



C a r a v a n s

December 2023

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*Each year as Christmas draws near,
We come once more, to the Advent Door... Mary-space, openness to grace.*

— Carol Crawford —

Dear Friends,

We always breathe a sigh of gratitude and relief when Advent arrives with its deep stillness and we wind down the year and prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus: quiet, solitary, empty days for us amidst the frenetic shopping and partying of our dominant consumer culture. “If we keep Advent still and uncluttered,” wrote William McNamara years ago, “we will be awake and ready when Christ comes.” We’ve always loved how he insisted, “Christ does not stick rigidly to our liturgical feast days. He may come December 4 or December 26.”

Rich and Full

As we meditate on the past year, we’re tempted to call it “busy.” But we’ve stopped using that word and prefer to call our life “rich and full.” We loved the weekend we led last April in Patagonia on “The Desert: Breathing Room for the Spirit,” the retreat with Adam Bucko’s new monastic [Community of the Incarnation](#) in June, and our four Zoom sessions for Spiritual Directors International on “[Desert Wisdom](#)” in November. Tessa enjoyed giving her regular reflections for the sabbatical program at the Redemptorist Renewal Center five minutes away and joined her annual women’s gathering there in October. She loved doing her July Zoom session for the Celtic Spirituality School sponsored by [Spiritual Wanderlust](#). And it was rewarding for both of us to connect with so many old friends at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in August and even explore a bit of Chicago.

Contemplation in Action

All these events grew out of our life of solitude in our “urban hermitages” here in Tucson. As Carmelites, we believe that every action flows out of contemplation. Our contemplative life comes first, and then we share



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. Our web sites are sandandsky.org and tessabielecki.com. *Caravans* is 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.



We enjoyed visiting Sedona, a retreat with the Community of the Incarnation in Tucson, and a visit with Paul Swanson from Contemplify.com.

its fruits with others. Since contemplation is “a long loving look at the Real,” this year included walks in our wildflower super-bloom and early March snow, camping at Organ Pipe National Monument during Holy Week, and harvesting saguaro fruit with Tohono O’odham elders in late June. We meditated on death and dying with Day of the Dead sculptures at the Botanical Gardens and a powerful musical production celebrating life and death called [Hasta la Muerte](#).

Fire and Light

We’ve loved your enthusiastic responses to the monthly podcast we began in January of 2023. *Fire and Light: Conversations about Life, Love, and Soul* wouldn’t be possible without the generous help of our friend, David Levin, our sound engineer and editor. We also appreciate your responses to the new [tessabielecki.com](#) and [sandandsky.org](#) web sites and feature some of them on page six. We receive so many thoughtful reflections from you, it’s frustrating not to share more with you. Your feedback makes our hard work worthwhile. We love to know what you’re thinking.

In Tune with the Seasons

It’s a joy walking with you through the seasons of the year with our monthly newsletters, posts and podcasts, in tune with the earth’s rhythms and the liturgical calendar: Advent and Christmas, Candlemas, Lent and Easter, All Souls and Day of the Dead. Some of our own favorite posts this year include Dave’s poems, [“Weird Stuff I Love”](#) and [“Marigold and Leaf Mold,”](#) and his reflections on [Martin Luther King](#), [“Seriously Silly,”](#) and [“Turning Points: Christ and Hiroshima.”](#) This last post was republished on the United Religions Initiative web site under “Voices,” along with Tessa’s [“The Atomic Christ and the Incinerated Saguaro.”](#) Tessa’s post on [“Twelve Ways to Cultivate Inclusivity”](#) was republished in *Living City*, magazine of the Focolare Movement. Our favorite podcasts have pithy titles like “Going against the Grind,” “A Taste of Place,” and “Before, After, and the Atomic Bomb.” If you haven’t had a chance, we hope you’ll look at or listen to some of these during your own quiet days in Advent.

Thank You for Your Support

In the coming year, we plan to talk less and write more. This will be good for our memoirs but strain our finances. We need you more than ever and hope you’ll continue with your generous support, particularly for the heart of our life, “the praise of God in solitude.”

*Blessings as we come to the stillness of winter,
Tessa & Dave*



The Story Teller

An Advent Meditation

David Denny

Children, there was a girl.
She lived in a small village
On a tall dry mesa the size of ours.
She did what you do.
But her ears heard more than sounds.
You hear me talk
And know I am bigger than my words:
They come from inside me.
This girl heard a word,
But it wasn't inside her.
She was inside the word.

She stayed as still as the
Stone canyon walls,
And let herself be spoken.

That word, which made
The desert and the sky,
The mesas and the arroyos,
The rain and the girl,
That great word of our Grandfather
Loved the girl

And became so small
He lived inside her
As you lived inside your mother once.
What became of that Word-Boy
Is another story.
Today, simply listen.
She is your mother, and
Gives you special ears
To hear more than sounds,
More than coyotes,
Rain, thunder
And wind.
You will hear your name,
And you will know what you must do.

You will walk in beauty,
Laugh and weep in beauty,
Because the girl is beauty
And your mother,
The Mother of Millions,
From a tall dry mesa
The size of ours.





Favorite Readings on Desert Spirituality

Annotated by Tessa Bielecki

Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey

This is a classic and a must-read, as relevant today as it was when first published in 1968. Abbey, the old curmudgeon, alternates between lyrical poetic descriptions of the red rock desert of Utah and diatribes about the loss of wilderness. He's irreverent, even rude, and considers himself non-religious. Is he "spiritual" and a contemporary desert father?

The Wisdom of the Desert, Thomas Merton

This was one of Merton's favorites among his own books. He presents 150 Sayings from the Desert Fathers (not Mothers), organized randomly, neither alphabetically nor thematically. This drives me crazy, along with his Roman numerals. But this little book is a must read, too. Merton's introduction is brilliant. He challenges us all to "swim away from the shipwreck" of our dominant culture as the Desert Fathers did and become our best and "true" selves by living a counter-cultural life.

Desert Fathers and Mothers, Christine Valters Paintner

Mercifully, Paintner organizes her collection of the Sayings by themes especially relevant to us and puts the numbers in Arabic numerals, focusing more on the Desert Mothers. Her commentary on each saying is excellent. She defines key desert terms in contemporary ways and is especially good with *accidie* and "the passions." Her introduction alone is "worth the price of the book," as Paula Huston wrote. Her quotations from other writings on the desert will lead you to further inspiring readings.

The Desert: An Anthology for Lent, John Moses

This book is a gold mine of inspiration for daily living from more contemporary writings on desert spirituality. Read it at any time of the year. The footnotes and the last chapter on "The Literature of the Desert" point you to other invaluable resources on desert spirituality.

Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers, Yushi Nomura

This volume illustrates the universal relevance of desert spirituality across cultures and centuries. Nomura is a Japanese artist who learned about the desert tradition in a class with Henri Nouwen at Yale Divinity School. He "hears" the desert sayings like Zen stories and koans and renders them in his own beautiful calligraphy. His Japanese brush paintings turn the Desert Fathers into Zen monks and place the Egyptian stories in a classical Japanese setting. As Nouwen notes in his introduction, "he created a place in which the Buddha and the Christ in him could reach out to one another."

The Solace of Fierce Landscapes, Belden Lane

In this unique and splendid book, Lane explores "desert and mountain spirituality" through the three classical stages of mystical growth: purgation, illumination, and union. He alternates between physical wildernesses such as Mount Sinai and Upper Moss Creek and the "desert" of the nursing home where his mother is dying of cancer and Alzheimer's. Like Merton, Lane emphasizes the counter-cultural dimension of desert spirituality where we go against the grain of our dominant culture and pay attention to what matters most in our lives, ignoring the rest through commitment to contemplative and compassionate living. The forty pages of footnotes are daunting and worth slogging through.



Without Vision

Two Traumatized Communities Collide

David Denny



Decades ago I became haunted by a question: When does a war end? The suffering of refugees and veterans endures long after and far away from the hell of war. If not faced, the trauma passes from one generation to the next. Since 1948, Jews traumatized by Europe's pogroms have traumatized Palestinians, who have further traumatized Israelis. I am devastated by the horrors unleashed on October 7, 2023. It is difficult to say anything at all. But silence can be complicity.

We hear all the predictable political rhetoric of violence and vengeance that, we know, leads to more violence and vengeance. My concern is pastoral, not political. Collective trauma seems similar to global warming: even if we slam on the brakes today, it may be many decades before a vital equilibrium flowers. But there were no brakes on October 7's Hamas atrocities. And now the American-backed Israeli military unleashes its ferocity on Gaza, often described as the world's largest open-air prison.

I've always loved Proverbs 29:18, which can be translated "Without vision, the people perish," or "the people run wild." In a recent video from Rabbi Marc Gopin, who has worked for peace and reconciliation in the Middle East for decades, he laments that almost no one is envisioning, let alone building, a new reality. If we continue to run wild, annihilationists on both sides may gain power and influence.

I find consolation in the vision of Rabbi Tirzah Firestone's [Wounds into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma](#). She cites many examples of people who have recovered from trauma and proposes seven principles of healing. The fourth, "Resisting the Call to Fear, Blame, and Dehumanize," goes a long way toward creating a vision that may guide us through this murderous chaos toward a Promised Land of healing, transformation that "eye has not seen," but for which we groan in travail.

I was heartened by Nicholas Kristof's recent *New York Times* article, "[Meet the Champions of Nuance and Empathy We Need.](#)" He describes the work of [Parents Circle–Family Forum](#). They bring together Israelis and Palestinians who have lost children to the violence that has persisted since 1948. In 2007 Tessa and I met two men whose lives were shattered by the loss of family members and then set on a path to healing through the Parents Circle. Guy was a Jewish Israeli who had served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Omar was a Muslim Palestinian physician. Omar's father was killed in 1972 by the IDF. Later Israel demolished his home and he lived in a refugee camp. Then his brother was killed by the IDF and Omar spent twenty years in exile in Jordan. Guy's sister was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber. Both men became completely disillusioned with all forms of violence. (Read my longer account of our 2007 trip to Israel at [sandandsky.org](#).)

Firestone notes the healing power of this group as she recounts the story of Rami Elhanan, an Israeli whose daughter Smadar was killed by a suicide bomber in 1997. You can read an expanded version of his story in Colm McCann's novel [Apeirogon](#), which includes the tragic tale of Rami's close Palestinian friend Bassam Aramin, whose ten-year-old daughter Abir was killed by the Israeli military.

The vision that may help transform this nightmare will arise from people like Gopin and Firestone, Omar and Guy, Rami and Bassam. In the meantime, we pray that "the dawn from on high will shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78-79).

Desert Voices: The Edge Effect, Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

In this compilation of essays from the early years of the Desert Foundation, we celebrate our love affair with the desert. In the "Tent of Meeting," we explore friendships between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, whose traditions grow out of the desert. We honor non-violent peacemakers who sow hope in the troubled desert of Israel-Palestine and describe the inner desert of loss and grief, impermanence and death.



Responses from Our Readers and Listeners

Your love of life is so evident in the *Fire and Light* podcasts. After your life “scars” you have found a way to work through your setbacks and turn them into comebacks in so many ways. You and Fr. Dave sound like you are enjoying your season in life and have found, as St. Hildegard would say, the *veriditas*, the “greening” of your work. Someone once said, “Don’t just grow older but BOLDER!” That’s what you are doing as you move “from aging to saging.” You have so much wisdom to offer. (Cathy Roby, Orange County, CA)

Your podcast has all the ingredients to make me want to listen: impressive content, sparkling dialogue, and superior production. Tell David Levin he gets an “A” in my book. The opening sounds very inviting. Love the theme music: upbeat, modern, happy. The episode about living a natural life, connecting to gardening and stargazing, was encouraging. (Donna Couch, Dana Point, CA)

Dave’s “Wabi: A Fertile Memory” was so interesting to read! I live at the former Nada in Crestone that is now Miyo Samten Ling Hermitage (aka the Center for Contemplative Research), a long-term Tibetan Buddhist retreat center. We’ve preserved the essence of Nada in many ways and the presence of the Christian contemplatives is very much still felt. I know exactly which wrought iron cross you’re talking about, up at John of the Cross cabin. It’s good to know more about where it came from and that you were the one who helped get it there. Thank you for sharing your story. (Virginia Craft, Crestone, CO)

Rich and Empty

After our “rich and full” 2023, we intend to keep 2024 emptier, devoting more time to our written legacies. Tessa will celebrate eighty years of life and is eager to make prodigious progress on her memoir.

Fr. Dave will work on his memoir, tentatively called “How Did You Dawn?” As our lives move toward sunset, we are fascinated by how many of the passions and principles we embraced in the “morning” years have endured.

Your generous support will help us pass on writings we hope will contribute to spiritual cross-fertilization that brings contemplative wisdom into the mainstream of twenty-first-century life. Thank you for your steadfast encouragement!

Give Good Reading for Christmas!

Season of Glad Songs

A Christmas Anthology

Tessa Bielecki and 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.

Available from Amazon.com. Proceeds support the Desert Foundation.

