

One Path with **Many Turns**

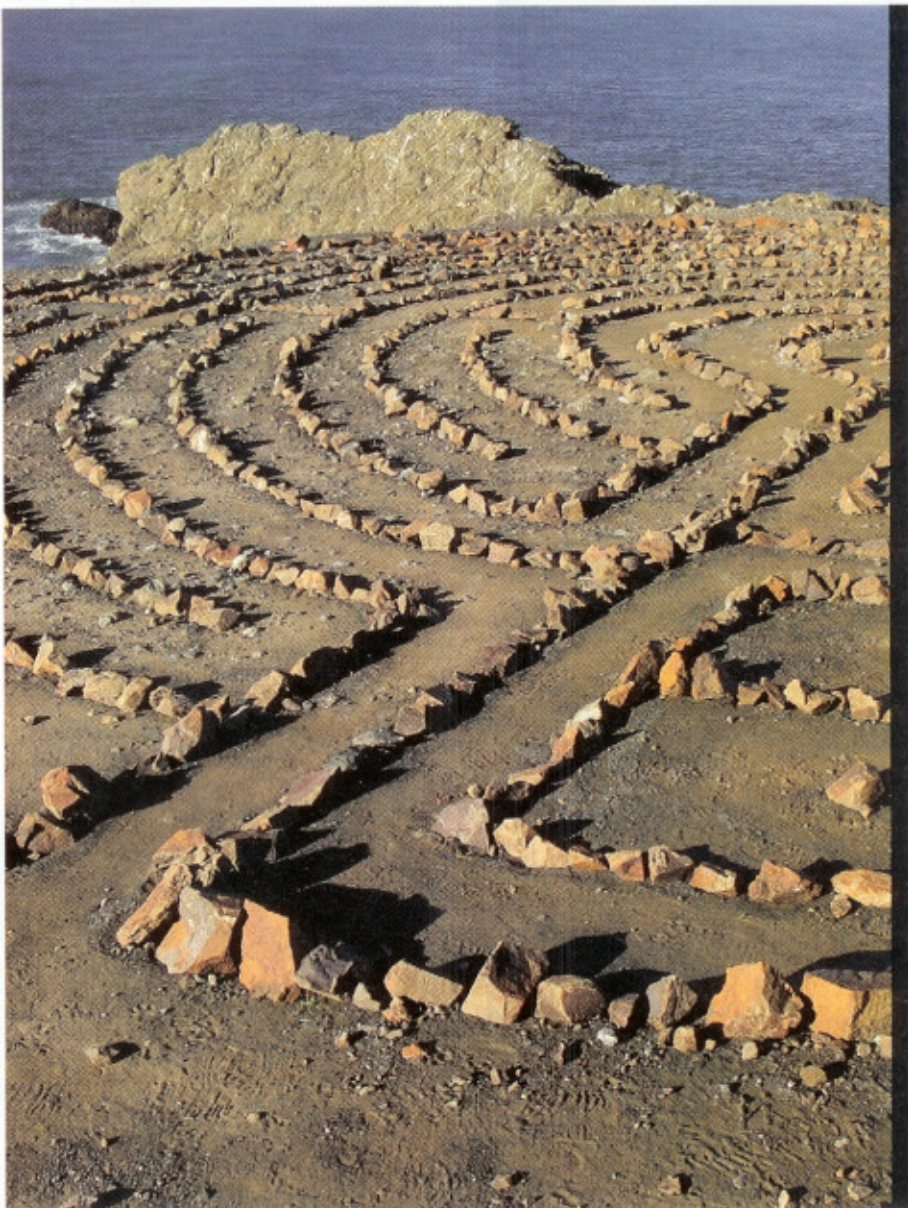
Discover the way to peace, healing and personal transformation, step by step.

BY VICTORIA FREEMAN

St. Augustine, a fourth-century theologian, once proclaimed, "*Solvitur ambulando*," or "It is solved by walking."

In few lives is that statement more compelling than in Ellen McDermott's. In November 1993 a stroke left the San Francisco resident impaired on her left side. She turned to labyrinths, a form of walking meditation, for healing. "I was drawn to labyrinths before my stroke because of their soothing meditative quality, but after the stroke I needed powerful healing and the labyrinth became even more important then," she says. "In my recovery I used conventional medicine, physical therapy, prayer and other spiritual practices, but walking the labyrinth was different. It was definitely unifying—the one thing that brought all the different aspects of healing together," McDermott says.

Over several months of walking the well-known labyrinth at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, McDermott regained her physical strength. But the healing went much deeper. "Walking the labyrinth helped me move beyond my physical body to find comfort, peace and confidence. I guess you could say it healed all of me," she says.



One path, endless potential

As one of more than a million people in this country who have walked a labyrinth, McDermott joins many pilgrims past and present who have found solace and strength through labyrinth journeys.

To walk a labyrinth, it's necessary to follow a path through an intricate pattern until you reach the center. Many people confuse labyrinths with mazes, yet critical differences separate the two. Mazes are "multicursal," which means you must choose among many possible

California Pacific Medical Center, in San Francisco, became the first US hospital to construct a labyrinth on their grounds.



paths once you enter, explains Helen Curry, author of *The Way of the Labyrinth: A Powerful Meditation for Everyday Life* (Penguin Compass, 2000). Wrong turns and blind alleys are common in

years, according to the Rev. Lauren Artress, president and founder of the nonprofit organization Veriditas, The Voice of the Labyrinth Movement and author of *Walking a Sacred Path:*

Of the 80 cathedrals that were constructed in the middle ages, 22 of them had labyrinths.

mazes, so is getting lost or disoriented, she adds. Whereas mazes are mental, linear, left-brained experiences, a labyrinth's path is soothing, rhythmic and meditative, says Curry, who also is the founding president of the global Labyrinth Society and executive director of The Labyrinth Project of Connecticut Inc. It's not possible to get lost in a labyrinth. Although some turns take you away from the center, your path is nonetheless sure, safe and gently guided, both in and back out again.

Labyrinths can be made of cloth or bricks; carved into stone floors, hillsides or walls; cut into living garden turf; or even woven into baskets. Circular labyrinths have a varying number of concentric rings, or circuits. The seven-circuit design (pictured below) is the oldest, dating back several thousand

Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool (Riverhead Books, 1996). The 11-circuit version (pictured on page 43), like the world-renowned labyrinth at the Cathedral of Chartres in France, most likely became well known around the 9th century. Recently, Curry developed a smaller three-circuit design for use in ceremonies such as weddings.

As a walking meditation, a labyrinth is similar to sitting meditations in its healing capacity, yet wonderfully different in its accessibility. "For me, walking the labyrinth is more available and effective than sitting meditation," Artress says. "It makes quieting my mind and being able to harness the power of concentration much easier."

Anchored in history, reborn in the present

"No one is quite sure how and where labyrinths were born," Artress says, "but of the 80 cathedrals that went up in the Middle Ages, we do know that 22 of them had labyrinths." Some evidence suggests these medieval church labyrinths were used symbolically to represent the journey to God. Other stories passed down through generations indicate ancient cultures from Rome to Scandinavia used labyrinths for good fortune, protection or healing.

"In the United States we've seen quite a strong labyrinth revival over the last 15 years," says Sudha Carolyn Lundeen, CHN, RN, a certified holistic health nurse and the labyrinth workshop



The outdoor labyrinth on the grounds of the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Mass.

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*I suffered a stroke one year ago and have an arterial vein blockage in my neck. I was on three different blood pressure prescriptions. I started taking **Green Cell Therapy™** two months ago and on my last exam, to the amazement of my doctor, the blockage was almost completely cleared. I'm totally off medications and feeling fantastic! Sid B., VA, age 55*



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The labyrinth as a healing tool

Scientific research delving into the labyrinth's healing powers is just beginning, and, in a ground-breaking pilot study conducted at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston, Texas, M. Kay Sandor, PhD, RN, recently became the first researcher to document evidence of its rejuvenating capacity. Sandor, an associate professor in the School of Nursing at UTMB and a nurse psychotherapist, explains that the study found a small decrease in breathing rate and improvements in mood profiles of the participants, after the labyrinth walk.

Meanwhile, progressive hospitals didn't wait for research proof before providing a labyrinth for their patients and staff. In 1998, California Pacific Medical Center (CPMC) in San Francisco became the first U.S. hospital to construct a labyrinth on their grounds, says Dennis Kenny, director of the CPMC Institute for Health and Healing's Integrative Clinical Education and Spirituality Program. Others have followed, like Mercy Hospital Grayling in Grayling, Mich., and Legacy Meridian Park Hospital in Tualatin, Ore. "We made the labyrinth accessible to anyone, placing it at the entrance to the hospital, right outside our main lobby and waiting area," Kenny says. "Cutting across spiritual beliefs and backgrounds, it provides a respite for patients, patient families and hospital staff when they most need comfort and peace. In a setting like this, the labyrinth's symbolic message is powerfully clear," he says. "There is a sanctuary for you here, and we care for much more than just your body parts."

leader at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Mass. But as Artress notes, it wasn't until 1998 that the *New York Times* officially labeled this revival "The Labyrinth Movement."

"There are now more than 1,600 labyrinths in the worldwide locator's database," Curry says (see page 48). "And more added daily in prisons, private and public gardens, schools and hospitals."

Why labyrinths now?

People are hungry for a richly symbolic life, especially for symbols that offer meaning and comfort, Artress explains. And "as an archetype of wholeness and unity as well as a metaphor for life's path, the labyrinth...offers a spiritual experience not tied to any particular religion or culture," she says.

"The labyrinth also offers much-needed psychospiritual healing," Artress notes. And sometimes it even helps

identify issues that need attention. "When those issues surface," she says, "it's important to go in and visit them. What are they trying to tell you?"

One night, Barbara Stephen Davis, an English-as-Second-Language



An 18-inch 12th-century "finger" labyrinth located on a stone pillar at the Cathedral of San Martino in Lucca, Italy.