

C a r a v a n s

Winter-Spring 2006

The Desert Foundation
PO Box 1000
Crestone, CO 81131
www.desertfound.org



Dear Friends,

Whether you live in the Sahara or San Francisco, the Mojave or Moscow, the Gobi or Galway Bay, the call of the desert is the same. You do not have to experience the geographical desert. Through the prophet Hosea, we hear God's call to the intimate depths of every human heart: "I will lead you into the desert, and there I will speak to your heart" (Hosea 2:14). The purpose of our new Desert Foundation is to create an informal circle of friends who explore the wisdom of the desert. We are especially interested in fostering peace, understanding, and mutual respect between the Abrahamic traditions: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. At this troubled time in history, when the children of Abraham are shedding each other's blood around the globe, we hope to sponsor an annual conversation between these people who began in the desert.

We incorporated as a nonprofit in the State of Colorado last June. In July we applied to the IRS for tax exempt status and in August began setting up a small library of desert spirituality. In September we initiated our free website (www.desertfound.org) for your ongoing reflection. We had our first Board of Directors meeting in late November. Now we bring you the first edition of *Caravans*, our semi-annual newsletter.

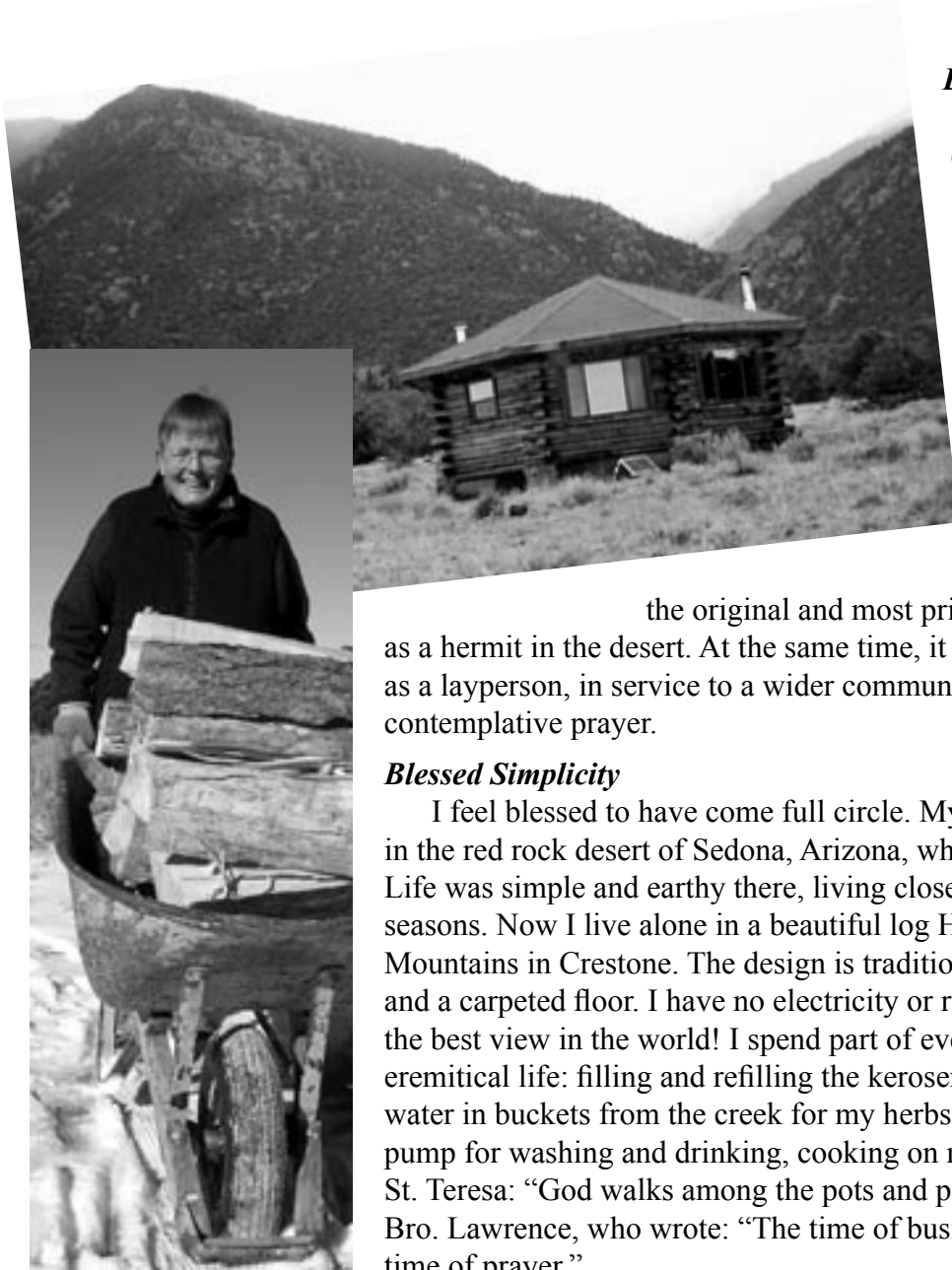
Why the Desert Foundation?

The desert has traditionally fostered a spirit of hospitality, respect, and dialogue with the stranger. This may take different forms: a freely chosen dedication to humility, interfaith dialogue, and simple sustainable living. Or we may suffer the *inner* desert that arises primarily from the universal human experience of grief: the desert of unchosen loss, of death, of exposure to pain that grinds the soul to dust and bears within it the threat of despair as well as the hope of transformation, compassion, justice and mercy. Abraham, Jesus, Muhammad, and countless saints from each of the Abrahamic traditions discovered the desert as a harsh school of human and moral maturation.

Caravans

The word "caravan" comes from the Italian *caravana*, from the Persian *karwaan*: a company of travelers on a journey through desert regions. So *Caravans* unites a diverse company of travelers as we venture through desert landscapes. We want to share what we are learning about the desert experience, and we want to hear from you. Please send us your "letters from the desert," the literal desert, the inner desert of grief, or your attempt to live a simpler "desert" existence in the midst of affluence and consumerism. One human instinct is to flee the desert. But the Arabic word *ashara* means to *enter the desert deliberately*. There, according to *The Sacred Desert*, "if one knows where to look, are springs and wells of water and places of life." That's why we've chosen this biblical passage to describe the heart of the Desert Foundation:

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



Dear Friends,

The three kings and their caravan of camels wend their way home through the desert after finding the Christ-child in Bethlehem. Like them, I, too, am coming “home” after an arduous desert journey. As many of you know, I spent almost forty years as a monk in the Spiritual Life Institute, most of those serving as Mother Abbess of the community. Now, at age 61, I have discerned a new gift from God, a “vocation within a vocation.” This calls me to

the original and most primitive form of monasticism: living as a hermit in the desert. At the same time, it is a call to move out into the world as a layperson, in service to a wider community, as the overflow and fruit of my contemplative prayer.

Blessed Simplicity

I feel blessed to have come full circle. My richest years were the early ones in the red rock desert of Sedona, Arizona, where I helped found Nada Hermitage. Life was simple and earthy there, living close to the land and the rhythm of the seasons. Now I live alone in a beautiful log Hogan, close to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in Crestone. The design is traditional Navajo Indian, with more windows and a carpeted floor. I have no electricity or running water, but an outhouse with the best view in the world! I spend part of every day in the natural rhythms of rural eremitical life: filling and refilling the kerosene lamps, stacking firewood, hauling water in buckets from the creek for my herbs and flower pots, or from a neighbor’s pump for washing and drinking, cooking on my little propane burner. I agree with St. Teresa: “God walks among the pots and pans!” And with her Carmelite confrère Bro. Lawrence, who wrote: “The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer.”

Apostolic Outreach

Part of my time is also spent writing, teaching, giving workshops and retreats. Last March Naropa University invited me to participate again in their Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Kathy McCarthy invited me to Russia in July where we met with post-Soviet Orthodox Christians, open-minded and hungry for contact with Western Roman Catholics. Shambhala’s New Seeds Books asked me to write a foreword for their new edition of Brother Lawrence’s *Practice of the Presence of God*, published in September. Now I am working on the foreword to Mirabai Starr’s superb new translation of St. Teresa’s *Life*, to be published by Shambhala in 2007. And I’ve accepted an invitation from Sounds True to record a new learning series in early spring. This will give me the chance to share my passion for Christ and the contemplative life with a wider community.

Growth and Gratitude

The sign outside the local Baptist church reads: “Change is inevitable; growth is optional.” I hope I’m growing as well as changing, enlarging my heart and my capacity for compassion, for giving, and forgiving. The sense of continuity in my life is strong: Christ and the Church, Carmelite prayer and Christian mysticism, desert spirituality, soul-searching and soul-friending. I’m grateful to God, and to all of you, our friends old and new, for the many blessings in my life, including the gift of pain in this transition. Generous friends have provided the Hogan. The surrounding wilderness allows me to live in silence, solitude, and intercessory prayer with the rugged manual labor I’ve always loved, as I unite my life as a desert hermit to those who live alone everywhere.

My outreach is challenging and creative, especially working with young people. As some of our Fire and Light students wrote in November: "I've never had a class open my eyes as much as this one did. ... This course opened my heart to the contemplative side of Christ. ... As I read the mystics, I began to see a new side of the Christian journey and realize that there is no formula. ... My work now is to approach life as an adventure." So is mine!

Can You Help?

The work we do covers modest living expenses, but we have no social security and no health insurance. And our fledgling Desert Foundation needs help to get started: desks, file cabinets, and computer equipment to set up the office, books and bookcases for our research library, a cart to haul firewood (the wheelbarrow gets pretty heavy!). Since our hermitages are small, we need a storage shed for tools. We need help to organize an annual gathering to foster respect and understanding between Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and to build our widening "circle of friends." All your donations are tax-deductible.

The Desert Foundation is generating keen interest, especially through our free website, as you can see from our readers' responses. Do you agree that the wisdom of the desert is "profoundly needed in our time"? If so, please consider sending a little "manna" into our desert.

Gratefully,

Tessa Bielecki

Tessa Bielecki

P.S. We are grateful for whatever you can send, especially your love, prayers, & friendships. You can count on mine! -T-



Dear Friends,

The past two years have given me opportunity to explore the deep passions in my heart's underground. I needed to deepen my eremitical vocation while at the same time reaching out through teaching and writing. A year later, these subterranean longings led me to another passion: the desert. As I drove through the forest of saguaros between Phoenix and Flagstaff, Arizona, I realized that I had not adequately explored my love for the land I first experienced in 1969, when my family moved to Arizona from Indiana. In the summer of 1970, while an exchange student in Afghanistan, I discovered the harsh, threatening beauty of Afghanistan's western desert and high arid lands, as well as the lavish hospitality of a Muslim household.

Loose Threads

I felt a bone-deep need to pick up threads that I had left loose thirty years ago, and weave them into the fabric of a new life that was both confirming me in my Carmelite, eremitical, priestly vocation, yet beckoning me into new conversations revolving around the desert experience, the American Southwest, and the Abrahamic desert traditions. I am researching articles on war and on Coptic Christians in Egypt and their relationship to Muslims. But I also need to make poems, a craft that, until now, has been a rare, sporadic luxury or a way of survival in time of pain. I need to make a sacred space in my life for this love affair with words, which is also my love affair with the Word. It's my way of "preaching," and woe to me if I bury this coin.

Open Doors

Seeking to build on the foundation laid in my thirty years in the Spiritual Life Institute, I knocked on doors that led me outside the community into more solitude, teaching, writing, and desert experience. I taught The Spiritual Quest in Literature at Colorado College last spring. Students, some with little background in

religion, explore the spiritual dimension in poetry and prose, sacred and secular, and the proposition that life is essentially a spiritual adventure. I will teach the class again with Professor Dan Tynan in spring 2007. After serving as chaplain of *Image* Journal's annual Glen Workshop in Santa Fe for the past three years, writing and teaching converged when Greg Wolfe invited me to help teach a course in Art and Faith for the students in *Image*'s new MFA program conducted through Seattle Pacific University. I eagerly anticipate joining them again for their spring residency on Whidbey Island in March: time with talented students and generous teachers who are also skilled writers. Tessa and I returned to Colorado College in November 2005 to teach *Fire and Light*, a history of Christian mysticism. This course continues to attract a full class annually. We are developing a new class for the Center for Southwest Studies at Colorado College to study the human and natural spiritualities and ecologies of the desert.

My Desert Life

I also hope to offer retreats or workshops on desert spirituality and poetry and prayer. But these brief ventures—about three months each year—will not pay all the bills! Nor are they the heart of the Desert Foundation. The desert is the heart: a simple hermit life dedicated to prayer, study, manual labor, writing, and sharing our thoughts and those of friends through our website. I believe that what I have to give depends upon the mysterious, often solitary life to which Christ calls me. Some folks study the desert and its peoples as a science. Some religious consider the desert a metaphor. But for me it is a tangible place as well as the metaphorical birthplace of wisdom to be shared. It is where I live, physically and metaphysically.

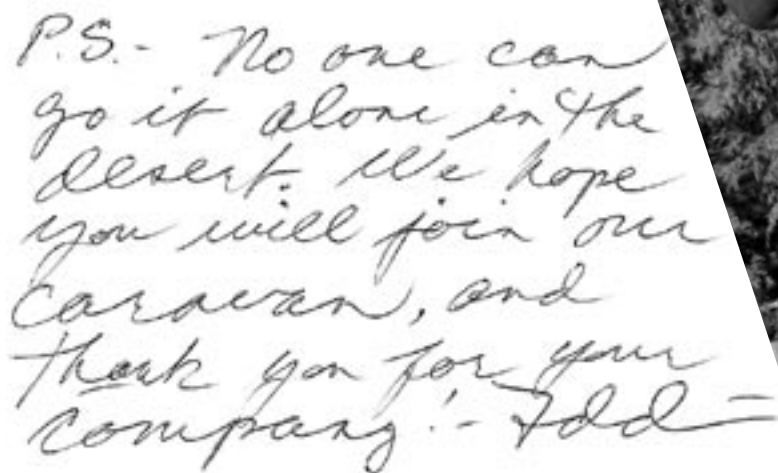
I try to live here simply. In August I moved into my hermitage on San Isabel Creek. Generous friends astounded me by building it for the Desert Foundation. I named it *al-Hadiyah*, Arabic for "the Gift." I have two solar panels and two batteries, which give just enough electricity for a day's work at the computer. In winter, I don't have enough electricity for lights, so I use kerosene. Eventually, I hope to generate more electricity in order to run a larger computer monitor for the website, operate a washing machine, store electricity for a cloudy day, and use the crock pot my mother gave me! Can you help? I keep heating costs low by chain sawing the deadwood around our hermitages to burn in our wood stoves. As for water, friends made it possible to drill a deep well. This means I need either more electricity or a larger generator to run a pump strong enough to lift the water over one hundred feet.

I hope that some of my enthusiasm for this new desert sojourn will rub off on you, and you will help us carve out a simple life that will bear fruit in visible writing and poetry, education and peacemaking, as well as in the invisible ways of Grace.

Gratefully,



Fr. Dave Denny



Grief, Belief, Rage and Surrender

A Seminar at the Glen Workshop

August 2006

Santa Fe, New Mexico

Led by Fr. Dave Denny

<http://www.imagejournal.org/glen/>

Through poetry and art as spiritual reading, we will explore a spirituality of grief and a wide range of responses to loss. Although English has only one word for death, St. Francis embraced this mysterious partner as a sister while Dylan Thomas impugned “her” as an outrage, an enemy. We will examine John Henry Cardinal Newman’s *Dream of Gerontius* and explore the Crucifixion and the Mother of Sorrows as portrayed by New Mexican *santeros* in their traditional wood carvings. We will also view the various faces of “living death”: the loss of friendship and home. We will wrestle with death’s stinging dominion while searching out intimations of hope, as in the soul’s purgatorial song in *Gerontius*:

*TAKE me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be,
And there in hope the lone night-watches keep,
Told out for me.
There, motionless and happy in my pain,
Lone, not forlorn,—
There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,
Until the morn.*



Readers' Responses

The Desert Foundation—great name you have chosen!
G.C., Crestone, Colorado

It takes strength and trust to make such a bold move.
C.C., Crestone, Colorado

The website is beautiful and reflects your wise and loving hearts.
J. H., Santa Fe, New Mexico

I love the contrast of the Sand Dunes and the bounty of the farmer’s market—just like life. Judy Maselli’s piece felt like home! Congratulations on all the great progress—moving in, putting down roots, reaching out – thriving like the cedars growing out of rocks in Sedona or those sand dune sunflowers. God blesses us all.
L.M., Santa Fe, New Mexico

I think your website is captivating. The colors and quotes are spare without being arid. The photos, especially of your [Fire and Light] students, have depth and vivacity. I liked the evocations of Thomas Merton, whose *Wisdom of the Desert* I read many years ago, when being a college president was too much with me, and patristic solitudes, with great distances in time, seemed purifying and comforting.
T.F., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I’ve been reading the Desert Foundation website, and I LOVE it! It’s well organized, timely, and contains many useful readings and photos. Thanks so much for the Wisdom of the Desert page. The excerpts from Merton’s work are a courageous statement in these times of conformity and rising fundamentalism on so many fronts. One thing that my time in the desert has taught is that God cannot be contained in something so frail as human expectations. Merton’s message needs to be shouted to any and all that will hear! I’m looking forward to exploring the website on many occasions. Thanks you for putting together something that is so profoundly needed in our time.

S. R., Wynantskill, NY



The Desert Foundation Website



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If you haven't explored our website, here is a guide to the regular features you will find there:

- **Circle of Friends:** Land, People, and Spirit always includes an introduction to someone fascinated by the desert and a sampling of his or her work: graphic art, poetry, prose, or photography.
- **Desert Prayer:** We often have no words of our own for prayer, but the Spirit aids us (Romans 8:26), sometimes through the words of others who have suffered and celebrated life in the physical or spiritual desert.
- **Fire and Light** is the name of a course on Christian mysticism taught at Colorado College by Tessa Bielecki and Fr. David Denny. Visit these pages to view the syllabus and photos of students.
- **Responses** provides a place for readers to respond to what they see on our site. We hope you will contribute!
- Visit **Seasons** to celebrate the natural and liturgical rhythms of life in the desert: day and night, planting and harvesting, fasting and feasting.
- **Wisdom of the Desert** provides a place for spiritual reading and reflection rooted in the spirit of the Christian Desert Fathers and Mothers and other contemporary seekers who have been transformed by the desert experience.
- Consult **What's New** whenever you return to find out about our most recent updates.