



C a r a v a n s

Summer 2024

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

—Edward Abbey—

Dear Friends,

June is upon us. Here in Tucson, we call it “dry summer.” Temperatures soar into the hundreds without relief until the monsoon rains begin in mid-July. Soon our Tohono O’odham neighbors will harvest red saguaro fruit and begin their new year’s celebrations. As they pull the ripe fruit down from the tall cactus, they pull down the clouds that bring the moisture.

As the heat intensifies, we hunker down inside to write. We have dedicated this year to working intensively on our memoirs. We’re not getting any younger and feel a sense of urgency. Several friends our age have died or taken ill this past year. We also feel a sense of excitement and wonder, looking back at our lives and bringing in our own “harvest.” You’ll learn about the themes of Dave’s memoir on page three. He presents them uniquely in a poem that includes jasmine, shrimp, and a red covered bridge, Afghanistan, Tunisia, and Brazil.

Contemplation

Tessa’s memoir tells the story of almost forty years in our original community, the Spiritual Life Institute, where we lived in four different landscapes that shaped our soulscapes, and where we helped “take contemplation out of the monasteries and put it on the roads of the world.” That’s how French philosopher Jacques Maritain described one of the great needs of our time.

The experience of contemplation has varied meanings: “seeing things as they really are,” “singling things out for grateful consideration,” “celebrating what’s too good to be used.” If we all embodied these ways of living contemplatively, would there be so much hate and division in the world? Would we wage so many wars, destroying one another and the environment?



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.



Shhh! Memoirists at work. Tessa writes longhand from archival materials. And Dave creates on his computer. Death Valley was a much-needed respite from the hard work of memoir writing.

The Desert

Tessa's reflection in this *Caravans* focuses on the desert and how it can enhance our lives no matter where we live because the ultimate desert experience is interior. Whether you live in the Sahara or San Francisco, the Mojave or Madagascar, the Gobi or Galway Bay, the call of the desert is the same. We do not have to experience the geographical desert. Through the prophet Hosea, God calls to the intimate depths of every human heart: "I will lead you into the desert, and there I will speak to your heart." You will find an expanded version of this desert reflection on *tessabielecki.com*. There you can also listen to our latest podcast, "The Desert Experience," Number Sixteen. We fell more deeply in love with the desert on our camping pilgrimage to Death Valley last spring with Stephen and Joanne Hatch. You can read more about this on *tessabielecki.com*, too, and see colored photos of Death Valley's stunning landscape. We talk about the deeper meaning of such an adventure for any of us in our March podcast, Number Fourteen, "Return to the Wild."

Fire and Light

We're grateful to Donna Couch from Orange County who wrote, "*Fire and Light* has all the ingredients to make me want to listen: impressive content, sparkling dialogue, and superior production. Love the theme music: upbeat, modern, happy. And I love hearing you laugh from time to time." Our generous friend and sound engineer, David Levin, has recently added music to the meditation which concludes each podcast. Good news! You can now subscribe to *Fire and Light* on YouTube @FireandLightPod or follow us at facebook.com/people/Fire-and-Light/61560040197981/. If you haven't listened to our *Fire and Light* series, please give it a try. And if you do listen, please share it with your friends?

Seasons of the Soul

We will be in Boulder, Colorado this coming October and hope you will join us. Thanks to Netanel Miles-Yepetz, head of the Religious Studies Department and our friend, Tessa will spend a week at Naropa University as "Wisdom Teacher in Residence," meeting with students and faculty. Her weekend event is open to the public. Turning eighty this coming September 16, Tessa will also draw on almost sixty years as a Christian contemplative with teachings she finds most relevant from the mystical streams she embodies: the counter-cultural witness of the desert, the earthy rhythms of the monastic tradition, and the intimacy and "holy ordinary" of Carmelite and Celtic spirituality. She will also explore the challenges of creating the "lively human atmosphere" conducive to contemplative experience, including "crisis contemplation." You'll find more details on page six.

We hope our reflections will enhance your own celebration of summer.

*So grateful to you, Tessa & Dave
Shhh! Memoirists at work!*

Before I Forget

David Denny

Should I be surprised at how unnerving it can be to write a memoir? My mother died of Alzheimer's disease, so someday I may forget who I have been. I better finish the story before it's too late. I recently reread a poem I wrote twenty years ago, a kind of memoir in fewer than two hundred words. It includes references to adventures in Afghanistan and Brazil, to early love, to swimming in the Bay of Fundy and Michigan's Crystal Lake, to aromas, animals, and objects that conjure a world of meaning, emotion and gratitude. So in case it takes a while for the unabridged version, here is a glimpse of my life in a list.

Some Important Things

Jasmine,

Because you may have to cross a Tunis alley flowing with sewage.

Pilau,

Because you can hear the muezzin of Kabul, see the lost Buddhas of Bamiyan, and remember holding hands with Syed Ahmad in a world now rubble and blood.

Cashews,

Because they grow wild in Guajerutia
and you can eat the fruit that few Hoosiers have ever seen.

Shrimp,

Because the naked fishermen there heaped them into my empty pan.

Macaroons,

Because you made them and they are as close as I ever came to tasting you.

Fresh clams, cold beer, and wild strawberries,

Because the sun shone at Mavillette and we shivered out of the salty bay.

Peanuts and cinnamon hearts,

Because their salt and spice were the end of a day spent splashing in liquid turquoise.

Piñon smoke, sheepdogs, sleepy-eyed donkeys,

sweet mint tea, red covered bridge, black ice skates ...

Because, because,

Because ...

We Get By ...

... with your help, friends! Thank you for your support over the past nineteen years. Can it be that we will celebrate our twentieth anniversary next year?

We spent most of our adult lives as monks in a monastery. That is, we were volunteers. Unpaid. So we have no "nest eggs." We have a little Social Security, thanks to the Desert Foundation and Dave's work with Cross Catholic Outreach. But we can't stop working. Which means we can't get sick. What are the chances?

The Desert Foundation **bank account is running low**. We will tell you more in our winter *Caravans*. In the meantime, can you help us continue writing and sharing wisdom we gleaned from our years exploring contemplative solitude? You are investing in a quiet revolution of loving wisdom in a world of need.

Thank you!



So Brave, So Bright, So Beautiful

Tessa Bielecki

“There is something about the desert,” wrote Edward Abbey after living in the red rock canyonlands of southern Utah. “There is something there which the mountains, no matter how grand and beautiful, lack; which the sea, no matter how shining and vast and old, does not have.”

“The desert has mothered magic things,” wrote novelist John Steinbeck. Here’s how Abbey describes the magic: “Life nowhere appears so brave, so bright, so full of oracle and miracle, as in the desert.” “If you look with the mind of the swirling earth... you become the land, beautiful,” sings Muscogee poet, Joy Harjo, first Native American Poet Laureate of the United States.

Sacred Beauty

“The white man sees desolation and calls it a desert,” explained western writer Tony Hillerman, but the Navajo name for desert means “Beautiful Valley.” The Tohono O’odham in the Sonoran Desert where I live call it “bright shining place.”

Death Valley is the official name for the vast expanse of rock and salt flats in southeastern California because of the number of early pioneers who perished there. But the Shoshone People native to that land call it and themselves *Timbisha*, after the sacred red pigment found in the surrounding mountains. For the Timbisha Shoshone, the land is not dead but alive.

Utah resident Terry Tempest Williams also finds red earth beautiful and sacred. One of the few women to write about the desert, she wrote in *Red*, “If the desert is holy, it is because it is a forgotten place that allows us to remember the sacred.”

Silence and Humility

The desert’s sacredness arises from its *silence*. “I became aware of an immense silence in which I lost myself,” said Abbey. “The crystal silence will uplift you,” said Anne Lamott. There is no place to hide in the vast empty landscape of the desert. “This desert hides nothing,” says Ellen Malloy, who also lived in the red rocks of southern Utah. She called the desert a “perfect crucible” for the “ecstasy and despair of solitude, the delicious terror of becoming lost.” Out there she felt like “a small dot and a big voyeur.... The sky and open desert are so enormous around us, who would know if we were out here anywhere?”

A camel driver from North Africa responds the same way: “I’ve crossed these sands many times,” he said one night, “But the desert is so huge, and the horizons so distant, that they make a person feel small, as if he should remain silent.” As we come to understand our little place in the cosmic order, we learn this kind of *humility*.

After her visit to a desert she never names, city dweller Meg Bernhard wrote, “[There we] are reminded of... our transience [impermanence]. This is the meaning of geological time. Our bodies will die... but the rocks and sand will go on.” Do you find this sad or consoling?

In his seminal work, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, Belden Lane explains how the “seeming indifference” of the wilderness brings us consolation. “How did the wild canyon cliff change when your world fell apart?” he asks. “The cliff remained constant in its immensity and majesty.”

Intimacy with the Desert, Pilgrimage to the Self

Bernhard titled her article in the *New York Times* online magazine, “The Desert Changed My Life. It Can Change Yours, Too.” The desert reminded her that she was not only small but mortal. She learned the ecological dimension of time in the desert which teaches us “to exist within this ecosystem, affirming we are of the landscape, not apart.”

Terry Tempest Williams echoes this wisdom and emphasizes the *social ramifications* of connecting with the desert: “For me, it always comes back to the land,” she said in an interview. “What we perceive as non-human outside of us, is actually in direct relationship with us. I think our lack of intimacy with the land has initiated a lack of intimacy with each other.”

“Every pilgrimage to the desert is a pilgrimage to the self,” she wrote. “The desert makes me feel like myself, and I like that,” said Georgia O’Keeffe, who painted the desert around Abiquiu, New Mexico. Georgia liked what she learned about herself there. But what happens when the desert reveals what we don’t like about ourselves? The desert is demanding and challenging: “It can swallow you up emotionally as well as spiritually,” said Carmelite friar Edward Leahy: “There are times when your inner self seems like a battlefield where a struggle is taking place.... The desert is not for the incurable romantic.”

Mary Earle agrees in her study of the Desert Mothers who populated the sands of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine along with the Desert Fathers in the first centuries of the Christian wisdom tradition: “The desert tradition is not for cowards or spiritual gadabouts. It is a tradition that cuts to the chase.... The desert will call us to be real... [In] a sparse landscape, it is hard to fool ourselves.”

The Inner Desert

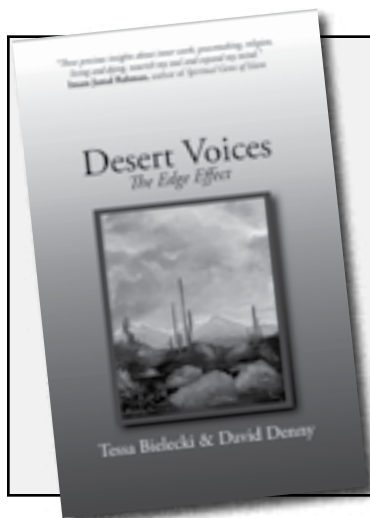
Many of these insights come from “desert rats,” people who love what the desert teaches because they’ve lived there. But not all of us are called to live in the physical desert. So, we need to focus more on the *inner desert* where each one of us will sooner or later venture, the desert as a *state of soul*, an empty space for solitude and “testing.” Not everyone can or should live like a hermit as I do. But no one can do without an *inner hermitage*, a “cave of the heart,” where we encounter Divine Presence.

The word “desert” fundamentally expresses the search for God in silence. Even the “secular” Edward Abbey calls the desert the *locus Dei*, “the place of God.” For most of us, the desert is not the wilderness of the Sahara, explains Benedictine monk Jean LeClerq, but “time to be alone with God. We all have the desert in our everyday lives.” This desert includes illness, loss, deprivation, mental anguish, addiction, abandonment, and loneliness. In this sense, *the desert can be anywhere*.

Desert Journey to the Promised Land

Whether our “desert places” are physical or more interior, we do not end up settling there, *we pass through*, driven by the Spirit towards the Promised Land like the ancient Hebrews crossing the Sinai Desert. But this new land is “only promised to those who are able to chew sand for forty years without doubting their invitation to the feast at the end,” laments Alessandro Pronzato, who was never the same after his own journey to the desert.

Whether you live in the Sahara or San Francisco, the Mojave or Madagascar, the Gobi or Galway Bay, the call of the desert is the same. You do not have to experience the geographical desert. Through the prophet Hosea, God calls to the intimate depths of every human heart: “I will lead you into the desert, and there I will speak to your heart.”



Desert Voices

The Edge Effect

Essays by Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

Desert Voices is a song from the edge. It celebrates loving encounters with an arid landscape of sand, sky, and giant cactus. It celebrates friendships between Abrahamic brothers and sisters who have spent too much time demonizing each other. It mourns the lives lost along the border of Israel and Palestine and honors non-violent sowers of hope. It sings from the death bed, from the poverty of the Cross, and the universal desert of impermanence that foreshadows eternal life.

Available from Amazon.com. All proceeds support the Desert Foundation.



Fire and Light

A Podcast with Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

We love sharing conversations with you about living joyfully and contemplatively in the midst of engaged lives in the world. We ponder 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 to *Fire and Light* at tessabielecki.com, subscribe to our [YouTube](#) channel, follow us at our new [Facebook](#) page, or wherever you get your podcasts!

“Fire and Light has all the right ingredients: sparkling dialogue, impressive content, upbeat music—and laughter!”

Donna Couch, Dana Point, CA

Join Us During Tessa's World Wisdom Residency in Boulder



A young Mother Tessa Bielecki dialogues with Eido Roshi at Naropa in 1984.

October 21-25, 2024: Tessa Bielecki will be on the Naropa campus, meeting with students and staff.

October 25, 2024: “Naropa’s Historic Buddhist-Christian Dialogues” with Tessa Bielecki and Dr. Judith Simmer-Brown, Naropa University, Nalanda Events Center

From 1981-1987, the former Naropa Institute hosted a series of historic Buddhist-Christian dialogues with some of the most celebrated names in Christianity and Buddhism. The youngest and only woman participant in the early dialogues was a young Carmelite Christian abbess, Tessa Bielecki. The organizer of the dialogues was a young professor at the institute, Judith Simmer-Brown. This evening, in the 50th anniversary year of Naropa, the two will talk about their experiences of the dialogues.

October 26-27, 2024: “Seasons of the Soul: Carmelite Christian Contemplative Teachings for Spiritual Renewal” with Tessa Bielecki, Naropa University, Nalanda Events Center

Now turning 80 and living as an “urban hermit” in Tucson, Arizona, Tessa Bielecki, former Carmelite Christian abbess, will draw on her experience of almost sixty years as a Christian monk and contemplative, offering the teachings she finds most relevant from the mystical streams she embodies: the counter-cultural witness of the desert, the earthy rhythms of the monastic tradition, and the intimacy and “holy ordinary” of Carmelite and Celtic spirituality.

Having co-founded contemplative centers in three countries, she will also explore the challenges of creating the “lively human atmosphere” conducive to contemplative experience and community, including “crisis contemplation.”