

C a r a v a n s

Winter 2012

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,

Your response to the summer *Caravans* was the most engaged ever and really delighted us. This winter issue focuses on your responses, hoping to evoke even more from you.

Regina Sara Ryan, along with several others, loved Tessa's review of Byrd Baylor's books and described how she now uses them "with joyous results" for her class of five-six-year olds. "We spent a long afternoon finding our special rock," she wrote, "and they especially liked the part about smelling the rock. I was moved to tears by the old woman who heard a cactus flower burst into bloom. I've bought several copies of the books and am sharing them with young and old."

Dr. Theodore Friend of Villanova, Pennsylvania, who just celebrated his 80th birthday, sent an essay entitled "The Arab Uprisings of 2011: Ibn Khaldun Encounters Civil Society," which appears as the epilogue in his latest book, *Woman, Man, and God in Modern Islam*. (We use excerpts from Ibn Khaldun, the 15th century North African traveler, scholar, diplomat and judge, for our own Colorado College class on Desert Spirituality.)

Shawn McQuate, also from the Philadelphia area, sent a thoughtful email with suggestions for how we can improve the Desert Foundation web site. Do any more of you have further suggestions? What more would you like to see on the site? How often do you visit?

The Abraham Path

Kathryn Devereaux emailed us about what she called "the best idea on the planet for this generation," The Abraham Path Initiative. "The development of this gem of opportunity for intrafaith dialogue is now well underway," she wrote, "with portions of the Path open in all the countries along Abraham's route from southern Turkey to the Levant. Perhaps you could lead groups down the Path, and meet the artists and saints



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.



Fr. Dave and Tessa with peacemaker James O'Dea.

providing hospitality to strangers (the travelers) along the Path, who might then contribute to your web site as part of the continuing conversation the Path inspires.”

A surveyor friend from Boulder, Colorado sent an article entitled “Not What, but Where is *Qibla*?” about the challenge of surveying the location of the *Qibla*, or direction which Muslims face as they pray.

Seeking Peace and Understanding

Our Taos, New Mexico friend, Mirabai Starr, sent excerpts from her new book, *God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, which will be published in April and also reviewed on our web site. Mirabai describes this work as a “passionate, lyrical, very personal exploration of the unifying wisdom at the core of the Abrahamic faiths.”

A new supporter from Chico, California, asked to be put on our mailing list because she is “impressed by [our] positive and prayerful attention to the Israeli-Palestinian problem.” Naomi Shihab Nye, the American-Palestinian poet we met in Sedona, Arizona when she was only sixteen, sent us her Palestinian father’s memoir, *Does the Land Remember Me?*

If you would like to make the same pilgrimage we did, “Seeking Understanding in Israel/Palestine,” the sixth Friends of Sabeel fact-finding trip is June 2-16, 2012. For further information contact Joy Lapp at 319-219-9171 (lappj@earthlink.net) or Arnie Voigt at 303-798-7887 (arnievoigt@msn.com). We highly recommend this trip. To read the accounts of our own journey in 2007, go to http://www.desertfound.org/wallsbridges/wallsbridges_intro.html.

Fields of Peace

Naomi introduced us to her friend Charles Busch, who founded Fields of Peace with his wife Cathey. In turn we must introduce you to their Communities of Faith Teaching Peace and Nonviolence so that you can receive their inspiring “Field Notes.” Along with Field Notes 9, they recently sent us a button which reads “Honorary Muslim.” Why? “I wear it,” Charles wrote, “because years ago a Jewish friend asked me, a Christian, ‘If you had lived in Germany in the 30’s, and they put a yellow star on me, would you have been willing to wear one, too?’ ... I wear it because what happened in Germany in the 30’s and to Japanese Americans in the 40’s can happen again.... I wear it because each of us is part of an interconnected whole, and to injure another is to injure ourselves.”

Our “Job” as Peacemakers

In May we attended James O’Dea’s workshop on *Your Call to be Peacemaker and Social Healer*. The highlight for us was writing our “job descriptions” as peacemakers. Fr. Dave’s is included here on page six. You may also find this exercise fruitful on the cusp of the new year. The simple formula is: “In a time of... I have been called to... And so my REAL work is...” As part of his “real work,” Fr. Dave focused this year on revitalizing our Colorado College course *Sand and Sky: Desert Spirituality from the Middle East to the American Southwest*. We had a larger number of Jewish students this year who really appreciated the contribution of our friend and colleague, Netanel Miles-Yepes, who described his experience as a Crypto-Jew and provided a helpful reading list on Jewish spiritual practice.

Artists and Uzbekistan

Tessa gave her workshop on *Inner Stillness: the Wisdom of the Desert* at Shambhala Mountain Center and participated in an inter-spiritual panel for the Taos screening of the new film *Globalized Soul*. Expanding her

horizons, she helped jury an art show called *Inner Vision: Messages from inside the Evolving Human Spirit*. You can view the artists' work at <http://www.voiceofthesilentmoment.net/InnerVision/>. Tessa introduced the exhibits in both Alamosa, CO and Denver with a talk entitled "Reweaving Meaning in an Unraveling World." In July she met Shamshod Hakimov, an artist from Uzbekistan, whose family has used coffee and tea for five generations to paint camels and caravans coming out of the desert. You may access her new podcast with Tami Simon at Sounds True: <http://www.soundstrue.com/podcast/tessa-bielecki-vitality-courage-daring/>.

Web Site 2012

We made two trips to Arizona this year to honor our old friend, Ned Danson (1916-2000) and help raise funds for the Chair of Anthropology in his name at the Museum of Northern Arizona. Tessa will soon review *Edward Bridge Danson: Steward of the West* on our web site.

As promised, we are committed to more regular updates on the Desert Foundation site. In the coming year you'll see Fr. Dave's article on a lecture by Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, details on the Abraham Path, Fields of Peace, Ibn Khaldun, Aziz Shihab, Mirabai Starr, Netanel Miles-Yepes, reflections from our Colorado College students and readers of *Caravans*, and much more.

Whichever Abrahamic feasts you celebrate throughout the year – Hanukkah, Christmas, or Eid – may you and your families and friends be richly blessed in 2012.

Gratefully,
Fr. Dave & Tessa

"Plea" and Thank You

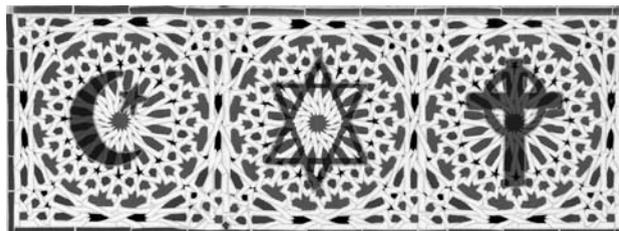
Our heartfelt thanks to all of you who responded to our "special plea" last summer. You came to the rescue, and we are deeply grateful. Thanks especially for your donations to help Tessa move into her new hermitage. She loves having water and electricity! Our needs are relatively simple. Here are a typical year's major costs:

Two issues of <i>Caravans</i> :	\$1,600
Communications (cell phones, internet access):	2,500
Computers and equipment:	1,000
Maintenance and repairs:	1,000
Office supplies:	500
Postage:	1,000
Stipends for Executive Co-Directors:	12,000
Travel:	500
Utilities	
Propane (for our refrigerators, water heaters and stoves); firewood (to supplement what we cut):	1,500
Web development:	700
TOTAL:	\$22,300

We have eight hundred of you on our mailing list. If each of you gives only \$28.00, we will cover the above expenses. We would then be able to send *Caravans* twice a year. (Some of you have requested this.) In 2011 you gave \$12,148. We worked for some of the rest, and drew on now-depleted savings. Our job descriptions as executive directors include writing for our web site, *Caravans*, and other publications, personal correspondence with you, bookkeeping, accountability to our board of directors and the IRS as a non-profit, networking with other Abrahamic communities, workshops, retreats, and teaching. But come 2012 we will be low on funds again and need your help. The Desert Foundation has no endowment or investments from which to draw. We rely on you to help us with operating expenses. As you see, the stipends we receive are not enough for us to survive, so we find work elsewhere. The more you support us, the more time we can devote to our *desert* calling: prayer, writing, study, caring for our land, and expanding our circle of friends. And the more we have to share with you. We hope this sounds like a good deal for all of us! **Thank you for your steadfast support.**

Circle of Friends

Responses from Our Readers



I love your website, the mission and vision, and I have recommended it to some Muslim friends. We have a large Muslim population in Philadelphia, but I don't know if there is any more understanding and mutual respect here between Muslims and Christians than anywhere else, unfortunately. Maybe there is a bit more, however, because this is the only city where I've become good friends with Muslims and talked with a couple of them on an honest level about their experiences of being Muslim and Black and mine of being Christian and White and the stereotypes, prejudices, and misunderstandings.
S.M., Philadelphia, PA

Summer 2011 issue of *Caravans* – OUTSTANDING!!! *G.E., Wilmington, NC*

Jo L'Abbate's article about Deir Mar Musa is uplifting. *T.F., Villanova, PA*

I enjoyed Tessa's spirit shining through the Summer *Caravans* and Dave's phrase "copious amounts of silence and solitude." *P.S., Crestone, CO*

I hope your web site will include more book reviews. You have a knack for un-earthing desert writings and inspiration. *M.D., Mimbres, NM*

Blessings to your and Tessa's endeavours, from which we all benefit!! Even if a big ocean lies in between our geographies, we are truly connected in the heart. *F.B., Salamanca, Spain*

The smallness and simplicity of Tessa's little house is so in keeping with your desert lifestyle.
S.F., Longmont, CO

I admire your desire and ability to live a quiet life. I am suspended between being very active with too many things and very quietly meditating. I often wonder why I live. It is not to accumulate things. Is it to help others? Is it to help myself? My family? Is it to stay busy? Is it to love? Right now it is to make a contribution to you. *J.L., Denver, CO*

The little "Casa Nueva" is fabulous! I hope to be a visitor in that guesthouse some day. Wish I could send you a larger donation. The life of an artist is rich in other ways! *M.A., Atlanta, GA*

Bravo for Tessa's new "Desert Voices!" Hope you can use some of the enclosed donation for some new plants and flowers for the new hermitage – both inside and out! *G. H., Boulder, CO*



Anchoring the Peace

The Desert's Transformative Power Gussie Fauntleroy



Tessa Bielecki has a small painting in her hermitage near San Isabel Creek north of Crestone, an image very similar to one that has enlivened her imagination since she was a child. In it, a camel caravan materializes in the distance on endless Saharan dunes, emerging from the desert's vast unknown. The image reflects not only a lifelong attraction to desert landscapes and cultures; it also speaks of the age-old movement of prophets, saints, seekers and outcasts who enter the desert, purposefully or unintentionally, spend time there and then return to share what they have found.

Contemplation in Action

Tessa, co-founder and former abbess of the Spiritual Life Institute's Nada Carmelite Hermitage in Crestone, describes this movement as a natural rhythm between "radical solitude" and "contemplation-in-action"—the nurturing depths of silence and then going out into the world. It is how she aspires to live, as does Father David Denny, also a former Nada member whose own hermitage is within walking distance of Tessa's one-person-sized home but separated by a thickly-treed landscape and by the mutual respect and understanding of decades of committed solitary life.

The two are co-founders and co-directors of the Desert Foundation, a Crestone-based non-profit organization whose primary means of sharing and interconnection are its website and semi-annual newsletter, *Caravans*. The foundation is a "circle of friends" with a common interest in the three Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam, especially in their mystical forms—and the metaphoric and physical deserts from which they emerged.

Through writings and reflections, occasional talks and classes and networking among like-minded individuals and groups, the Desert Foundation seeks to help create interfaith bridges of understanding, respect and peace, in particular in response to troubled relationships in the Middle East. Among the ways the co-directors have sought to fulfill this mission: spending two weeks studying Islam at Dar al Islam near Abiquiu, NM, traveling to Palestine, and listening to an Israeli Bedouin feminist in Denver—and then writing and speaking about these experiences. Sharing thoughts on the desert, in all its richly layered meanings, also provides fodder for individual spiritual growth, the co-directors note. They welcome contributions to the website and *Caravans*.

Interfaith Bridges

The Desert Foundation's genesis took place, appropriately, in Arizona's Sonoran Desert as Father Dave and Tessa were driving through the saguaro-spiked landscape in the winter of 2005. Searching for

a way to combine and express their overlapping commitments to a contemplative lifestyle and interfaith sharing, they quickly became aware of the common theme of the desert. Six months later the Desert Foundation was incorporated as a non-profit.

Dave traces his passion for the Abrahamic traditions and monastic life to a confluence of formative experiences as a young man. His family moved from Indiana to Arizona when he was in junior high school, sparking a love affair with the desert. Then at 17 he spent a summer in Afghanistan as an exchange student. “I suddenly realized there are so many languages, cultures and religions out there, and what depth and beauty there are in them,” he relates. “It was a profound opening to other ways, other lives.”

During his college years he studied Islam and Arabic, had a Buddhist teacher, did a month-long silent Vipassana meditation retreat, read Thomas Merton, and visited the Spiritual Life Institute whose Carmelite retreat center at the time was in the desert near Sedona, AZ. Tessa, who served as the monastery’s abbess for almost 40 years, remembers of Dave, “Even then, he radiated such a depth of stillness.” In 1975 Dave converted from Protestantism to Catholicism and joined the Spiritual Life Institute. He was ordained a priest in 1980.

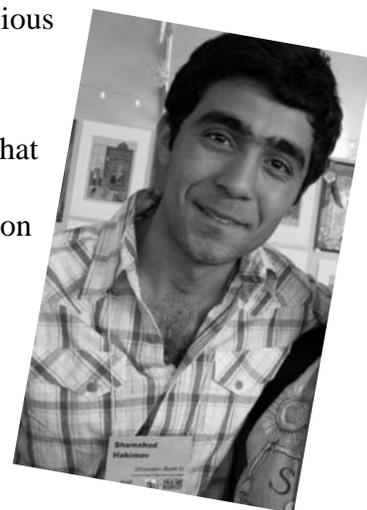
Loss and Grief as Desert

In recent years Father Dave’s conception of the metaphoric desert has expanded to include loss, grief and the opportunity for spiritual growth that arises from those experiences. “The Hebrew prophets and Sufi mystics talk about life falling apart and what happens then,” he points out. “In our tradition it has to do with the dynamic between the cross—the ultimate desert—and resurrection. There’s a transforming, mysterious relationship with Christ that knocks the wind out of you, knocks you down to size. That, to me, is a very hopeful thing.”

While Dave focuses on overlapping themes within the three Abrahamic traditions, Tessa’s personal lifestyle and teaching—through writing and as an invited speaker—revolve more around the desert landscape itself. It’s a place whose defining qualities she sees as expansiveness and receptiveness. “A major part of my teaching is about the relationship between landscape and soulscape,” she says, gazing out a west window at the vastness of the valley. “To me, the desert is about my heart needing to become as open and spacious and receptive as this.”

Walking lightly on the earth in rhythm with the seasons is an integral part of both Tessa and Dave’s commitment to the contemplative lifestyle, Tessa explains. From that base, which she calls “good humanness,” the Desert Foundation provides ways for sharing and reaching out. “Connection happens,” she notes, adding that the foundation is less aimed at growth and more at expanding interfaith understanding and respect through quality networking and sharing. “It’s serendipitous, spontaneous, small and simple,” she reflects, “the way living in the desert ought to be.”

This article first appeared in the Crestone Eagle, August 2011. Camel Caravan art by Shamshod Hakimov, pictured here at the Santa Fe International Folk Arts Festival.



In a time of clashing tribalisms when love appears weak, noise abounds, poverty restricts hope, and Christ seems not to have risen, I have been called to be silent much of the time, to seek and celebrate common ground between Abrahamic traditions, share Christian mystical wisdom, and help relieve the suffering of the poor. My real work is to gamble on the efficacy of love in the midst of tragedy and to communicate the glory and hope of the risen Christ through words, deeds, and a light, slightly mischievous heart.

David M. Denny