



C a r a v a n s

Winter 2025

The Desert Foundation
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www.sandandsky.org
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*I bring you tidings of great joy, a joy
to be shared by the whole people.*

—Gospel of Luke 2:10—

Dear Friends,

As Advent begins, our hearts fill with gratitude for the blessings of the past year, for your friendship, your responses to our writings, and for your generous support. We are especially grateful for the blessings of the recent conference at Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation.

Bidding farewell to James Finley the last evening, Tessa told him, "Goodbye, Old Boy." In reply he said, "Goodbye, Old Girl." It was an affectionate moment for two old-timers who have spent their lives sharing the treasures of the Christian contemplative tradition with so many others. Jim, Tessa, and Richard are contemporaries, all three in the "autumn of life."

Fallen Leaves, New Growth

At the conference workshop led by Paul Swanson and Drew Jackson, we meditated on Drew's poem about a fallen leaf and "the door of the world." Our lives now feel as free and fruitful as that fallen leaf, which reminds us of this Christmas haiku by an anonymous author: *Soft sound, a leaf turns / Oh sudden joy! At midnight / Clear, a Child is born.* Old leaves fall from the trees and blow away, new leaves open and cover them with lush green growth. One era dies, a new one is born. A generation passes away, a new one rises to take its place.

A New Generation

The greatest blessing from the CAC conference was connecting with so many of the gifted younger generation carrying on the legacy of the Christian contemplative tradition in new and innovative ways. We are happy to serve as mentors and call this generation our friends. On pages four-five, we introduce you to some of these people and their work to enrich your own contemplative lives. We love including photos so you can meet them "face-to-face."



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.



At the campfire with John Glinsman, Amelia Ray Weesies, and Mike Petrow; a mushroom-shaped hoodoo in the Valley of Dreams; two old-timers share a fireside laugh.

Sometimes we think we haven't done enough to "move contemplation out of the monastery onto the roads of the world," as French philosopher Jacques Maritain urged decades ago. Then we remember these new leaders and rejoice in the passing of the torch. Jesus came to "set fire on the earth," as the Gospel tells us. This new generation helps keep the fire blazing.

Campfires and Starlight

Before the Albuquerque conference, we camped with Mike Petrow and friends in the high desert of New Mexico and hiked the Valley of Dreams in the Navajo Nation's *Ah-Shi-Sle-Pah* Wilderness. We built fires in the morning for warmth before breakfast and fires at night under the vast canopy of stars for story-telling and soul-sharing. This was perfect preparation for the workshop Mike and Tessa led at the conference where they asked, "What does the desert teach us about resistance in our culture of status, speed, and selfishness?" You'll find part of Tessa's presentation on page three.

Podcasts and Healing

This season we were also interviewed for a podcast called "Cosmic Consciousness" with Dr. Daniel Sage. Dan describes Tessa's interview as a "fascinating conversation" in which she recounts her "journey into monastic life, living contemplatively, founding monastic communities, writing books about St. Teresa of Avila, working through trying times, exploring desert wisdom, and living a fulfilling and rich spiritual life."

In his episode, Dave discusses his calling as a Carmelite monk and priest, his experience with inter-spiritual communities, and the importance of taking time to be silent and solitary, especially in nature, as a way to stay sane and serve in a world of chaos and "soul-dulling digital inundation."

You will find both these podcasts on tessabielecki.com and sandandsky.org. Tessa's interview for Mike Petrow's powerful series, "Healer with a Thousand Faces," will appear in January 2026.

The theme of the CAC conference was "What do we do with Christianity?" For us the answer is simple: *make it more contemplative*, the first "C" Tessa described in her workshop. As we learned from William McNamara decades ago, "The contemplative is not a special kind of person, but everyone is – or can become – a special kind of contemplative." This has always been our life's work and our joy. Thank you for supporting us.

With Christmas joy,

Fr. Dave & Tessa

The Desert as Resistance

Tessa Bielecki

In 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. Emperor Theodosius made it the official religion of the Empire in 380. This was the beginning of Christian Nominalism, when people became Christian in name only because it was politically expedient. It was also the beginning of Christian Nationalism, as the Church aligned itself with Empire.

Thousands of men and women resisted this corruption and moved out of the cities into the desert in protest, building a new model of society. We need this kind of movement again today. But we don't have to go out to the geographical desert. We can resist in our own homes and create alternative models of society by living the spirit of the desert with four "Cs" and six "Ss."

I first learned about the desert as resistance in the late 1960s when I read Thomas Merton's *Wisdom of the Desert*. In his provocative introduction, Merton urges us to become like the Desert Elders of the fourth century and "swim away from the shipwreck of society"—not as an act of selfishness but as an act of love. Once we get "a foothold on solid ground," he explains, we have "not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety" after us.

Merton's challenge continues to haunt me almost sixty years later as I've grown to understand desert resistance with *four "Cs"*. This resistance is *contemplative*, not consumerist, and *counter-cultural*, not conforming to or colluding with the dominant culture. It's *compassionate*, not competitive, and *cooperative*, *collaborative*, and *communal*, not capitalistic.

Solitude and Solidarity

How do we live out this desert witness? With a series of *six compelling "Ss."* The first is Merton's "swimming away from the shipwreck." How? By carving out some period of *solitude* every day. As the Desert Fathers taught, "Stay in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." In the seventeenth century, spiritual writer Blaise Pascal said, "All our troubles come because we do not sit alone in our rooms for some part of every day." Our third "S" is *solidarity*. When we are solitary, we mysteriously experience solidarity with the whole human family. "Alone" does not mean lonely but "all-one."

Slow Down and Be Joyful

To experience this, we need to *slow down*. Google Wilferd Peterson's poem-prayer "Slow me down, Lord" and learn the "art of taking minute vacations." Slow down even more dramatically one full day a week by honoring *Sabbath* in the genuine spirit of leisure: the "celebration of what's too good to be used." Celebrating Sabbath is a powerful counter-cultural stance against our utilitarian culture which claims only the useful is valuable – even our fellow human beings.

Lastly, a counter-cultural desert witness is *subversive*. Decades ago, theologian Rosemary Haughton coined the phrase "*creative subversion*." She reminds me of her contemporary, inventor Buckminster Fuller, who wisely insisted: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. [Instead,] build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." Or, as my own contemporary, Richard Rohr, puts it: "The best critique of the bad is the better."

Above all, we need to listen to farmer-poet Wendell Berry who reminds us to "be joyful, though [we] have considered all the facts." In an empire based on fear, *joy is the ultimate resistance*.



Mike Petrow and Tessa converse about desert spirituality at their workshop in Albuquerque.



With poet and public theologian Drew Jackson and CAC stalwart and Contemplify podcaster Paul Swanson; celebrating with Kelly Deutsch and Adam Bucko; a friendly visit with Guesnerth Josué Perea.

A New Generation of Contemplative Leaders

Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

In our “autumn” years, we find hope and inspiration in a new generation of contemplative leaders. Many of them use the language of “new monasticism.” Here’s how the Charis Foundation describes what they mean:

“‘Monastic’ traditionally symbolizes a complete commitment to a transformative spiritual journey. By ‘new monastic,’ we refer to the potential of living out this spiritual calling while ‘in the world,’ amongst intimate relationships, friendships, family, and daily hardships. As a ‘new monk,’ one passionately embraces social, political, and spiritual transformation, utilizing tools of traditional contemplative life, and allowing all of one’s life decisions to flow out of this commitment.”

We find the words “monastic” and “monk” misleading and prefer to speak of “new contemplatives” and contemplative life “in the world.” Let us introduce you to this younger generation, carrying on the legacy of the contemplative tradition in new and innovative ways.

Adam Bucko (correct Polish pronunciation is “*Butch-ko*”) is a co-founder of the Center for Spiritual Imagination (spiritualimagination.org) and the Community of the Incarnation, providing rigorous contemplative formation in Benedictine, Carmelite, and Franciscan spiritualities. He is author of *Let Your Heartbreak Be Your Guide: Lessons in Engaged Contemplation* and with **Dr. Rory McEntee** *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*.

Kris Vieira Coleman is a co-founder of the Center for Spiritual Imagination where she serves as Program Director (and designer) and a core member of the Community of the Incarnation. With an MFA in Dramaturgy and a “passion for connecting theory and practice,” she’s also an adult formation teacher in the Episcopal Church. Her reading recommendations have opened new worlds for us.

Kelly Deutsch created SpiritualWanderlust.org to provide “contemplative formation for the restless heart.” She gives us deep teachings in her podcasts and online “schools” of Women Mystics, Modern Mystics, Celtic Spirituality and more. Every year she also hosts a free online “Contemplative Summit” with over forty teachers.

Kaira Jewel Lingo (kairajewel.com) is a mindfulness meditation and Buddhist teacher in the Plum Village tradition. She is co-author of *Healing Our Way Home: Black Buddhist Teachings on Ancestors, Joy, and Liberation*. She’s also married to Adam Bucko, and together they are transforming a monastery in upstate New York into a contemplative sanctuary for healing and spiritual growth.

Mark Longhurst is an ordained minister, Publications Manager for the Center for Action and Contemplation, and an original member of the Community of the Incarnation. He is the author of *The Holy Ordinary*, which he wrote while navigating “the beautiful and dense thickets of ministry, marriage, and parenting” to explore the sacred dimensions of everyday life.

Netanel Miles-Yépez wears many hats. He is Chair of Religious Studies and Wisdom Traditions at Naropa

University, leader of the Inayati-Maimuni Sufi-Hasidic Order he co-founded with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in 2004, and co-director with **Rory McEntee** of the Charis Foundation for New Monasticism and InterSpirituality (charisinterspirituality.org) with its Keating-Schachter Center. He is also a generous and creative member of the board of directors of our own Desert Foundation.

Christine Valters Paintner is online abbess of Abbey of the Arts (abbeyofthearts.com), a global online monastery dedicated to the integration of contemplative practice and creative expression. She covers a vast array of topics such as Celtic and desert spirituality, the elements, *lectio divina* and monastic wisdom. Her descriptions of what it means to be a monk in the world inspire us, especially her “Monk Manifesto.”

Guesnerth Josué Perea is executive producer of the documentary, “Faith in Blackness,” a member of the Community of the Incarnation and Director of Black Lives and Contemplation, offering an invaluable perspective on *AfroLatinidad* and spirituality, with workshops both online and in person.

Mike Petrow has served in several capacities at the Center for Action and Contemplation, most notably as Director of Content for its many online and in-person events. With degrees in religious studies, mythology, and psychology, Dr. Petrow is also a spiritual director and grief and trauma counselor. He recently began his own podcast, “Healer with a Thousand Faces” which he describes as “conversations with friends and teachers about how our wounds lead us to our wandering, our weird, our wisdom, and our work in the world.”

Paul Swanson is a member of the Community of the Incarnation and wears many hats at CAC. In his “spare time,” he has created the vibrant *Contemplify.com* with a variety of offerings: podcasts, a monthly “NonRequired Reading List,” and weekly “LoFi and Hushed Contemplative Practice Sessions.” Humbly describing himself as a “contemplative shoveler,” Paul is a husband, father, and good friend.

*The online version of this article at tessabielecki.com provides links to all the cited websites.
You can also find most of these creative people at Substack.com.*



Advent–Christmas in the Desert

Tessa’s article on “Christmas in the Desert” appears in the November-December issue of *Living City*, the magazine of the Focolare Movement in North America. An online version appears at focolaremedia.com. Tessa describes our quiet and radically Marian Advent, “waiting for the baby to be born,” even “hiding” images of the infant Jesus until Christmas Eve. Since our “crazy commercialized culture” is parted out by December 26, she then describes our counter-cultural celebration of the *full 12 Days of Christmas*, the unsentimental connection between the cradle and the cross, and Frank Horne’s World War II poem on the Magi, sobering for us in 2025: “... as the bombs crash all over the world today, the real wise guys know that we’ve all got to go chasing stars again... [hoping to] get back some of that Kid Stuff born two thousand years ago.”

Pros and Cons of Gratitude and Generativity

Grateful people tend to live longer. We’re so grateful for you and your generous support, especially after last year’s unprecedented plea from our Board of Directors, we face the challenges of longevity. That means (here comes the con) **we still need your support!**

We have another “problem.” According to a recent study published in *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, “Older adults who exhibit concern for guiding and contributing to future generations, a quality known as generativity, are more likely to enjoy psychological well-being and lead fulfilling lives.” As you see from our encounters with younger people devoted to contemplative living, we are doomed to generativity, which will also lead to longer lives.

Thank you for empowering us to thrive through the Desert Foundation’s 20th anniversary year. Please help us continue our trek into the next decade as our country faces the false religion of supremacy and violence. With your assistance, we offer a humbler, liberating embrace of the whole human family guided by divine mercy.

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.



Conversations with Daniel Sage

This season we were interviewed for a podcast called “Cosmic Consciousness” with Dr. Daniel Sage. Dan describes Tessa’s interview as a “fascinating conversation” in which she recounts her “journey into monastic life, living contemplatively, founding monastic communities, writing books about St. Teresa of Avila, working through trying times, exploring desert wisdom, and living a fulfilling and rich spiritual life.”

Dave discusses his calling as a Carmelite monk and priest, his experience with inter-spiritual communities, and the importance of taking time to be silent and solitary, especially in nature, as a way to stay sane and serve in a world of chaos and “soul-dulling digital inundation.” As a bonus, he shares one of his poems, “Weird Stuff I Love.”



You will find both these podcasts on tessabielecki.com and sandandsky.org.



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