

# C a r a v a n s

December 2018

The Desert Foundation  
PO Box 1000  
Crestone, CO 81131  
[www.sandandsky.org](http://www.sandandsky.org)

*In time it came round, the time / ripe for the birth of a boy.  
Much as a bridegroom steps / fresh from the chamber of joy,  
arm in arm he arrived / entwining the sweetheart he chose...*

St. John of the Cross

**Dear Friends,**

I love meditating on the poetry of John of the Cross during the weeks before Christmas. "If we keep Advent quiet and uncluttered," wrote William McNamara, founder of the Spiritual Life Institute, "we will be awake and ready when Christ comes." I try and keep Advent empty and still, whether I'm sitting by a crackling fire in my Crestone hermitage or wandering among the silent saguaros in the Tucson desert.

I had cataract surgery on both eyes in October and wore a patch for Halloween. All went well, but I felt more like a tired old witch than a jaunty pirate. I hope the new lenses will give me deeper inner vision as well as outer. The surgeries slowed progress on memoir-writing and the archives for Boulder's University of Colorado. I've sorted a half century of news clippings, interviews, and articles, but am still slogging through five thousand photographs and digitalizing old talks currently on cassette tapes. Some days this project feels overwhelming, and I long to finish it so I can live more in the present moment.

## **Desert Nature**

Dr. Gary Nabhan is a friend and Desert Foundation partner, an ethnobotanist who holds an endowed chair at the University of Arizona Southwest Center and also a Prescott College classmate of Fr. Dave's. He's writing a book called *The Nature of Desert Nature* and invited both Fr. Dave and me to contribute short essays. We compiled several writings from former issues of *Caravans* to describe our long love affair with the desert.

I gave autumn retreats in Southern California and Sand Springs, Oklahoma. The first, called "Something Mystical," was for a group of women I meet with every year, along with my friend Donna Couch. The second was called "Earthy Mysticism" at the Osage Forest of Peace.



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.

## *A Bridge*

I thoroughly enjoyed doing a podcast for [Contemplify.com](http://Contemplify.com) this fall. As Paul Swanson and I conversed, I understood more profoundly that my forty years of monastic life in the Spiritual Life Institute were a bridge between “old” and more traditional monasticism and what is now called “new monasticism.”

I’m saddened by the “end” of the Spiritual Life Institute of America, which I joined in 1967. The community in Crestone will dissolve after Nada Hermitage is sold. If you know anyone who would like to buy this unique retreat center (fourteen hermitages, a chapel, library and community building), please contact Spiritual Life Institute, PO Box 219, Crestone, CO 81131.

As I meditate on this “death,” I’m inspired by the wisdom of theologian, Illia Delio, O.S.F. “One can look at a dying community in two ways,” she says. “Yes, you are dying out historically and whatever work you have done will live on in someone else. Or, you can look at dying as a participation in an unfolding evolutionary story and see that your life and your works have always been part of a larger whole.... every death is the beginning of new life; every end is a new arrival. A community may be dying, but something new is being born. We need to shift our focus to the new births taking place in quiet, hidden, and perhaps, non-traditional ways.”

—*Tessa Bielecki*

## *New Life*

One of the “new births” that excites us is the Foundation for New Monasticism and Interspirituality. We are currently sharing our hermitages in Crestone with two of the leaders. Along with Adam Bucko, Rory McEntee is co-author of *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Life in the 21st Century*, and is currently writing his doctoral dissertation. Netanel Miles-Yépez is an artist, religion scholar, and spiritual teacher in the Sufi-Hasidic Inayati-Maimuni lineage. Both young men have helped us improve our internet service in Crestone, our solar electrical systems, and even the “outhouse” at the Hogan.

We enjoy our informal conversations with these new monastics as well as more formal dialogues. Last June we joined them and other interspiritual leaders at Osage Forest of Peace to explore “Spiritual Formation” for the emerging generation, many of whom have no such formation in their lives. Visit them [online](#) to learn more about this movement, which fosters a more relevant and inclusive spirituality and integrates sacred activism in our troubled world. Click on their [blog link](#) to find my reflections on “Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Archetype.”

The Foundation for New Monasticism eagerly partners with the Desert Foundation. They are responsible for getting our archives into University of Colorado Boulder. They even made this issue of *Caravans* possible by giving us an interest-free loan, since our coffers were empty by the time we needed to go to press.

Since we began with a Christmas meditation, let us close in the joy of this Hanukkah prayer: “Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season. Amen.”

—*David Denny*

### *Spiritual Formation Dialogue*

**Left:** Netanel Miles-Yépez, Arapata TeMaari Aiono and Fr. Dave Denny.

**Right:** Rachel Jones, Vera de Chalambert, Lasette Brown, and Tessa Bielecki. **Not Pictured:** Rory McEntee, Rev. Don Chatfield, and Swami Atmarupananda.



# Christmas is a Wedding

Tessa Bielecki



Christmas is a wedding, according to St. John of the Cross, in his mystical poems, *Romances on the Gospel*. (See page 1.) John says that Jesus emerges from his mother's womb not as a helpless baby, but as an erotic Bridegroom. The celebration of Christmas becomes the consummation of a marriage. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," we learn from the Gospel. This is the Incarnation we celebrate at Christmas, and how I wish we called the feast "Incarnation" instead of Christmas.

Throughout Christian history, we have crudely attempted to separate the bride and groom, matter and spirit, body and soul, as if one were evil and the other good. Whatever we call this tendency, the Church has officially condemned it as "heresy," yet accepted it in daily practice. But as William McNamara wrote: "Ever since the Incarnation, no one is permitted to scorn or disregard anything human or natural... The Incarnation establishes once and for all, the *given-ness* of union with God. We do not have to *attain* divine union... [or] climb out of our messy flesh into the pure Spirit of God. God has become man. Our flesh is his flesh."

So there can be no spiritual practice where the body does not play a role. "You, Lord, are on the earth and clothed with it," prayed St. Teresa of Avila, implying that we are, too. "We are not angels," she said, "but we have a body. To desire to be angels while here on earth is foolishness." God isn't satisfied if we merely bring our souls to prayer—as if that were even possible—but desires our bodies as well.

How do we bring our bodies? We bend our knees, fold our hands, bow our heads. But we do not always have to be in a posture of stillness and tranquility. Our prayer can be more tumultuous. We may beat our breasts, flail our arms, pace the room, even writhe on the floor. We may wrestle with God like Jacob and come out maimed for life. We may argue with God like Job or scold like St. Teresa. You may know the story about Teresa travelling the roads of Spain in a rickety old cart and getting stuck in the mud during a torrential rainstorm. Christ said to her, "This is the way I treat my friends." Teresa snapped back at him: "Well, no wonder you have so few!"

Sometimes we dance our prayer joyfully like King David as the Ark of the Covenant entered Jerusalem, or like Miriam, the sister of Moses, after the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea safely. Teresa also danced her prayer—with castanets and a tambourine. Even John of the Cross, a more restrained personality, was once so carried away in his celebration of Christmas that he scooped the statue of the baby Jesus up in his arms and whirled away with him.

Some of the deepest body-prayer comes from the sickbed, when the body lies broken, bleeding or diseased. Then we are united to the crucified Christ, the suffering God, who prayed most eloquently from the cross—not with his words alone, but with his entire body racked in excruciating pain.

This is the rich vibrant tradition of Christian humanism, earthy mysticism, or incarnational contemplation. Yes, you'll find me praying in church, on my knees, in silence, but you're just as likely to find me praying out-of-doors, wandering among the saguaro cactus in the desert, swimming in the ocean, sitting on a rock at sunset or moonrise. St. Teresa encouraged us to "go outside, go into the country... look at the fields. Look at the water, look at the flowers."

According to the French Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "by virtue of the Creation and, still more, of the Incarnation, *nothing* here below is *profane* for those who know how to see." This is what John of the Cross meant when in *Romance 4* he wrote that the world was created as a "palace for the bride" so that she "might know the bridegroom she had."

# Hope Here and Now

David Denny



*Another day will come, a womanly day,  
diaphanous in metaphor, complete in being,  
diamond and processional in visitation, sunny,  
flexible, with a light shadow. No one will feel  
a desire for suicide or for leaving....*

Mahmoud Darwish

**D**reams take place in our imaginations as we sleep. This must be why we call people who can't cope with the daylight world's harsh realities "dreamers." According to the stereotype, they may have lovely dreams, but they cannot contribute anything practical to the world.

But then I think of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's dream, of Dr. Martin Luther King's dream, and how Rev. William Barber and the New Poor People's Campaign have revived King's dream fifty years after its inception, and I see another possibility. Some dreamers have nerves of steel and the tenacity to fight for the dream to become flesh. Christians believe that in the end, love is all that lasts. This is a faith-based realism. If we want to be realistic, then we better be lovers.

St. Paul believed that although Love is the greatest among theological virtues, Hope also endures. Hope is not feeling optimistic about the future, which justifies our being pessimistic about now. Hope is the experience of something wondrous, luminous, trustworthy, healing, now, deep beneath the suffering present. We exist in time. But reality and humanity are more than temporal.

St. John of the Cross taught that Hope arises as our memories are mortified. I have always been puzzled by this. Maybe what he meant is that memories, whether joyous or painful, may limit our imaginations. As memories accumulate, we long to repeat or forget the experiences. But what if a new deed is possible? Something unprecedented and unimaginable? Something that seems like a dream?

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
then we thought we were dreaming.  
Our mouths were filled with laughter;  
our tongues sang for joy. (Psalm 126:1-2)*

What if our fortunes are already restored, what if Christ rises, moment by moment, now, in each of us? I remember studying the fascinating history of the Middle East in college. I discovered saints and heroes. I also read about a queen who teamed up with one of her sons to ensure that he inherited the throne. She and the chosen one rolled up the other son in a rug and cudged him to death. This is not an infrequent behavior. So history may look like "one damned thing after another," as some cynics put it. I began to wonder if something trustworthy and healing lives beneath all the betrayals and fratricides.

Rumanian writer Petru Dumitriu felt the weight and the horror of history. But he noted one day how beautiful a beam of sunlight was as it struck a staircase. He saw kittens wrestling in the green grass. He came to the conviction that the weight of evil in our world cannot be overcome by any counterweight, but it may be transfigured by seemingly weak and humble opponents: prayer and beauty. These realities do not cancel each other out. They contradict and coexist. Shaken by it all, I try to be hospitable to Mystery, open to Annunciation.

I don't understand it, but under the news cycle I sense another Day, here and now. She is womanly and complete. Sunny. No one's suiciding or leaving. Maybe I'm dreaming. Or maybe I'm realistic. Hopeful.

# Contemplative Happy Hour

Tessa Bielecki

Many of the most important lessons of my life come together in a recent podcast from [Contemplify.com](http://Contemplify.com). Of all the interviews I've done over the past fifty years, this is my favorite. I hope you'll smile at the way I link monastic Vespers with British teatime and our tradition of "Happy Hour." Paul Swanson's approach to contemplative living is creative, refreshing, and lighthearted, and even includes "drink pairings." It was a joy to converse with him. As he says, "Please listen responsibly."

Here is Paul's introduction to our conversation:

*I first met Tessa Bielecki as I was exiting a port-a-potty. Let me explain. A few years back, I was at an arts and spirituality festival. As I departed a port-a-potty, I made a crack about it being a cramped prayer cell (or some such nonsense) to the woman next in line, and she let out an infectious belly laugh while I held the grimy door open. Looking back, this was the right way to meet Tessa. See, Tessa Bielecki is a contemplative on the roads of the world. She is familiar with the ditches, the byways and the old desert roads that take you to the end of what you know. And she's gracious enough to share her wisdom of these roads with us today.*

*Tessa Bielecki has written a number of books, I recommend them all, and most heartily Holy Daring: The Earthy Mysticism of St. Teresa, the Wild Woman of Avila. Tessa dipped into a contemplative way of being early in her life and has followed that thread all the way up to the present moment. She has been a part of many groundbreaking contemplative initiatives, and I'll highlight one now. The Desert Foundation was founded by Tessa with her pal Fr. David Denny as "an informal circle of friends exploring the spirit of the desert, its landscape and soulscape, with a special focus on peace and reconciliation among the Abrahamic traditions: Jews, Christians, and Muslims." You'll get a mighty wash of that spirit of the desert in our conversation today, which holds the bearings for a rhythm of life that incorporates contemplative practices, the insights gleaned from re-reading formational books in your life, why the stories of Ernest Shackleton might just be the marker for transforming a season of life and so much more.*

## Wasted Sunlight and Empty Pockets

Thanks to you, we made progress with our water system, but the old pump needs more work. It sometimes fails to start without receiving a whack from Fr. Dave. We need a new pump so we can remove and rebuild the old one. We'll hang onto the refurbished one as a backup for the future. This fall, the batteries at Tessa's hermitage were not charging adequately. A local electrician diagnosed and repaired the system so that it now harnesses sunlight efficiently. Can you help us pay for this vital improvement?

We were resigned to postponing our monthly stipends until January due to the low balance in our bank account. Our summer *Caravans* does not bring in as many donations as our winter issue, so we pinched pennies in order to print this *Caravans*. But as you read above, the New Monastics' no-interest loan allowed us to publish *Caravans* and pay ourselves. Please help us repay this generous loan. And can you help sustain us either with a more generous donation now or next summer, so that we can finish 2019 on a solid financial footing?

*Thank you for your support  
& Happy 2019!  
Love, Tessa & Fr. Dave*





Give Good Reading for Christmas!

## Season of Glad Songs

*A Christmas Anthology*

by Tessa Bielecki & David Denny

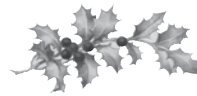
\$20.00

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 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.*

## What Readers Say about *Season of Glad Songs*



**“Just when you think enough has been written** about Christmas, along comes a book that delights the senses and draws you into a deeper level of meaning about the seasonal celebrations of winter. Opening up a spaciousness at the heart of humanity, far from the cultural trappings of consumerism, Tessa Bielecki and Dave Denny communicate the primordial sense of wonder that stares at us every day from the human experience. From Advent to Candlemas, the authors invite the reader to see the ordinary and familiar with new eyes. A collection full of wisdom, unusual poems, hymns, rituals, and just plain beautiful prose, this book is essentially a gift, to give and to savor, for many years to come.” *D.E.C.*

**“I plan to read it again** next year at Christmas and to leave it out at Christmastime so others can enjoy it, too.” *S.P.*

**“Wonderful book!** Different from other Christmas books because it includes a great variety of cultural and spiritual traditions.” *S.G.*

## Desert Voices

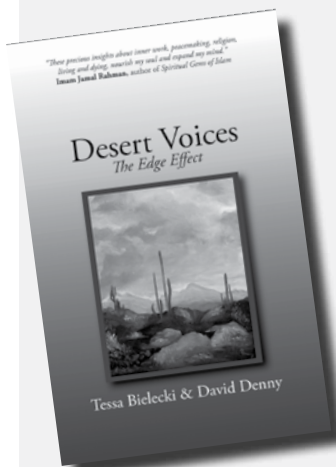
*The Edge Effect*

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.

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



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