

## **Walking in circles: Rev Lauren Artress on walking a labyrinth as spiritual practice**

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*You can't get lost in a labyrinth. There are no tricks to it, no deceptive passageways or dead ends. One meandering path coils into the center, and you exit where you entered, letting the labyrinth itself guide you through its loops.*

*Walking a labyrinth may seem like nothing more than an amusement, but these serpentine spirals have been used as spiritual tools by many cultures for thousands of years. The Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress, who runs the labyrinth program at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco describes labyrinths as "paths of prayer, a walking meditation, a crucible of change, a watering hole for the spirit and a mirror of the soul."*

*Labyrinths were popular during the Middle Ages, fell out of favor for awhile and are now making a comeback. According to Artress, there are now between 2,500 and 3,000 labyrinths in the United States alone; in hospitals, prisons, schools, cemeteries, parks, wellness centers and houses of worship. Grace Cathedral has two labyrinths, one inside the cathedral and one outdoors. The indoor one, inside the nave of the cathedral, is currently made of wool carpeting but is being replaced by inlaid stone. The work will be completed Sept. 1 and a dedication ceremony is planned for Sept. 30.*

*I spoke with Artress, who is also the president and founder of Veriditas, The Voice of the Labyrinth Movement," an organization that aims to introduce people to the powers of the labyrinth, about how labyrinths can quiet the mind, soothe the soul and bring order to chaos.*

### **What inspired Grace Cathedral to create a labyrinth back in 1991?**

My work there as canon pastor was to help people get connected to spirit -- in whatever way possible. People often seek to satisfy that spiritual hunger outside of the church because organized religion sometimes doesn't address what we might call "the living spirit," the way that we can grow in our spiritual lives.

We want to become better people. We want to deepen our compassion for ourselves and others. We want to be less judgmental. You don't just learn these things from people preaching and saying, "This is what you should be." You have to have a tool or method; a practice would be the word that we like to use.

### **And the labyrinth is one of these tools?**

Absolutely. By walking the labyrinth your inner world becomes transparent to you. You become aware of what your thoughts and feelings are that you're carrying inside. You might realize that you've been carrying a grudge against somebody for years or that your pride has been in the way of healing a relationship that's been longing to be healed.

### **What is it about walking a labyrinth that helps one see these things?**

Part of it has to do with the structure of the labyrinth itself. The path is narrow by design, and that narrowness focuses the mind.

### **It forces you to pay attention.**

Right. It intensifies your focus. This is why they are wonderful with kids with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). Anybody who has trouble focusing can teach themselves how to focus their mind in a labyrinth.

Another reason your mind quiets in a labyrinth is that you're actually moving your body. Unlike in sitting meditation, it's much easier to allow your mind to flow and you're not trying to control your mind. You're

releasing energy to allow you to quiet more quickly.

The other thing about the Chartres-style labyrinth is that it's an archetypal form. It's in the Christian tradition, but it's more universal. A circle is not just an image; it's a symbol of unity and wholeness.

**Grace Cathedral started with a pretty basic labyrinth made of canvas. It was modeled after a design placed at the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France in 1201.**

In the beginning, we weren't sure how people were going to receive this. We also didn't know how to create a labyrinth accurately in the ground. We commissioned a tapestry labyrinth in 1994, and the following year was when the Melvin E. Swig Memorial labyrinth went in the outdoor plaza. Now we are building an inlaid labyrinth in the floor of the cathedral. It's also modeled on the one inside the nave at Chartres.

**During the Middle Ages there were labyrinths in many cathedrals in Europe. But they pretty much stopped building them in the mid-1300s. And many of the original labyrinths have been destroyed over the years. Why is that?**

They kind of became white elephants or were forgotten about. Some were ripped up when the floors wore out in these old cathedrals, and never replaced.

But I think they fell out of favor, too, during the Renaissance because there was a whole different paradigm coming into being. Labyrinths were identified with the Middle Ages and therefore looked down upon, just like Gothic cathedrals were during that time. Of course, our thinking is quite different now.

**Are labyrinths difficult to build? Can an average person construct one?**

Well, realize that there are several kinds of labyrinths. The classical seven-circuit labyrinth is probably the easiest to build because you start with a simple pattern, and it's just a matter of connecting lines with dots.

The medieval 11-circuit labyrinth that Grace Cathedral has replicated from Chartres Cathedral is more difficult to build because it's based on a complex pattern derived from sacred geometry. It's challenging to do, but it's not rocket science.

**What is the difference between a labyrinth and a maze?**

A maze has cul-de-sacs, dead ends. It's a cognitive puzzle, and you have to figure out how to get to the center. A labyrinth only has one path that starts from the outer edge and weaves in a very circuitous way into the center. You can say that a labyrinth is designed for you to find your way; a maze is designed for you to lose your way.

**When did people first start using labyrinths as spiritual tools?**

The classical seven-circuit labyrinth is the same design as the Hopi medicine wheel. And it could date back as far as 25,000 years. We don't know exactly how they used it, but labyrinths are found in many traditions. The seven-circuit labyrinth also appears in Celtic tradition and in Greek mythology. Everyone knows about the myth of the Minotaur, which was supposedly imprisoned in the center of the labyrinth.

**I've heard the Greek myth of the Minotaur in the labyrinth described as a story about someone journeying to find his shadow self within. Is that relevant today?**

I think so. When you walk a labyrinth, the mind quiets and a deeper awareness of ourselves emerges. You begin to bring into consciousness the parts of yourself that are working against you. That's the shadow at work.

**Grace Cathedral's Web site states that there are three stages of a walk through a labyrinth. What are those stages?**

We call it the three R's. The first stage is "releasing." As you follow the outside entrance all around the labyrinth to the center, you're letting go, quieting, opening, emptying. When you are in the center, because you have cleared everything out, you are ready for the second stage, "receiving," and you can stay as long as you want in the center while you do that.

### **What are you receiving?**

Whatever is there for you to receive. You might receive guidance a deep sense of peace and calm. That's why each experience in the labyrinth is unique.

And then, when you are ready, you follow the same path out of the labyrinth. That's the third R, "the return." That's when you can integrate what you have received. You work with it as you are coming back out into the world.

### **How and where did you first encounter a labyrinth?**

I was at a place in my life where I was wondering, personally, what's my next step? I was working with the AIDS ministry at Grace Cathedral and was completely burned out. I wasn't sure what to do, but I knew that had ended for me. One evening in 1991 I went to a weekend conference where a group of people had laid out an 11-circuit medieval labyrinth. It was pretty informal, taped to the ground and not built to scale. I walked it three times. Then later in the evening, I did it again, and I noticed that it really calmed me and quieted me down. And then it occurred to me, maybe this is it! Maybe this is what I needed to introduce at Grace Cathedral. Maybe this would address the spiritual hunger that I was sensing in the community.

And that sent me off to Chartres Cathedral, where they have the last remaining labyrinth in the nave. A small group of us from Grace met there and moved 256 chairs to clear the labyrinth so we could walk it.

### **It wasn't in use?**

It's still not actively being used. The authorities there are rather skittish about the labyrinth.

### **Can you give me another example of how a labyrinth has helped you through a challenging point in your life?**

There was a time when I needed to make some tough financial decisions about our organization, and -- this was years ago now -- but we needed to cut back on staff. It was an extraordinarily painful thing to do, and I was torn apart by it.

So I went to the labyrinth, and just cried during that walk. I let myself really feel the bottom of the pit of despair. Then, all of a sudden, the strength flowed back, and I thought, I can get through this! I can feel these deep feelings and, literally, keep walking forward.

### **You said to me earlier that everything that happens in the labyrinth is a metaphor. What do you mean by that?**

A labyrinth can hold up to 40 people. Often at Grace Cathedral there are at least three or four other people walking it when you're there. When you look across and you see them, you realize, "We are all on the same path together. We are all on this journey, the journey from life to death." So that's one example of what I mean.

### **What's the best lesson that you've learned from walking a labyrinth?**

I think the main thing is the gift of spiritual reflection. The labyrinth offers a place for people to be able to reflect in their lives. It offers a place where the rational reasoning mind is married to the intuitive imaginative mind. And that's magnificent. That's where wisdom comes from.

*<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2007/08/27/findrelig.DTL>*