



C a r a v a n s

Summer 2026

The Desert Foundation
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*Look back only for as long as you must,
Then go forward into the history you will make.*

—Alberto Ríos—

Dear Friends,

Tessa began the year by letting you know she is putting all her writing energy into her memoir. She's doing it and has developed what Fr. Dave calls "aerobic archiving and memoir writing." She moves through three rooms, a desk in each room, organizing archives, taking notes, deciding which files to send to the Norlin Library archives at the University of Colorado in Boulder, which to keep for reference, and which to throw away. To encourage stretching, she also uses the floor to sort papers. And yes, she writes, edits, and rewrites, too. By the end of the day, she racks up a few thousand steps inside her apartment. And quite a few paragraphs.

Visiting Season

People love to visit Arizona in late winter and spring. This year's prize for visitors-from-farthest-away goes to Dutch journalist Alex Burghoorn, who joined us in February. In 1990 Tessa spoke about Christian contemplative wisdom at a conference in Amsterdam called "Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy." Alex recently wrote about that "legendary" conference in his Dutch newspaper, and interviewed Tessa for the article. So why not visit Arizona? A few weeks later, we accompanied him to Saguaro National Park. It was a joy to meet him and know that one of Tessa's early excursions on the "speaking circuit" is still making an impact.

We loved spending a February weekend with the Community of the Incarnation during their annual Carmelite spirituality retreat at the nearby Redemptorist Renewal Center. These thoughtful contemplatives gave Tessa great encouragement for her memoir. While the form of the Spiritual Life Institute died, we carry its spirit and vision. We are deeply grateful that these young pioneers find value in what we have learned and lived. We pass



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.



Left: Gary Nabhan and Laurie Monti enjoyed a New Year walk with us among the saguaros.

Right: Dave and Tessa surrounded by Incarnation Community founders Michael Sniffen, left, Kris Vieira-Coleman, Adam Bucko and Morgan Mercer Ladd.

them a scarred-but-useful baton and they run with it, employing tools for avoiding or mending flaws that caused those scars.

Our dear friend Sharon Doyle visited at the end of Lent and the three of us spent the last days of Holy Week at Santa Rita Abbey, a community of Cistercian nuns living near Sonoita, Arizona. We had the small retreat house to ourselves and loved the deep silence of this holy place and its moonlit nights.

A Time to Grieve

Our friend Paul Baynham died on March 21 and we suffered the grief of Good Friday in a special way this year as we prepared for his memorial service. In April Fr. Dave spoke at Paul's graveside in Evergreen, Colorado and at the memorial service the next day. It was bittersweet to spend time with Paul's extended family and close friends. Paul was an invaluable member of our Desert Foundation Board of Directors. Fr. Dave celebrates his friendship with him on page three.

We moved from the sorrow of Paul's memorial to the joy of visiting Desert Foundation board members Dennis Brown in Denver and Netanel Miles-Yépez in Boulder, where we saw Tessa's archives for the first time at Norlin Library at the University of Colorado. Some of the materials are accessible at <https://archives.colorado.edu/repositories/2/resources/1900>. We are deeply grateful to Netanel, who made this archive possible.

Tessa's Podcast Conversations

Tessa recorded four interviews this season, two easily available. She speaks about surviving betrayal with Mike Petrow on his *Healer with a Thousand Faces* podcast. Listen to Season Four of the *Everything Belongs* podcast if you want to learn about the Enneagram, "a compassionate lens for understanding your work to do in the world," according to the Center for Action and Contemplation. In episode three, "Architects of the Ideal," Tessa discusses the light and shadow sides of her own personality, a type she shares with Fr. Richard Rohr. Find out more on page four.

Here Comes the Heat

Fr. Dave spent more time at home this season as he underwent new child protection training in the Tucson diocese. This will permit him to continue his ministry with Cross Catholic Outreach this summer. He should receive permission any day now, and—who knows?—if you live west of the Mississippi, he may visit a parish near you! Or have your pastor contact Cross Catholic Outreach to invite him.

Summer is quiet in Tucson: the heat keeps us indoors and repels visitors. We miss the long, cool nights of winter, but we look forward to concentrated creative work: harvesting past writings and producing new written expressions of the vision that brings us joy. We couldn't do it without you and your generosity.

Gratefully,

Fr. Dave & Tessa

Paul Baynham

Contemplative, Healer, and Friend

David Denny

Paul Baynham died on March 21, diagnosed with a glioblastoma tumor last November. He was a rare presence in my life: he had visited and loved Afghanistan long before it suffered decades of bloodshed that stretch from the Soviet invasion and the mujahideen resistance to the rise of the Taliban. In the late 1960s and early 70s, Afghanistan was relatively stable. Paul and his wife Kirsten had traveled there. So had I.

Buddhism: Thailand and Colorado

He and Kirsten had also spent a significant stretch of their early adulthood in Buddhist monasteries in Thailand. They had been living in Laos when the Vietnam War spilled into their neighborhood. They could have fled, but their local friends could not. Rather than heading home, they headed into separate monasteries under the guidance of Ajahn Chah, intending to become peace in a war-torn world. They thought they'd try it for a month. That became five years!

My exposure to Buddhism as an undergraduate at Prescott College in Arizona was less dramatic. I spent a month in a Denver meditation center in 1973, three years after my summer exchange student experience in Afghanistan. But this rigorous practice developed by Burmese teacher Mahasi Sayadaw—eighteen hours of meditation per day—changed me forever.

Paul was one of the few people with whom I shared these soulful experiences. And the final bond: our rediscovery of Christ after immersion in the non-theistic wisdom of the Theravada school of Buddhism.

Friend through Thick and Thin

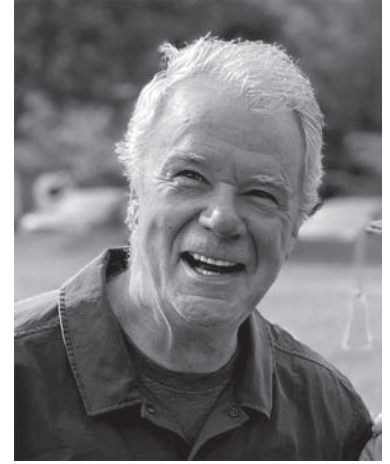
What a blessing when Paul arrived at our monastery for a retreat in 1992. I had been living in the Spiritual Life Institute monastic community for seventeen years. After graduating from the University of Arizona, I thought I'd try monastic life for a few months. It lasted thirty years! Paul visited our Nada Hermitage in Crestone, Colorado on the Feast of the Epiphany. He loved our exuberant celebration, including a feast of Persian and Arab cuisines. It was healing for him to encounter Catholics who were open-minded and lighthearted, so different from the abusive monks who taught in his childhood English boarding school. After Tessa and I left the monastery and struck out on our own to found the Desert Foundation, Paul generously agreed to join our board and help shepherd us into a new beginning.

Final Words

Paul and I spoke by phone before he died, and he expressed wonder at the joy he was experiencing. He awakened one night after receiving the news of his tumor and felt a Holy Presence surrounding him. He felt like he was waking up to a new life.

He was surprised at some of his neighbors' responses to his illness. Some, who did not know him well, wept at the news. For those of us who knew him, this is no surprise. He exuded peace, whether you knew him well or not. He was peace. And is peace now, more than ever. Contagious peace. And I'm sure that peace was a healing power in the people whom he served as a nurse—here in the United States, and in Laos, where he trained nurses who venture into rural areas lacking health care.

In our conversation, he expressed tremendous gratitude to Kirsten, as *she* nursed *him*. He said he was losing a sense of time and listening deeply. St. Paul said faith comes from hearing, and Paul Baynham was hearing Good News as he was letting go. He wanted us to know the joy he was experiencing.



Father and Fisherman

A busy work life notwithstanding, Paul still found time to quiz his children on world capitals, serve them macaroni and cheese with ketchup, and read them books at bedtime — “The Chronicles of Narnia,” “Watership Down,” “The Hobbit” and “Lord of the Rings” were among his favorites, and his Gollum voice gave them shivers. In the summer, he camped with his family, always near trout water. He taught Hannah and Jacob to cast dry flies on meadow streams.... Paul is survived by innumerable trout who are frankly glad to see the back of him.

—from the obituary by Paul's son Jacob

I wonder if Paul now experiences the fullness of an encounter and hears the music that Spanish Carmelite St. John of the Cross described in his *Spiritual Canticle*. The poem’s narrator encounters her bride, Christ, in the darkness of night:

*The hushed night, / The stir of dawn above, / Silent music, / Singing solitude,
A feast that revives, / that tastes like love.*

As for us? When death visits, we remember a beautiful, fierce, innocent young man hung on a cross and we weep. We grieve when friends cross the dark threshold into Sister Death’s domain.

And we remember that young man Jesus appearing three long days after his death, consoling his friends, breathing peace and courage, cooking fish, and promising Life with him: all of us in Love.

Laughing with Paul was one of the great joys of my life. I look forward to glorious gales of laughter with him and our divine Friend in eternity.

Healing Beyond Betrayal

Joining Mike Petrow’s *The Healer with a Thousand Faces*, Tessa shares insights about the mystical path, and how she survived being let down by a spiritual leader’s sexual scandals. If you’ve been hurt by a pastor, priest, politician, person in power, a parent, or a partner, this episode has some medicine for you. Visit YouTube and search for *The Healer with a Thousand Faces*.



Exploring the Enneagram

Tessa’s episode of *Everything Belongs* explores the Enneagram Type One. She describes how trauma and betrayal shattered her need to fix everything, the 1’s ability to make order out of chaos, and how saguaros became teachers — all opening her up to a more compassionate way of living.

Richard Rohr and Tessa shed light on the struggle with perfectionism and self-judgment, eventually finding healing through embracing imperfection, forgiveness, and presence. Find this rich exchange at www.cac.org/podcasts, where you’ll find a link to *Everything Belongs*.



What I Learned from a Cactus

Michael Sniffen

I have just returned from a retreat in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. A place where the land does not rush to explain itself. A place where silence has texture. A place where life survives not through excess, but through wisdom learned over centuries.

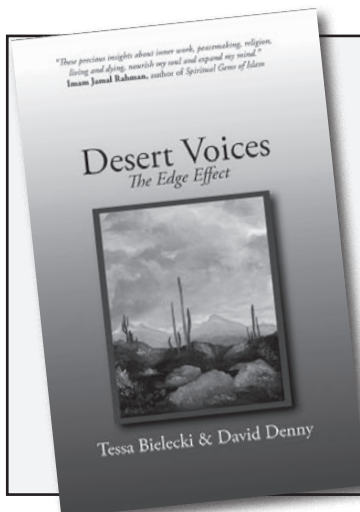
There stand the saguaros, the quintessential giant cactus, with tall, branched arms we may know best from old western movies. If you do not know their story, you might imagine them as solitary monuments, self-sufficient, unmoved by time. But the truth is far more tender. Saguaros are among the slowest growing beings in the desert. In their first ten years of life, they grow only a few inches, so small they are almost impossible to find.

They survive those early years not by independence, but by relationship. Young saguaros grow beneath nurse trees (palo verde, ironwood, mesquite) whose shade protects them from the fierce summer sun and winter frost. Without that shelter, they would not live. And often, as the saguaro grows strong, the nurse tree that once protected it dies and fades away. What fosters our life on earth does not always remain, but it is never wasted.

Around thirty-five years old, a saguaro begins to flower. Quietly. Faithfully. And once it begins, it blooms again and again throughout its long life and produces fruit that feeds a community of creatures, including people. The arms we associate with maturity do not appear until sixty, seventy, sometimes even a hundred years have passed. Long after our culture expects adult productivity from humans, the saguaro is still becoming.

Saguaros may live a hundred and fifty years or more. Some live beyond two centuries. They can grow fifty feet tall, weigh over ten tons, and hold enough water from a single rain to survive months of drought. What looks barren is a disciplined life lived fully. What appears empty is deeply prepared for the dry seasons of life.

This is what I learned from a cactus this year. The wilderness is a place of formation. It is where life learns how to endure *and* how to bloom. This is surely why Jesus goes there.



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.



Preserving the Archives

Tessa continues to organize photos and written material for the Norlin Library in Boulder. Thanks to Desert Foundation board member Netanel Miles-Yépez, we are hiring one of his students to scan these archives this summer so that anyone interested in Tessa's life and work and the history of the Spiritual Life Institute and the Desert Foundation may access the archive online.

Can you help us fund this important work? We believe it is not only an interesting history of spirituality at the turn of the millennium in the United States, but it also contains insights and wisdom that may help inspire future generations of New Monastics, students, scholars, or seekers looking to past examples of contemplative life to inform fresh expressions for a new millennium.

To digitize a written page costs five dollars. It costs ten dollars to create an archival photograph scan. Tessa is working hard to minimize the cost and quantity of materials while making sure nothing truly valuable is omitted. It isn't easy! But she's the woman for the job.

A few decades ago, philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre wrote that we need a "new Benedict" who can provide a healing response to today's broken world. We do not believe that the future will depend on a single "Benedict" or a few individual "Benedicts," but on a compassionate network of Beloved Communities, rooted in ancient contemplative wisdom, cross-pollinating each other. We hope that our own experience of Christian contemplative life, combining tradition and innovation, may contribute to the emergence of this new communion of friends deepening and bridging their traditions.

That's why we're putting so much energy into the archives. **We hope you will help.**

And **thank you** for your support over the decades. We may be aging, but thanks to you, we're thriving.



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