

C a r a v a n s

December 2017

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

*In Jesus Christ the finite and the infinite meet, the human and the divine
are joined...the material and the spiritual are one.*

Raimon Panikkar

Dear Friends,

Our good news can be summed up in one word: expansion. Tessa describes our expansion into the Sonoran Desert on page three while I describe our expanding collaboration with the Foundation for New Monasticism and InterSpirituality (www.new-monastics.com).

Netanel Miles-Yépez is one of the founding “New Monastics,” an artist, writer, publisher and also a Desert Foundation board member. During his desert time in Crestone this autumn, he and I had wonderful conversations and shared and encouraged each other’s writing. Tessa and I are also helping the New Monastics develop guidelines for formation in a spirituality rooted in monastic tradition while “dedicated to the emergence of a newly conceived [interspiritual] contemplative life.” Sensing a “new” moment in the history of monastic life, the New Monastics also find deep inspiration in the lives and practices of pioneers from various world religions, including Christians such as Raimon Panikkar. Netanel’s presence prompted me to look back on my first encounter with this giant.

The Monk as Archetype

Three months after my ordination, my community gave me a gift: I attended a seminal conference called “Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Archetype,” in Holyoke, Massachusetts, sponsored by people whose work is carried on today by Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. Raimon Panikkar was the main speaker. He dazzled me. I was 26 years old and had never met anyone whose intellect and experience had absorbed so much. Even with his grasp of several languages, he often struggled to express his insights. He’d say things such as, “Greek and Latin do not have an adequate word for what I want to say. It is similar to the Pali ‘w’ or the Sanskrit ‘x,’ yet it needs to be tempered with the subtlety of the Chinese ‘y’ and at the same time incorporate the Hebrew ‘z.’”



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 Netanel Miles-Yépez look forward to more inter-generational collaboration between the Desert Foundation and the New Monastics.

His infectious smile and expressive hands made him spellbinding. We have doctors without borders. Panikkar was a *person without borders*—body, mind, spirit. This was the kind of witness and wisdom for which I hungered.

Panikkar helped me trust the intuition that since Christ is the Alpha through whom all is created, then this grace has operated throughout time, through many cultures and religions. Although Christ brings miraculous Good News, and our grasp of this revelation is “adequate for salvation,” we are still limited, since Christian tradition draws on and is limited by Hebrew, Greek, and Latin cultures and languages. How can someone as radiant and liberating as Christ be so historically, culturally, linguistically, racially limited?

If the Christian community is the Body of Christ, then we are organic, alive, and capable of mutual cross-fertilization: changing other traditions through contact, and being changed ourselves. It is difficult to share Good News through conquering. It becomes attractive through conversing. And to converse we have to listen and learn. We need to be “vulnerable to conversion,” as Pannikkar put it. Not that we “convert” to another religion, but we change. If we are Christian, as Tessa puts it, we become a different kind of Christian. The fear of contamination may give way to the amazement of cross-fertilizing fruitfulness. Adherence to a closed doctrine may give way to the kind of development John Henry Cardinal Newman described: The Church must change in order to remain identical with herself, as an acorn needs to germinate and send out roots and limbs, leaves and new fruit in order to fulfill its end. It cannot grow without contact with sunlight, rain, earth, and other trees, which may nourish rather than contaminate.

New Monastics

Netanel and his colleagues Adam Bucko, Rory McEntee, and others, have adopted Panikkar’s book, *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Archetype*, based on the conference, as a seminal work in their quest for “new monasticism.” Recently I remembered visiting Fr. Panikkar at his home in Tavertet, Catalonia, Spain, a few years before he died, so I returned to his book and felt hope rekindled. More than thirty years later, the seeds planted by that initial conference were bearing fruit. I was surprised at my delight because since leaving the monastery I lived in for three decades, I have thought of my life as “post-monastic.”

But as I reread Panikkar’s distinction between the monk as a *professional* living in an exclusive community and the *monastic archetype* at the center of every human being, I trust more confidently my own strange path from exchange student in Afghanistan, Buddhist trainee, and ordained priest, to my present life as a Catholic hermit on a Colorado cattle ranch, traveling monthly to raise funds for Cross Catholic Outreach, in service to the poor, and the creation of the Desert Foundation with Tessa Bielecki in 2005.

Tessa and I accept the quixotic folly of praying and writing about healing between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. We believe that once we encounter the “desert,” physically or internally, through loss of beloved prejudices or beloved family, friends, and loves, we suffer an expansion that makes us hunger for a deeper communion with a larger community. We become a different kind of “monk.”

*May Advent and Christmas
deepen our hope and bless
our simplicity. gratefully,
Fr. Dave*



Fifty Years and Counting

Tessa Bielecki

... Come, my friends.
*'Tis not too late to seek a newer world....
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are:
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

Over the past summer, I meditated on my fifty years of living contemplatively, always in the wilderness: the red rock desert of Sedona, Arizona in the 1960s, the woods and lakes of Nova Scotia, Canada, in the 1970s, the mountains of Colorado in the 1980s, and the green fields of Ireland beside the ocean in the 1990s, helping to create a contemplative retreat center for the Spiritual Life Institute in each landscape. Then in the early years of the New Millennium, after all these adventures, the trauma of separating from my monastic community under tragic and painful circumstances, and as part of my healing, creating the Desert Foundation with Fr. Dave Denny in 2005. When we set up our first web site, we wanted the name desertfoundation.org, but that was already taken. So we settled on desertfound.org.

Last summer I marveled at the deeper meanings of “desert *found*.” And I kept hearing “Ulysses,” the poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, reminding me “to seek, to find” because it’s “not too late to seek a newer world” – which may mean rediscovering an older and familiar one. I began to feel an urgent paradigm shift in my being. It felt like the Holy Spirit prodding me to make a change. I doubted, agonized, wept. But the call was persistent and inescapable. (A spiritual guide I deeply trust assured me I’d left no stone unturned in my discernment.) So with only a sleeping bag, a blender, and a card table for a desk, I took off for the Sonoran Desert of northwest Tucson. I checked into a hotel while I searched for an apartment in a specific location: close to Saguaro National Park so I can walk among these majestic cactus, close to the Desert House of Prayer so I can pray in community again. *Desert found*.

Contemplation in the City

Now I’m becoming more like my friends, the “new monastics,” moving from “old” to “new” monastic, as I explore “contemplation in the city” for a while. I’m living the same way I have for the past fifty years, but in an urban environment. And, I humbly confess, after the initial excitement, I’m struggling, especially with the noise and the light pollution. How will the fundamental elements of contemplative life I’ve lived and taught for fifty years “work” outside the wilderness, which I now recognize as both an ideal and highly privileged environment? What is a good rhythm between time in Tucson and time back in my Colorado hermitage? (I’ll live in both places for now.) What new collaborations will emerge from coming full circle and connecting with my beloved Arizona again?

In this *Caravans*, Fr. Dave tells you more about our collaborations with the Foundation for New Monasticism and Interspirituality. Stay tuned for more tales of connections to Saguaro National Park and the Desert House of Prayer, founded in 1974, with inspiration from the Spiritual Life Institute’s magazine, *Desert Call*, and our early way of life in Sedona. And thank you for your trust and support in this new adventure.



Season of Glad Songs

Compiled by Tessa Bielecki

The celebration of the birth of Jesus is a long rich season for Christians. We prepare ourselves *interiorly* through the four-week season of Advent, which includes the Winter Solstice. Christmas erupts, then a deeper penetration of the mystery of the Incarnation on Epiphany, with the celebration of the Motherhood of Mary and the Holy Name of Jesus on New Year's. The season does not officially end until February 2, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, also called Candlemas because we do a special candle blessing this day. To enhance your own celebrations, we offer these meditations, drawn from our Christmas Anthology, *Season of Glad Songs*.

(For more details, see page six or visit sandandsky.org.)

I. Advent

I live my Advent in the womb of Mary....
I knew for long she carried me and fed me,
Guarded and loved me, though I could not see.
But only now, with inward jubilee,
I come upon earth's most amazing knowledge:
Someone is hidden in this dark with me.

Jessica Powers

II. Winter

Peace
Be with you, winter,
Whose rage and
Tempest
Restore to nature
Her sleeping
Strength.

Kahlil Gibran



III. Christmas

The vagabond mother of Christ
and the vagabond men of wisdom
all in a barn on a winter night
and a baby there in swaddling clothes on hay
Why does this story never wear out?

Carl Sandburg

IV. The New Year

Angels, as this year now nears its end
Fold their wings, as gently down they bend,
Rent and broken hopes on earth to mend.
May they find us ready to rise!

Angels, at the dawn of a New Year
Spread bright wings and rise, and rise from here
Raising us to heights we crave, yet fear.
May they find us daring!

David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B.

V. Epiphany

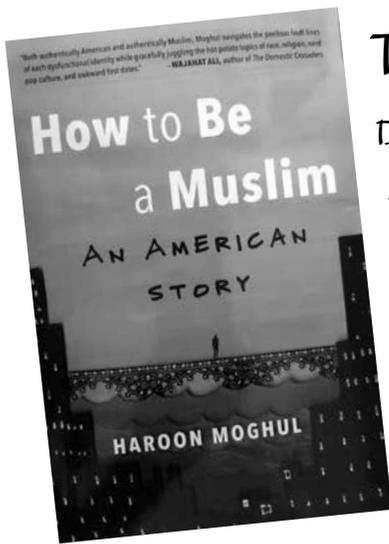
Oh, far away in time they rode
Upon their wanderings,
And still in story goes abroad
The riding of the Kings.

Eleanor Farjeon

VI. Candlemas

Light the candles.
They have more right to exist than all the darkness.
It is Christmas, Christmas that lasts forever.

Karl Rahner, S.J.



The Man on the Bridge

David Denny

The cover of Haroon Moghul's memoir, *How to Be a Muslim: An American Story*, already tells a tale. Dark blue skyscrapers with pale blue windows ascend the left and right margins. Beyond the buildings, water rises, cold and threatening. A bridge stretches between the buildings, finely decorated with turquoise, red, and pale yellow geometric and floral designs, like a Persian rug. An orange sky glows in the background. It could be dawn, but it feels like dusk. Perched on the bridge, just off-center, stands a small silhouette of a man with his hands in his pockets. No guardrail. Precarious and alone.

Haroon's tale includes some hilarious moments and luminous epiphanies, and by the end, I wished there were another cover, depicting a dawn and warm, inviting tropical waters. Moghul suffers and causes suffering, heals the hard way, through long and humbling awareness. He offers sober, practical wisdom for readers. A dark night, as St. John of the Cross knew, can become lovelier than the dawn. A night of terror may also be a night of revelation, what the Qur'an describes as a Night of Power or Destiny, in which angels descend, leaving "peace... until the rise of dawn" (Surah 97:5).

Between Cultures

Moghul was born into a well-to-do Pakistani-American family in New England. Privilege and a noble pedigree reaching centuries back into the history of Islam do not spare him from life-threatening illnesses as a child and profound isolation as a brown adolescent Muslim who revels in the pop culture his family finds barbaric. At NYU, an institution his father believes is substandard, but appropriate for his unpromising son, Moghul discovers a talent for organizing Muslim students and launches a dynamic Islamic Center. He and his friends share a similar alienation: they cannot replicate the cultures from which their families emerged, nor do they fit comfortably into American "Judeo-Christian" or purely secular culture. As he achieves great success with Muslim students at NYU, Haroon felt split within. Turmoil brews in the tension between his nearly encyclopedic knowledge of Islam and his inner hollowness, his desperate loneliness.

And then comes 9/11. He is thrust into representing Islam on national news broadcasts, becoming what he calls a "professional Muslim." Ten years later, at thirty-one, he has a philosophy degree, a wife, and a "dream job." Then he becomes that silhouette on a bridge, ready to jump. Until the phone in his pocket vibrates.

Life-Changing Pilgrimage

One of the most moving passages describes Moghul's response to visiting the Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina. When I studied Islam in college, I had the impression that most Muslims downplayed Muhammad. He is "only" human, whereas the Qur'an is the pure revelation of God, honored somewhat as Christians honor the Incarnation. But over the years, as I get to know more Muslims, they often share profound devotion to Muhammad. If you don't have Muslim friends or know little about Muhammad's life, Moghul's two pilgrimage chapters are a warm introduction. He does not describe an angry zealot bent on jihad. He sketches a man whose "inclination was always to peace." Many residents of seventh-century Mecca were early and fierce opponents of Muhammad, yet say he "never lied. Never cheated. Never mocked. No one recalled him cursing, abusing, or dismissing anyone, no matter her station—or lack thereof." Skeptics may dispute this glowing description, but what good person doesn't admire such virtues?

In the end, Moghul no longer sees his life and heritage as a deterministic straitjacket. His hard-won conclusions may sound simple, but the suffering, humility, and humor that engender them lend these tenets gravity and grace: love and honor yourself; pray tearfully and honestly in your own words; tell your story and listen to stories; and instead of rejecting or uncritically affirming your biography and spiritual roots, use it all as "a grammar" to write your own stories.

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.



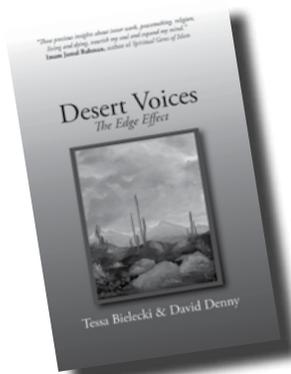
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Desert Voices

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.

An Appeal to Heroic Hearts

If you are holding a printed version of *Caravans*, you see this issue looks different. In October, we were ready to send *Caravans* to press and contacted our Colorado Springs printer. They had moved! We scrambled to find a new one. The good news: you hold *Caravans* in your hand.

The bad news and second reason *Caravans* looks different is that we are low on funds. Our summer *Caravans* did not inspire enough donations to cover the usual printing and postage costs. So you are receiving the “budget edition” until, we hope, you can help us return to a more pleasing look with higher quality paper.

Buying our books is also a great way to support us. And *Season of Glad Songs* makes a wonderful Christmas gift, as do *Holy Daring* and *Desert Voices*.

As years pass, some of our oldest friends and supporters have died. Others suffer changed circumstances that prevent them from giving as they once did. We need new supporters. We hope our expansions into Tucson, the Sonoran Desert, and among the New Monastics may yield new donors. If you know someone who may benefit from becoming part of our circle of friends, please let them know about us, share this *Caravans*, or introduce them to our web site, sandandsky.org.

Thank you for helping us “to seek a newer world” nourished by contemplative living and deep respect, especially among the children of Abraham and Sarah.