

Favorite Readings on Desert Spirituality

Compiled and annotated by Tessa Bielecki

The Desert Foundation

PO Box 655

Cortaro, AZ 85652

www.sandandsky.org

www.tessabielecki.com

1. ***Desert Solitaire***, Edward Abbey

This is a classic and a must-read, as relevant today as it was when first published in 1968. Abbey, the old curmudgeon, alternates between lyrical poetic descriptions of the red rock desert of Utah and diatribes about the loss of wilderness. He's irreverent and considers himself non-religious. Is he "spiritual" and a contemporary desert father?

2. ***The Wisdom of the Desert***, Thomas Merton

This was one of Merton's favorites among his own books. He presents 150 Sayings from the Desert Fathers (not Mothers), organized randomly, neither alphabetically nor thematically. This drives me crazy, along with his Roman numerals. But this is a must read, too. Merton's introduction is brilliant. He challenges all of us to "swim away from the shipwreck" as the Desert Fathers did and become our best and "true" selves by living a counter-cultural life.

3. ***Desert Fathers and Mothers***, Christine Valters Paintner

Mercifully, Paintner organizes her collection of the Sayings by themes especially relevant to us and puts the numbers in Arabic numerals next to the names, focusing more on the Desert Mothers. Her commentary on each saying is excellent. She defines key desert terms in contemporary ways and is especially good with *accidie* and "the passions." Her introduction alone is "worth the price of the book," as Paula Huston wrote. Her quotations from other writings on the desert will lead you to other inspiring texts.

4. ***The Desert: An Anthology for Lent***, John Moses

This book is a gold mine of inspiration for daily living from more contemporary writings on desert spirituality. Read it at any time of the year. The footnotes and the last chapter on "The Literature of the Desert" point you to further invaluable resources on desert spirituality.

5. ***Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers***, Yushi Nomura

This volume illustrates the universal relevance of desert spirituality across cultures and centuries. Nomura is a Japanese artist who learned about the desert tradition in a class with Henri Nouwen at Yale Divinity School. He “hears” the desert sayings like Zen stories and koans and renders them in his own beautiful calligraphy. His Japanese brush paintings turn the Desert Fathers into Zen monks and place the Egyptian stories in a classical Japanese setting. As Nouwen notes in his introduction, “and so he created a place in which the Buddha and the Christ in him could reach out to one another.”

6. ***The Forgotten Desert Mothers***, Laura Swan (2001)
Praying with the Desert Mothers, Mary Forman (2005)
The Desert Mothers: Spiritual Practices from the Women of the Wilderness, Mary C. Earle (2007)

Finally, books that focus on the long-neglected Desert Mothers—and there were many Mothers. But I confess, I’m less fond of these three volumes. Lots of information here, especially in Swan, who even gives us a calendar of the feast days of these holy women. I wish she’d spent more time reflecting on the teachings of the women instead of historical details of their lives. Earle offers suggestions for incorporating desert practices into our daily life. Forman includes contemporary examples, reflection exercises, and further passages for prayer from both the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

7. ***The Solace of Fierce Landscapes***, Belden Lane

In this unique and splendid book, Lane explores “desert and mountain spirituality” through the three classical stages of mystical growth: purgation, illumination, and union. He alternates between physical wildernesses such as Mount Sinai and Upper Moss Creek and the “desert” of the nursing home where his mother is dying of cancer. Like Merton, Lane emphasizes the counter-cultural dimension of desert spirituality where we go against the grain of our dominant culture and pay attention to what matters most in our lives, ignoring the rest through commitment to contemplative compassionate living. The forty pages of footnotes are daunting and worth slogging through.

8. ***Desert Voices: The Edge Effect***, Tessa Bielecki and David Denny

In this compilation of essays, my friend and colleague David Denny and I celebrate our love affair with the desert, the arid landscape of sand and sky. In the “Tent of Meeting,” we explore friendships between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, whose traditions grow out of the desert. We honor non-violent peacemakers who sow hope in the troubled desert of Israel-Palestine. We describe the inner desert of loss and grief and reflect on the universal desert of impermanence and death, the painful shadow of eternal life.