

Caravans

Winter 2013

The Desert Foundation
PO Box 1000
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*The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. (Isaiah 35:1)*

Dear Friends,

Our exchange with you, our Circle of Friends, is one of the most inspiring aspects of the Desert Foundation. We are grateful to all of you for taking the time to write us your responses to *Caravans* and the web site, and for sharing your concerns about your own contemplative lives and the lives of others around the world.

Like so many of you, our life here in the high Crestone desert is a challenge. How do we balance contemplation and action, solitude and togetherness, prayer and service? One of the most thoughtful letters recently came from Fran Neuenschwander, who wrote: "I have one fear: As your activity and influence widens, there will be ever-increasing worldly intrusion into the solitude that maintains and strengthens your mental and physical well-being. Please don't allow a selfless desire to be 'all things to all people' rob you of the desert immersion that sanctifies your Mission."

We have the same concern. So we have decided to take some financial risk in 2013 and stay home more to write, pray, and "steward" the land around our hermitages. Many of you already seem to support this choice because you donated more for "the praise of God in solitude" than any other category on our pledge card. We hope you will enjoy the fruits of our solitude in future *Caravans* and web updates, a desert retreat we'll design for you, and we hope, a book. Here are more responses we received from readers this past year.

Readers' Responses

We read Caravans at our house whenever it arrives. Tessa touched a chord with the very wise advice in "Top Five Regrets of the Dying." No, I'm not planning to leave this world any time soon, but it doesn't hurt to think about it.
MS, Placentia, CA

Thank you, Fr. Dave, for your moving [web site] reflections on your formative trip to Afghanistan [in 1970]. Your creative and hopeful comments are particularly welcome as we read of the latest tragedies in that stricken country.
DW, Woodland Park, CO



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



Archival photographs of Ned Danson and Tessa; Fr. Dave and Jessica Danson.

Reading Caravans, for me, is always to strip away non-essentials, and to bore into realities.

DF, Villanova, PA

To my dear voices in the wilderness: Thank you for keeping the flame of solitude with God alive! "The praise of God in solitude" is my passion and the most urgent need of today's Church. Bro. JM, Perryville, MO

Thank you, Tessa, for your beautiful card and your [\$60] donation to my campaign for my Art Exhibit for Middle East Peace. I am so very touched that you brought the backer donations to the 4K mark and by your account of September 14 [opening of the exhibit in Washington D.C.] as the feast of the Triumph of the Cross.

Anne Barber-Shams, Silverton, OR

See our web site for photos of Anne's art and a video of her studio and how she creates paintings that express the spirit of *convivencia*, the convivial relationship between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in medieval Spain. If you'd like us to contact you when we update our web site, please go to our home page, enter your email address, and click on the "Sign Up" button.

In this issue we review *God of Love* by Mirabai Starr and feature Eric Haury's *Edward Bridge Danson: Steward of the West*. As Tessa reflected on Ned's remarkable career, she was inspired to focus her "review" on our personal relationship with him and his wife, Jessica, during the years we were part of the Spiritual Life Institute in Arizona. The Desert Foundation aspires to carry on the Dansons' legacy as "stewards" of the desert.

We are writing this in late autumn, but you will read it during Advent, when our fire season gives way to ice and long nights of starlight. We love how this season is dedicated to the pregnant Mary and includes the feasts of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12) and St. John of the Cross (December 14). Guadalupe brings hope to the poor and St. John, fully aware of life's sorrows, sings of the "happy night" we undergo as loss gives way to Christ's rebirth in us. May this Advent find you waiting in joyful hope, and may Christmas fill you with wonder.

Tessa + Fr. Dave

Thank You!

We have a small space here to send you great thanks for your generosity. Your donations this past summer provided us with six months' operating costs: just what we needed to make it to January. We have committed ourselves to greater creativity in 2013: to writing, improving our web site, and finding grantors who may match your generosity and allow us to expand the Desert Foundation's voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for peace within and between peoples.

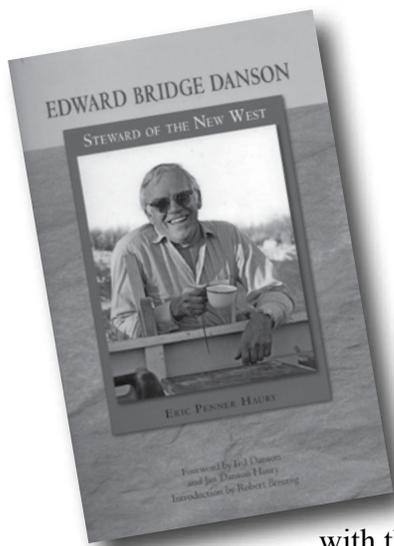
Please continue to help us in this wondrous work!

Voice of the Desert

Tessa Bielecki

A Response to *Edward Bridge Danson: Steward of the West*, by Eric Penner Haury
Hardcover: Museum of Northern Arizona, 2011

Instead of a formal review of Steward of the West by Ned Danson's grandson, I opted for a more imaginative "interview" with my old friend in the present tense. All the questions are in my own voice. Ned's responses are taken accurately from Haury's book with the exceptions of Jessica's 80th birthday, my move to Sedona, and the tale of my living in Juliana hermitage.



Tessa: Ned, even though we both were born and raised in the lush green east, you and I share a passion for the arid Arizona desert. When did your love affair with the desert begin?

Ned: I first saw Arizona in 1926 when my family traveled to the Southwest from Cincinnati. My memories of that trip are faint, yet I recall the Grand Canyon, Indian dances, and visits to various archeological sites. But at age ten, I was more interested in the big cars we drove!

T: That changed on your second visit to the desert?

N: In 1937, at age 21, I drove to Arizona to help my uncle turn some desert land south of Tucson into a dude ranch. As we drove out of the canyon west of Bisbee and up on to the plateau to Tombstone at 5 am, there was a pink and blue pre-sunrise sky with fleecy white clouds, a hill with a coyote on it – I know it's melodramatic, but that's the way it was. I fell in love with Arizona there and knew it was going to be my home.

T: Arizona was even part of your "marriage proposal" to Jessica, right?

N: On our first date I said, "You're going to love Arizona." She thought, "Wow, what a line!" I wasn't engaged for a while, but doing my darndest to be. My only worry was whether Jess would like Arizona and like going on expeditions and roughing it. She'd "camped out," but never "lived out." There's a big, big difference. But she loved the open. She was a good sport with a sense of humor. And she had imagination and intelligent interest, all necessary attributes.

T: And did she fall in love with the Arizona desert, too?

N: She did. We were married in 1942. After serving in World War II as a naval ensign, we bought a house in Tucson in 1945. Then I got my PhD in Anthropology at Harvard. For my dissertation, I surveyed the Upper Gila River Basin, 14,500 square miles of wilderness along the Arizona-New Mexico border. For three summers, while Jess lived in California with her parents and our two children, I filled in the archeological map. I taught briefly at the University of Colorado in Boulder where I felt I should get excited by Plains archeology. But I never did. The Southwest was always my cup of tea. In 1950 I was asked to teach at the U of A in Tucson, and we moved onto five acres of Sonoran desert. With few houses nearby, we could look out on the desert and walk there whenever we wanted. Our son Ted developed a passion for horseback riding. Our daughter Jan loved playing "knights" with long, straight "ribs" of dead saguaro cactus as lances. Jessica loved wild nature and thrilled to Arizona's powerful thunderstorms. One day she heard thunder crashing outside, threw open the door, and called out, "Isn't this glorious?"

T: She didn't like moving to Flagstaff in northern Arizona?

N: Not at first. I joined the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Northern Arizona in 1953. In 1956 the Museum needed a new assistant director. Jessica asked who should be named, and I was suggested. For years she considered asking the question one of her worst mistakes. I served as assistant director from 1956-1958 and then director from 1959-1975. Jessica and I especially loved the annual Hopi Show which stimulated a market for the tribe's arts and crafts so that their traditional skills would not be lost – pottery, jewelry, rugs, baskets, katsina dolls.

T: Jessica played a big part in your work, didn't she?

N: She typed up everything I wrote for my dissertation, and we edited it together. As well as entertaining guests from the Museum, Jessica cleaned cabins for summer assistants and took care of sick staff. As one student wrote years later, "Jessica was an essential presence, providing a depth and beauty of character and spirit that nourished" us all. I was energized by the entertaining and loved playing host. But it began to drain Jessica. You know how she loved her solitude. Yet she felt bound to give hospitality – both by a sense of duty and her own inborn desire to give of herself.

T: Which brings us to Sedona, where we met.

N: All the entertaining got harder for Jessica. In one year alone, we had 500 guests. When they stayed overnight, Jessica missed her solitude in the tiny chapel she'd created in the house. Without this quiet time, she felt her life was out of balance. In 1969 her sister moved to Sedona and Jess started to visit her. Since you moved to Sedona yourself in 1967 to join the Spiritual Life Institute, you remember how small the town was then, with only 2700 residents. In 1971, Jessica discovered "Singing Waters," and soon after we bought the house with its beautiful gardens, apple orchard, and frontage on Oak Creek.

T: Getting to know you and Jessica during those years remains one of the highlights of my life.

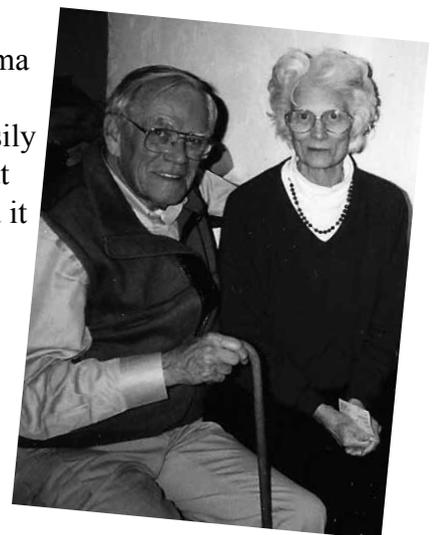
N: Jessica found SLI's contemplative Christianity invigorating and became such an eager friend of all you "Nadans," as she loved to call you. I wasn't initially drawn to your community. At first I resisted, but as I got to know you all, I changed my thinking – changed it completely.

T: At the end of your life, did you experience the "desert of human diminishment?"

N: My health started to decline. Decades of smoking gave me emphysema and heart problems. I had a hard time giving up cigarettes and even deceived Jessica about quitting. And my memory was fading. I could easily use my charm and social skills to cover up my growing forgetfulness, but details were starting to slip. In 1974, the Board of Trustees and I decided it was time for me to retire as director of the Museum.

T: But you stayed involved for almost 25 more years.

N: After retirement I became President of the Board of Trustees and continued to use my skills to help the Museum without having to deal with day-to-day details. Jessica and I made plans to move to Sedona full time and designed an extra wing to turn Singing Waters into a year-round house. It became a living reliquary of our lives. We covered the floors with Navajo rugs, built a special shelf for our Hopi pots



Ned and Jessica at Juliana Hermitage.

and baskets, and hung the walls with Jeffrey Lungé's Southwest paintings. And we added a small chapel for Jessica, where you also came to pray with us.

T: But you couldn't "save" Sedona, however, and that forced us to move the SLI to Colorado.

N: Like you, I felt strongly that the loss of Sedona's scenic area would be a loss for all Americans. With other Sedonans, I tried to make part of Sedona a National Park, but failed. So I joined Keep Sedona Beautiful, and in the 1980s we "saved" three national wilderness areas near Sedona. But I didn't save the land around SLI, so Arizona lost you to Colorado.

T: Despite the distance, we remained close friends.

N: Yes, we loved our regular visits to Crestone, and loved building Juliana, the first hermitage for you there. I love how it reminded you of our Sedona home. And I'm glad you got to "christen" it and live there for several months, alone at the new Nada, while the chapel and other hermitages were being built. It was deeply meaningful for Jess and me, members of the Episcopal Church since birth, to convert to Roman Catholicism under SLI's influence, and renew our wedding vows with you in Colorado. And we celebrated Jess's 80th birthday there, too.

T: Among life's many rewards and awards, you also suffered increasing diminishment.

N: In 1987 I had a heart attack. By 1994, Jessica noticed that my memory was seriously failing. That year I fell and suffered a back injury that never fully healed. After I broke my ribs falling into the irrigation ditch at Singing Waters, I required supplemental oxygen full time. I could still tell tales from my youth, yet I had difficulty recalling what happened that very day. And I loved the southwestern desert until the day I died.

Postscript

Ned Danson died on November 30, 2000. I last saw him only two months before when I slept outside Singing Waters under a huge cottonwood tree, watching the desert stars as an owl hooted over the rose garden Ned had tended so lovingly. The entire SLI community was there. Knowing that both Ned and Jessica were nearing the end of their lives, we "anointed" them in a moving outdoor ceremony.

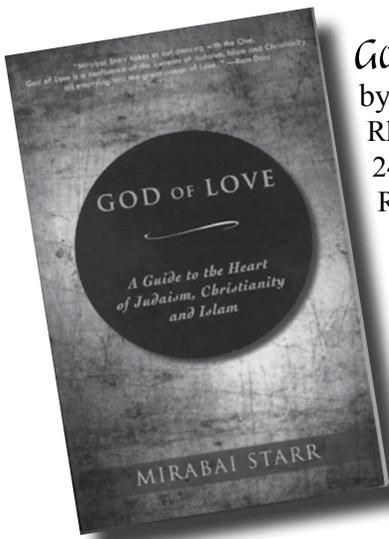
Jessica died five years later on January 11, 2006. Thanks to her daughter, Jan Haury, I had the privilege of sitting with Jessica for the ten days of her dying. If you have not read my account of this profound "desert experience," visit http://www.desertfound.org/circleoffriends/circle_tessa_jessica1.html.

Although Ned did not live through the enormous changes that took place in the SLI after 2003, Jessica did. She witnessed the creation of the Desert Foundation and blessed our efforts. The year before she died, from January through September 2005, she wrote us these words of encouragement: "Fr. Dave and Tessa, You both are such a breath of fresh air and such an inspiration and nourishment for my soul, it is always hard to say goodbye to you. You live so fully – it delights me.... I think your discernment in leaving SLI is a very wise choice and the only way for you to go. I'm excited about the future for both of you. You are so dear and thoughtful to keep us posted on your new Desert Foundation. We are thrilled to hear how everything has unfolded so beautifully."

Space does not permit a longer interview here. See our web site for more photos and details on Ned's life, his friendships with the Hopi, his work with the National Park Service and influence on federal policies in the West, the Ned Danson Chair of Anthropology, and a description of his laughter. I remember Ned most as a big barrel-chested bear of a man with a generous heart and a hearty laugh which "injected something special into any and every situation."



Ned and Jessica renew their wedding vows at Nada.



God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

by Mirabai Starr

Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing, 2012

240 pages, \$15.95

Reviewed by Tessa Bielecki

God of Love pays homage to the mystical and social justice teachings at the common core of the world's great monotheistic religions, focusing on what unifies rather than divides us. Major themes include the "emptiness of unknowing," stewardship of the earth, mercy and forgiveness, welcoming the stranger, "smashing idols," loss and death, grief and woundedness, the "fire of global suffering," balancing contemplation and action, and the feminine face of God.

The author addresses these themes in fresh contemporary language that makes her work accessible to men and women, young and old, ardent practitioners and even smirking skeptics. Each chapter begins with what has become Starr's signature: a compelling invocation that seduces us into the heart of the matter. The chapters then unfold with an overview of the theme from each tradition's perspective; a memoir which vividly describes Starr's personal engagement with the theme; and exemplars who embody the theme in their own lives in refined, rich, relevant, and uplifting ways.

We receive new insights into Abraham and the Prophets, Jesus and the Gospels, Hildegard, Francis, and other Christian mystics, the Baal Shem Tov, and Etty Hillesum, who refused to demonize the Nazis who murdered her. It's good for us to learn more about the holy ones of Islam, especially Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhair, co-founder of the Jerusalem Peacemakers (with Israeli Eliyahu McClean), who suffered an untimely heart attack in 2010 after almost sixty years of celebrating the interconnectedness among the Children of Abraham. I found the author's treatment of Muhammad particularly sympathetic and inspiring.

Most importantly, this book points to the great need in our time for the interspiritual approach: sharing the mystic heart beating in the center of the world's deepest spiritual traditions. Starr is uniquely poised to embody this approach. Her eloquent afterword, "Walking the Interspiritual Path," gives us concrete suggestions for activating our own interspiritual quest.

Starr has a unique, vibrant, and deeply mystical voice. It is refreshing to hear her name the *fit of iconoclasm* that has made us reject so much good from the monotheistic traditions and ultimately left us spiritually bankrupt. Starr recommends a more realistic approach: "In spite of the undeniable history of abuses committed in the name of religion, the monotheistic faiths offer innumerable points of access to the realm of love," a "song" which all three traditions sing "in a deliciously different voice," welcoming everyone to the table.

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Dear Fr. Dave: What I most deeply appreciate about your long and thoughtful review of my book [on your web site] is its authoritative coping with the full structure and range of my thinking. I was afraid nobody would pick up what I say about the five dimensions of [Muslim] women's future fulfillment -- identity, choice, individuality, equality, and variety. You have it all, nuanced and in your own language. The epilogue on the Arab uprisings was done at the request of my publisher, to which I acceded with misgiving about its quickly becoming outdated. But you handle that segment nicely, with your own sensibilities. I respect your ways of picking up my emphases in each of the country chapters. And you are right to see that Indonesia presented itself to me as the opening chapter, because so much of what I wished to say had been said so well by Indonesians. Your review makes me happy to have put seven years into the work.

Theodore Friend, author of *Woman, Man, and God in Modern Islam*