

Centering on solutions

EMPOWERMENT BY WALKING THE LABYRINTH

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The labyrinth has been used as a means of personal empowerment for several thousand years. It is common in cultures all over the world and crosses all religions. The circular design is seen on the walls in ancient caves in Scandinavia, in Egyptian tombs, in the foundations of age-old temples in Greece and even in Native American traditional basket weaving patterns. The origin of this spiral formation is unknown. But its influence is being rediscovered today, and its calming, healing power seems to reconcile the intense need for reassurance, comfort and guidance in these times of uncertainty.

MODERN APPLICATIONS A labyrinth was laid down on the hallowed ground at the World Trade Center to help those who lost loved ones walk in meditation to resolve grief and loss. San Francisco's California Pacific Medical Center (PMC) is one of the first hospitals to install a labyrinth for patients, caregivers and family members to deal with the uncertainties of sickness, disease and death. PMC's Medical Director, Dr. Martin Brockman, calls it a "complementary" method of healing that is recommended in addition to traditional Western medicine. "No one knows exactly how it works, but it seems to help people deal with their stress," he says. At the famed Golden Door spa in Escondido, CA, an outdoor labyrinth encircled with flickering votive candles offers guests an opportunity to calm the mind, body and spirit in a sunset walk at dusk or under the moon. And these are just three of hundreds of labyrinths opened all over the country in the last ten years.

ANALYSIS OF A LABYRINTH The labyrinths that are being used today for self-empowerment, as a way of solving problems or answering personal questions, are re-creations of the traditional 11-circuit labyrinth from Chartres Cathedral in Chartres, France. This labyrinth was laid in stone in the nave of the cathedral. It is 42 feet in diameter with a single, 16-inch wide meandering path to the center of a six-petaled rosette – no tricks or blocks like a maze. The walker enters at a prescribed point and continues to the middle of the spiral. The six petals of the center motif are said to represent the six evolutions of life: mineral, vegetable, animal, human, angelic and the unknown, or the divine pattern of evolution that is unfolding and is beyond the grasp of the human mind.

Once people step into the center, they can choose to honor one of these stages of life, or several of them, depending on their feelings. The act of "centering" generates thoughts that always seem to apply to personal concerns at hand. The center appears to act as a vortex for dealing with fears and anxiety, almost without exception, with positive results. Once a "message" has been "heard,"

the walk out along the same pathway is devoted to contemplating the message and figuring out actions to implement it in daily life. The total length of the walk in and out is approximately one third of a mile.

Experts in geometry who have analyzed the 11-circuit Chartres labyrinth, find it is replete with complexity. A 15-pointed star is integral to the spiral and must be drawn up first before a labyrinth can be accurately laid out. Some view this "invisible star" as the guiding mechanism that empowers the labyrinth in some inexplicable way, establishing the pattern for the flow

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of energy that allows the seeker to have transcendental experiences. The number 15 is symbolic of the 15 full moons in a year, and also relates to the number of turns toward the center – 15 – when negotiating the spiral path. The double axe symbol that occurs at the turns has been found in many Mediterranean regions, including Crete, Greece and Egypt. According to archeological historians, this symbol represents power and is known as a "labyr," believed to be the root of the word "labyrinth."

The double axe symbols occur at the four quadrants of the spiral and mark each quarter of the year. The exterior edge of the labyrinth has 115 cusps or points, and 112 foils on the curved part of the rim. This pattern is called "the lunations" and relates to the sequences of the moon. So it is believed that the labyrinth was inscribed to be used as a calendar or measurement of time. But it is also a metaphor for the journey of life, with its twists and turns and unknown destiny. We use words and phrases every day that tune in directly to the labyrinth, i.e., "going

around in circles,”
“getting to the center of
things,” “walk the walk,”
“where are we going?” “are
we on the right path?” “let’s find
a middle ground,” and “get to the
heart of the matter.” All of these
situations crave for a home destination,
a place where conflicts, anxieties or
perplexing issues are resolved.

A LIFE-ALTERING TOOL The rediscovery of the labyrinth as a tool for personal transformation came to the U.S. through a remarkable woman in San Francisco. Dr. Lauren Artress is Founder and Director of the Veriditas World Wide Labyrinth Project at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. An Episcopal priest who earned her master’s degree in religious education from Princeton Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Andover Newton Theological School, she is also a licensed psychotherapist in the State of California. Dr. Artress’s awakening began at a meeting with philosopher and author Dr. Jean Houston, whose Mystery School is renowned for its forward-thinking seminars. At one such Mystery School retreat attended by Artress, Dr. Houston presented the history and relevance of the labyrinth. For Artress, it was an epiphany. Walking the spiral, she received a clear message that her life was

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going to change and that she was going “to exercise my heart muscle as never before.” It was the beginning of her research and subsequent resurrection of the medieval Chartres labyrinth into modern-day culture.

Shortly after her Mystery School weekend, Artress and some friends visited Chartres, only to find



Walkers during an Enrichment Workshop session at the Four Seasons Hotel, Beverly Hills. A canvas labyrinth was laid down in a private garden. The 11-circuit medieval labyrinth with its single path of twists and turns toward the petaled rosette in the center derives from a spiral pattern in the nave of Chartres Cathedral, France, dating back to 1201.

the labyrinth unused and hidden under 256 chairs in the nave of the cathedral. Taking courage and holding their breath, they removed the chairs, and walked the labyrinth while inhaling the history and mystery reverberating within this immense and beautiful Gothic structure. “It was truly powerful and drew me into a meditative state despite my uneasiness about walking it without permission,” she recalls in her book *Walking a Sacred Path*. (Riverhead Books). “Everyone in our group felt an awesome, mysterious sense of grounding and empowerment from the walk. However, what attracted my attention most was that the cathedral became light, fluid and joyful in the dark and quiet space.”

Her daring act caused a reactivation of the labyrinth at Chartres and the establishment of an important Chartres-San Francisco research and information axis that has flourished ever since. Returning home to the U.S., Artress found herself talking the Dean and the Board of Trustees

into installing a similar labyrinth in the nave of Grace Cathedral. It opened on New Year's Eve 1991 to a crowd of hundreds of people standing in line outside the cathedral to discover this unique and mysterious meditative experience. Millions have since walked the path, so many people, in fact, that Artress has "given up counting." In 1994, a new floor tapestry was dedicated at the cathedral – a one-piece wool carpet 56-feet in diameter, specially woven in South East Asia with the help and advice of Clara Igonda, partner of CNI Design in Los Angeles. A second labyrinth was laid in terrazzo outside the cathedral in 1995, 40-feet in diameter, open to the public 24 hours in a garden-like setting surrounded by trees.

DOUBTERS BELIEVE Artress gives seminars and lectures about the labyrinth all over the world and trains labyrinth facilitators to take on the role of introducing interested walkers to the history and techniques for walking it. "The Enrichment Workshop," accredited with a .2 CEU for designers and architects, is one such introductory learning option. (Industry sponsors have included Solutia, Trendway, Western Office Interiors and Metro Furniture). At these experiential gatherings, most people initially exhibit skepticism about the possibility of the labyrinth actually contributing to their daily lives or career paths.

But after a "hands on" walk, most come away quite astonished by the feeling of self-empowerment gained from it.

"I loved the idea of the workshop, and attending to spiritual and mystical matters in the middle of a work week. I had not really expected to come away with a message," said Nayana Currimbhoy of Currimbhoy Design, New York, N.Y. "But to my surprise, I found myself standing for a long time on the petals of the

rosette at the center, quite oblivious to the other people around me, a clear sense of wisdom slicing through the center of my brain. While walking back, I realized it did quite neatly pertain to the concerns I had jotted down earlier in the workbook session of the seminar."

INTERPRETATIONS Diane Barnes, Eastern Regional Manager for Metro Furniture in New York felt the workshop helped "in team building" and that they "provided a safe, exploratory environment for professionals to express their challenges and evolve them into their life goals." New York designer J.J. Falk, IIDA described her experience as "a new way

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of solving problems." After walking the labyrinth on a beautiful sunny day in a private garden at the Four Seasons Hotel, Beverly Hills, Pam Light, FIIIDA, Senior Vice President, HOK Interiors Group, Los Angeles, CA, said she contemplated "many messages and feelings" that she received. "It helped me understand the great responsibility our profession carries. We are creating images that people hold dear; safe homes with comforting warm spaces; we are specifying materials that are either toxic or safe; designing spaces that people want (or in some cases don't want) to be in to work, to be healed, to visit, to travel. We must live up to the challenge of making our world human."

As St. Augustine proclaimed many centuries ago, "Solvitur ambulando." All is solved by walking. ■

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