

PEACEFUL PATH OF PRAYER



Tribune photo by GREG FIGHT

Gail Whiting, left, and Sister Cathy Cahill say a walk through the Franciscan Center's new labyrinth can help people develop a greater connection with God. Whiting had her first labyrinth experience two years ago in California.

The vacation in Colorado, deep in the color-studded mountains and far from cell phones, computers and deadlines, was perfect.

The re-entry was a disaster.

The car wouldn't start and needed to be towed. For the second time in a month, a mad pack of squirrels had ripped through the recently repaired screened porch to have another party in my domicile. Bills I thought had been paid never got mailed, so I'm looking at a heap of late charges.

Let's not forget gas prices, hurricanes and bad news out of Iraq, none of which went away.

Welcome home.



MICHELLE BEARDEN

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or in a wheelchair, there are lap labyrinths people use by closing their eyes and completing the circle with their fingers.

Think of a labyrinth as a symbolic pilgrimage or journey to the

FRANCISCAN CENTER SPECIAL EVENTS

Labyrinth Retreat

WHAT: Retreat led by the Rev. Lauren Artress

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday

WHERE: 3010 N. Perry Ave., Tampa

ADMISSION: \$25 for day (includes breakfast and lunch); \$15 for evening

Anniversary Ceremony

WHAT: Opening ceremony for 35th anniversary celebration; includes liturgy and social hour

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Welcome home.

What an appropriate time to tell you about the newest addition at Tampa's Franciscan Center, a favorite oasis of mine celebrating its 35th anniversary this month.

It's a labyrinth (not to be confused with a maze) modeled after the sacred design in the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France in the 13th century. Built of bricks in 11 concentric paths that wind through four quadrants of a circle, it's a place anyone can come to walk the circuitous path to the center as a way to quiet the mind.

Don't we all need a little of that from time to time?

"Yes, we do," says the Rev. Lauren Artress, an honorary canon at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and creator of the Labyrinth Project. "Think of it as a watering hole for the spirit. We all could use a little time out, especially in these trying times. And a labyrinth provides just that."

If you want to know more about the origins and purposes of a labyrinth, Artress is the nation's go-to person. She has been studying this ancient form of "sacred geometry" for 14 years. Her book, "Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool" (Putnam/Riverhead Books, \$12), is a handy guide to getting acquainted with this ancient form of serenity that is making a comeback in the modern Western world.

To The Center

Artress comes to the Franciscan Center on Thursday for day and evening sessions on how to use the labyrinth as a path of prayer, and how it quiets the chattering mind and turns it toward thoughts of God.

She estimates there are some 3,000 labyrinths throughout the country in spiritual and secular settings. About 100 hospitals use them for stress reduction for pre- and postoperative patients; the famed Golden Door Spa in Southern California offers guests a labyrinth for meditative purposes. They are used by practitioners of nearly every religious tradition, including Jewish mystics, Buddhist monks, Christian traditionalists and American Indians.

And for those who are bedridden

their eyes and completing the circle with their fingers.

Think of a labyrinth as a symbolic pilgrimage or journey to the divine. These archetypal images are found through history as far back as ancient Greece. The idea is that once you begin walking the path, it will gently lead you to the center of the labyrinth no matter how many twists and turns you need to negotiate.

The labyrinth is based on a circle, the universal symbol for unity and wholeness. Although labyrinths have been around for thousands of years, they haven't always been prominent.

"More on the fringe of culture, on the edge of our consciousness," Artress says. "People connect them to New Age because it's something you have to experience rather than just read about. But their rich history tells a story that gives a whole new perspective."

Time To Talk To God

Gail Whiting, a co-chairman of the Franciscan Center's yearlong anniversary celebration, had her first labyrinth experience at the Golden Door Spa two years ago. Walking the path forced her to slow down and dig deep within, something a self-described Type A personality such as she sorely needs.

"I'm one of those people who has a hard time sitting and meditating. I tend to fall asleep," she admits. "I keep thinking of things I should be getting up and doing."



The center's labyrinth, modeled after the floor of France's Chartres Cathedral, uses 11 concentric paths in four quadrants of a circle.

Anniversary Ceremony

WHAT: Opening ceremony for 35th anniversary celebration; includes liturgy and social hour

WHEN: 1 to 3 p.m. Oct. 9

INFORMATION: (813) 229-2695

But once you begin walking the labyrinth, you're committed. This is my time for introspection, talking to God, letting ideas come to me. I can separate myself from the world, if even for a brief amount of time."

A Tampa Jewel

There's no better place for the labyrinth than the Franciscan Center, one of Tampa's most precious jewels. Owned and operated by the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, the center is on the Hillsborough River near downtown Tampa. It offers day and overnight spiritual retreats for people of all faiths throughout the year. And now it has this labyrinth, built on tranquil grounds adjacent to the center and available to visitors who need a timeout.

"I think the hurricanes taught us that everything we have can be gone in just minutes; all the material things," says Sister Cathy Cahill, the center's director. "Our spiritual connection with God, ourselves and with each other is what is most important when everything else is gone. Here's a place where you can develop that and appreciate it."

There aren't many rules to walking the labyrinth. Take your watch off, wear comfortable clothes and release your daily life, if only for 30 minutes. When I take my first walk, I vow to forget I have to share space with squirrels in this world or that cars don't always start when you need them.

You can learn more about labyrinths on Artress' Web site, www.veriditas.net.

If you think this experience might make a difference in your harried life, check out the program next week.

Bring a journal and wear comfortable clothes. And leave your problems and worries at home.



Michelle Bearden visits the Franciscan Center's labyrinth on her "Keeping the Faith" segment at 9 a.m. Sunday on WFLA-TV.

Michelle Bearden can be reached at (813) 259-7613.