



C a r a v a n s

Winter 2024

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*You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something,
build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.*

—Buckminster Fuller —

Dear Friends,

This is a transition time in the United States as we prepare the way for a different presidency. It's also transition time for the Desert Foundation as we prepare for our 20th Anniversary in 2025. It's transition for us personally, too, as an exceptionally active year ends with the liturgical year. Now we enter the quieter season of Advent and prepare for the great feast of Christmas, celebrating new beginnings with the birth of Christ.

Moves and Memoirs

As we wrote you in our last *Caravans*, we began 2024 deeply committed to writing our memoirs. But this was interrupted in early summer when we learned unexpectedly that we could move into our “dream” apartments after waiting almost six years. We spent the next months packing and unpacking—and coping with a round of Covid we contracted at a Bielecki family wedding. (Ten of us got sick.)

We are still trying to find room in our two new neighboring apartments for our library of books on the desert, Christian mysticism, Islam, Judaism, interspiritual dialogue, our favorite literature, Palestinian human rights (see Dave's article on Gaza on page six), and the *convivencia* period in medieval Spain when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived and worked together in harmony. We are currently seeking homes for more of our books as we continue to downsize.

World Wisdom Teacher

We hadn't finished settling in when Tessa began preparing for her residency at Naropa University as “world wisdom teacher.” After five days of meetings with a class on Judaism, individual students and faculty, and



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.



Judith Simmer-Brown and Tessa reflect on Buddhist-Christian dialogue at Naropa University. Dave and Tessa harvest apples from our friend Dennis Brown's tree. Netanel Miles-Yépez (r) planned the Naropa event.

Masters of Divinity candidates preparing to serve as chaplains in hospitals, hospice, and the military, Tessa dialogued with Dr. Judith Simmer-Brown, whom she'd first met at the historic Buddhist-Christian Dialogues held at Naropa Institute during the 1980s.

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

Tessa was the youngest member of those dialogues and in the first years the only woman. Judith asked her about several of her presentations during those years, including contemplation as “a long loving look at the real,” Carmelite bridal or spousal mysticism, and the importance of passion in the contemplative life. Judith came to those dialogues at her teacher’s urging “kicking and screaming,” as Tessa did as well. And, like Tessa, over time Judith “began to see how important this was for [her] own spiritual development.” Dialogue was essential to keep her from becoming “a provincial Buddhist,” as it has kept Tessa from becoming a provincial Roman Catholic.

“Vulnerability to conversion” is the great lesson we have all learned over decades of interspiritual dialogue, inspired by pioneer Raimon Panikkar, son of a Roman Catholic Spanish mother and a Hindu Indian father. His teaching does not mean that we convert to Buddhism after dialogue with Buddhists. It means that we convert to a different kind of Christianity and become inclusive like Panikkar himself, discovering in ourselves “the terrain where the Hindu, Muslim, Jew and atheist may have a place in our hearts and our lives.” (This wisdom applies as well to Republican and Democrat, blue and red, conservative and liberal.)

Advent Joy and Laughter

Tessa shared the meditations on page three with her Naropa students as they struggle to navigate the challenges in their lives, so different from ours, growing up in the 1950s. These reflections on joy as resistance are not only appropriate “tidings” for Christmastime, but for any troubled time in our lives.

Sojourner Truth was an African American abolitionist and women’s rights activist who escaped from slavery and fought for civil rights in the nineteenth century. As she so aptly proclaimed, “Life is a hard battle anyway. If we laugh and sing a little as we fight the good fight of freedom, it makes it all go easier. I will not allow my life’s light to be determined by the darkness around me.” Nor will we.

May our lights shine brightly,

J. Simmer-Brown & Tessa

P.S. We’re troubled these days, however, by our financial situation, as you’ll read in the attached letter from our Board of Directors. We hope you’ll be especially generous this season. Thank you for your prayers and all your support over the past two decades.

★ JOY IS RESISTANCE.
—TOI DERRICOTTE ★

★ WE DON'T HAVE A
★ MOMENT TO WASTE
★ ON NON-JOY. ★

—ROSHI BERNIE GLASSMAN ★

★ CHILDREN CAN LAUGH UP TO 400
★ TIMES A DAY. FOR ADULTS THIS
★ DROPS TO BARELY 15 TIMES A DAY. ★

★ WHERE IS OUR LAUGHTER? ★

—DR. MADAN KARARIA ★

★ BE JOYFUL, THOUGH YOU
★ HAVE CONSIDERED ALL
★ THE FACTS. ★

—WENDELL BERRY ★

★ EVEN A WOUNDED WORLD IS FEEDING US.
★ EVEN A WOUNDED WORLD HOLDS US, GIVING
★ US MOMENTS OF WONDER AND JOY. I CHOOSE
★ JOY OVER DESPAIR. NOT BECAUSE I HAVE MY
★ HEAD IN THE SAND, BUT BEAUSE JOY IS WHAT
★ THE EARTH GIVES ME DAILY, AND I MUST
★ RETURN THE GIFT.

—ROBIN WALL KIMMERER ★

★ WE MUST RISK DELIGHT....
★ WE MUST HAVE THE
★ STUBBORNNESS TO ACCEPT OUR
★ GLADNESS IN THE RUTHLESS
★ FURNACE OF THE WORLD.

—JACK GILBERT

★ I BRING YOU TIDINGS OF GREAT
★ JOY, A JOY
★ TO BE SHARED BY THE WHOLE PEOPLE.
★ TODAY IN THE TOWN OF DAVID
★ A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU.

—GOSPEL OF LUKE 2:10-12

★ LAUGHTER IS CARBONATED HOLINESS! ★ —ANNIE LAMOTT ★

World Wisdom Residency

Tessa Bielecki

My eight days as “World Wisdom Teacher-in-Residence” at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado was the most rewarding “apostolic” work in over forty years “on the road.” I’ve seldom encountered such hunger for truth as in these students. The group was widely varied. Some were in their early twenties, others were older and had considerable life experience with their addictions, alcoholism, and homelessness. They were gay, straight, and trans, rape victims and mothers with young children. Several students were former Christians trying to come to terms with their early religious roots. I was especially moved by the veterans who want to be chaplains for firefighters or other vets struggling with PTSD and suicide.

Autumn and the Elements

I set the tone for the intense weekend by grounding us in the season with an altar of pumpkins, maple leaves, orange marigolds, and seed pods I’d gathered around the neighborhood where I stayed, and with autumn poetry: “Baptize me with leaves!... We are pleased to walk on radiance, amazed. O light come down to earth, be praised.” And by grounding us in place. Since Naropa sits on land within the territories of the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho peoples, I read a Ute benediction focusing on what the earth teaches us about stillness and suffering, humility and caring, limitation and regeneration. Then I did a ritual with the elements of earth, air, fire, and water and blessed each person in the room with holy water.

I wasn’t sure I could make it through the fifteen hours of “class” over the weekend which gave each student a full credit for attending, but their energy inspired and sustained me. They asked such provocative questions, not only about living more contemplatively but about solitude, the ravages of capitalism, Israel’s genocide in Gaza, celibacy and sexuality. I especially loved sharing what I’d learned from English philosopher E. I. Watkin (and my own experience): “Mysticism is not disguised sex, but sex is disguised mysticism.”

Christian Mysticism

Together we pondered insights from the Christian mystics on passion for life, loving service to the world, the vital need for a sense of humor, and the “bounce that counts.” We grappled with Thomas Merton’s opinion that the solitude of the Desert Fathers and Mothers was “swimming away from the shipwreck,” an act of resistance against the corruption of the Roman Empire and the church which colluded with it for economic and political advantage: the first “Christian nationalism.” We ended with reflections on five stages or rhythms of growth along the path of life: wonder, bravado, disillusionment, shattering, and glory, with examples from St. Teresa.

I loved each person I met. And they seemed to love me, too, partly because I presented the Christian wisdom tradition to them in a new and more positive light. As I’ve turned eighty this year, and my life is coming to an end, theirs is beginning, and the world is different now. So, I focused an entire session on “crisis contemplation” and “joy as resistance,” since “life is a song in one ear and a lament in the other,” as Irish playwright Sean O’Casey wrote.

How are these younger folks going to carry on in the face of what’s happening in our country and our world? I offered them the deep conviction I share with Richard Buckminster Fuller, who invented the geodesic dome. They knew neither the man nor the dome, so I really dated myself. But “Bucky’s” insights remain perennially valuable: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”



*“Rhythm Number One:
Wonder.”*



Christmas Joy and Gladness

The final episode in our *Fire and Light* podcast will arrive in time for your celebration of Christmas!

Drawing on the richness of our beloved Christmas anthology, *Season of Glad Songs*, we celebrate the joy of this season with you and offer our favorite Christmas poetry and prayers, recommend books and movies, and suggest simple rituals you can do in your own homes, alone or with your families.

Listen to Fire and Light at www.tessabielecki.com/listen, subscribe to our YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/@FireandLightPod>, follow us at our new Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/people/Fire-and-Light/6150040197981/>, or wherever you get your podcasts.

We have loved doing these podcasts with you over the past two years and now need to focus our energy on more writing, especially our memoirs. We conclude our series with the Christmas episode and fondly remember our favorite podcasts.

For Tessa, these include #1: Living a Natural Life, #7: A Taste of Place: Saguaro Harvest, and #15: Joy as Resistance. For Dave, these include #2: Candles and Good Trouble, #8: Before, After, and the Atomic Bomb, and #14: Return to the Wild.

As one listener wrote, “*Fire and Light* has all the right ingredients: sparkling dialogue, impressive content, upbeat music – and laughter.”

Thank you for listening!

A Gift for All Time

Donna Erickson Couch

Just when you think that quite enough has been written about Christmas, along comes *Season of Glad Songs: A Christmas Anthology*, a bedazzling book that invites readers into a deeper understanding of an all too familiar feast day. Far from the cultural trappings of seasonal consumerism, authors Tessa Bielecki and David Denny communicate the primordial sense of wonder that naturally erupts from the Incarnation. This unique collection of earthy wisdom, unusual poems, novel rituals, and just plain beautiful prose, floods our souls with new appreciation for the fullness this season offers.

“This anthology helps you celebrate a soulful season of glad songs, from the dark stillness of Advent and Winter Solstice through Christmas, the New Year and Epiphany, on to the welcome light of a candle on a cold February night,” write the authors in the introduction.

The book brings together a myriad of effervescent images and words that even the Scroogiest among us will find hard to resist. The readings address new viewpoints seldom found in other collections. From “The Unicorn Christ” and “Feasting around the Globe” to “Merriment in a Warring World,” our spirits shine brightly. Powerful rituals include “Blessing the Manger,” “Walking Through the Door” and “Following the Star,” inspiring readers to gather their friends and celebrate the 12 Days of Christmas with more ceremony.

Season of Glad Songs is aptly titled because, like music, these readings and the art uplift and transport us to both a transcendent and immanent place in the soul.

Savor it or give it away, this book is a gift for all time.

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



"No Such Thing"

David Denny

I've been thinking about *lex talionis*: the law of retaliation (Leviticus 24:22). We know it as "an eye for an eye." It was a humane step forward from some other forms of retaliation. It's much less punitive than, for example, "The Chicago Way" described by Sean Connery in *The Untouchables* film: "They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That's the Chicago way!"

But Jesus thought even Leviticus was too harsh. He had the mad idea that we need to move toward reconciliation. According to my calculation, our war on terror took three hundred eyes for each eye lost on 9/11. And in Gaza, about forty Palestinian eyes have been forever closed for each Israeli eye lost. I hesitate to write this because numbers have no place here. If a person is an image of God, then each of us is a *microtheos*, and to kill a person is a sacrilege. That's a scale of tragedy beyond numbers. Still, I grieve over these ratios.

Waves of Prayer

The horror unleashed October 7, 2023, followed by the continuing horror of genocidal violence in Israel/Palestine leaves many of us on the brink of despair. Sabeel, an ecumenical liberation theology center, posts a "Wave of Prayer" regularly on their web site, and the prayer for September 12, 2024 begins,

"Divine Protector, how much despair can our people take? As we lose our loved ones, our homes, and our livelihoods, we cry out before You. Grant us the strength to resist oppression with dignity and the hope to continue striving for peace."

Although the prayer grows out of Palestinians' ongoing experience in Gaza, recent violence in the West Bank inspired this specific supplication.

Ambassador

Soon, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee will be the United States' ambassador to Israel. When he was running for the Republican presidential nomination, writes journalist Sean Mathews for *Middle East Eye*, Huckabee claimed, "There's really no such thing as a Palestinian.... There is no such thing as a West Bank. It's Judea and Samaria. There's no such thing as a settlement. They're communities, they're neighborhoods, they're cities. There's no such thing as an occupation."

What Can We Do?

What can we do to end this calamity and move toward healing? We watch antisemitism and Islamophobia increase. Both are toxic. We witness three billion dollars of our taxes going annually to assist Israel's military while we give no aid to Palestinians, who are stateless. We mourn the deaths of twelve hundred Israelis and forty-three thousand Palestinians, sixteen thousand of whom were women and children. We mourn the 237 United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) colleagues who have been killed since October 2023.

The United States has cut off funds for UNRWA. "Without these funds," writes UNRWA's Lein Soltan, "millions of refugees from Gaza to Lebanon will lose life-saving assistance."

Education is one important action we can all take. Many of us elders grew up with the myth of Leon Uris's *Exodus*, believing it was an accurate history of Israel's birth in 1948. If you are in this group, I recommend reading *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* by Rashid Khalidi. It is not fiction. Or watch this enlightening interview with Khalidi (<https://youtu.be/zXvZ61MFFbg?feature=shared>).

If you believe Palestinians exist and that their land is occupied, you may wish to donate to the Friends of Sabeel (<https://www.fosna.org/donate>) or to UNRWA (https://donate.unrwa.org/-landing-page/en_EN).