



C a r a v a n s

June 2022

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

*Life nowhere appears so brave, so bright,
so full of oracle and miracle as in the desert.*

—Edward Abbey—

Dear Friends,

Summer is upon us here in the Sonoran Desert. Waxy white blossoms cover the tall arms of Saguaro and will soon turn to juicy red fruit. The harvest signals the New Year for our Tohono O’Odham neighbors, with prayers for monsoon rains.

In the Desert Foundation, too, we are experiencing a summer burst of growth and revitalization, the harvest of our rich contemplative life in the Sonoran. Our newly designed web site will be up and running by early autumn. We’ll let you know when through *Desert Tracks*, our monthly email. You’ll recognize it by the striking image of our Tent of Meeting, which you can see here on page three, along with a new description of who we are and what we do in the Desert Foundation.

This new “vision statement” also includes quotations from some of the people we most admire in the world today, including Naomi Shihab Nye, bell hooks, and Valarie Kaur.

Women Mystics School

Tessa will teach a masterclass on St. Teresa of Avila on July 9 for the Women Mystics School, sponsored by *Spiritual Wanderlust* and *Contemplative Monk*, an online community for contemplative seekers – with 800,000 followers. Whet your appetite with Tessa’s article about Teresa here on pages five-six.

To register, visit womenmystics.org and choose your package: Tessa’s class only, or any number of the other mystics. Please indicate that you learned about this school from Tessa, which will help support our work.

You may also be interested in other sessions on classical mystics Thérèse of Lisieux, Hildegard of Bingen, and Juliana of Norwich and contemporary inspirations Maya Angelou, Dorothy Day, and Evelyn Underhill.



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.



Designing the new Sand and Sky web site, Fr. Dave loves using the big monitor from Sr. Deb Giles.

www.womenmystics.org

THE
Women Mystics
SCHOOL

PRESENTING

Christine Valters Ronald Rolheiser Tessa Bielecki Matthew Fox

Paintner

The course features twelve wise women: artists and activists, married and single, widowed and monastic, tender and tenacious, embodied and audacious, glowing with holiness and deeply immersed in the richness of life and the nitty-gritty of the real world. Other presenters include Matthew Fox, Ron Rolheiser, and Christine Valters Paintner. Please join us?

Computers, Podcasts, and Paper

Tessa's computer is suffering from the slowness of old age, and Dave's has seen better days. He needs a larger screen to do the design and lay-out for *Caravans* and build our web site pages. Our old friend, David Levin, from our days in the Spiritual Life Institute, helped us find new computers, but we haven't finished paying for them yet and would appreciate your help.

For those of you who remember David, he and his wife moved into the apartment next to Tessa's last February. We call this part of the building the "monastic wing!" David is also the newest member of the Desert Foundation board of directors.

We're also dreaming about doing podcasts for those of you who prefer audio, and we need a good microphone and headphones. We have so many ideas for our podcast conversations, it will take us longer than the rest of our lives to present them all! We've almost come up with our name for the podcast, so stay tuned.

Because of supply chain problems everywhere, our printer was short on paper, so we had to do this issue on three separate sheets of white paper instead of our usual ivory spread sheet. The world has changed so much in the past two years. We still love and believe in print, but who knows what the future holds.

A Joyous Vision

Do you know that if you shop at smile.amazon.com/ch/20-3037179, Amazon donates a percentage to the Desert Foundation? And if you donate via PayPal, please know that their fees have increased, as costs have everywhere. It helps if you add a little to your PayPal donation to help cover these higher charges.

"All the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic," insists cultural critic and visionary feminist, bell hooks. We hope the Desert Foundation offers you what she calls a "joyous vision of love's transformative power." Thank you for *your* love and support all these years.

Join me July 9 (+ June 30)? -- Tessa
What are your podcast ideas? -- Tessa



What is the Desert Foundation?

Creating a Tent of Meeting

Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

The Desert Foundation is a small informal Circle of Friends, exploring the wisdom of the desert and the inner desert of loss and grief, offering stories of hope in a welcoming tent of meeting.

You do not have to experience the geographical desert. Whether you live in the Sahara or San Francisco, the Mohave or Madagascar, the Sonoran or Saigon, the desert calls you to the intimate depths of your own heart and opens you to the hearts of the whole human family, the Beloved Community.

“The spiritual life requires us to do more than read a good book or go on a restful retreat... [It is] first and foremost about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness.”

bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions*

Desert Wisdom

The Desert Foundation explores the wisdom of the Mothers and Fathers of the Christian desert and both the Jewish and Muslim traditions, which also grow out of the desert. We build bridges, not walls, and help heal divisions created by the violent tribal dualism that has plagued these three “Peoples of the Book” for centuries.

We also explore the wisdom of the desert itself, especially the Sonoran Desert of the American Southwest where the Tohono O’odham have lived forever. The O’odham see immense power in the desert and call its wilderness the place of dreams, songs, and yes, nightmares. They even say, “Saguaro is a person.” The desert we share is “a place of miracles.”

“The different forms of life in the desert are intricate parts of our own being.... We sing, engage in ceremony, and do the work of writing and testifying on behalf of those who do not speak with human voices.”

Lorraine Eiler, Hia-Ced O’odham Elder

The Inner Desert

We move together in a caravan across the inner desert of grief: the universal desert of unchosen loss and death, darkness and injustice, the pain that breaks and grinds the soul to pieces and carries within it the threat

of despair as well as hope for justice, compassion, and transformation. “Come, come, whoever you are,” wrote poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, “Ours is not a caravan of despair.” Neither is ours. We travel in a caravan of kindness.

***“Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.***

You must wake up with sorrow....

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore.”

Naomi Shihab Nye, “Kindness”

Stories of Hope

The Desert Foundation offers you human interest stories, spiritual reflections, poetry, and podcasts, looking for signs of hope not widely reported in our mass media. We review relevant books, films, and the occasional art exhibit. We engage in interspiritual dialogue and listen to other languages, cultures, and religions, encouraging peace and understanding, healing and reconciliation.

“See no stranger... You are a part of me I do not yet know.”

Valarie Kaur, *The Revolutionary Love Project*



Tent of Meeting

We create a Tent of Meeting where everyone is welcome. In the biblical tradition, the Tent of Meeting was a sanctuary where the Hebrew people encountered Yahweh on their journey through the desert.

“Widen the space of your tent,” urged the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, which means widening the space of your heart and mirroring the spaciousness of the desert itself.

In our tent, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah meet the descendants of Mohammed, Jesus, and the Christian mystics. The Jewish Voice for Peace and ICAHD, Israelis against the destruction of Palestinian homes, meet the Muslim Peace Fellowship. The Charis Foundation for New Monasticism and Interspirituality and the Center for Creative Imagination meet the “Nones,” who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.”

Meeting the “other” is not contamination but cross-fertilization, counter-cultural creative subversion, and good common sense. So let us simply love one another, as Martin Luther King declared: “When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.”

“My heart can take on any form... a cloister for monks, Ka’ba for the circling pilgrim, the tables of the Torah, the scrolls of the Qur’an. I profess the religion of love. Wherever its caravan turns along the way, that is the belief, the faith I keep.”

Ibn ‘Arabi, Sufi Mystic

The Wild Woman of Avila

Tessa Bielecki



Cover portraits by Suzie Ryan, Fray Juan de la Misera, and François Gerard.

St. Teresa continues to fascinate me in an ongoing conversation sixty years after I first met her. The covers of my books say so much about who Teresa is – and isn't.

It's rare for an author to choose the art for a book cover, but Crossroad let me do this in 1993 for *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Writings*, part of their "Spiritual Legacy Series." I asked my friend, Suzie Ryan, to draw Teresa dancing with her tambourine. Suzie even added castanets in Teresa's right hand and superimposed her dynamic figure against the dramatic walls of Avila. This is the vibrant Teresa in love with life who wrote, "We are not angels, but we have a body. To desire to be angels while we are on earth – and as much on earth as I was – is foolishness."

Holy Daring

The editor of *Holy Daring*, my second book, first published by Element in 1994, came up with "wild woman" as part of the awkward subtitle: *An outrageous gift to modern spirituality from Saint Teresa, the grand wild woman of Avila*. The book designer used a brilliant red for the cover with yellow lettering to match the flames on the burning dart which Teresa felt pierce her heart: "I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God."

Ecstasy and Common Sense

I finished the third volume, *Ecstasy and Common Sense*, for Shambhala in 1995. (Yes, three books in three years! Isn't it great that a Buddhist publisher wanted St. Teresa?) I told the editor, "Whatever you do, please don't put that classical portrait of Teresa on the cover. She *hated* it, and so do I." When he insisted on it, I insisted in turn that he also print a "disclaimer." One of Teresa's friars did this portrait in 1576 in Seville as Teresa neared the end of her life. When she saw it, she exclaimed, "Fray Juan, you've made me look like a bleary-eyed old hag!" I find it so endearing that this lively saint was still vain and concerned about her appearance as a sixty-one-year-old nun! (Teresa died six years later.)

I don't like the cover on the revised edition of *Holy Daring*, published in 2016 by Adam Kadmon Books. Part of a painting by Francois Gerard (1770-1837), it's too dark and gray, and makes me apologize to my friend, "Oh Teresa, they've made you look like a pious spook!" The Teresa I know and love is neither pious nor spooky. "May God deliver us from foolish devotions," she proclaimed in her autobiography. And "God deliver me from people so spiritual they want to turn everything into perfect contemplation no matter what."

Woman of Passion

Teresa was first and foremost a *woman*, a woman of *passion*, who not only felt strong emotion but expressed it freely in her life and writings. She was earthy and in touch with her body, not only writing about spiritual matters but down-to-earth human matters: good food and books, illnesses and home remedies, the fields, flowers, and fruit she loved: limes, quinces, coconuts. She called her soul a garden and compared prayer to watering that garden. An intimate companion to both men and women, Teresa models strong, loving, and not always balanced man-woman friendships. She was also a remarkable leader who stands out as the only woman in the Roman Catholic Church to reform an order of men.

Teresa was open and vulnerable not only about her vanity but her other shortcomings. She often got so angry, she wanted to “eat everyone up.” In two of her most poignant images, she describes herself as a “helpless bird” with broken wings or a “stupid little donkey grazing.” She often confessed, “I was frightened and scared.” She offers sage advice about how to keep going when we mess up because she often made mistakes but picked herself up with a sense of humor, often laughing at herself.

The Saint of Common Sense

Teresa’s mystical life was ecstatic, but she is known as the “saint of common sense,” who teaches us about the mystical path and then in the next breath about the importance of walking under the sky, the danger of overwork, the value of celebration, and finding God in the kitchen “among the pots and pans.”

“Gracie,” the artist who creates the images used for the Women Mystics School, depicts the women in their “correct ethnicity” and makes them look contemporary with “real human expression.” She paints each one “like someone you’d run into at your local coffee shop.” Teresa is dressed in red. Under her dark hair, she looks at us with a saucy smile and exclaims, “Oh, Gracie, you got me just right!” I’ll bet she wishes Fray Juan had painted her like this.



*In this lineup by “Gracie,” Juliana of Norwich is on the left and Teresa of Avila is on the right.
To see more icons, visit www.themodernsaints.com.*

Registration

To register, visit womenmystics.org and choose your package: Tessa’s class on July 9, or any number of the other mystics. Please indicate that you learned about this school from Tessa, which will help support our work.

On June 30, 2022, you can watch a live interview with Tessa and Kelly Deutsch, creator of the Women Mystics School, on the *Contemplative Monk* or the *Spiritual Wanderlust* Facebook pages. You may also watch at the *Spiritual Wanderlust* Youtube channel.

After June 30, listen to the interview at Apple, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.