

WALKING MEDITATION: THE LABYRINTH

by Melanie Bowden

My first labyrinth walk was in a garden at a retreat center. I skeptically entered the stone lined circular path to look for answers regarding a conflict with a family member. Within minutes I was so overwhelmed at the insight I discovered that I stopped dead in my tracks and gasped out loud. I not only found understanding for the other person's behavior, but also felt a strong wave of forgiveness and sympathy wash over me.

I have since returned to the labyrinth many times either to ponder a conflict, look for direction, or just to quiet the chatter in my brain.

WHAT IS A LABYRINTH?

For centuries the pattern of the labyrinth has been utilized to help people reconnect with their spirituality. The labyrinth is not a maze, but a set of concentric foot paths. A person enters and exits at the same point, following a path that winds into the center of a circle, and then taking that same path back out. Labyrinths can be found in a variety of places: gymnasiums, hospitals, playgrounds, prisons, etched in the dirt of a California canyon, and mowed into the prairie grass of a Missouri farm.

According to Melissa Gayle West, a psychotherapist and the author of *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth*, the labyrinth evolved from the spiral, the universal symbol of growth and transformation. We see spirals in the scalar patterns of a pinecone, the chambers of a nautilus shell, and in our own fingerprints. West says, "The spiral is literally encoded into the universe. The labyrinth, echoing the spiral's transformational theme, has invited journeyers and spiritual seekers through the ages to contemplate the mysteries of life. Each time we walk the labyrinth we walk into a world that contains far more mystery and magic than our literal minds could ever grasp."

Renewed interest in the labyrinth has surged since the early 1990s, largely due to the work of Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Artress founded Verditas: The Worldwide Labyrinth Project in 1991 after traveling to Chartres Cathedral in France. The Chartres labyrinth was built into the cathedral floor during the Crusades, around 1220, to provide a spiritual journey for those who couldn't make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Artress found walking Chartres' stone labyrinth so transforming that she dedicated herself to spearheading a labyrinth movement.

BENEFITS OF THE LABYRINTH

Like Artress, thousands have discovered that the labyrinth is a powerful tool, accessible to all. Walking the labyrinth can deepen spirituality, help access intuition and creativity, or provide a way to connect with your community. People have been known to cry, laugh out loud, and even jump for joy during their labyrinth walks.

Of her first walk Darcy Spence says, "Even though I walked with a group of 10 people, I felt calm, peaceful, and relaxed at the end. I know my blood pressure went way down!"

Other comments from labyrinth walkers include:

"I feel centered, grounded, and more in touch with my spirit. The labyrinth quiets my anxiety and leaves me in peace." - Cheryl Pierson-Carey

"I have a labyrinth in my yard that I walk every day. My husband says that since I started walking the labyrinth regularly I am more directed, passionate about my work, more calm, and more loving" - Georgiana Lofty

"It's a guided walking meditation and you can't get lost--really! I just walk and pay attention to what comes up. I find it very quieting." - Anne Dilenschneider

FINDING A LABYRINTH NEAR YOU

Once you start looking for labyrinths, you'll be surprised by how many are around. A good place to start your search is the Labyrinth Locator on Grace Cathedral's Web site at www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/. At the Locator, addresses of labyrinths are listed along with information on whether the labyrinth is public or private, indoors or outdoors, and portable or permanent.

Another way to seek out labyrinths is by contacting the The Labyrinth Society at (877) 446-4520 or visiting their Web site at www.labyrinthociety.org. At the Web site you can find the address and phone number for a Labyrinth Society Regional Representative in your area and contact them directly for information.

Additionally, the representative may be able to guide you to a local labyrinth facilitator, many of whom own portable labyrinths made from canvas or other materials. You can also call a church or other place of worship to inquire about labyrinths.

If you decide to make your own labyrinth, West's book contains detailed instructions on making either an indoor one, using masking or electrical tape on the floor, or an outdoor labyrinth made with rope. She also suggests trying a

finger labyrinth--tracing the labyrinth pattern with the index finger of your nondominant hand--either on your computer screen or on a labyrinth pattern printed on paper. Go to http://www.lessons4living.com/finger_labyrinth.htm.

PREPARING FOR A LABYRINTH WALK

There is no right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth. You may walk slow or fast, skip, run, sing or dance; there are no rules. Do not be too hard on yourself if your first labyrinth walks are uneventful. The labyrinth is different for everyone, so do not get discouraged if your first attempts are awkward.

The three parts of the labyrinth are--walking in, remaining in the center, and walking out. Reverend Marjorie Hoyer Smith sees the parts in this way: Walking In is a time to let go of the details and concerns of your life; The Center is a time of meditation and prayer; and Walking Out is symbolic of taking what you received back out into the world and incorporating it into your life.

You will gain more from your labyrinth walks if you enter with an open mind. West suggests you ask yourself, "Am I really willing to receive guidance that may lead me in a new direction? Is my commitment to knowing the truth greater than my commitment to having the answer be the one I'm demanding?" If you can honestly say yes, then you are ready to begin your walk.

West also finds using "mindful preparation" for a walk makes for a deeper, more transformative experience. Before you go to the labyrinth, or as you take a moment at the entrance to become clear about your intentions, try one of the following suggestions to mindfully prepare for your walk:

- Think of a question or issue that concerns you right now, either big or small. My own concerns have ranged from, "How do I keep my kids' fighting from getting to me?," to, "What am I suppose to learn from the recent death of my grandmother?"
- Pray for someone or for healing in a particular situation.
- Walk the path as your life journey, with all of its twists and turns. In the center meditate on what you need to do on your life path at this point.
- On a birthday or anniversary reflect on the past year or plan for the upcoming year.
- Give thanks for all of life's gifts and ponder how to better foster a life of gratitude.

- Pray or ask for guidance regarding a relationship issue.

THE POWER OF THE LABYRINTH

The healing power of the labyrinth works in mysterious ways. Research is still to be done to determine the brain/body connection for those undertaking a labyrinth walk and why so many experience deep spiritual and personal healing.

Georgiana Lofty, a labyrinth facilitator and author of the book *Step by Step: How to Introduce the Labyrinth*, believes in the labyrinth's power. She says, "The labyrinth teaches that we need to trust our sacred walk in life. Just put one foot in front of the other and walk towards God, Home, Center, Higher Power. The (labyrinth) patterns are complex enough that a walker has to give up some control of knowing where they are going. Isn't this a wonderful metaphor of what our sacred walk in life's wonders has to offer?"

SIDEBAR

LABYRINTH RESOURCES

Web Sites:

- 1) Veriditas: The Worldwide Labyrinth Project and The Labyrinth Locator are at <http://www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/index.shtml>.
- 2) The Labyrinth Society at www.labyrinthsociety.org.
- 3) The Sacred Labyrinth Walk at www.sacredwalk.com.

Books:

- 1) *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth* by Melissa Gayle West, Broadway Books, 2000
- 2) *Walking A Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* by Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress, Riverhead Books, 1996
- 3) *Step by Step: How to Introduce the Labyrinth* by Georgiana Lofty, Georgiana Lofty, 2000

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