

Labyrinth

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—Patricia Mathes Cane, Ph.D.

The labyrinth is an ancient symbol of healing and transformation for body, mind, and spirit. Walking the labyrinth can be a powerful experience for the person and the community. The energy field of the archetypal pattern, along with the spiraling turns of the path, somehow unblock, harmonize, and heal the whole person. I have used the labyrinth as a healing practice with many groups in the U.S. and in Latin America where people have been personally or communally overwhelmed by traumatic stress from natural disasters, political violence, divorce, abuse, and other wounds. The following section gives personal experiences with the labyrinth, information on its history and spirituality, guidelines on how to lead a labyrinth ritual with a group, and resources for further study.

It is thought that pilgrims during the Middle Ages used the labyrinth to cure paralysis of body and soul. The labyrinth is currently being used in many places to heal from the wounds of violence. One of the most powerful labyrinth experiences I have had was with a group of 25 Mayan men, women, and children. Sacred circles are part of Mayan cosmology, so the labyrinth pattern felt familiar to these people. The Kachiquel community had experienced much suffering and trauma during thirty years of violence in Guatemala. A few months before my visit, a lynching of two youth had occurred in their town square. The Mayans walked the labyrinth like a sacred procession, many weeping. They walked once again through their history connecting with past memories of terror, massacres of loved ones, and political violence. When the community knelt together to pray before the candle in the center of the labyrinth, a remarkable peace and radiance surrounded the group of mothers, fathers, and young children. The grace and dignity of this people had not been destroyed by years of brutality and inhuman suffering. After the labyrinth experience when the group took time to reflect, some of the Mayans shared how they wanted their communities and other family members to likewise walk a labyrinth. Several of the men who were tailors, measured the pattern and calculated that they would need 40 grain sacks sewn together to make the base for the circular pattern. With house paint they could draw the paths and with Mayan symbols they could decorate their own community labyrinth.

Background and History

Different kinds of labyrinth patterns can be found in the floors of churches in Europe, in the religious art of Judaism, in indigenous art of the Americas, in the cultures of Crete and Tibet, and in many mystical traditions. The actual use of the labyrinth was probably connected with spiritual practices or solar festivals in different cultures. Unlike the maze which is designed to confuse the user, the one-path labyrinth tends to quiet the mind and focus the person. Lauren Artress, founder of the Worldwide Labyrinth Project, compares the stages of walking the labyrinth to stages of the spiritual life—purification, illumination, and union. The use of the labyrinth was rediscovered only within the last decade, and today through a

worldwide project labyrinths are being built in schools, parks, hospitals, retreat centers, churches, and children's playgrounds in different parts of the world.

Preparation and Walking of the Labyrinth

(Based on the work of Lauren Artress)

Before walking the labyrinth it is important to take time to prepare for the experience. Breathe deeply and center yourself, letting go of worries and preoccupations, surrendering yourself mindfully to the present moment. Open yourself to receive whatever may come to you in the labyrinth. You may want to focus on a question or a prayer before you set foot on the path. Wait until you feel ready or called to enter the labyrinth.

During the first part of the path spiraling to the center, the purification, let whatever emerges pass through you without judgment. Body feelings, images, memories, strong emotions, dreams, past wounds, desires, or prayers may arise. Open your heart and surrender to the grace of the process. Breathe deeply, walk with attention, and follow your own rhythm, listening to your body and spirit. If you are walking the labyrinth with others and your rhythm is different, you may pass them respectfully along the path, and greet or acknowledge their presence with a bow, an embrace, or just with your eyes. Some people prefer to walk the labyrinth slowly, others rapidly moving with Tai Chi or dance, while others move across the lines without following the design. In walking the path to the center, let all pass through you without judgment—the wounds of the past, the traumas, the worries, the joys and sorrows—like a great river cleansing and restoring all in your life. Connect with the eternal silence of your soul and the gift of your life. There is no other being like you, and you are guided on your unique path by divine love.

The center of the labyrinth represents the second stage of the spiritual path—illumination. Take time in the center for prayer, meditation, thanksgiving or deep silence, surrendering and listening to your soul. This is the time to ask for what you need, and to open yourself to receive the abundance that is always around you. When you feel called to leave the center to walk the return path spiraling outward to the world, you enter the third stage of the spiritual journey—union. Walk this part integrating the inspirations you received in the process. This part of the labyrinth contains the challenge to return to the reality of life with healing and renewed commitment. Feel the energy, grace, and confidence of walking with Spirit and with the strength of community.

The process of walking the labyrinth calms the mind, centers the spirit, and brings deep inner peace, inspiration, and illumination to the soul. The unconscious mind is awakened and many times you recall the whole microcosm of life. Wounds of the past transform into wisdom for the present. After walking take time to write or draw your experiences, images, dreams, desires, and commitment for your life and for the future.

A Labyrinth Visualization

Sit or lie in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Feel yourself immersed in a sea of warm Earth energy. Breathe slowly and deeply into your abdomen, feel the warm energy filling the center of your being. Imagine the energy filling and relaxing each part of your body. Start with your feet and legs and slowly breathe into each part of your body, moving up

to the crown of your head. Breathe, stretch, and tense each part and then let go. Feel the warm energy of the Earth nourish and relax you completely.

Now imagine that you are able to follow a winding spiral path, a labyrinth down to the center of your soul. Imagine yourself as a wise young child, without fear, alive and open to the surprise and possibilities of the path. Follow your path and arrive at a sacred space deep within you. What is this sacred space like for you? Perhaps it is a garden with many colorful and fragrant plants and flowers. Or perhaps your sacred space is a chapel or a favorite place in nature. Or maybe your sacred space is a vibrant darkness filled with deep peace and a loving presence. Take time in this sacred space, filling and nourishing yourself with peace and healing. This place is always there for you, a source of light and joy along the journey. And no matter what has happened or what will happen along your life path, you are held, guided and protected with love.

Imagine now a small spark in the center of your sacred space. Watch it grow into a loving light that fills you and surrounds you. Take a moment to let this light flow within you, to permeate you, to wash away any wounds or negativity, to give you a sense of power and energy for your journey. Feel deep peace and gratitude for your life. Take a moment more in this sacred space, and when you are ready, slowly leave the center. Wind back along the labyrinth path, spiraling outward to the world, knowing that you always carry a sacred space within you. Breathe deeply, stretch and move your body, and gradually open your eyes. Feel completely present in your body, alive and peaceful in the moment, ready to continue walking your labyrinth of life.

“To walk the labyrinth, is to discover our inner sacred space: that core of feeling that is waiting to have life breathed back into it...As we grow up, our spark of life continually shines forth. If we ignore this spark, we become thirsty and shrivel. And if we respond to the spark, we flower. Our task is to flower, to come into full blossom....”

—Lauren Artress, Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool

Finger-Walking the Labyrinth

For disabled persons, or where a labyrinth is not available for walking, the many healing benefits of the practice can be received through walking with the fingers. With your index finger simply follow the labyrinth path as if you were walking. On the following two pages are labyrinth patterns for your use. For the Chartres style labyrinth pattern follow the path with one finger. The paths may be colored or painted to your liking.

Resources for Further Study

Books

Artress, L. Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

Attali, J. & Rowe J. (Translator). Labyrinths in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom. North Atlantic Books, 1999.

Bartnett, B. Peace Labyrinth—Sacred Geometry. Lifestyle Institute, 1997.

Matthews, H. Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development. Dover Publishing, 1985.

Purce, J. The Mystic Spiral: Journey of the Soul. Thames & Hudson. 1980.

Music

Om Namaha Shivaya, Robert Gass & On Wings of Song. Spring Hill Music.
A Feather on the Breath of God, Chants of Hildegard of Bingen. Hyperion Records.
Quiet Heart, Spirit Wind, Bamboo & Alto Flutes. Richard Warner. Enso Records.

Contacts

Chartres style Eleven-Path Labyrinth: Veriditas: The Worldwide Labyrinth Project, President and Creator: Dr. Lauren Aretress, Grace Cathedral, 1100 California Street, San Francisco, California 94108 415-749-6358 www.gracecathedral.org.

Seven-Path Labyrinth: Taffy Lanser, P.O. Box 4665, Cave Creek, Arizona 85327
480-488-0085 FAX: 480-959-8288.