

C a r a v a n s

Summer 2011

The Desert Foundation
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*The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. (Isaiah 35:1)*

Dear Friends,

Every summer here in Colorado's San Luis Valley, the hermit thrush sings each day into being, and June brings high water to our San Isabel Creek. Nights in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains grow shorter and warmer, and remaining high-altitude winter snows melt, tumbling down the creek bed between aspens, piñons and cottonwoods to water pastures and make the desert bloom.

This spring brings other new growth to the Desert Foundation: Tessa's new hermitage is well underway, thanks to a generous benefactor. Last fall contractor Denny Ertle buried water lines and a septic tank. Now he has framed the walls and roof and installed windows, preparing the way for plumbers and electricians. After eight years without plumbing or electricity, Tessa will have a home in which to grow old. It will also serve as an office and adjunct library. (Fr. Dave's *al-Hadiyah* Hermitage bookshelves are overflowing, even though we have been unable to buy books for over a year.) We're calling the new structure "La Casa Nueva" or simply "the bunkhouse." It will also serve as a guesthouse, in case you wish to visit sometime.

Another sign of growth is Tessa's new column, "Desert Voices," in which she reflects on desert land and peoples. (Fr. Dave will continue to focus on relations between the Abrahamic traditions.) This is our final print edition of the summer *Caravans*. In order to save paper and reduce printing and postage expenses, summer *Caravans* will appear exclusively on our web site. (We will continue to print and "snail mail" winter *Caravans*.) If you wish to see *Caravans* online, please visit our web site and sign up for "Desert Tracks" newsletter so we can let you know when we post *Caravans*. We are eager to put more energy into the web site.

You may notice that this issue has more words than usual. In addition to launching Tessa's "Desert Voices," we were eager to include Jo L'Abbate's reflections on her time at Deir Mar Musa, a monastery and retreat center in Syria. Jo studied the Arabic language, lived in the Christian quarter of the old city of Damascus and visited seven of the twenty-two rites of the Catholic Church during the summer of 2005, thanks to a Fellowship from the Fund for Teachers. She continues to participate in Christian-Muslim dialogue.



The Desert Foundation is an informal circle of friends exploring the wisdom of the world's deserts with a special focus on peace and reconciliation between the three Abrahamic traditions that grow out of the desert: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We are a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization founded in June 2005 by Tessa Bielecki and Fr. David Denny. Contributions are tax-deductible.



Tessa, Fr. Dave, and contractor Denny Ertle enjoy the early stages of building Tessa's new hermitage.

Please pray for the Deir Mar Musa community, which ministers to Christians and Muslims undergoing a stressful transition as the Syrian government reacts to grass-roots unrest. You can learn more about this promising center at www.deirmarmusa.org. In their Easter reflection, the members of the community affirm their commitment to non-violence and trust that Syria can “gradually build a democratic and pluralistic society able to also guarantee the rights of religious and ethnic minorities with dignity for all.”

We are delighted to include Jo's reflections here and hope to include contributions from more of you in future *Caravans*. If you wish to share your experience of desert land and peoples or of deepened understanding and reconciliation between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, please send them our way.

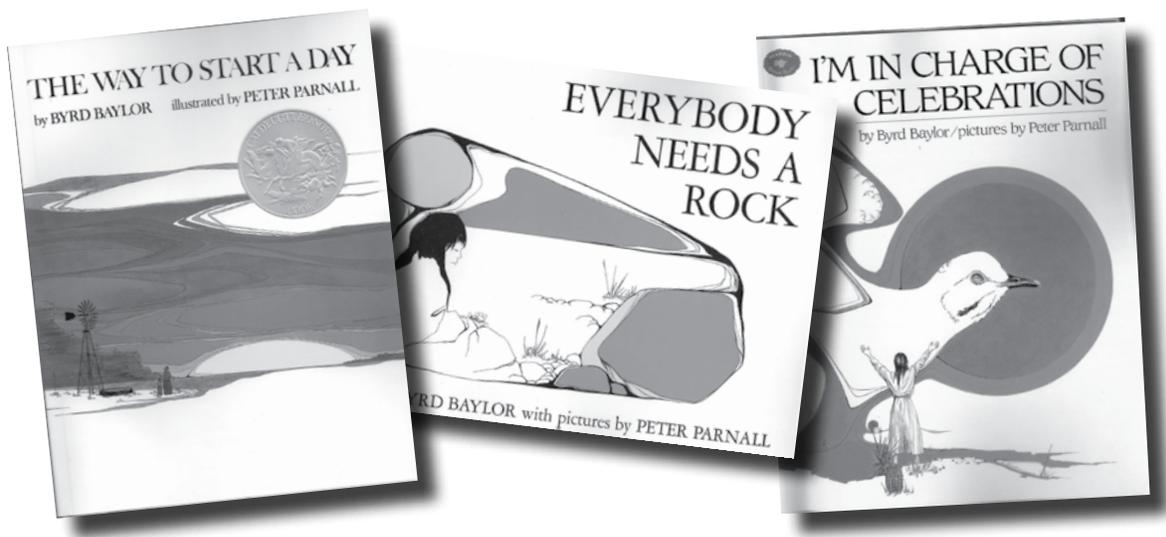
Looking ahead to our winter *Caravans*, we are eager to describe the fruits of a recent workshop we attended, “Your Call to be Peacemaker and Social Healer,” led by James O’Dea here in Crestone. James’s peacemaking includes his role as former Director of Amnesty International in Washington, DC. We will also report on the launching of *Steward of the West*, a biography of our dear deceased friend Ned Danson, former Director of the Museum of Northern Arizona and passionate lover of the American Southwest, its history and cultures.

A Special Plea

We need your help to finish and furnish the “bunkhouse.” The sooner we do this, we will be able to contribute more regularly to our web site and other writing projects. The new house will also allow us to offer hospitality to occasional guests.

We have a final, urgent request. Since the 2008 recession, donations have dropped significantly. Both of us receive less income from the Desert Foundation and volunteer more of our time. We look elsewhere for personal income and are grateful for meaningful work that fulfills our individual vocations, but our concentration on survival deflects energy from the Desert Foundation. Thanks to all of you who came to our aid in 2009 when we were in a similar predicament. We hope you can help again now. Unless our circumstances change, as of July 1 the Desert Foundation bank account will be empty once more. Please consider a special gift so that we can continue and, we hope, increase our vital work: celebrating the meaning of the desert and exploring the deep spirituality of reconciliation and cross-fertilization between the children of Abraham. Our calling is especially significant in this volatile, hopeful, yet precarious season following the “Arab Spring.”

*Gratefully,
Fr. Dave & Tessa*



Desert Voices

Tessa Bielecki

“I can’t help laughing,” says the girl when they ask her, “Aren’t you lonely out there with just desert around you?” She then sings rhapsodically about her desert companions: hawks, lizards and coyotes, hot sand, rocky trails, deep canyons, and birds nesting in the cactus who “sing out over a thousand thorns because they’re where they want to be.”

She’s where she wants to be, too, with her “strong brown people” who “have to see mountains and have to see deserts every day... or they don’t feel right.” (I don’t feel right either.) Where else would Desert People want to be? Their land is “no place for anyone who wants soft hills and meadows and everything green, green, green...”

If you’re a desert person like I am, you’ll love the lyrical prose-poems of Byrd Baylor who has teamed for decades with illustrator Peter Parnall to create an evocative series of children’s books I often use for meditation. For Baylor, the spirit, not material things, is necessary for personal development. “Once you make that decision,” she wrote from her home in Arivaca, Arizona, “Your whole life opens up and you begin to know what matters and what doesn’t.”

Parnall lives on a farm in verdant Maine yet has an exquisite feel for the arid desert. His illustrations are simple line drawings, usually with big vibrant splashes of gold, yellow, and red which mirror the light of the desert. Only occasionally does he use green and blue and purple.

In *The Desert Is Theirs*, Baylor describes how desert people learn to be patient because “the desert has its own kind of time (that doesn’t need clocks).” “Rain is a blessing counted drop by drop.” Desert plants don’t have to waste moisture on “floppy green leaves.” Some can wait three years to bloom. The saguaro cactus can last a whole year after one summer storm. “Squash tastes best if you’ve sung it slow songs while it’s growing.” Most importantly, as this volume concludes, “every desert thing knows when the time comes to celebrate.”

“What’s worth a celebration?” asks the girl who voices Baylor’s desert values. She answers for us all: something worth remembering the rest of our lives, that makes us feel like we’re standing on top of a mountain, makes our hearts pound, and our breath catch like we’re breathing some new kind of air.

If we’re sensitive enough to the sacred all around us, the number of our celebrations multiplies. One year the little girl gave herself 108 celebrations! – “besides the ones that they close school for.” These included the days she saw a triple rainbow, seven dust devils “dancing in time to their own windy music,” and stars falling from the night sky when she felt her own heart shoot out of her. She celebrated the days when the clouds appeared a rare green and she looked into the eyes of a coyote and knew “I never will feel quite the same again.”

She reminds us that some of the best celebrations are “sudden surprises,” so we need to pay attention and

spend more time outside, “looking around.” “What if I’d been in the house? Or what if I hadn’t looked up when I did? What if I’d missed it?” What a tragedy!

The girl has the true contemplative spirit natural to a child and essential for every adult: “Unless you become like little children...” (Matthew 18:3). She does not arbitrarily celebrate New Year’s on January 1 but in the spring when her favorite cactus blooms because “it always makes me think I ought to bloom myself.” On that day she visits all the places she likes to “check how everything is doing.” And like our Creator on the Seventh Day, she spends this new day “admiring things.”

She pays special attention to rocks, because “everybody needs a rock”—as a friend. She sagely gives us rules for finding such a rock-friend. We must look it right in the eye. It must not be too big or too small, but the perfect size to fit in one hand or a pocket. It must also be the perfect color and “look good by itself in the bathtub.” Above all, we must choose the rock when everything is quiet, and we must choose it alone. As a lifetime collector of rocks, this child has taught me the best way to find them.

In *The Way to Start a Day*, Baylor enriches her usual southwestern focus by showing how people all over the world celebrate the sunrise. They “go outside and face the east and greet the sun with some kind of blessing or chant or song that you make yourself and keep for early morning.” Peruvians with chants and Aztecs with flutes, Congolese with drums and Chinese with bells, East Indians bathing in the Ganges with marigolds—peoples everywhere and throughout history understand: “A morning needs to be sung to. A new day needs to be honored.” These people know they need to make offerings – gold or flowers, fire, feathers, sacred smoke blown to the four directions, or simple good thoughts.

When the sun rises, “all the power of life is in the sky.” So we need to welcome the sun, “make it happy,” “make a good day for it” and “a good world for it to live in.” If the sky turns a color sky never was before, we must simply watch it. “That’s part of the magic. That’s the way to start a day.”

And that’s the way to live our lives—in stillness and contemplation, deeply grateful, aware of the sacredness of all things and our kinship with all life.

Deserts East and West

Jo L'Abbate



Above: The winding path to Deir Mar Musa. Right: Jo L'Abbate stands beneath the cliff-hanging monastery.



Low doorways encourage a spirit of humility upon entering.

“Are you sure you want us to leave you here by yourself?” The desert sun was setting fast, and our guide looked from where we stood up to the monastery. The guidebooks warned against attempting the mile-long scabble up the mountain after dark, and he knew I was already weary. I was part of a

special summer program in Arabic at Damascus University in Syria. The director had carefully chosen an expert guide for our excursion to the Crusader castles. We had left the university at 5 in the morning and climbed through medieval castles all day. The guide's reputation and honor was at stake, not to mention future business with the university, if anything happened to me and he wasn't there to help. Arab peoples take hospitality seriously. I was unsure myself, but having come this far to visit this remarkable place, I couldn't turn back now. I decided the "worst-case scenario" was a chilly night on the path if I couldn't make it all the way, so acting more confident than I felt, I reassured him and headed up the path.



The desert surrounding Deir Mar Musa.

I was fortunate. Syrian guidebooks are usually several years out-of-date, and the monks had completed a mile-long stairway from the "welcome station," a picnic area with water, tables, shade and restrooms, to Deir Mar Musa, the 6th-century monastery where a young monastic community is restoring the ancient treasures of the building and the tradition of Christian hospitality.

Approaching the end of the stairs, I heard bells calling for evening prayer. I hurried to the top and saw a tiny door, perhaps three feet tall. Older homes in Syria were built with these doors, usually in the middle of a larger one, and a gracious guest would choose the smaller door, bending low to enter the host's home as a sign of humility and respect. I removed my backpack, tossed it through the door and entered the enclosure of Deir Mar Musa. Seeing a stack of shoes outside a door, I removed my own and quietly slipped into the chapel to find television cameras and a hundred Italian college students! Italian television was filming a documentary on the monastery and its founder.

During a retreat in his formation as a young Jesuit, Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio saw the ruins of the ancient monastery of Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi (St. Moses the Abyssinian) in the Syrian desert outside the city of Nebek and began to conceive re-founding a community there. As he discerned the inspiration and purpose of the community, three tenets emerged: first, the rediscovery of spiritual life through prayer, silence and contemplation; second, evangelical simplicity, living in harmony with and full responsibility for, creation and society; and third, a mission to serve as "Christian leaven in an Islamic dough," emphasizing the ancient monastic tradition of hospitality.

Fr. Paolo coordinated the efforts of the local Church, the Syrian government and a group of Arab and European volunteers, and the restoration work began in 1984. A new monastic community of men and women from different Churches of the East and West and dependent upon the local Syrian Catholic tradition was founded in 1991. Restoration of the main monastery building was completed in 1994, thanks to continued cooperation between the governments of Italy and Syria. This cooperation continued in 2002-2003 with European help, jointly supporting the establishment of a school to restore Deir Mar Musa's frescoes.

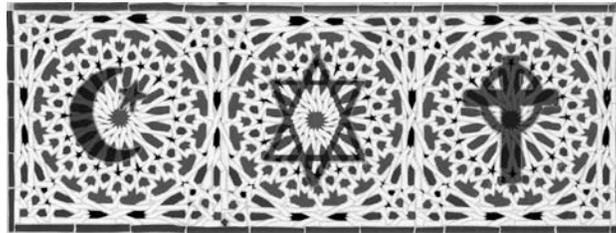
In spite of the distracting television crew, evening prayer seemed to proceed normally. Everyone sat on the floor, covered in carpets, or on low benches around the edges of the room. All prayer was in Arabic, the monastery's "official" language, the liturgical language of most of the Oriental Churches, and the universal religious language of the Islamic Community. We knelt and put our foreheads to the ground while chanting the Triasigon beloved in the Syriac Churches, "Praise to you Holy God! Praise to you All-Powerful God! Praise to you Immortal God! Have mercy on us." We closed with the Our Father, and the large crowd drifted into the courtyard, hungry for dinner. Stools and chairs were

brought up and large trays were set on other stools to serve as tables.

The monks have one radio phone line which is always busy with the internet, but no reservations or communications are needed for individuals. People simply show up, stay for as long as they like, then leave. The vast majority of visitors are Muslims from the surrounding villages who make a day or evening holiday with their families. This call to “radical hospitality” is an essential component of the community’s mission. While the community maintains an ancient Christian presence in the region and assists local Christian communities, they also work closely with the Syrian antiquities authorities and the national museum to preserve the cultural treasures of the ancient sites; and with the agricultural ministry on sustainable agriculture and preservation of the fragile desert ecosystems.

The monks, long-term retreatants, and friends brought out simple but plentiful food from the tiny kitchen. Arabic bread, lebna (thickened yogurt), olives, home-made cheese from the monastery goats, olive oil and zatar (a blend of thyme, sesame seeds, and other herbs) were the staples of every meal. A cooked vegetable dish of squash, beans, and tomatoes rounded out lunch and dinner. Scrambled eggs and the fabulous homemade apricot preserves found throughout Syria were Sunday’s special treats. Folks walked through the crowded courtyard pouring tea and water. With the exception of a Fulbright scholar who was an old friend of the community, I was the only American and shared stories with the Italians, Syrians, Germans and Australians at my table. After dinner the tables were put away, the film crew and many people left, but there were still about 50 people to spend the night. I found Sr. Huda, one of the first members of the community and the only woman at that time, and asked if I could stay the night. She asked if I would share a bed. I agreed, and she showed me to a lovely small room at the top of the stairs over the courtyard, which I believe was a “perk” for my age, since twelve of the female college students were in a large adjoining room in bunks, and most of the men rolled out sleeping bags for a night under the Bedouin tent on the second deck over the courtyard. The bell rang for Grand Silence, and I considered the day.

The Christian presence in Syria is palpable. In Damascus, I lived just off the “street called Straight” and two blocks from the house where Ananias cured St. Paul of his blindness (see Acts of the Apostles 9:10-19). And now I was standing in a millennia-old monastery, looking out at the desert in union with our Christian forebears, with another desert center dedicated to silent, contemplative presence half a world away in Crestone, Colorado. The politicians and media want us to believe we are headed for a “clash of civilizations” between the Christian west and the Muslim east. In the midst of this deception, God has established two centers, one at each of the “poles” of the debate, at almost the same time, with many of the same interests and very similar spirits. There is hope for our future together, hope that flourishes and flows into our world through Deir Mar Musa and the Desert Foundation.



Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio discerned the purpose of the community: first, the rediscovery of spiritual life through silence and contemplation; second, evangelical simplicity, living in harmony with and full responsibility for, creation and society; and third, a mission to serve as Christian leaven in an “Islamic dough,” emphasizing the ancient monastic tradition of hospitality.