

C a r a v a n s

June 2017

The Desert Foundation
PO Box 1000
Crestone, CO 81131
www.sandandsky.org

*The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.*

Isaiah 35:1

Dear Friends,

On August 17, 2017, I will celebrate the 50th anniversary of my joining the Spiritual Life Institute. I have lived in a wilderness hermitage for *all* those fifty years. As I write a memoir commemorating this anniversary, stories about those exuberant years keep pouring out of me. Stories about growing up joyously in a strong ethnic family and studying in the international atmosphere of Washington D.C. during Vatican II and the presidency of J. F. Kennedy. Stories of learning to be a monk and a Carmelite hermit when I joined SLI, and creating retreat centers—one each decade—in the desert of Arizona, the woods of Nova Scotia, the mountains of Colorado, and the green hills of Ireland. Landscape is a big part of my soulscape and the story I need to tell. The “Muse” often wakes me up in the middle of the night, and I write pages and pages.

Then there are stories of leaving SLI, while still being true to its charism and my eremitical vocation. Stories of creating the Desert Foundation with Fr. Dave Denny, exploring the geography and spirituality of the desert, and building bridges between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, an effort more important now than ever, focusing on our common ground rather than what divides us. You’ve been so generous in your support. As Gretchen Mellberg recently wrote, “It was a joy to receive the latest issue of *Caravans* and see your smiling faces. It is indeed a sign of hope to know that dialogues continue between people of faith. We need all the hope we can find these days.” We’re delighted that some of you send donations for “a little treat when you go to town” or even “something decadent” as well as “healthy laptops.”

The Praise of God in Solitude

The largest number of you donate “for the praise of God in solitude,” a phrase created by our Jewish-Sufi friend, Netanel Miles-Yépez, who also serves on our Desert Foundation Board of Directors, along with Dennis



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.



Desert Foundation Board members Dennis Brown, Laura Keim, Paul Baynham, and Kiki Kauffman. Not pictured: Netanel Miles-Yépez and Pegge Erkeneff.

Brown, Paul Baynham, Kiki Kauffman, Laura Keim, and Pegge Erkeneff. Fr. Dave and I build more and more solitude into our lives, especially now in this season of writing, and as I organize over fifty years of archives. I have only two speaking engagements “on the road” this year in order to stay home and write more. One was a conference on Embodied Spiritual Practice Fr. Dave and I did together at Colorado College in February. It was beautiful to be with students from all over the United States who take interfaith spirituality for granted and seek deeper mutual understanding. The second engagement is a dialogue with Pir Zia Inayat-Khan, spiritual leader of the Inayati Sufi Order. Please join us in Richmond, Virginia this coming November 2-5, 2017. We’ll post more details on sandandsky.org as the date approaches.

Heroic Journeys

I was happy to learn that *Holy Daring* was selected a Nautilus Award Silver Winner for 2016 in the category “Heroic Journeys,” true stories of courage, collaboration, and leadership, including situations where persons overcome obstacles or “impossible odds.” Nautilus recognizes “Better Books for a Better World.” The same day I learned that “The Wild Woman Project” listed *Holy Daring* as one of “5 Books for Women’s Empowerment,” along with titles by the poet Maya Angelou and Clarissa Pinkola Estés, author of *Women Who Run with Wolves*. Yes, my friend and patron saint, Teresa of Avila, was a wild woman who ran with the wolves and also soared with the eagles.

Soaring myself & grateful for you, Jessa

I hope to see my Pilot face to face / When I have crosst the bar.

My father, Lewis Emrick Denny, died on December 26, 2016 in Green Valley, Arizona. His last words to me were, “I know you wish you could do more,” and then, in a whisper, as I leaned closer to hear him, “I’m a happy camper.” Two days later, he “turned again home,” in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s words.

Years ago he asked my brother Mike to read Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar” at his funeral. When my friend Theano Lamb heard about this, she wrote: “The Happy Camper has crossed the bar.”

As I look ahead to writing my memoir in the coming months, I feel as if my father released me to new freedom. It doesn’t make the loss less painful, but it deepens my wonder at the mystery: in a spirit of hope he let go of his life, allowing *Life* to deepen in those left behind.



Gratefully, Fr. Dave

Monarch of the Desert

Tessa Bielecki

I've been enthralled by the saguaro cactus my whole life. I saw my first saguaros in movie Westerns and the cowboy TV shows that fueled my childhood imagination in the 1950s. I encountered my first one "face-to-face" in the late 1960s when I moved to Arizona to join the Spiritual Life Institute. The saguaro was the logo of the Institute, coupled with a passage from the Hebrew prophet, Hosea: "I will lead you into the desert, and there I will speak to your heart." Or, as a more modern translator puts it: "The desert will lead you to your heart where I will speak."

When I left SLI in 2005 and wanted to create a new non-profit with my friend and colleague, Fr. Dave Denny, the Desert Foundation was born the very moment we saw the saguaros rising majestically in the wilderness between Phoenix and Cordes Junction on Arizona Highway 17. We use the saguaro for our new logo, too, with another desert passage from the prophet Isaiah: "The desert and the dry land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom." Behind the saguaro is a huge full moon I once saw in a stunning Sierra Club calendar and often see "live" during my sojourns in the desert.

Saguaros are like people. Made mostly of water, they stand upright with trunks and spines, ribs and flesh. When they die, they leave behind starkly beautiful skeletons—and their "boots," another story for another time. Best of all, saguaros have personality. Each one is different. On my walks through saguaro lands, I find myself spontaneously greeting these behemoths with affectionate nicknames.

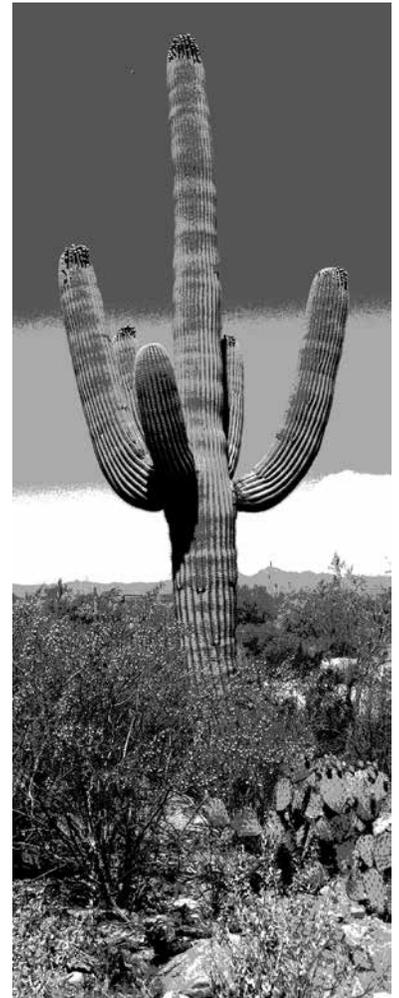
The one I call Friend reaches out her two arms to embrace me. *Los Abuelos*, the Grandparents, have many arms in their old age to hug their many grandchildren. The Sentinels, much younger and therefore armless, stand five abreast in a remarkably straight line, keeping watch. The one-eyed Cyclops looks at me grotesquely. The Headless Horseman, despite his name, is more benign, and lets a white-winged dove, migrating from Mexico, sit on his "neck," while his multiple arms support tinier song birds.

Venerable Carnegiea Gigantea

Scientific facts about *carnegiea gigantea* endear the saguaro cactus to me even more. Saguaros are ancient and venerable, sometimes living two hundred years. They grow up to fifty feet tall and can weigh as much as eight–twelve tons. They don't begin to grow arms until they are fifty–one hundred years old. Saguaros have an enormous capacity for storing water in their spongy tissue. Shallow roots, three inches below the desert surface, grow in response to moisture and may soak up as much as two hundred gallons of water in a single rainfall. The saguaro can produce its big, bold, creamy-white flowers and red fruit even during long droughts. Each fruit contains almost two thousand tiny black seeds. One saguaro may produce some forty million seeds in its lifetime, but most are eaten by animals and birds. The saguaro is plentiful in the Sonoran Desert of southwestern North America and not endangered. The biggest threat to them is our rapidly expanding human population, which promotes habitat destruction and even saguaro poaching.

What do I learn from the saguaro? Endurance, adaptability, generosity, and a sense of mystery and awe. The longer I look at saguaro cactus on my walks through the desert, the more I notice how many of them carry multiple and beautiful scars. So their greatest lesson for me now is the *healing of wounds*.

(An expanded version of this saguaro love-affair will appear in my memoir.)



Silver Linings

David Denny

Our Muslim neighbors are among Americans suffering anxiety these days. It is heartening to hear news of non-Muslims expressing solidarity with them. A “Protect Our Muslim Neighbors” rally took place in Denver in February. Moroccan Mohamed Mouadane brought his seven-year-old daughter to the event so that she could learn about her First Amendment rights, and to see that she can share opinions without fear.

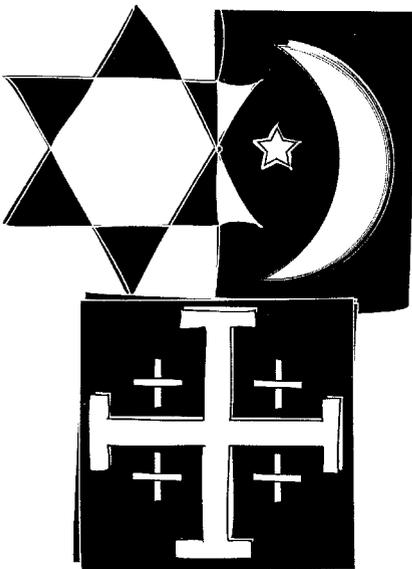
In January, a Jewish and a Muslim family who had never met went to O’Hare International Airport in Chicago to protest against the recent immigration ban. The two fathers lifted their children onto their shoulders. The Jewish girl and the Muslim boy encountered each other in a photo that went viral. The *Chicago Tribune* tells the story of this encounter and includes the photo. In Canada, Jews and Christians formed “rings of peace” around Canadian mosques on the first Friday after a shooting at a Quebec mosque on January 29.

The *National Catholic Reporter* covered a March national meeting in Chicago of Christian-Muslim regional dialogue groups. “It is unconscionable,” San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy contended, “that in the United States...one of the great world religions is caricatured, misrepresented and despised so widely in our culture.” Muslim scholar Sherman Jackson contended that “The zero-sum mindset of the past, when the gains of one religion can only be seen as a loss to another, will no longer serve any religion in America.... the discrediting of any religion has the cumulative effect of discrediting all religion.”

What Is Your Calling?

A great hope and challenge of our time is to learn to extend the love and respect we cherish within our own spiritual communities to neighbors living in other denominations and religions. Our ecumenical Franciscan friend Gary Nabhan recently wrote about how important it is for Christians to understand “church” to include not just members of “my” denomination.

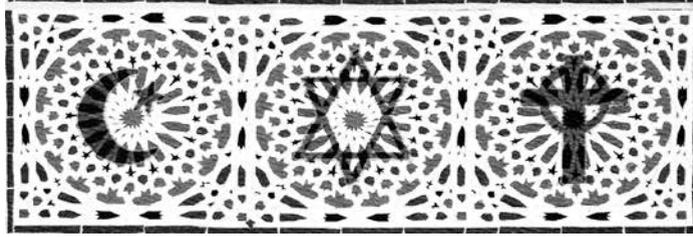
If the “church” includes everyone, and if our global community needs repair, then we all share a “Franciscan” vocation. He accepts that we can’t all be “activists,” but we each need to ask how we may help repair our relationships and our planet:



“I am asking you to take seriously the question of what YOUR CALLING might be. Is it to repair old homes for the poor or dilapidated schools and churches? Is it to reform our government and our religious institutions? Is it to reduce waste polluting our streams and landfills, restore wildlife habitats or the regenerative capacity of our streams, farms, orchards and ranchland? Is it to help heal those stuck in our hospitals, asylums, prisons and nursing homes? Now is the time to figure out what your personal role will be for the next four years in repairing our home. I don’t care which task you choose, but take out your saw, your hammer, your garden trowel, your guitar, your suture thread and needle, and repair our house...to a healthy order!”

That’s a *tall* order, but people I know who take a stab at it are joyful and radiant. At the Desert Foundation, we are aware of the new political context that makes our commitment to Abrahamic reconciliation more important than ever. We want to emphasize the positive, the graced, the luminous, the “silver linings” in these times.

Readers' Responses



To say I loved *Desert Voices* would hardly be an exaggeration. The least of it was encountering all the wondrous quotes and figures I hadn't known, though a few were my personal heroes, such as Reb Zalman and Wilfred Thesiger. (My name first appeared in print, eons ago, when I reviewed *Arabian Sands*.) What then was the most of it? Wherever I opened the book and began reading, I felt I was in the realm of sacredness. When one shuts the book, he or she of course is still in the realm of sacredness, only—perhaps especially here in D.C. —it's harder to discern. Indeed, one effect of the book is to foster a desire, should I regain the physical oomph to do so, to exit the hurrying city and live where inner and outer more readily enter into benevolent collusion. Congratulations and felicitations to you both for this little gem. I am now impatient for both your memoirs.

J.P., Washington D.C.

I have finished the first reading of *Desert Voices* but not the contemplation thereof. It will provide another dimension to the practice as I continue to discover and refine what “works” as a desert dweller in the Chihuahan “high” desert. I can easily identify with your serious infatuation and immersion in this “empty” environment, empty only on the visual surface, not in the dimension of soul-seeking. I hope you both will continue to write and publish. Your efforts keep us “wannabe” hermits mentally alert and spiritually active.

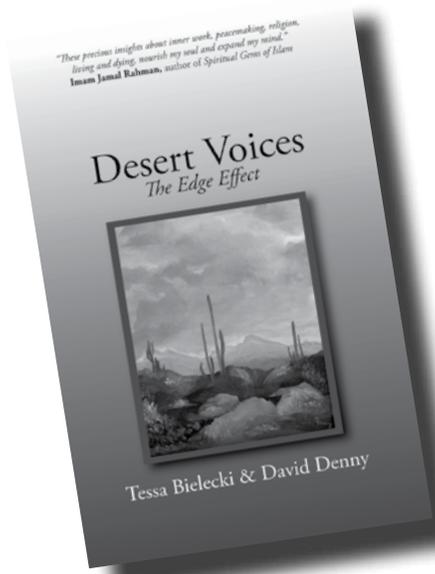
M.D., Mimbres, New Mexico

Today I received *Caravans* and a photo of my mud-covered granddaughter, joyfully working at her first post-graduate job as a botanist. I realized that it's people like you, Dave and Tessa—with your patient and mindful devotion to promoting peace and prosperity amidst chaos—and Crystal's desire to protect the earth's bounty, who will turn today's frightening “breaking news” into a message of hope. In contrast to every bigoted, cruel human being strutting on the world's stage, *Caravans* highlights the efforts of peacemakers from all races and faiths banding together in action that can transform the planet. Please continue to nurture your desert-based roots as you circle the globe spreading sanity! I hope you know that you make the journey enveloped in the prayers of all of us who are watching. Great news to learn that you will be focusing on memory sharing that will provide inspiration for others and give you a chance to reflect upon the soul-shaping events that prepared you for the critical work you do.

F.N., Chico, California

Our Tool Box

Now that we have published *Desert Voices*, 2017 allows us to devote more time to writing our memoirs. Your support enables us to set aside long stretches of time for the silent, solitary task of reflecting on our lives and the world we inhabit. You helped us purchase two new computers for this and other Desert Foundation tasks, such as web site management, *Caravans* publishing, and finances. Thank you! But we did not receive enough funds to cover the complete cost of \$1,885. Please help us pay for these essential tools.



Desert Voices

The Edge Effect

by Tessa Bielecki & David Denny

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.

Available from Amazon.com. Proceeds support the Desert Foundation.

“These precious insights about inner work, peacemaking, religion, living and dying, nourish my soul and expand my mind.”

Imam Jamal Rahman, author of Spiritual Gems of Islam

Winner of a 2016 Silver Nautilus Award

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

