



C a r a v a n s

December 2022

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

We follow the feet where all souls meet / At the inn at the end of the world.

—G.K. Chesterton—

Dear Friends,

The season of Advent is upon us with its quiet days and long starry nights, and we are grateful. We will always remember the summer and fall of 2022 as one of our busiest and most creative seasons. Dave completed the new sandandsky.org web site and Tessa designed tessabielecki.com. We share our enthusiasm in the following pages and hope you'll visit the sites often.

Fire and Light Podcast

We also began to “practice” for our new podcast, which begins in January 2023. (We’ll tell you why we call it *Fire and Light* on the first episode.) David Levin, our old friend from years together in the Spiritual Life Institute, has generously and competently become our “producer” and sound engineer. He also keeps us laughing, as we pile pillows around the microphone to absorb echo! But David has several ideas for better sound. He designed the *Fire and Light* logo and listened to dozens of music selections before he found both our “theme song” and interlude music. Watch for that first episode!

Retreat on the Ocean Cliffs

In early October we both gave talks at the 10th Annual Retreat for oblates and friends of New Camaldoli Hermitage. Dave did a stirring presentation on the importance of poetry as *lectio divina* or spiritual reading. He held us spellbound with his renditions of poems as diverse as John of the Cross’ *Dark Night*, Pablo Neruda’s *Ode to Socks*, and his own sighting of a bobcat at his Colorado hermitage. Tessa spoke on five movements in our growth towards spiritual maturity with examples from St. Teresa. We also shared a panel on spiritual writing with Paula Huston, the author of a recent book called *The Hermits of Big Sur* on the history of the Camaldolese in America. (Last year Tessa wrote an endorsement for the book.)

Then we drove farther south along the California coast and made our own personal retreat with the monks in Big Sur. Each room in the guest house opens onto a little courtyard overlooking the Pacific Ocean. High on the



The Desert Foundation is a small informal Circle of Friends, exploring the wisdom of the desert and the inner desert of loss, grief, and injustice, offering stories of hope in a welcoming Tent of Meeting. 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 and Tessa
in their makeshift
"studio."



Photo by Tara Bielecki.



David Levin, sound
engineer: "the man
behind the pillows."

cliffs at the edge of the North American continent made Tessa a little dizzy! We loved our time in the silence under the stars, but it was too short. The monks and oblates want us to return and teach again, and we look forward to more collaboration.

Contemplation In Action

Tessa taught a zoom class for Rory McEntee at Drew University on St. Teresa and contemplation, for Netanel Miles-Yépez on her experience of the early Christian-Buddhist dialogues at Naropa University, a class on Teresa for the Women Mystics School, on "mystical companioning" for Spiritual Directors International, and on Carmelite spirituality for Adam Bucko and the Community of the Incarnation. She continued presentations for the sabbatical program at the Redemptorist Renewal Center five minutes away and once again joined a women's circle for retreat in Orange Country where she led a reflection on her favorite classical music, *Lark Ascending*. Dave did an interview with *Contemplify.com* on "Vitality out of Emptiness."

Thanks to You

We are grateful for all the ways you supported the Desert Foundation in 2022 through your prayers and friendship as well as your financial contributions. We really love hearing from you. Murray wrote, "It's amazing all the creative and inspiring projects and prayer opportunities happening out there!" Leigh is "always happy" to see *Caravans* in her mailbox. Liz appreciates the "spirit of joy" she heard in our podcasts with *Contemplify* and *Spiritual Wanderlust*. Jean sent us a fascinating study she did of St. Teresa and her Jewish heritage, and Pat her book of poetry. Rudi drew us a bright candle and earmarked his donation for desserts!

We also received a good letter from Nelly, a Buddhist friend in Puerto Rico, who described the strong connection she sees between our lives as "urban hermits" and the rest of the world: "As you walk and reflect in the silence in the desert, there is an immense group of souls that walks silently (from afar) with you. There is a thread (a mystic one) that keeps us in tune.... I believe in your very important and necessary interfaith work.... Your work and prayers [are] of great benefit to all of us, [and all] sentient beings around the world."

If you agree with Nelly, we hope you'll be generous this season. Both new web sites were more expensive than our original budgets, so we need help to cover the extra costs. And we still need more recording equipment to bring the riches of contemplative life out into the world through *Fire and Light*. We appreciate your support when times are difficult for all of us.

Season of Glad Songs

The two new web sites have gone "live" at last. Major travels and speaking engagements are over for this year. Now we're settling in for an Advent of deeper stillness, more prayer, and more writing as we approach this holy season: the beginning of eight days of Hanukkah on December 18, winter solstice on December 21, the Twelve Days of Christmas on December 25, and Kwanzaa on December 26. Whichever days you celebrate, may you and your families and friends be blessed.

With gratitude, Tessa + Fr. Dave



I'm happy to announce tessabielecki.com, the web site I've dreamed about for years. Such a fruitful harvest for me, as my best pal, Dave Denny, said recently: "Your new site allows you to finish strong, leaving a wise and wondrous legacy." The words from a song Tom Renaud wrote for me decades ago at Nova Nada in Nova Scotia set the tone for the new site: "The seasons surround me like a circle of friends."

The Beauty of Four

Four seasons expressed in four symbols and four colors: snowy branches, daffodils, saguaros, and autumn leaves in blue, gold, green, and bright orange. Then four significant quotations from four remarkable women, who are sensitive and poetic, practical and powerful all at once. In very few words, Mary Oliver, Maya Angelou, Helen Keller, and Naomi Shihab Nye tell us about the state of our world and how to live in it: love this world, view your life as a great adventure, do the best you can and learn from your mistakes, and above all, be kind, because "it is only kindness that makes sense anymore."

In my first post you'll find reflections on the "full four seasons" of the year in the different landscapes where I've lived—deserts, mountains, woods and lakes—and how they relate to the inner landscape of our souls. You'll read about my good friend, St. Teresa, the "Wild Woman of Avila," in case you missed this piece in our summer *Caravans*. I've lived over fifty years in a hermitage. What have I learned about living contemplatively that may interest you in your own contemplative life wherever you are? I outline ten of the most important rhythms I've found helpful, especially in the past five years since I've lived in the city like so many of you.

Monthly Emails

Be sure to listen to the "trailer" for our new podcast, *Fire and Light*, which we'll begin in January 2023. What sets *you* on fire and lights up your life? Dave and I will explore this question and more as we talk about life, love, and soul and bring you stories of hope that celebrate everyone in the great Circle of Life. Send us any questions and concerns you'd like us to address in our podcast.

Dave will continue to send out a monthly email called *Desert Tracks*. I have begun to send a monthly email called *Seasons*. If you sign up, you will automatically receive both emails and then notifications whenever we create new posts. If you choose not to receive these, you may unsubscribe at any time. We have also expanded our presence on social media, so look for our meditations on Instagram and Twitter as well as Facebook.

I loved collaborating with Terry Sullivan Prevey, another old friend who used to illustrate *Desert Call* for us in the Spiritual Life Institute. She drew the striking "mirror" image which you first see on tessabielecki.com. And I'm grateful to my niece, Tara Bielecki, who took Dave and me out into the saguaros for a "photo shoot" and captured such good portraits of us.

You'll enjoy Dave's conversation with Paul Swanson at Contemplify.com. They talk about "the roundabouts, the striking insights and the totality of the journey of Dave's life." What an eclectic list of resources and people he mentions: from Paul Tillich to Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young! And those sazeracs!

Please share our posts and tell your friends about these new adventures? As Helen Keller said, "Life is a great adventure or nothing at all."

Sand and Sky

David Denny

After a year of dreaming, consulting, and climbing the digital learning curve, I'm delighted that we are launching our redesigned *SandandSky.org* web site. Having edited *Desert Call* magazine for many years with Tessa, we have always loved the margin-to-margin, fluid possibilities of designing for print. Now much of that freedom is possible on the web: spacious layouts, with the added attractiveness of color, always too expensive for *Desert Call*.

We chose a color scheme that reflects the tones of sand and sky. We hope our home page, which introduces the Desert Foundation, will appeal especially to first-time visitors. You saw its verbal contents in last summer's *Caravans*. Now you can browse through photographs in the "What We Do" slide show: a "mini scrapbook" of our adventures over the years. We often feel we do so little. We are not shakers and movers, but we hope our quiet, manifold contemplative efforts to *be* and *communicate* peace may help bend the arc of our world's bloody history toward justice.

Women's Voices

We are especially inspired by the quotations we use to accompany each section of the "Who We Are" slide show. We chose several women's voices since we have heard plenty of men's words in religion, politics, and culture for a few millennia. Some of those voices consider corporations as persons with rights while belittling the notion that natural life forms, from cactus to coyote, "are intricate parts of our own being," as Hia-Ced O'odham Elder Lorraine Eiler declares.

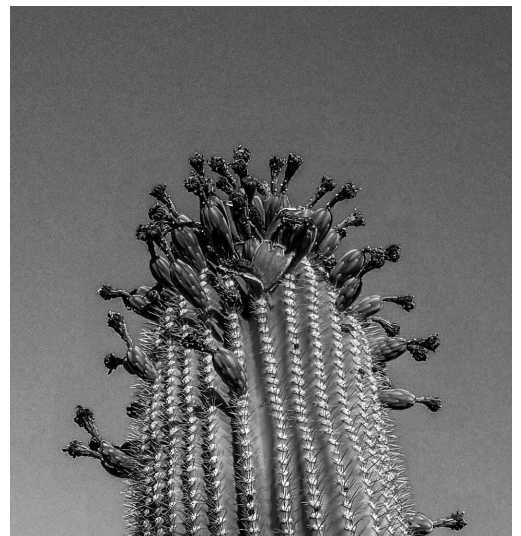
For millennia we have also honored the belief that a people's way of life is inherently sacred, and that defending that way of life through violence somehow defends God, as if God were anemic, needing blood sacrifice to survive. Naomi Shihab Nye describes a feeling familiar to many: that life will go on and on, "the bus will never stop." But sudden loss breaks this spell and we see "how desolate the landscape can be..." Over time, sensing our own losses and the threads of others' sorrows, we know grief's universality and immensity and we "see the size of the cloth." Only then, having passed through this crucible, do we awaken to the true power of *kindness* and its capacity to renew the face of the earth. A promising alternative to blood.

"See No Stranger"

Writer, activist and devout Sikh Valarie Kaur also counters justifications for violence by insisting that there is no such thing as an "other," a "stranger." Theologian Raimun Panikkar taught that we harm ourselves when we reject another religion because we reject that part of us that may already need and intuit the wisdom and insight the "other" offers. We would do well to offer hospitality to that "part of me I do not yet know."

Our new web design also offers some delights unavailable in print, unless you live in the world of Harry Potter, where bodies move around in newspaper photos! You will note some animations. I acknowledge my nerdiness by admitting my delight over the way the photo of the bedouin's feet shifts as you scroll through the section titled "Help Us Make the Trek." (While you check it out, don't forget to donate!)

And then there is the world of podcasting, coming your way in January. Please pray for us as we take the plunge into audio production, following through on our commitment to "finish strong" in these final years of our earthly exploration into God. Now that we complete a very long season of designing and implementing, we are thrilled to pour our energies into sharing our writing with you, receiving your input, and opening our tent flaps to a wider world of desert explorers.





Hanukkah Prayer

During each night of Hanukkah, a candle is added to the menorah. Here is the blessing over the candles:

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with His

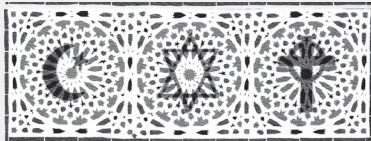
commandments and commanded us to light the lights of Hanukkah. (Amen)

Here is a blessing for the feast itself:

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time.

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)

To learn more about Hanukkah and hear these blessings in Hebrew, please visit: https://www.jewfaq.org/prayers_chanukkah.



The Birth of Jesus

According to Thomas Cleary's translation of the Qur'ān (19:29-33), Mary returned to her family after giving birth to Jesus. Her shocked relatives sought an explanation. Mary simply pointed to the infant. Her family said,

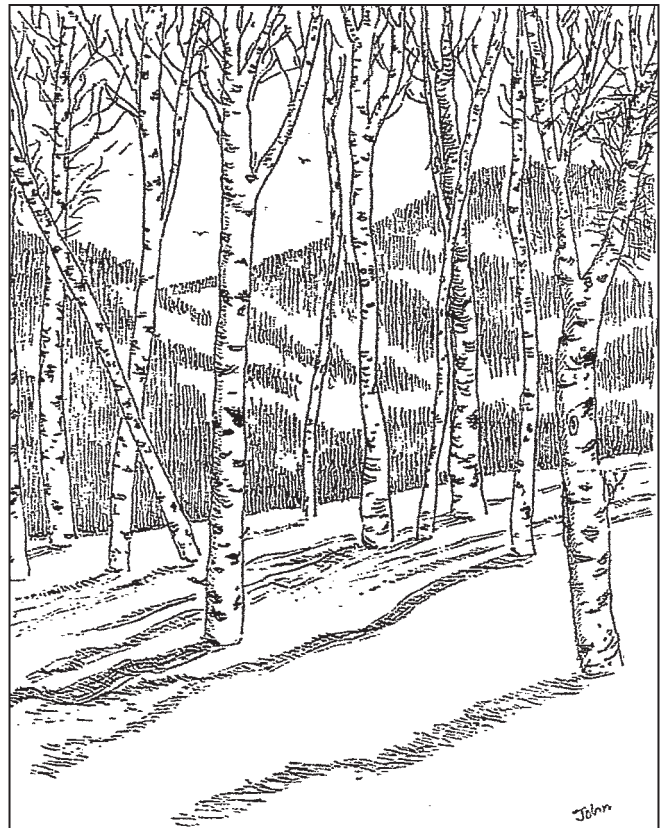
'How can we talk to one who is an infant in the cradle?'
He said, 'I am indeed the servant of God, who has given me scripture and made me a prophet, and made me blessed wherever I am; and has prescribed prayer and charity for me as long as I live, and kindness to my mother as well; and did not make me an arrogant malcontent. And peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am resurrected, alive.'

Each year Luci Shaw sends us her latest Christmas poem, illustrated by her husband, John Hoyte. With her permission, we offer you this Christmas meditation on the splendor of Jesus "falling" to earth quietly like snow.

Snow

Luci Shaw

With what calm and gentle grace
last night's fresh poem of snow
was laid across the land, whitening the hills,
filling the simple spaces between
the birches. Fallen snow is an easy essay
in quietude, in anonymity. And when
the Baby came—He who carved
those hills, who designed each lacy branch
on every tree, who shaped that uniquely
gleaming signal star borne from high heaven—
it was He whose splendor fell to earth,
simply and quietly as a flake of snow,
to bring to all our troubled, broken world
his gifts of grace and beauty.





A New Podcast Hosted by Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

Coming in January 2023!

We are two old friends who lived in monasteries out in the wilderness for fifty years. Now “urban hermits” in Tucson, Arizona, we long to share conversations with you about living sanely and contemplatively in the midst of engaged lives in the world. We wonder how to keep love alive and celebrate everyone in the great Circle of Life. We’re honest about what sometimes keeps us awake at night and offer stories of hope that can bring us light and set our hearts on fire. Join us as we ponder life, love, and soul. Listen *now* to our trailer wherever you get your podcasts!

Advent: Reflection and Peace

Responses from Our Readers

I love Advent—our permanent state, until it is not, *Deo gratias*. I love the characters, the stories, the candles, the whole flavor. I love the meeting of the Testaments. This is living, I think.

M.M., Providence, Rhode Island

This Advent, more than ever, we are grateful to have contemplatives in the city [like you], who wait for the mystical Christ, manifest in a tiny baby.

K.B., Denver, Colorado

December should be a time of waiting / but I rush and flurry;

December should be a time of stillness / but the lists jangle.

There was no room at the inn; / there is no room within.

The silence of the star calls / urgently...

Patricia Greer, Chicago, Illinois

Knee-deep in Advent, and I’m still scurrying about and feeling fragmented. Thank you for holding a space of reflection and peace.

K.C., Phoenix, Arizona

Give Good Reading for Christmas!

Season of Glad Songs

A Christmas Anthology

by Tessa Bielecki & David Denny

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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