



Caravans

Summer 2025

The Desert Foundation
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They who abide in friendship abide in God, and God in them.

—Aelred of Rievaulx—

Dear Friends,

As summer arrives, we brace ourselves for desert heat by exercising at dawn and hunkering down in our air-conditioned apartments to focus on writing. No one wants to visit when the temperature soars above 100! So we write. Tessa has made great progress on her memoir. Dave is focusing his writing energy on Gaza and our teetering democracy, in search of healing, just, and hopeful possibilities.

Our year began by celebrating companions. Winter and spring in Arizona are a time for friendship, as travelers relish the desert's mild climate.

In January, the new monastic Community of the Incarnation returned to the nearby Redemptorist Renewal Center for their annual Carmelite spirituality retreat. Instead of giving formal presentations, we engaged in lively conversations about living thoughtfully, prayerfully, and prophetically. As in previous years, the deepest teaching probably came through direct contact with the desert's prickly spaciousness and silent music. Our Incarnation Community friends spent two early mornings wandering through the desert from pre-dawn darkness through sunrise.

It has been a season of reunions. We joined Tessa's sister Connie and their brother Tom and his wife Karen in Chandler, Arizona, to celebrate Connie's 75th birthday. Then we drove to Prescott to see Terry Sullivan Prev y, who used to illustrate our *Desert Call*. Connie hadn't seen her in thirty years!

In April, including Holy Week, our Canadian friend Sharon Doyle escaped Nova Scotia's lingering winter to bask in the Renewal Center's dry desert haven. We hadn't seen each other for nine years. Our friend, neighbor, and Desert Foundation board member David Levin joined us as we laughed and wept and basked in each other's



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.



*David Levin joined us in celebrating Sharon Doyle's visit,
and we were delighted to meet Kelly Deutsch in Montana.*

presence. We spent our early adult years together in the Spiritual Life Institute, and after years of separation, it was a wondrous grace to celebrate together.

David made it possible for us to spend some solitary days at the nearby Sanctuary Cove Cottage during Holy Week. Our apartments are *adjacent to* the desert, but the Cove's cottage is *in* the desert. The difference is profound. Tessa writes beautifully about her time there at tessabielecki.com.

"Reunion season" ended with a visit from David's sister Liz and a visit to our friend Donna in California, where we enjoyed a production of *The Fantasticks*, a play Tessa has seen more times than she can count! She will write more about its affect on her in the memoir.

Easter week took us out of the desert and into the Rocky Mountains to meet new friends at a retreat near Bozeman, Montana. Kelly Deutsch, founder of *Spiritual Wanderlust*, encouraged us to join the Contemplative Community Creators Network. She has interviewed both of us, and we were delighted to meet at last in person. *Spiritual Wanderlust* is an online hub offering support and teachings for explorers on the spiritual path. Kelly and her podcast guests draw on gifts available from contemplative wisdom traditions and modern psychology.

The 3C Network supports and gathers a diverse group of contemplative community creators from across the United States, including Contemplate Lincoln, Closer than Breath, and The Integral Christian Network. We were heartened by their support for each other and their soulful dedication to bringing contemplative wisdom and friendship to communities hungry for spiritual growth.

We balanced formal meditation and sharing with hikes, convivial meals, and an outdoor liturgy during which wild turkeys strutted nearby and gobbled hearty responses to our voices. Tessa spoke about contemplative practices she has found fruitful over decades and Dave read and commented on select poems as spiritual reading. We both shared stories about our lives' turning points. We felt like elders imparting kernels of wisdom we gleaned through our decades of suffering and celebrating in Christ.

We returned home from Montana to learn of the death of our old friend Susan Ryan, who also spent years in the Spiritual Life Institute. Her beautiful drawings created our *Desert Call* magazine style for many years. Please pray for Suzie and her family.

An elder named Aelred in the twelfth century attracted young men to his monastery partly because of his belief that friendship is a sacrament. Tessa has more to say about this on page four. Spending time with kindred spirits is especially comforting in this perilous season of merciless destruction abroad and our unraveling democracy here in the United States. And the inspiration and courage in the young contemplatives with whom we spend time gives us great hope. So does our board of directors, so generous with their time.

The Easter season reminded us that joy rises in triumph, even now. It also reminds us that those first followers of Jesus, joyful "fools" vulnerable to an Empire's cruel might, endured long dark nights, armed with humble trust and compassion. And that world-conquering virtue: love.

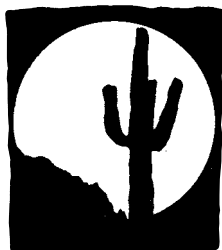
Fr. Dave & Tessa

The Desert Foundation is Twenty Years Old!

June 2005 – June 2025



Incorporation 2005



Study at Dar al-Islam

Fire and Light Podcast



Desert Spirituality "in the field"

Exploring the Desert



Fact-finding in Palestine



Abrahamic Dialogues



Snowmass Interspiritual Dialogues



Sandandsky.org



New Monastic Retreats



Thank you for twenty years of support!

Friendship

Tessa Bielecki

Aelred of Rievaulx is unique among the Christian mystics because he emphasizes human friendship. “Scarcely any happiness whatever can exist” without friendship, he wrote. A friend rejoices with us in our joys, weeps with us in our sorrows, feels what we experience, and shares our aspirations and inspirations.

Aelred was born into a noble family in 1110 and spent his youth in courtly circles where he was popular and successful because of his intelligence, charm, and literary gifts. But he grew disgusted with his superficial life and became a Cistercian monk during the Golden Age when more than five hundred monasteries sprang up in Europe in less than a century. When Aelred became abbot at Rievaulx, the monastery grew from three hundred to over six hundred.

Cicero’s De Amicitia

Aelred loved the essay on friendship written by Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero around 44 BCE, quotes liberally from it, and models his own writing on it, using the form of the Ciceronian dialogue. (This really delights me because I love Cicero’s *De amicitia*, too, and won a Latin medal in high school for translating it!) Cicero describes friendship as “mutual harmony in affairs human and divine coupled with benevolence and charity.” For him friendship is a social grace, while for Aelred it is a Christian virtue.

Aelred analyzes the nature of true friendship and distinguishes it from false friendships for “carnal pleasure” or material gain: “Worldly friendship, which is born of a desire for temporal advantage or possessions, is always full of deceit and intrigue... it ever changes with fortune and follows the purse.” Drawing on Sirach 22:25-27, he outlines five behaviors which break the bonds of friendship: insult, attack, arrogance, betrayal of secrets, and the stab in the back.

The Kiss of Friendship

I love his discussion of three kinds of kisses: corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual. The spiritual kiss, or the “kiss of friends,” is “not made by contact of the mouth but by the affection of the heart; not by a meeting of lips but by a mingling of spirits.” Aelred calls this “the kiss of Christ, yet [Christ] does not offer it from his own mouth, but from the mouth of another.” Aelred believes that human friendship leads to divine friendship.

But he was no dreamy romantic. Aelred knew we could be led astray under the guise of friendship and insisted that we test potential friends to avoid “vice” and disaster. And he admits we cannot find everyone “enjoyable.” There are some we must love “as an act of the will and intellect, without the consolation of being able to enjoy their company.”



We loved introducing the Community of the Incarnation to the Sonoran Desert, and Tessa enjoyed soulful encounters with Keith Kristich and Colleen Taylor in Montana.

St. Teresa and Intimate Sharing

While Aelred wrote more about human friendship and alluded to divine friendship, Teresa of Avila wrote more about divine friendship, and then *embodied* human friendship throughout her life. “Oh what a good friend You make, my Lord!” she prayed. “This compassionate Lord... desires our friendship,” she wrote: “I can speak with Him as with a friend, even though He is Lord.”

Her description of prayer sounds like Aelred’s description of his human relationships: “Prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends.” Later in her *Life* she says, “God and the soul understand each other... It’s like the experience of two persons here on earth who love each other deeply and understand each other well; even without signs, just by a glance, it seems, they understand each other.”

Teresa’s friendships were extensive: men and women, family and benefactors, confessors and advisers, nuns, laypeople and churchmen, nobles and people of little means, muleteers and saints. Her 450 extant letters were handwritten to over one hundred different recipients. But she mentions almost eight hundred more friends! What would she do today with social media?

“Since spiritual friendship is so extremely important, I don’t know how to urge it enough,” she wrote. “All must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear.” In his October 2020 encyclical, Pope Francis echoes Teresa by calling all of us to an inclusive “social friendship” that embraces everyone and leaves no one out.



Thank You for your helping hands!

Last fall our Desert Foundation board sent you an unprecedented letter asking for your financial help. You responded generously. **Thank you!** Although our writing and speaking outreach is relatively small, we hope its depth encourages and nourishes you. And because you are a relatively small “flock,” we look to you for financial support, rather than relying on wealthy patrons or grants.

With your help, we will pursue our writing and occasional teaching as long as we are able. Although we concluded our two-year “Fire and Light” podcast, we continue our regular “Desert Tracks” and “Seasons” newsletters, as well as posting on our websites at sandandsky.org and tessabielecki.com.

Thank you for helping us live as “urban hermits.” We dedicate ourselves to quiet, prayerful solitude and to sharing the fruits of our study and prayer with you.

We look forward to what lies ahead with our new Pope Leo XIV, who pledges “to build bridges with dialogue and encounter so we can all be one people always in peace.” The United States has many faces. Some express contempt for our neighbors or pride in raw power. But it heartens us to encounter a bridge-builder Pope with an American face who served the poor in Peru. He speaks five languages and immediately dedicated himself to “the disarming and humble” peace of Christ.

Please continue your support. We look forward to a new season of fostering contemplative life and interspiritual bridge-building. Strengthened by your support, may God’s grace guide our feet into the way of Christ’s disarming and humble peace.



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 <https://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/61560040197981/>, 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

"Go to where your suffering is aligned with your capacity to meet it. You don't have to go to death row or live in a monastery. You don't have to sit with the unsheltered if that's not your work. Go to where you can care safely and deeply and broaden that capacity over time."

— Roshi Joan Halifax —

Winner of a 2016 Silver Nautilus Award

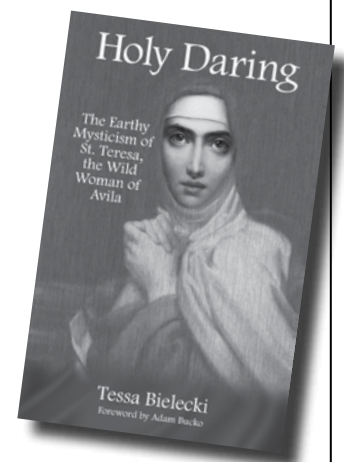


Holy Daring The Earthy Mysticism of St. Teresa, the Wild Woman of Avila

by Tessa Bielecki

This fresh, upbeat, and deftly profound book joyfully reconnects the fullness of our lives and the depth of our prayer. Much more than yet another book *about* a great saint who once *was*, it actually *rekindles* something of St. Teresa's outrageous spiritual impulse for contemporary readers, especially those who describe themselves as "spiritual, not religious." With a foreword by Adam Bucko, co-author of *Occupy Spirituality* and *The New Monasticism*, *Holy Daring* will be an abiding source of inspiration to all who want a fuller, deeper, meaningful, and balanced life.

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