

Labyrinths One Step at a Time

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World Labyrinth Day, Saturday May 4th

Labyrinth Workshop: "Healing One Step at a Time" 10 am – 2pm.

Church of Reconciliation, 8900 Starcrest, San Antonio.

Featuring "Walk As One at 1 pm" labyrinth walk.

Contact Gillian Corcoran peacewalk@gmail.com to reserve, or for more details.

Healing the Planet One Step at a Time

Seeking peace within and peace in the world, modern-day pilgrims see themselves and others anew by walking the purposefully meandering paths of labyrinths.

To the uninitiated and skeptical, a labyrinth isn't much to look at -- just a long, winding path filling a circle laid out on a flat surface. Watching an individual walk slowly along that path with downcast gaze gives little indication that something transformative may be happening. Even when the person exits the labyrinth, there may be little sign of change or difference.

Despite their unimposing appearance, labyrinths are finding growing use as instruments both for healing individuals and for bringing peace and reconciliation between individuals in conflict. Labyrinths are not some New Age invention; they are ancient, sacred patterns that combine the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path. They represent a journey to our own center and back again, out into the world.

Labyrinths have long been used as meditation and prayer tools. Simply defined by the Labyrinth Society as "a single path or unicursal tool for personal, psychological, and spiritual transformation," a labyrinth has the effect of calming, centering, and focusing the whole person. Mazes, in contrast, with their multiple entrances, exits, and dead ends, are intended to confuse and trick the mind. Mazes are really a game, whereas labyrinths are instruments of peace.

An Instrument for Peace

When a bishop, an imam, and a rabbi walk together in a labyrinth -- as they did in September 2005 in a Walk for Peace in the Middle East on the Grace Cathedral interfaith labyrinth in San Francisco -- they are applying an ancient tool to meet a modern need. Kevin Thompson, a pastor from the Bay-area Family Federation for World Peace, who also attended the walk, offered some thoughts on labyrinths' contribution toward peace building. "Being in the labyrinth," said Thompson, "brought us together in a way that I have not experienced before. Doing that walk seemed to equalize us all as children of the same creator. It brought down barriers, so our prayers were much deeper."

In light of today's powerful impulses toward interfaith communion, labyrinths are a natural meeting ground. All three Abrahamic faith traditions honor the practice of pilgrimage, and for more than three thousand years labyrinths have been known as symbols of the spiritual journey. Medieval Christian pilgrims often traveled the labyrinth's circuitous path on their knees all the way to the center, which to them represented the "New Jerusalem." As Jerusalem is a sacred city for all Abrahamic religions, it is fitting that the focus of the September walk was "praying for the peace of Jerusalem."

The versatility of labyrinths in contributing to the peace-building process where racial conflict exists is expressed through the Reconciliation Labyrinth, developed in South Africa by Clare Wilson to heal the wounds of apartheid. In "Walking the Path to Tomorrow Together, or Reconciling Inner and Outer Journeys," Wilson writes:

The Reconciliation Labyrinth is designed with two entrances, recognizing that as South Africans because of apartheid we do not start the journey toward reconciliation from the same place. Like the "person" embedded into the design [see diagram], the journey starts from where one's feet are. No matter how far apart we start, however, with the intention to

relate, to recognize and reconcile our differences and to grow in the strength of our diversity, we can still make a start on our journeys.

Sometimes the path allows us to travel alongside each other, sometimes it takes us away and sometimes towards each other but, if we keep walking, when we are at the furthest point from our divided entrance we find we are in the same path as each other. We then pass each other and walk the path that "the other" has walked, gaining understanding along the way of how we were shaped to be where we are now. Eventually we reach our "heart-space" where we need to make a decision whether we want to walk into the center together, a center that belongs to us all. When it is time to leave we find that there is a third path, a new path, by which we can exit. Incorporated "through the body," together and on our feet, walking into the future, still "not-knowing" but nevertheless on a journey of hope.

Looking Backward

Although labyrinths are found in diverse cultures throughout history, their exact origin is unclear.

According to Jeff Saward, researcher and editor of *Caerdroia*, a British journal devoted to labyrinths and mazes, one of the earliest-known labyrinth designs decorates an Italian wine jar from the seventh century b.c. Other early examples include Neolithic rock art and a 3,200-year-old clay tablet inscribed with a labyrinth from Pylos in Greece.

Labyrinth designs were transported throughout the Roman Empire to Britain, eastern Europe, and North Africa, and they are also found in Scandinavian countries, Russia, and Iceland. In North America, the Tohono O'odham and Pima tribes wove labyrinth patterns into their baskets. Labyrinths have been discovered in India and China as well.

The historical diversity of labyrinths is reflected in their varied uses, from representing special cities, such as Troy, to keeping time (Chinese incense labyrinths), protecting fishermen and shepherds (over 500 stone labyrinths along the Scandinavian coastline), and representing the spiritual path to the holy center (House of Iitoi and Chemin de Jerusalem).

Robert Ferré, director of the St. Louis Labyrinth Project and master labyrinth builder (having made over 800 of them since 1996), states, "Walking the labyrinth is another way of tapping into forces beyond our normal conscious mind. It takes us to some ancient part of ourselves, as old as the turning of the planets and stars, as old as the goddess and earth energies, back when night was dark, when people knew the sky and nature was a part of us and we of it. This is something lost in our modern world, and the imbalance that it causes cries out for resolution. That's why the labyrinth touches so many people so forcefully.

Resurgence of Labyrinths

Toby Evans, creator of the Prairie Labyrinth in Kansas City, Missouri, supports this view. "These ancient patterns of transformation," she says, "seem to reemerge when we most need to reconnect to one another, our communities, and ourselves. The current labyrinth revival is stronger than it's ever been, drawing people around the world from every denomination and all walks of life."

She has pondered the universal appeal of labyrinths. "The art of living," she writes, "is the art of changing directions. A labyrinth imitates life's journey, taking you through reversals or constant turning points, but it is designed to return you to your center." Indeed, to be at peace within ourselves and also to be peacemakers, we need to operate from our centers. For many, labyrinths provide a path there.

Labyrinths can be found worldwide, both indoors and outdoors, in hospitals, schools, prisons, wellness centers, hospices, churches, corporations, public parks, and retreat centers. They are used in therapy and at various conferences. A business school in Illinois employs labyrinths to teach business students to think creatively. Schools use them to teach geometry and math. Individuals with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism walk them to achieve calm and focus.

Labyrinths and Healing

At least sixty hospitals in the United States, led by California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco in 1997, have introduced labyrinths as a component of their wellness programs. These purposeful winding paths define a healing space in which:

- Caregivers relax despite their burden of responsibility.
- Individuals or families pray.
- Men and women reduce chronic pain and increase energy levels.
- Nurses, physicians, and other health care staff decompress after attending to patients.
- People cope with the mental demands of serious illness.
- Preoperative patients focus their energies into healing before surgery.

One of the most noticeable effects of walking the labyrinth is stress reduction. Most doctors acknowledge that stress can kill and hence that reducing it can heal. The same is true with balance. When our priorities get far too out of balance, we are more likely to experience dis-ease. The labyrinth brings us back to a state of equilibrium.

Mark Scott, former CEO of the Mid-Columbia Medical Center in The Dalles, Oregon, states that the labyrinth complements the use of chemotherapy and radiation in cancer treatment by giving the patient a sense of confidence and control. Three Rivers Community Hospital, in Grants Pass, Oregon, invites the local community to use its labyrinth, and the community has responded. Programs have included a women's cancer support group, hospice butterfly release,

survivors' labyrinth walk, holistic nurses' retreat, candlelit memorial service, Spears Cancer Center walk, Day of Renewal walk, domestic violence awareness walk, and a volunteer chaplaincy program.

Labyrinths address and embrace an area that is largely ignored by the scientific paradigm -- namely, inner healing, which is achieved through no standard dose or specific regimen. Labyrinths meet people wherever they are emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, leading them gently forward to the next step, and then the following step, and then the step beyond that. Even in cases where outer healing fails, inner healing can still take place. Hence, hospices are beginning to discover the benefits of using labyrinths.

How Labyrinths Work

By looking at the many reasons and intentions with which people walk labyrinths, we can gain some clues as to how they may work. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stony Brook, New York, lists the following reasons for walking the labyrinth: to find peace, express gratitude, solve a problem, destress, work on a problematic relationship, unblock creative energies, and find one's purpose, calling, or heart song.

Labyrinths help in the process of forgiving, releasing, and letting go. They provide comfort to the grieving and balm to the soul. Walking a labyrinth involves the participant in intentional action and reflective thought through three stages that together contribute to achieving these significant effects.

Spiraling inward toward the center of the design, walkers journey toward their own center. This is a time of letting go of the details of life, shedding thoughts and distractions, relaxing into and trusting the path. Everything that happens within the sacred space of the labyrinth can be seen as a metaphor for life's journey. The labyrinth acts as a mirror, allowing walkers to see themselves and the patterns of their lives clearly and often from a new perspective.

This first stage of the walk allows hearts and minds to become clear and open in preparation for being in the center. The second stage is one of "illumination," where there is time to listen, to receive whatever is there to be received, to be in touch with the intuitive self, and to bask in the comfort and warmth of the labyrinth's embrace. This is often a time to linger until one feels ready to begin the third stage, that of the outward journey, the stage of union.

As walkers wend their way back following the reverse path, they feel the labyrinth's integrating effects. The insights received in the center are absorbed so that walkers often leave the labyrinth empowered to take action, able to offer more to the world. This threefold process occurs even when people, unaware of it, step into the labyrinth for the first time. The effectiveness of the labyrinth nevertheless increases cumulatively the more it is walked and the more consciously the walking is done.

Lauren Artress, author of *Walking a Sacred Path* (Riverhead Books, 1996), is one of the forces behind the development of the labyrinth movement in the past ten years. She states that "the labyrinth is an archetype, a divine imprint, found in all religious traditions in various forms around the world. ... We [people who use and work with labyrinths] are rediscovering a long-forgotten mystical tradition that is insisting to be reborn."

For people with a mystical bent, including many who work with labyrinths, these ancient patterns are a bridge to invisible realms of meaning. Many see in the enfolded paths the embodiment of a spiral of unfolding consciousness. They associate these paths with the golden ratio (1.618) and the Fibonacci sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8...), number patterns that have long been revered as the keys to recognizing a sacred geometry of nature. Examples include the proportions of the human body and the patterns and rates of growth of sunflower seeds, pinecones, nautilus shells, and the galaxies, to name a few.

Viewed in this light, then, as we walk a labyrinth, our bodies, following the path that embodies these numbers, are aligning with the sacred geometry of nature. As they do, they are balancing out our minds and bodies and also the right and left sides of our brains. The more we walk, the more in tune or "in harmony" we become with ourselves, nature, and the universe. We find the still, small voice within; we integrate what we hear into our lives; and moment by moment, person by person, those walking the labyrinth contribute to a ripple effect of inner peace felt throughout the world.

One Heart at a Time

Bringing about a peaceful world begins within each one of us, and from there we all have our unique part to play in relationship to others. The goal of Cathie LeVasseur, who traveled to the Balkan peninsula to conduct labyrinth workshops during the Balkan Youth Reconciliation Seminar Series (2000), was to heal the wounds of war "one heart at a time." The impact on the youth who participated exceeded expectations. One participant wrote, "The labyrinth was a way for me to gather all my personal dreams and hopes into something bigger that I'll always keep in my heart as a peace message to the people all over the world." Another wrote: "The labyrinth helped me get rid of some negative emotions and thoughts, it gave me energy, hope, and love... And now I believe! I believe the world can be better."

The World Peace Prayer Society in Amenia, New York, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to spreading the message and prayer "May Peace Prevail on Earth." Its Peace Pals Program reaches children through educational programs that "nurture inner peace and global awareness in children around the world." An important part of the program is the Peace Labyrinth at its sanctuary. Both children and adults are beckoned into the tranquillity of the 125-year-old black walnut grove, where they can experience walking together for peace.

Ariane Burgess, of Camino de Paz Labyrinths in New York City, works with organizations to design labyrinths and peace walks that relate to the location and the people who will walk them. One example of her work is the Labyrinth for Peace in the Community. Built on an open green space at East 136th Street in the Bronx for the anniversary of September 11, it is dedicated to all victims of violence and is a call for peace in the community. "The labyrinth can be a powerful tool for

creating community and peace, as the building process cultivates friendship, trust, inner peace, confidence, and connection to an innate knowing," says Burgess. Through the process of creating a labyrinth, people learn how to collaborate with others and with nature. They are enlivened when they bring it into their daily lives through walking and caring for it. They come to know old friends and neighbors in new ways and make new friends.

Burgess also created the Labyrinth for Contemplation in the Jerusalem Grove in Battery Park, New York (at the foot of West Street and open to the public daily). Surrounding the labyrinth are flowerbeds with a selection of plants known for their healing properties: artemisia, lavender, sage, and rugosa roses.

Backyard Labyrinths

As the benefits of walking labyrinths are becoming widely known, more and more people are building them in their own backyards. One such person is Deirdre Fisher, who gathered a group of friends in May 2003 to construct a classical labyrinth in her garden, which overlooks a lake. The impact on her life was so great that she founded Lakeside Labyrinths of Rhinebeck, New York, to design and install labyrinths on other private properties in the Hudson Valley, as well as at local churches, schools, hospitals, public parks, and corporations.

"To achieve lasting universal peace, it is necessary to start with ourselves and individually find and nurture our inner peace," says Fisher. "Walking a labyrinth can facilitate this process of self-reflection and serve as a calming ritual in our daily lives, acting as a positive focus in our increasingly complex world."

The path to peace requires many steps of healing, and labyrinths can advance our progress along the way if we choose to walk within their charmed paths. People who return to walk labyrinths again and again are nearly universal in reporting that following the simple pattern enclosed inside a circle brings them peace and calm. Apart from any explanation of how it may happen, the effects are real to these people. It is as though the labyrinth has a voice that calls them to seek out its rejuvenating presence.

The growing interest in this ancient instrument is evidence of that call. Out in a field, in the garden of a church, a backyard, or the courtyard of a hospital, labyrinths are calling and people are responding. The pursuit of peace lies not only in politics but in the hearts of human beings.

Gillian Corcoran is an Ambassador for Peace and a Veriditas-certified labyrinth facilitator, designs and builds labyrinths as well as conducting workshops and retreats utilizing them. She writes: "I am one of the many who heard the call and responded. For me, working with labyrinths is a way to tangibly advance the cause of peace in our world one step at a time."

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