

C a r a v a n s

June 2021

The Desert Foundation
PO Box 655
Cortaro, Arizona 85652
www.sandandsky.org

*... the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin
growing over whatever winter did to us ...*

—Ada Limón

Dear Friends,

What “green skin” of new life is “growing over whatever winter did” to you, whatever Covid and 2020 did to you? Poet Ada Limón says we return to the “strange idea of continuous living despite / the mess of us, the hurt, the empty.” Is this what Jesus meant when he called himself the green vine and we the branches, proclaiming, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10)?

NPR recently reported that “Covid-19 has been good for very little, but it has been good for poetry.” During the pandemic, visits to the website poets.org went up 30% as people turned to poetry for courage, comfort and guidance. According to Kim Stafford’s “Shelter in Place,” “Long before the pandemic, the trees knew how to guard one place with roots and shade. Moss found how to hug a stone for life. Every stream works out how to move in place, staying home even as it flows generously outward, sending bounty far.”

A Different Summer

This summer is so different. A year ago we were in lockdown, many of us fearful, wondering when it would end, and how long it would take to find a vaccine to keep us safe. In last summer’s *Caravans*, Tessa shared some of the wisdom decades of living alone in a hermitage taught us about staying home and “sheltering in place.”

In this issue, inspired by our old friend, Naomi Shihab Nye, and poetry centers at the University of Arizona and Kent State University, we share our funny little poems about getting our second vaccines. (Dave cheated and took a few days to write his instead of the suggested fifteen minutes in the car!)

As the blazing heat of southern Arizona’s summer comes upon us, like real “desert rats,” we hike outside way before dawn and spend the rest of the day indoors: the reversal of how people live in northern climates summer



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 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 PO Box 655, Cortaro, AZ 85652.



Fr. Dave works on web posts; Fr. Dave and Tessa enjoy the company of Saguaros; Tessa stuffs Caravans envelopes before mailing.

and winter. The rhythm is good for our writing. Tessa continues to work on her memoir which flows like water some days and feels like pulling teeth on other days.

What's the Story?

On our web site, Dave continues to post reflections on racial discrimination as a form of desert experience. He began the year reflecting on Martin Luther King Day and how Muslims built the first permanent King memorial in Chicago. He raised the question "What's the Story?" about who really built America. He reviewed nonfiction, fiction and films that help us understand what may drive racial hatred in America, especially against Muslims. Dave examined "slaveholder religion" in America and our regression to Jim Crow laws after Reconstruction. His latest post is a meditation on the *March* trilogy, a graphic memoir about the late Congressman John Lewis. Dave felt an intimate closeness to the heroism and heartbreak of the many years Lewis spent nonviolently resisting relentless cruelty.

Urban Hermits

This July marks four years since Tessa moved to Tucson and over a year since Dave left Colorado and we relocated the Desert Foundation here. Our life as "urban hermits" is not much different from our life as wilderness hermits in Colorado. We normally spend three days a week in solitude and have just begun taking a full week each month. We meditate and celebrate Mass together with a small "congregation" of two friends who have been part of our "Covid pod" all year. We pray, read, study, and write. Tessa still gives occasional talks, especially to those on sabbatical at the Redemptorist Renewal Center five minutes away. Dave has just begun traveling again for Cross Catholic Outreach after a year of lockdown.

We marvel at how seamlessly our contemplative life has transitioned from the wilderness to the city. We struggle, however, with both noise and light pollution and remain mystified that so many people do not value silence and darkness. So we try to live out this insight from Thomas Merton: "The silence of the sky remains when the plane has gone. The tranquility of the clouds will remain when the plane has fallen apart. It is the silence of the world that is real."

*Thank you for supporting our lives as
"urban hermits"!
Gratefully, Tessa + Fr. Dave*

Touchstones

Tessa Bielecki

Teresa of Avila was captivated by a religious painting but felt guilty about keeping it. Then she experienced a “revelation” in which she learned, “Do not reject anything which awakens love.” The painting was a *touchstone* of connection and meaning that led her into deeper realms of life and love.

We see or hear or feel something that “speaks” to us in a deep primal language without words and touches us in some mysterious way we may not understand at the time. A touchstone awakens us to some new realization or reminds us of something we may have forgotten. It need not be religious. My touchstones include an empty box, a shell, red dirt, a ceramic camel, and a great many rocks from my most sacred places. We carry touchstones in our pockets, write stories, poems or songs about them, and put them on our altars.

What touchstones awaken love and life in you? Create an altar to honor them, which also honors you and the Holy One who gives them to you for your inspiration and growth. This is an interior exercise with an outward manifestation. As theologian Howard Thurman wrote in *Meditations of the Heart*, “There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island, and on that island there is an altar.” As human beings we have been building altars for eons, long before we thought to put them in churches and so-called “holy” places. We knew intuitively that the whole world is an altar.

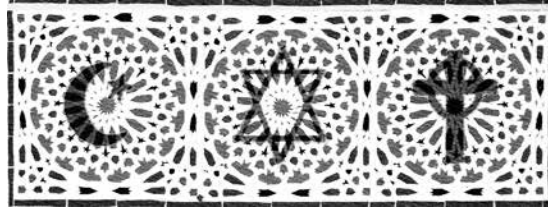
You can create your own altar indoors or out, on a bookshelf or your bedroom bureau, on top of a rock or on the earth in your backyard. Almost every corner of my Tucson apartment, my “urban hermitage,” is an altar: one for my “totem animals,” one for the desert, the landscape of my heart, one for the Saguaro. All these symbols stop me in my tracks and awaken me to the presence of God in some way. The most powerful image, the Cross, hangs all by itself on the spacious white wall opposite my bed where I can see it every night before falling asleep and every morning as I awake.

Be sure your altar grounds you distinctively where you are. (Even when I stay in a hotel, I find something to celebrate that I’m *there* and not someplace else: a leaf, a rock, a flower.) And ground yourself in the natural seasons of the year with eggs for springtime, flowers in summer, autumn leaves, evergreens or berries in the “dead” of winter. The seasons of nature are the most primordial symbols we have for the seasons of the soul.

Touchstones may change over the years as we grow in the mystical life. And there will come a time when these “incarnational connections” have taken us as far as they can and we must let go of them and leap into a new unknown. As Carmelite mystic John of the Cross wrote, “Do not send me any more messengers, they cannot tell me what I must hear.”



Saguaro art by Terry Sullivan Prev y



Circle of Friends: Responses from Our Readers

Thank you for “Holy Week 2021: Saguaro and Rejected Stones” along with Tessa’s “Way of the Cross Via Saguaro” on your web site. As always, you bring the silent wonder and peace of solitude home by sharing your Via Amoris. Sara and I remember everyday the quiet solace and glory of those desert trails animated by Tessa’s courageous saguaros, each one unique and universal. My friend Arthur and I often tried to guide the students in our class at Amherst to a place of felt solitude for its “edge effect” with wholeness and eternity. Sometimes it worked for some. For others it was a bit frightening; or perhaps too “awe-ful.”

Our experience in Tucson was that the desert has its ways to bring you home to solitude. We were always startled to leave a crowded parking lot filled with SUVs and milling anxious people only to discover the complete silence and peace of solitude within minutes of walking into the desert. For the moment, in lieu of being able to return to Tucson, I have ordered *Desert Voices: The Edge Effect* as a bridge to the desert magic which I find also in my “Ai-no-ma,” a place of mysterious meeting as in the fateful encounter of lovers.

Joel Upton, Amherst, MA

Tessa, I got a copy of *The Nature of Desert Nature* at the Desert Museum. We really love the chapters by you and Dave. What stands out for me is the way the spaciousness of the desert mirrors in both of you an expansiveness of mind and heart that widens to love and learn-from ever-wider realms of otherness, including other religions and other species.

It is clear to me that you embody a Christian form of non-duality that inhabits the place between having a love affair with the Saguaro as a beloved other and being one-with and fused with that other. In our conversation the other day, I loved how you defined non-duality in terms of “I am the Saguaro.”

We had an amazing time visiting with you. We love and value your passion and union with the Saguaro saints. And the restful, peaceful atmosphere Dave brings to the gathering. I love what he said about poetry being a chief spiritual path.

Stephen Hatch, Taos, NM

I love this summer *Caravans*! It speaks profoundly to the world’s deep hunger: the poetry, pandemic, all of it. It relates to a broad readership, inviting, and so full of the is-ness of you both.

I wrote the St. Teresa quote on my whiteboard and look forward to reading *Caravans* on something bigger than my iPhone over late breakfast. It strikes a wonderful tone in me as I’m off to the urban political marketplace for work.

Pegge Erkeneff, Kasilof, AK



Getting Us Going Again

David Denny

In 1970 at the Spiritual Life Institute in Sedona, Arizona, Tessa Bielecki met Aziz Shihab, a Palestinian journalist, and his teenage daughter Naomi, who grew up in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and San Antonio. At an early age Naomi wrote songs and poems and performed them with panache. In Colorado in 1985, as we celebrated the Spiritual Life Institute's 25th Anniversary, she sang about rutabagas, dancing alone, and enlightened roosters. Naomi Shihab Nye is a renowned poet, whose "Kindness" is a contemporary classic. She is the Poetry Foundation's Young People's Poet Laureate.

Dear Vaccine

Recently her poem "Dear Vaccine" inspired a collaboration between the Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University and the University of Arizona Poetry Center. Her poem serves as a prompt for anyone who receives the Covid vaccine to write a response to the experience.

Tessa and I decided to take her up on this. Although I received the vaccine at Walgreens just across the street from my apartment, Tessa landed reservations at the Tucson Medical Center's drive-through vaccination clinic. We loved seeing the well-organized parade of cars from all over town wending its way from one canopy to the next in Lot 29, where patients filled in forms, received their vaccinations, and then waited fifteen minutes, to make sure they had no adverse reactions to the shot.

The poetry centers suggested we spend that fifteen minutes writing our response to the shot and then send it to their web site. Tessa conscientiously jotted her thoughts while I gazed lazily at the blossoming palo verdes and thought of a title: "Two Down, None to Go." It took me a couple of days to come up with the poem itself.

You may visit people's submissions, including ours, at <https://www.globalvaccinepoem.com/responses>. But we couldn't resist sharing them with you as a sigh of relief and celebration of new hope. Referring to the vaccine, Naomi writes, "It's the gas in the car / Getting us going again."

Vaccine 2

While my eccentric neighbor
Walks around in his underwear
With his door open,
Proclaiming his immunity
Without the vaccine,
I drive cross town to the TMC
And marvel at the tents,
The lines of cars,
The generous volunteers,
Then Ouch!
The second Moderna really hurts,
And I rejoice
Over true immunity
But not impunity.

Tessa Bielecki, April 12, 2021

Two Down and None to Go

On a sunny spring morning we snake
The car through shaded canopies; my friend
Answers all the cheery volunteers'
Questions.

At last, after months of empty
Streets and broken hearts, she rolls up
Her sleeve and
"Aaaah!" she cries and flinches when
The jab jolts her shoulder. Good thing
She followed orders: "Put the car in park
And turn ignition off." Otherwise,
She could have kicked the pedal through the floor
And torpedoed us into the Navy vet's
Gleaming Cadi trunk.

Instead, she caught
Her breath and inched her way to a quiet
Stop

beneath the green-bark branches singing
Out their lemon-lucent spring song
Of sunlight.

David Denny, April 14, 2021

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Help Beautify Sand and Sky

This summer we hope to update our Sand and Sky web site to make it less “boxed in” and more spacious, like the desert itself. We hope the design will attract new readers who find nourishment in our vision and will support our urban hermit lives. **Wanted:** friends who support our praise of God in solitude, our writing, and even, as you see from our notes from readers, occasional shenanigans! We remain committed to printing *Caravans* and love the feel of paper. We also enjoy more frequent communication through our informal *Desert Tracks* emails and our blog posts at Sandandsky.org. Please let us know what you wish to see and read on our site. The design update will cost \$2325. We hope you will help. Thank you for supporting us as we celebrate the Desert Foundation’s sixteenth year.

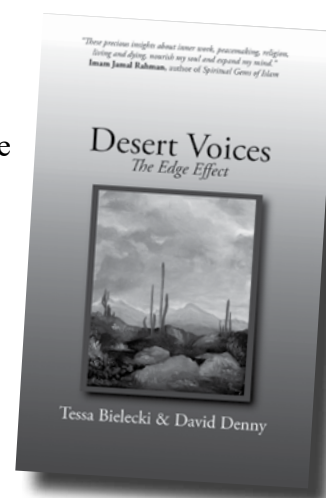
Anniversary Sale Extended!

Originally \$20.00 Each, Now \$15.00 for our 15th Anniversary!

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. All proceeds support the Desert Foundation.



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.” 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.

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

