



# C a r a v a n s

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The Desert Foundation  
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[www.sandandsky.org](http://www.sandandsky.org)

*Learn to meditate on paper.  
Writing and drawing are meditation.*

—Thomas Merton—

Dear Friends,

Arizona's spectacular "superbloom" of wildflowers has faded, but not our memories of purple lupine and night-scented stock, golden poppies, pink penstemon and lavender scorpion weed swaying in the breeze. We loved our wildflower hikes at Picacho Peak, Peridot Mesa on the Apache Reservation, and Organ Pipe National Monument, photographing flowers and posting colorful pictures for you to enjoy. Now the heat of summer is upon us, saguaros are blooming and will soon give us their red fruit. Our lives continue to bloom as well.

## ***Fire and Light***

We are grateful for your enthusiastic responses to our new podcast, *Fire and Light*. Sarah from San Diego wrote, "As someone who doesn't subscribe to a specific religion, I'm often turned off by the exclusivity that comes from religious communities and discourse, but Tessa and Dave bring such an openness to the conversation. It feels like what religion and spirituality should be: open, kind, curious, inclusive and accessible to all." Deanna likes how our podcasts are "short, pithy, simple, to the point.... down to earth, not too 'holy.' You both let your own humanity show, so folks can identify. Stay human and ordinary."

Julia from Chicago admires our "online courage." Cathy thinks we are not just growing older "but BOLDER!" Clare emailed from Sacramento: "It seems like you have really come into this new stage of life achieving the goals you set out to accomplish, which is very inspiring. In yoga we say, 'You're never too old, too bad, too late and never too sick to start from scratch once again.' You certainly live up to this."

We love how Donna from Orange County commended our friend, David Levin, our sound engineer and editor: "The first podcast had all the ingredients to make me want to listen: impressive content, sparkling dialogue, and superior production. Tell David L. that he gets an 'A' in my book. Love the theme music: upbeat,



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](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.



*Tessa enjoys a hike at Organ Pipe National Monument; Dave and Tessa marvel at the wildflower superbloom at Peridot Mesa; Dave hangs a lantern in his tent at Organ Pipe.*

modern, happy. [David found the music.] I love hearing your chuckling from time to time. Glad you included the part about what a mystic is and is not and how the interspiritual includes everyone and all religions.”

Do you know about our podcast? If you have sent us your email address, we will now send you our two monthly newsletters, which announce the podcasts, new web posts, upcoming retreats and new *Caravans*. (You can unsubscribe at any time.) For those of you who only read *Caravans*, we include a brief black and white version of our adventures here. Want to go paperless and read *Caravans* in color online? Include your email on the enclosed card. Prefer paper? Don’t worry: you will continue receiving paper *Caravans*.

### ***Contemplation on the Road – and Zoom***

We tell the story of our retreat in Patagonia, Arizona on page four. In over forty years “on the road,” Tessa considers this one of her richest experiences. We had such sweet encounters with Richard Rohr and others in between our presentations. We also facilitated a retreat on Carmelite spirituality for the new monastic Community of the Incarnation who came to the renewal center near us. Not quite warming to “Zoom” at first, we have come to appreciate the way it helps connect us with people around the globe. On July 8, Tessa will do a Zoom class on Celtic Spirituality. You’ll find details on page six. In August we will attend the ninth Parliament of the World’s religions in Chicago. We are also talking to Spiritual Directors International about a Zoom class on desert spirituality sometime later this year. We’ll keep you posted through the monthly newsletters.

### ***“Apostolic Hermits”***

How is that we as “urban hermits” engage like this with others in the world? Carmelite hermits are “apostolic hermits.” Here’s what Nicholas the Frenchman wrote in his 12th-century work, *The Fiery Arrow*: “...the hermits of Carmel persevered for a long time in the solitude of the desert, but as they intended to be of service to their neighbor... they went sometimes, but rarely, down from their hermitage. That which they had harvested with the sickle of contemplation, in solitude, they went... to sow it abroad on all sides.” As Thomas Merton wrote in his chapter on “The Primitive Carmelite Ideal” in *Disputed Questions*, “The first Carmelites had initiated something quite original and unique: a loose-knit community of hermits with an occasional, informal apostolate.” We continue to embody this ideal today in our Tucson apartments, truly *hermitages* in the city, with solitude the heart of our lives.

The deeper solitude we enjoy at this stage in our vocations, paradoxically along with deeper engagement with others as elders and mentors, allows us to focus on the writing we both feel God has called us to do. You see this on both web sites. We trust it will emerge in memoirs, too. Merton was right: writing is meditation – and prayer. Thank you for supporting our Carmelite life.

... as “apostolic hermits”! -- Tessa  
 ... and as writers! - Dave



# Listen to Fire and Light

Join us as we share conversations with you about life, love, and soul. We began 2023 with our first podcast, and we have produced a new one monthly. If you haven't listened yet, here's what you will find:

## *Episode 1: Living a Natural Life*

We introduce ourselves and explore our vision for this continuing conversation on the mysteries of life, love, and soul. Each podcast includes a concrete practice to help you live more contemplatively in the world and concludes with a meditation. In this episode, we discuss how everyone is a special kind of mystic. Tessa encourages us to live more naturally in tune with the earth, and we end with a New Year Celtic blessing.

## *Episode 2: Candles and Good Trouble*

We explore the beauty of candlelight and the Feast of Candlemas. In honor of Black History Month, we reflect on the spirituality of the late civil rights activist and congressman John Lewis. We celebrate the universal appreciation of candlelight in spiritual ceremonies and suggest a candle blessing practice. We close with a meditation by Howard Thurman, author and mystic whose wisdom helped guide the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

## *Episode 3: Alchemy of Earth and Soul*

Tessa rhapsodizes on the beauty of compost. She celebrates the season of Lent as alchemy: allowing the cast-off peelings, the inedible "garbage" of our lives to be transformed into fertile soil for future flowers. She recommends we get our hands dirty and grow something green in this month that Tohono O'Odham people call the Green Moon. Dave celebrates Women's History Month by commenting on bell hooks, Naomi Shihab Nye, Valarie Kaur, and desert elder Lorraine Eiler.

## *Episode 4: Breathing Room for the Spirit*

Tessa and Dave explore ways to create breathing room for our spirits in a world of speed and utility. They describe a recent desert camping trip and Dave recites "Superbloom Toast," a poem celebrating the spectacle of a desert bursting with flowers. Since April is National Poetry Month, they ponder the value of poetry and its relationship to contemplation. This month's meditation creates breathing space for the spirit by helping us slow down, pay attention, and enjoy everyday wonders.

## *Episode 5: My Story, Your Story*

Tessa and Dave introduce the Irish saying, "my story, your story." They explore how the concrete details, joys and sorrows of our unique life stories have an uncanny power to communicate across time and cultures. Allow yourself to slow down and ponder the meaning of "destiny" and how your years unfold along themes that weave in and out of your life's seasons. Tessa and Dave note major landmarks or thresholds in their own lives and lead you through a meditation to help you discover and celebrate your own destiny and the legacy you hope to leave for future generations.

*Listen wherever you get your podcasts, or find links at [www.tessabielecki.com/Listen](http://www.tessabielecki.com/Listen).*

# Retreat in Patagonia

Tessa Bielecki

Have you ever seen a scorpion or eaten a lobster? Then you'll understand why I go into gales of laughter when I read how Alberto Rios connects them in his poem, "Desert Bestiary Sonnet, One": "Scorpions are lobsters sent west by the witness protection program." Rios makes other remarkable comparisons, too, between the tarantula and playing the piano, the gila monster and beaded purses, the horny toad and Queen Elizabeth's crown.

Dave Denny and I read this poem in a kind of "call and response" on the opening night of our recent retreat in Patagonia, Arizona. We also read George Ella Lyon's "Our Mother Who Art in the Kitchen" (the Universe), "The Patience of Ordinary Things" by Pat Schneider about chairs, teacups, and the generosity of windows, and "Wildflowers" by Maya Stein who speaks not about the flowers in our meadows but the flowers that come out of our own mouths when we "tell aloud the thing that broke inside."



*From left: Fr. Richard Rohr and Tessa enjoyed their reunion; the entire group of retreatants; Dave and Tessa at the desert altar.*

Next day, our smaller group pulled our chairs into a circle, which invited deep intimacy and vulnerability. We were in an empty echoey hall, which Dave and I transformed into a desert landscape with rocks and skulls, saguaro sculptures, and colorful rugs and blankets. Then each participant made a personal offering on the altar we created: lupine seeds from a beloved mother who had just died, a medicine bag of stones from favorite places in New Mexico, an icon which brought consolation when a brother committed suicide. See what I mean about intimacy and vulnerability?

I talked about what I've learned from the wounds and scars I see in the saguaros I visit in the desert around Tucson. Dave read more poetry that moved from the hominess of Pablo Neruda's socks to the power of St. John of the Cross' Dark Night by way of Anna Kamienska's bird finding the human condition poignant and "funny." Everyone's sharing came from the heart. Richard Rohr came as a simple participant. Gary Nabhan cooked us luscious Moroccan food. Rita Cantu sang her heart out about loving the dry land. On the last morning we offered tepary beans to Mother Earth and an old grandmother cottonwood tree and prayed a Navajo Beauty Chant and Gary's "Canticle for All Creatures in a Time of Climate Change."

Paul said, "The weekend was an incredible gift that lingers. The container and contents melded together in a contemplative flame." Nancy said, "Each moment [was] another opportunity to share grief and celebrate how pain can give birth to resilience and community.... [in] an intimate exploration of the spiritual desert ... through the active circle of listeners holding space." Gary was glad to see the way Dave and I "mixed moving poetry and prayer with mirth and everyday ways of living." Rita thanked us for our "spaciousness and delight," the quiet, and the way everyone on the retreat created "a chamber in which the energy was more than a sum of our individual parts." In my forty-plus years of what French philosopher Jacques Maritain called "putting contemplation on the roads of the world," this retreat ranks up there in my top ten significant experiences. I am so grateful to each person and hold each one in my heart and prayer.

# Canticle for All Creatures in a Time of Climate Change

Brother Coyote, OEF

Most awesome, benevolent, compassionate Creator:

We offer you our praises for the glory, honor and blessing of being with you here in our earthly home.

*To you alone do all of us creatures belong, but none of us is worthy of your gifts when we spoil this nest. We pray for your help in making earthly restoration our new story.*

**We still praise you, Creator,** across all Creation, for giving us the blessing of knowing your diverse creatures. We sing with joy as Brother Sun brings the day as you let your Love Light brightly shine through him.

*Now, because of our sins of emission and consumption his radiance burns our eyes, until they blur with tears as we glimpse his heat waves in their shimmer and splendor! O Creator, forgive us for inflaming his anger and displeasure. Help us find a way to pull down carbon to cool your nest for us.*



**We still praise you, Creator,** for granting us Sister Moon and her stars, who enchant us with their radiance, movements and marvels.

*Lately we have had trouble seeing them at all, for the heavens in which you formed them are no longer clear, but full of light contamination and pollution. Help us live in a manner that clears the skies once more.*

**We still praise you, Creator,** for bringing Brother Wind, who moves through the air to make it fresh and fair.

*But now he is coming with more turbulent weather that sweeps away your creatures and the soil they stand upon. Help us plant trees that will buffer us from his wrath.*

**We still praise you, Creator,** for the grace of Sister Water, who not only slakes our thirst, but washes and refreshes us.

*Somehow we have sullied her, overtaxed her, defiling your most valuable gift, once precious and pure. Forgive us for disrespecting her and help us protect her artesian springs, rivers and seas from any more troubles.*



**We still praise you, Creator,** for our luminous Brother Fire, who leaps across this land, regenerating its fertility and its cover.

*But we are the ones drying down the land and parching its plants, turning what was playful, robust and refreshing in him into incendiary monsters, burning down towns and woods. Help us make peace with this fiery lone Wolf, Brother Fire, as we restore greenery and moisture back to this land.*

**We still praise you, Creator,** for being incarnate as Sister Earth, who has generously nourished and sheltered us,

*Though now she dons a tattered dress, no colorful blooms or fruits. Help us redeem her confidence in us, so that*

*we may care for the diversity of flora, fauna and microbiota as she has cared for us.*

**We still praise you, Creator,** though you might doubt our sincerity, so pardon us with your love each and every time we miss the mark, bringing upon ourselves so many infirmities and inequities.

*Grant us time to heal the earth so that we may heal ourselves. Help us make peace with all the races, cultures, genders and species we have ignorantly struggled against, for they have been made in your image just as we have been. We live only in relation.*

**We still praise you, Creator,** for fully embracing Sister Death, from whom no mortal species can flee by air, land, or sea. Help us recognize that she is as much a part of the cycle of renewal as is the seed and the suckling, the fungus and the lightning-struck tree. Woe to those who simply cannot see Your Wholeness, for it is Your Holiness, as is Your Diversity. In this sense, dying to become life-giving compost will do us no harm.

*We join in the chorus with all the fishes and fowl, frogs and ferns, ferrets and fin whales, firs and forget-me-nots in singing your praise through every respiration and inspiration for, together, we are your Body and Blood.*

## Thanks from Two Aging Adventurers

Thank you for supporting the Desert Foundation. You make it possible for us to deepen our wisdom and spread our message of hope, respect, listening, sharing and celebrating the gift of contemplative life. With your help, we launched two new web sites and a podcast in the past year.

You also help us pay rent for our two “urban hermitages” and put food on our tables, maintain the security of our web sites, and pay for the software subscriptions that enable us to produce beautiful images and layouts, on paper and online. As we age, we wish we had more energy and time. You cannot give those! And yet your continued support boosts our energy by relieving financial anxieties. You can also help by going paperless with *Caravans*.

On an adventurous note, we are excited about attending this August’s ninth Parliament of the World’s Religions (<https://parliamentofreligions.org/>) in Chicago. We secured free housing, thanks to the very generous Sr. Julia Walsh, but the trip will involve expenses: air and cab fare, and maybe Chicago deep-dish pizza! Can you help?

Our encounters with faith leaders from around the world will inspire reflections we hope you will be eager to read. The Parliament’s goal is “to cultivate harmony among the world’s religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.” Will you support us as your delegates?

*Thank you!*

## Embodying Beauty in “Ordinary Plenty”

How do we embody beauty and abundance in ordinary everyday experience? By finding our “island,” digging deep into the “bog” of life, keeping our fire burning, and “going green” like the landscape of Ireland, we see how life is art and beauty will save the world. Tessa begins with stories of her years in Ireland, incorporating poetic images and metaphors, and then fleshes them out with concrete contemplative practices.

**Join Tessa Bielecki on July 8** as she contributes to “*The Celtic Spirituality School*.” <https://school.spiritualwanderlust.org/the-celtic-spirituality-school>. You must sign up for the entire course, but listen only to what you want, then unsubscribe. Stream it live over Zoom, or watch recorded sessions anytime.