



# C a r a v a n s

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The Desert Foundation  
PO Box 655  
Cortaro, Arizona 85652  
[www.sandandsky.org](http://www.sandandsky.org)

I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and traveled and thought and written.... Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.

—Oliver Sacks

*Dear Friends,*

## The Desert Foundation is Fifteen Years Old!

In this anniversary year, we planned a special summer issue of *Caravans*. With lots of archival photos, we hoped to share our fifteen-year history, which you have so generously supported. Then the Covid-19 pandemic changed everything for all of us.

We realized that our decades of solitude in our hermitages had uniquely prepared us for this crisis, so we share what we've learned with you instead. We'll tell our anniversary story in the winter issue. Meanwhile, please note that *Desert Voices: The Edge Effect* and *Season of Glad Songs: A Christmas Anthology* are now on sale, to celebrate our fifteen years, as you'll read on page six.

Tessa is pleased to announce her first e-course, which she'll teach with Carl McColman November 2-17, 2020. Sponsored by Spirituality and Practice, this event focuses on the Christian mystics. Details about the provocative themes and how to register are on page three.

Please let us know if you have special prayer intentions this challenging season.

Now that we have officially moved the Desert Foundation to Arizona, our new address is:

**PO Box 655, Cortaro, AZ 85652.**



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. [Sandandsky.org](http://Sandandsky.org) 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 PO Box 655, Cortaro, AZ 85652.

# Coming Home to Quarantine

David Denny



**M**y move to Tucson is a homecoming. I fell in love with Arizona, especially the Sonoran Desert, when I lived here from 1969-1976. Late last January, I drove from frigid Colorado to Tucson's spring-like winter. Wildflowers soon exploded in the Sonoran Desert. And Covid-19 swept across Europe and the United States.

Thanking God we were together in "next-floor-neighbor" apartments (#18105 and #18205), Tessa and I stocked up for the lockdown. We rewrote our wills to comply with the laws of our new home state. We even managed a last-minute run to Home Depot for red flowerpots, geraniums and petunias for my tiny patio.

We've chuckled about how our lives as hermits prepared us well for being home alone. In some ways, our lives have not changed much as a result of the pandemic. In fact, our normally counter-cultural silence, simplicity and solitude now seem mainstream, and we don't have to worry about offending friends if we aren't available.

## *Solitude and Isolation*

Solitude differs from isolation, and many of us feel isolated these days. Its effects threaten our health. But isolation can become solitude. Solitude fosters communion and solidarity. Some social interactions, especially in today's political climate, threaten our sense of community and drown out the harmonious "silent music" of mutuality that sings in solitude. This communion-in-solitude can transform and nourish us. It is a way of loving and begets more love.

Solitude, like words written and read in silence, is solidarity with the wide world. It listens. It hears. It doesn't insulate me from anguish. I will remember this spring the way *New York Times* columnist Margaret Renkl did after recovering from plain old flu right before the pandemic. "The Beautiful World Beside the Broken One," she called her reflections. And that's what I taste in my new home. That's the flavor of this strange season of virus and wildflowers, lonely deaths and the fragrance of acacia blossoms beneath the pollen-yellow full moon that rose over Tucson during Holy Week.

The pandemic reflects the paradox of beauty and brokenness, life, death, and Resurrection. In weeks, we have lost more Americans to Covid-19 than we did in years of war in Vietnam. And nurses go to work. And Christ is risen.

## *Black Hours*

I've had nocturnal bouts with anxiety, sometimes wondering how I will pay the rent now that I cannot work for Cross Catholic Outreach, for whom I celebrate masses in churches throughout the country. Or concern gnaws: how will the people Cross serves defend themselves against the viral onslaught without clean water, soap, or access to health care? Or I wake up dreading that Tessa or I may be hospitalized and never see each other again. Or will it be another dear friend or relative? I don't feel Christ's peaceful presence in these vivid imaginings. I suffer Gethsemane, which, I hope, participates in Christ's plunge into the abyss of human poverty.

Are we "all in this together"? Some die alone. Some have no safe haven or reliable source of food. We elect callous, inept leaders. Protesting neighbors strap on guns. Does God free them to catch and spread disease? I love the confidence of Psalm 91: "You shall not fear the terror of the night... nor the pestilence that roams in darkness." But in my black hours I do not experience it. I experience something like Psalm 30: "At dusk weeping comes for the night; but at dawn there is rejoicing." I haven't been weeping, just dreading. I call



*As we celebrate our 15th Anniversary, we recall enriching times with Colorado College students (left), the faculty of Dar al-Islam's Summer Institute for Teachers (center), and the Three Interfaith Amigos (right).*

this desolation the “inner desert of grief.” No one escapes it. Then comes dawn and the desert is blossoming, century-old Saguaros quietly host Gila Woodpeckers and Chollas harbor Cactus Wrens.

On a quiet Easter Sunday, we celebrated mass and feasted on marinated lamb. We watched Andrea Bocelli singing live from the empty Milan Cathedral. And then I wept. Bocelli sang farewell to a beautiful broken world that has died, and his solitary voice christened this precarious new world. May we learn something. May our solitude bear fruit. May we live to help nurture this infant world that relies on our loving commitment to communion, justice, mercy, and peace.

## *Wisdom of the Christian Mystics*

*An E-course with Tessa Bielecki and Carl McColman*

*November 2-27, 2020*

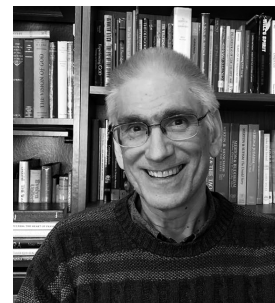
In every generation, those who enter deeply into the mystery of life are known as mystics, great wisdom-keepers who celebrate union with God and manifest love and compassion in action. Their writings are full of inspiring poetry, visionary wisdom, prophetic insight, and guidance for bringing justice and mercy into our world.

This e-course includes twelve emails, a teleconference, and a Practice Circle (an interactive forum open 24/7), introducing you to Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, Howard Thurman, Aelred of Rievaulx, Evelyn Underhill, and several other mystics, who can inspire and transform our lives today.

We will consider the relationship between contemplation and action, the earth and the body as sacraments of Divine Presence, the breath as our guide to deep meditation, personal touchstones, mantra prayer, the sorrowful mother, soul friends, the code of chivalry, healing the sacred wound, the mysticism of resistance, and more. Be careful: the words of the mystics have been known to change peoples' lives.

*Carl is the author of The Big Book of Christian Mysticism, Unteachable Lessons, and Befriending Silence. His books, along with his blog and the “Encountering Silence” podcast he co-hosts, are all designed to help celebrate the wisdom of the mystics for today.*

*Tessa is an “urban hermit” in Tucson, Arizona and the co-director of the Desert Foundation (see sandandsky.org). Her works include Holy Daring and other books on St. Teresa of Avila as well as Wild at Heart: Radical Teachings of the Christian Mystics, a six-hour audio course available from Sounds True.*



For more information, visit *Spirituality and Practice*:  
<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/WisdomoftheChristianMysticsEcourse>



# Corona Rhythms

Tessa Bielecki

I lived in a hermitage in the wilderness, “sheltering in place,” for over fifty years, in three different countries and six different landscapes, many years without electricity or running water. Since 2017, now that I’ve turned 75 and need to be closer to health care, I live in an apartment in Tucson, Arizona. It’s small and simple, and I call it my “urban hermitage” because the solitary life I lead here is barely different from my earlier years in the wilds. What has life as a hermit taught me that may benefit others who need to stay home during the corona virus pandemic?

## **1. Live in tune with the rhythms of the earth.**

Even if you live in the city, as I do now, this is key. Find a place out in nature that’s special to you, and visit that same place often. Or at least look out your window. I had a friend who was crippled with rheumatoid arthritis and barely left her bed. She deeply inspired me by the richness she saw out her tiny bedroom window. What do *you* see? What changes through the seasons? What happens to the light? How does the air feel on your face? What’s growing now, even if it’s only on your windowsill? Where does the sun come up and go down? What constellations do you see in the sky, and how do they move? The spectacular gathering of three bright planets, Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn, which happens only every twenty years, consoled me in the first months of Covid-19 when I woke in the night, filled with anxiety.

## **2. Begin and end the day well.**

It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as the beginning and end are intentional and quiet – not necessarily silent. In my formal years of monastic life, I went to chapel with my community morning and evening and prayed the psalms, with a period of silent meditation. Now I simply sit and welcome the new day or its end with the rhythms of sun and moon, the sounds and smells, with birds and clouds, raindrops or snowflakes. Music is good. So is any kind of formal meditation or exercise. I walk in the desert. My friend Dave bikes along the river. Every night before bed, I do a brief “check-in” (we used to call it an “examen”) and hold myself accountable for the quality of my day. Children? A word about them soon.

## **3. Live each day deliberately.**

This means “ordering” the day. One of the geniuses of monasticism is the *horarium* or Rule of Life, which orders the hours of the day. A personal Rule of Life still helps me. In her little classic, *Gift from the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh struggles with the busyness of her life and calls it *zerrissenheit*, meaning “torn-to-pieces-hood” in German. She discovers that “one perfect day can give clues for a more perfect life.” Nothing can guarantee a perfect day, but we can set the stage for a good one. The first step is to order the day. The quality of each individual day determines the overall quality of our life. The poet May Sarton reveals a secret we both share: “Routine is not a prison, but the way into freedom from time. The apparently measured time has immeasurable space in it.”

## **4. Live mindfully in the present moment.**

I ask myself the same question as Lindbergh: How do I remain “whole in the midst of the distractions of life... balanced, no matter what centrifugal forces tend to pull me off center?” If I suffer from *zerrissenheit*, fragmentation, lack of focus, or a dispersion of energy, then I need to practice focus, recollection, mindfulness, a concentration of energy. It helps to have a “mantra,” which we Catholics used to



call an “aspiration,” a short word or phrase we repeat throughout the day, especially when we feel frantic or torn to pieces, to quiet us down and bring us back to center. These words don’t have to be “spiritual.” Zorba the Greek asked himself, “What are you doing now, Zorba?” Then he’d answer, “Do it well, Zorba,” or “There’s nothing else on earth.” A Zen teacher I know repeats “Just this, just this, just this.” My root teacher, William McNamara, talked about “personal passionate presence,” which I like better than “mindfulness.” We need to live each moment personally, passionately present, or, as Ram Dass said, “Be here now.”

### **5. *Work well without worry and fret.***

We tend to blame our busyness or “torn-to-pieces-hood” on our work. I fell into this trap for years until I realized that the difficulty was not my work, but my worry about my work. I looked more carefully at the Gospel story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42, which Catholics have used for centuries to create a false dichotomy between contemplation and action. I realized that Jesus did not reproach Martha for her serving, but for being *distracted* with the serving. She missed out on “the better part” not because of her work, but because of her *worry and fret* over it. We need to be both Mary *and* Martha. St. Teresa insists that the two are *sisters* and “walk together.” We make either-or what God made both-and. I can be busy, but not frantic; occupied, but not preoccupied; a good worker, but not workaholic. This is the key to *sacred* activism.

### **6. *Nurture the whole person: body, mind, and spirit.***

I exercise daily. I cook good nutritious food and make it beautiful, a feast for the eyes as well as the body. I create food *art*. I nourish my mind with good reading. I don’t eat junk food, so I don’t fill my mind with junk either. “Tell me what you read, and I’ll tell you who you are.” I read widely but discriminately: spirituality, poetry, both classic and contemporary literature. I love a good detective story, especially Louise Penny’s series about Armand Gamache. And I often find a good film as inspiring as a good book. I nurture my spirit through meditation and prayer, yes, but also through art, music, and nature. I enjoy as much beauty as I can every day, and look for it everywhere, even in the wrinkles of my beloveds’ faces – and my own. As Chinese actor Chow Yun-Fat says, “Every wrinkle is a life experience.”

### **7. *Carve out “quiet time” every day.***

I say “carve out” because it takes effort. No technology, unnecessary interactions or playing “catch-up” on work. Is the best quiet time for you in the morning before everyone else wakes up? In the evening after everyone goes to bed? Do you need to get up in the middle of the night? If quiet time is hard for you, carve it out in what Edward Ford calls “brief endurable chunks.” Blaise Pascal said, “All our troubles in life come because we cannot sit quietly for a while each day in our rooms.” Children? They can be taught the value of stillness. I know a family from Phoenix who had a quiet hour every afternoon – with almost a dozen children in the house. The parents went to their room. The older children helped the younger ones be still. They read, drew pictures, played quiet solitary games. I saw this year after year in an exuberant household and never forgot it.

### **8. *Slow down and live more leisurely.***

Our life is characterized by speed: fast foods, fast cars, high-speed internet, instant noodles, instant communication. We tend to hurry, but why? I once read on a restaurant menu, “Good food takes time.” Good *anything* takes time: food, friendship, meditation, worship. Slowing down means nurturing the spirit of leisure, which David Steindl-Rast O.S.B. says is “not the privilege of those who *have* time but the virtue of those who *take* time.” He also (or was it another of my mentors?) described leisure as “making time for what’s important” and “celebrating what’s too good to be used.” How will we know what’s good and important to us if we don’t slow down enough to consider it? “Plant a carrot and watch it grow,” taught an old wise woman. If you garden, you know that a carrot doesn’t grow like a weed!

### **9. *Break the pattern of the day with poetry and play.***

Life is full of quotidian tasks that bog us down: cleaning the house, paying bills, preparing the umpteenth meal. Even our most cherished daily rhythms can become dehumanizing routines, our good ruts worse than our bad ruts. Novelist Walker Percy called this “the grip of everydayness.” The Desert Fathers and Mothers called it

*acedie*, sloth, “the noonday devil” that plagues even the holiest monk. We need to discern when to maintain the order of our days with discipline and when to break the pattern of our days. What can we do differently or more adventurously? Write a poem or paint a water color? Put on music and dance? Make an exotic new omelet? If you regularly get up early in the morning, then luxuriously sleep in. If you get up later, then rise earlier and discover the dawn. Jesus urged us to become like little children. And that means playing like children. Am I capable of childlike play? Or am I “driven by a neurotic compulsion to work in a utilitarian society that makes everything useful,” as columnist Walter Kerr once asked? I used to wonder how I could fit more leisure into my busy life. Now I ask, how does a woman of leisure get her work done? Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, “Madness is the grain of salt that keeps good sense from rotting.” Breaking the pattern of my day with poetry and play is the grain of salt that keeps my good Rule of Life from rotting!

### 10. Celebrate Sabbath.

In the mid-1970s, I realized I was chronically violating God’s commandment to “keep holy the Sabbath” by using it to catch up on the work that frequently overwhelmed me. (I’m Christian, so my Sabbath is Sunday. It may be another day for you, by personal choice or religious tradition.) To break this bad habit, I read Abraham Heschel’s jewel of a book on the Sabbath. I felt so ashamed of myself and so inspired by the Jewish tradition of *Shabat*, I changed my ways. Heschel taught me the real relationship between my work week and Sabbath rest: I am “not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for enhancing the efficiency of work.... The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life.” How do I celebrate Sabbath now? I sleep in. I rest. I don’t wear my pedometer and count my steps, but stroll leisurely. I’ve revived the tradition of “Sunday dinner.” I pray, play, and create a work of art out of the hours from sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday. I “waste” the day because the Sabbath is “too good to be used.”

These ten suggestions may help you move from Covid-19 quarantine to retreat, from isolation to solitude, from lockdown into Sabbath leisure. You may even become more contemplative, because these ten rhythms are not only a solid foundation for deep contemplative life, but its crown.

Please take care of yourselves! -- Jessa --  
and stay safe and healthy! -- Jude --

## 15th Anniversary Sale!

Originally \$20.00 Each, Now \$15.00 for 15 Years!

*Desert Voices* celebrates the amorous frontier between two “desert rats” and an arid landscape of sand and sky, and friendships between Abrahamic brothers and sisters. It 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.

There’s something for everyone in *Season of Glad Songs: A Christmas Anthology*, 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.

Both books are by Tessa Bielecki and David Denny and are available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). All proceeds support the Desert Foundation.

