Mirabai Starr, author of Caravan of No Despair



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