# The Labyrinth—Exploring A Path

*by Anne Tanner*

LABYRINTHS in Europe may have originated around the Mediterranean basin more than 3000 years ago, but their history is hard to trace. From earliest times, it seems they were used for various purposes by different cultures. Trojan warriors in classical times may have used labyrinth designs on the ground for training horses. Later, Roman children played an outdoor game with a labyrinth pattern called "Walls of Troy." Labyrinths also featured in goddess worship. In Baltic countries, fisher-folk walked labyrinths made of stones on a beach before going out to fish. This was to ensure a good catch.

Labyrinths are vehicles for prayer and reflection, often found near water, perhaps because of the association with healing and life-giving qualities. We may surmise that this is one significant reason for a pre-Christian vehicle for spiritual life being adopted by the Christian church. The oldest known existing labyrinth in a church is on a wall in a 4th century church in Algeria.

Until the later Middle Ages, labyrinths appear to have been well used as a part of Western Christian prayer and reflection. Now, after a period of about 400 years, they are being walked again throughout Europe, North America, and elsewhere. The complex pattern of the 13th century Chartres Cathedral labyrinth in France, laid in stone in the nave, is now being reproduced in grass (cut by a mower), or painted on canvas and on floors and on parking lots, or stamped out in the snow in public parks and people's gardens, and built with stones or paving in hospital and school grounds. A simpler, earlier pattern associated with ancient Crete is swept with brooms on sandy beaches and made with earth, flowers, and herbs in city and country gardens and at summer cottages. A Toronto hospital has installed a carpet labyrinth.

Early Christianity seems to have adopted labyrinth designs that could be walked on the ground, or traced by finger on a wall. A 9th century design, a forerunner of the later 13th century Chartres Cathedral pattern, can be seen on a pillar in a church in Italy dedicated to St. Martin of Tours. St. Martin founded the first European school of contemplative prayer. It is appropriate that this contemplative tool exists in a building dedicated to him.

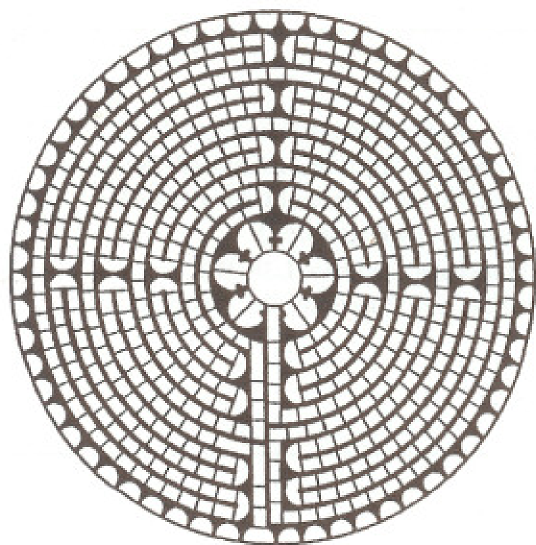
What is common to all labyrinth designs of any era or culture is a single, winding path leading into and out of a centre. There is only one path to follow in and out, and no danger of becoming lost. The only decision to make is to enter the path. Labyrinths may be best described as creative, right-brain, meditative aids to reflection. Walking a labyrinth is a symbolic journey that reflects the many twists and turns of daily life. A different perspective on our world emerges as we negotiate the turns in the path, meet and pass others, pause to look towards the centre or out into the surrounding space, and run, dance, skip, sit, or stand still. The labyrinth is an enigma; we still don't know why walking it becomes a healing process.

Mazes, on the other hand, are left-brain, cognitive puzzles, full of choices and tricks to confuse the unwary. Their paths may be lined with trees, walls, or hedges. Misleading turns and dead-ends make it difficult to find the way into and out of the centre.

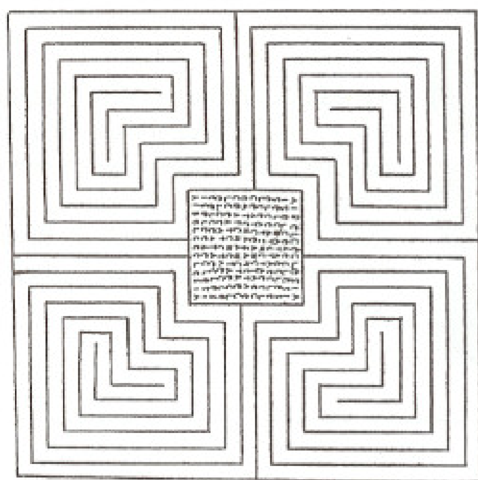
Women, men, and children walk labyrinths and experience healing and release on various levels. When the walk stirs up disturbing feelings and memories, these are felt as movements towards integration, not fragmentation. Many find joy and relief as they walk. "Holy ground" may conjure up an idea of special places set aside for meeting with God. But when we put a portable labyrinth down in a basement or cut one in grass in a public park, we walk its path in the confidence that we will find God's healing presence. This too is "holy ground."

Lauren Artress, an Episcopal clergywoman on the staff of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco has worked persistently to encourage wider use of the labyrinth as a spiritual tool. Both her work and her book, *Walking a Sacred Path* (see Resources at right), have strongly influenced the current labyrinth revival in North America. Grace Cathedral's carpet labyrinth in the Chartres pattern is laid permanently in the nave, and an outside terrazzo labyrinth is always open for walking. People from all over the world come to walk these labyrinths.

Why are many people so drawn to labyrinths? Lauren Artress suggests that an answer may be found in Carl Jung's writings about archetypes. The archetype that is enlivened in the labyrinth, she says, is the archetype of transformation,



The labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral, France



The labyrinth of the Church of Reparatus, Orleansville, Algeria

and she quotes Jung as follows: Archetypes "Are like river beds which dry up when the water deserts them, but which it can find again at any time. An archetype is like an old watercourse along which the water of life has flowed for centuries, digging a deep channel in it. The longer water has flowed in this channel, the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return to its old bed."[1]

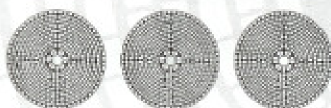
When we walk a labyrinth, water in the form of tears may also begin to flow, outward signs of those invisible inner streams. This can be a relief; the labyrinth is a safe place in which to grieve, to face pain, to allow a memory. Walking this path regularly also enables "water" to flow in those inner "dry channels." Culture, age, sex, colour, religious beliefs, or the lack of them, are irrelevant in the labyrinth.

At times, we come to communal worship with grief, pains, frustrations, anger, or scattered thoughts. We try to focus, to unload our failures and miseries. We hear words of forgiveness and encouragement, and, in the words of one hymn, the assurance that we are "forgiven, loved, and free" ("I come with Joy," *Common Praise, Anglican Church of Canada* (ACC) #60). Before leaving, we hear the injunction to "go in peace to love and serve the Lord" (*Book of Alternative Services,* ACC) or a similar bidding.

The threefold pattern of the labyrinth–walking the path to the centre, resting there, and then walking the path out–is similar to the process we follow when we worship in church. Effects may be immediate or delayed, but are always directed towards healing and wholeness.

The labyrinth is a symbol of life's journey and involves all our faculties—physical, mental, and spiritual. Our bodies are made for active prayer as well as still prayer, and at times our bodies will tell us that exercise **right now** will improve our physical well-being and nourish our spirits too. To combine walking with focused prayer in a labyrinth (or with a portable finger labyrinth if we cannot walk) is a way towards healing for the soul and the release of strength and courage to live life to the full.

*Anne Tanner works with labyrinths and encourages people in the practice of contemplative prayer. She has a doctorate from Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit. Anne was manager of the Anglican Book Centre in Toronto for 16 years. She has written two books (one on marriage breakdown and one on prayer).*



## Resources

Artress, Lauren *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool.* (New York: Riverhead Books) 1995.

*Common Praise* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre) 1998.

*Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre) 1985.

Matthews, W. H. *Mazes and Labyrinths, Their History and Development.* (New York: Dover Publications Inc.) 1970 (originally published in 1922).

[1] Reproduced from *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* by Lauren Artress, with permission of Riverhead Books, New York.