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A Twisting Walk to Inner Peace on a Painted Purple Canvas

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SAN FRANCISCO, Aug. 28 — Stretched across the nave floor of the majestic Grace Cathedral like a tarpaulin hauled in from a football field, the 35-foot-wide labyrinth is nothing more than a bright purple pattern painted on an expanse of bleached canvas.

Yet the design has an extraordinary pedigree: it is a replica of a labyrinth built into the stone floor of Chartres Cathedral in France, and it inspires in the people who have come to walk along its sinuous, painted path a palpable mix of solemnity and joy.

A woman wearing glasses, a peasant skirt and a small, secret smile walked through the maze design one recent evening practically on tiptoe, her gaze turned toward the cathedral's gothic vaulting, her arms lifted away from her sides as if she were about to fly.

Two 9-year-old girls holding hands scurried along with swift, mincing steps, goading each other on and scooting impatiently around any adults in their way, and when they finished following the tightly coiled design, an intricate series of loops and switchbacks that measures a third of a mile long, the pair started it all over again.

Finding a Sense of Calm

They were among more than 100 people gathered at Grace Cathedral on Nob Hill, perhaps the most photographed cathedral in the city, to take part in a ceremony that is at once ancient and New Age mysticism, called "walking the labyrinth."

Two evenings a month, the seven pieces of the makeshift labyrinth are pulled out of duffel bags, stuck together with Velcro and laid out for ritualized walking by anyone who cares to experience the maze, to stroll along its surprising torques and curves and, in so doing, to find a sense of calm.

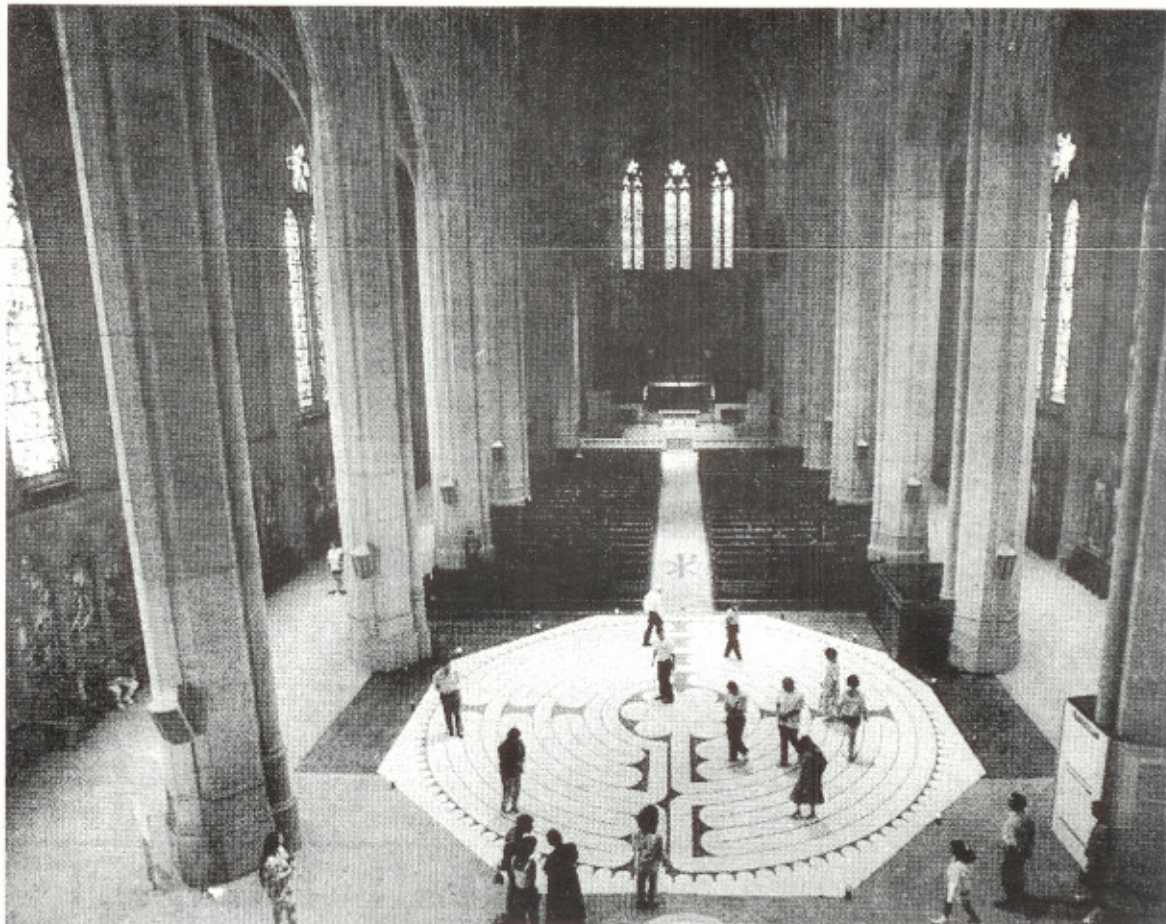
The labyrinth design painted on the canvas, the only one to be seen in any American church, also evokes a grand sense of history. Back in the 13th and 14th centuries, visitors to Chartres and other soaring cathedrals like Rheims and Amiens would walk the labyrinth designs built into the naves as the spiritual culmination of their lengthy pilgrimages.

The tradition of meditative walking has long since lapsed among Westerners, and chairs now cover the labyrinths of the great French cathedrals so completely that even many devoted Chartres lovers are not even aware the stone maze exists.

But at Grace, the Rev. Lauren Artress, canon pastor of the Episcopal cathedral, is trying to revive the tradition as a tool for encouraging introspection and spiritual transformation, whatever one's religion.

"When I'm walking the labyrinth, I have the chance to think about all the people in my life who are very sick right now," said Joanna DeVito Larson, an unemployed employee counselor. "A friend has ovarian cancer, my brother is addicted to drugs, my sister is falling apart psychologically. It makes me very sad, but being here at Grace gives me the focus that helps me deal with my troubles."

The labyrinth, Ms. Artress said, is a profound archetype seen in most cultures throughout history. The ancient Greeks had the labyrinth of Minos, whose serpentine corridors on the island of Crete led to the Minotaur, a creature with the head of a bull, the body of a man, and a bottomless appe-



Marc Geber for The New York Times

The 35-foot-wide labyrinth on the nave floor of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco duplicates a labyrinth built into the stone floor of Chartres Cathedral in France. Two evenings a month, the canvas replica is assembled for ritualized walking by those who wish to experience the maze.

tite for sacrificial young men and maidens. Hindus and Buddhists have the mandala, a circular design symbolizing the universe and totality. For medieval Christians, the labyrinth became a manageable substitute for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Act of Celebration

All good Christians vowed to visit Jerusalem during their lives, but most had to settle for a pilgrimage to great cathedrals like Chartres. Walking the labyrinth served as the final stage of the pilgrim's journey.

In the new rendition of the labyrinth rite, walking is less an act of penance than of celebration. Walkers are gently tutored on how to get the most out of the maze.

Going into the center, a walker is supposed to shed the solipsistic obsessions of everyday life. At the center of the labyrinth, a six-petal design, the pilgrim looks for illumination. "I call it clarity," Ms. Artress said. "You get insight into yourself."

On the way out from the center, the walker should feel a sense of commu-

nion with the cosmos, God, or some sort of higher, healing power. One woman at Grace, a retired lawyer who now writes for a living, described the experience of walking the labyrinth as "a dance I do with my soul."

Revealing Exercise

A high school math teacher said he found the journey toward the center much harder than the journey back out. "I practically stumbled while I was going in," he said. "Going out was much more peaceful."

Over the next few months, a permanent stone labyrinth will be built in the cathedral garden, and Ms. Artress will be taking the canvas labyrinth on the road, to show churches and other groups in Southern California, New York, North Carolina and elsewhere how to design one.

"You have to get the mystical figure in the center right," she said. Underneath the center is a 13-pointed star. "When you lay that star right," she said, "then all the paths are perfectly balanced."

Walking the Labyrinth

Strollers meditate as they walk along the 35-foot-wide maze painted on canvas and spread on the floor at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

The labyrinth is a replica of the design in the stone floor of Chartres Cathedral in France.

