

RELIGION

Artress tells Chautauqua audience at lecture, 'Get thee to a labyrinth'

by Judy Lawrence
Staff writer

"From Sole to Soul: Walking the Labyrinth for Contemplation," was the topic of the Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress' presentation Thursday afternoon at the Hall of Philosophy. Artress is canon for special ministries at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

She handed out pieces of paper with designs printed on them. The designs looked like traditional labyrinths but these are "patterns" rather than labyrinths, she explained.

One side had a drawing of a classical seven-circuit labyrinth and the other was of the 11-circuit labyrinth like the one at Chartres Cathedral in France.

Artress asked the audience to trace a route on one of them "while keeping an inner eye open to their thoughts."

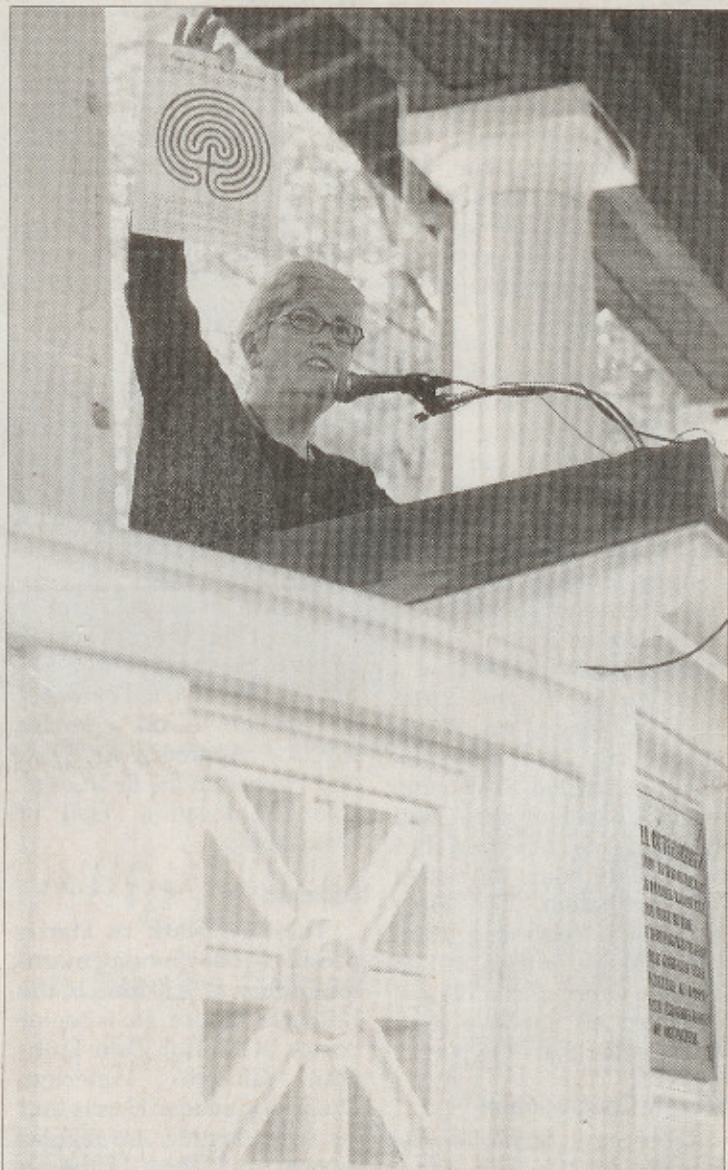
Huston Smith said "to the still mind, the world surrenders," she said.

She described a time when she watched shiner fish flashing like mirrors in the river. It drew her in to look at the patterns.

"This is the first time I realized that there's a sacred pattern behind nature ... that we're attracted to, we're drawn to, we don't know why, but we're drawn to," Artress said.

Years later she learned from a Native American that this is called "the dance of the fishes."

The medieval labyrinth has



Photos by Meghan Gauriloff

The Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress holds up a picture of a labyrinth (above), a 12th-century tool that symbolizes the path of life, at the Thursday afternoon lecture in the Hall of Philosophy. She spoke about about the labyrinth as a way to feed spiritual hunger.



ing for me gives me spaciousness inside."

American culture tells us it's dangerous to go inside. But people shouldn't only look for God outside, she said. God is everywhere, she said. Are people afraid to have time alone by themselves?

"Our culture wants us busy, folks," she said.

The labyrinth is one of the easiest ways to get to the spaciousness inside and it gets stronger and stronger over time.

"But you can do it other ways," she said.

Knitting, painting, watercolors, walking, or "anything that allows you to step out of the linear thought process that is evaluating, circumscribing, that is limiting your experience, that's where we need to go," she said.

Quieting the mind is an art form.

"It's very hard to tame the upheaval in your mind," she said.

A second thing that can come from the spaciousness is being able to not be reactive, to be responsive.

"If you have spaciousness inside yourself, then you have the capacity to reflect before you react," Artress said.

It's a great tool to connect contemplation with action. One can find what one wants to do, and make a decision informed by the soul while taking the next step in the labyrinth, she said.

When we have spacious-

called "the dance of the fishes."

The medieval labyrinth has 11 circuits. They're called circuits rather than paths because there's only one path to the center. One was put in the floor of Chartres Cathedral in 1201.

"They knew something we didn't know. They knew something about transforming the human consciousness," she said.

No one knows who first created this design.

The seven-circuit labyrinth is also ancient and is the Hopi medicine wheel and the Celtic labyrinth.

"These designs have some kind of power in them that we are still just beginning to understand," Artress said.

They are a walking meditation, a way to take people to quiet.

"They allow us to touch ... into that sacred well that is in each of us that allows us to be quiet and knowing and wise," Artress said. "We need wisdom on this planet."

They help people find compassionate heart and be broader and to think.

Between 1987 and 1991, Artress worked with AIDS at Grace Cathedral and was burned out.

"What's my next step?" she had thought. "That's a great quest for the labyrinth, folks."

At that time her prayer life was in tatters, she explained. She can't do sitting meditation when she gets stressed.

"I consider myself a failed meditator," she joked.

Lilly Tomlin's bag lady character said, "Reality is reported to be among the living causes of stress for those who are in touch with it."

"Well, if you're in touch with reality these days, folks, it is stressful," Artress added.

Walking the labyrinth led



her to Chartres Cathedral where she found the labyrinth covered by 256 chairs, which she and others moved.

The labyrinth is a frightening thing to most of the church. Churches like to teach that the only way to Jesus is through the advocacy of a priest.

"Well, maybe it takes another priest to come and say, no, no, no ... not in our day and age," she said.

There's an enormous hunger in the Western world for genuine religious or spiritual connection. We want to know God, not just believe in God, she said. The Christian mystical tradition used to teach this but no longer.

To find communion with the ultimate reality, contemplation is the first answer, Artress said. One problem is that the tradition of meditation handed down to us was through the monastic tradition and Indian traditions. With these you have to spend long hours meditating and that's no easy task, she said.

"For me the key was being able to move my body,"

Artress said.

It's easier to quiet the mind when moving the body. Sitting meditation is like trying to hold a volleyball underwater, she said.

The beauty of the labyrinth is that you can go through it any way, she said. One can go in silence, the silent or quiet, still way or the *via negativa*, or use what comes up in the labyrinth as part of her thought process. You find your natural pace and follow it, trust it, then that deep intuitive part can open up, she said.

If your thoughts crowd your mind, just let them. Eventually it becomes a trickle and the mind gets exhausted from thinking and lets go.

"Our soul needs quiet and it needs beauty and it needs peace," she said. "For me, a good practice that's function-

taking the next step in the labyrinth, she said.

When we have spaciousness the symbolic world speaks to us in a new way, Artress said. The metaphor of the labyrinth and its turns can be used to reflect on life.

In that quiet space one is able to receive what she's thinking in a new way, to see how people are marginalizing others, to see their shadow, she said.

A practice reveals slowly with each step the things we're frightened of including our gifts, she said.

"When you're working with a practice like a labyrinth, inner world becomes transparent to you," Artress said. "And we get curious about these things instead of frightened of them."

Finally, having spaciousness inside allows people to connect to their bodies. Many don't have a good relationship to their bodies. We forget them, she said. Labyrinths help people come into connection with their bodies.

Walking the labyrinth can bring imagination and reasoning power together.

"That's when, all of a sudden, our dreams, and our visions and our hopes have traction on the earth," she said. "So I want to encourage this audience here at Chautauqua to 'get thee to a labyrinth.'"

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