

The labyrinth-walking movement

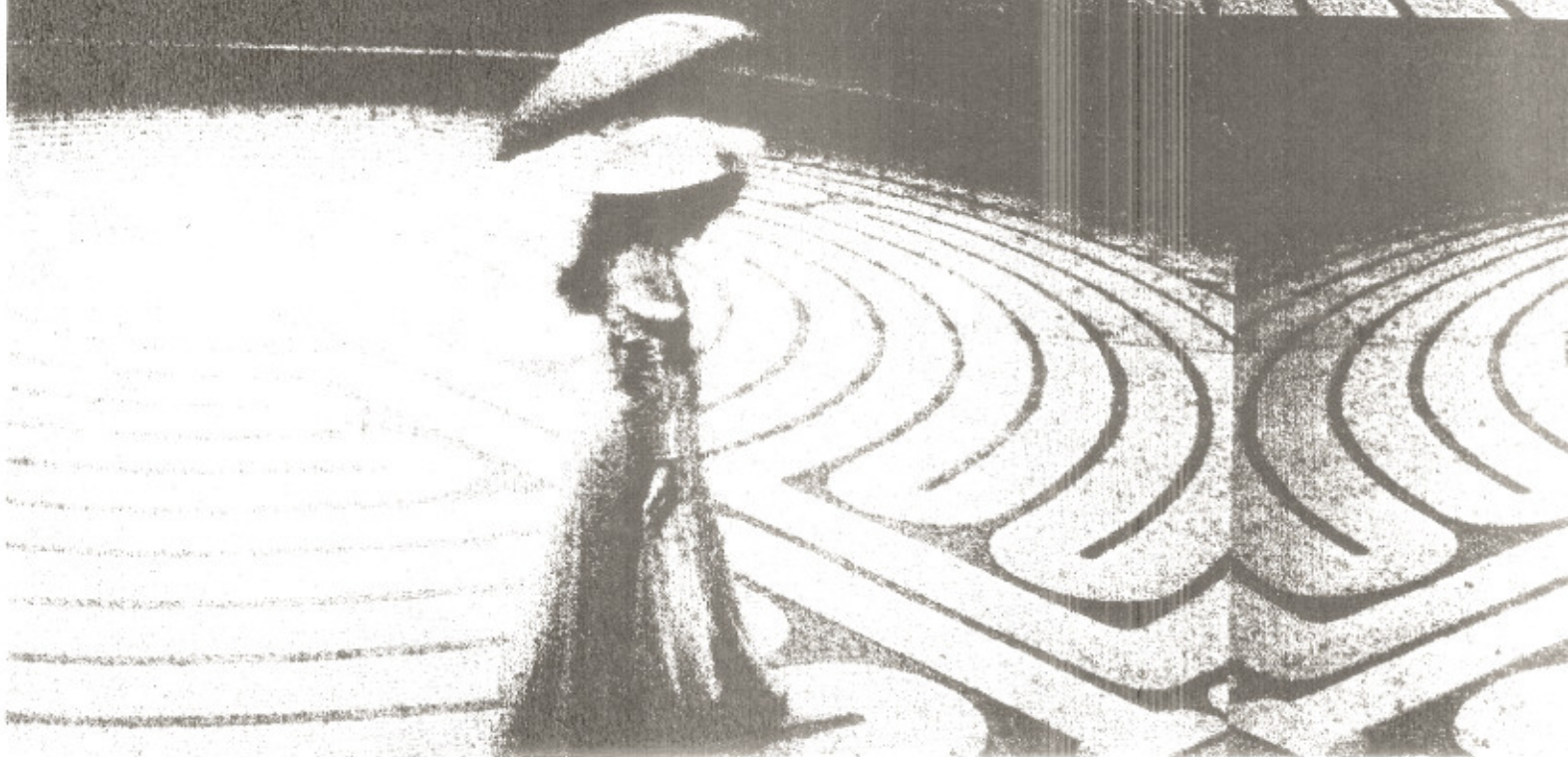
The Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress is sitting with a dozen people in an empty hotel restaurant in the famous French cathedral town of Chartres, explaining how to walk a labyrinth. Around her, seated in chairs drawn up to form a circle, the rest of us, mainly Americans, listen intently as she holds court. Some in the group — which includes the genteel-seeming owner of a tea shop in Kentucky, a retired couple wearing hiking shoes, an energetic blonde expatriate who lives in a houseboat on the Seine, among others — are scribbling notes.

"Take whatever's happening frame by frame, step by step," cautions Artress, an Episcopal priest and trained psychotherapist, whose title at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral is Canon for Special Ministries. "You can even enter the labyrinth with a dream in mind. As you begin to walk the dream, try to let it take on its own meaning."

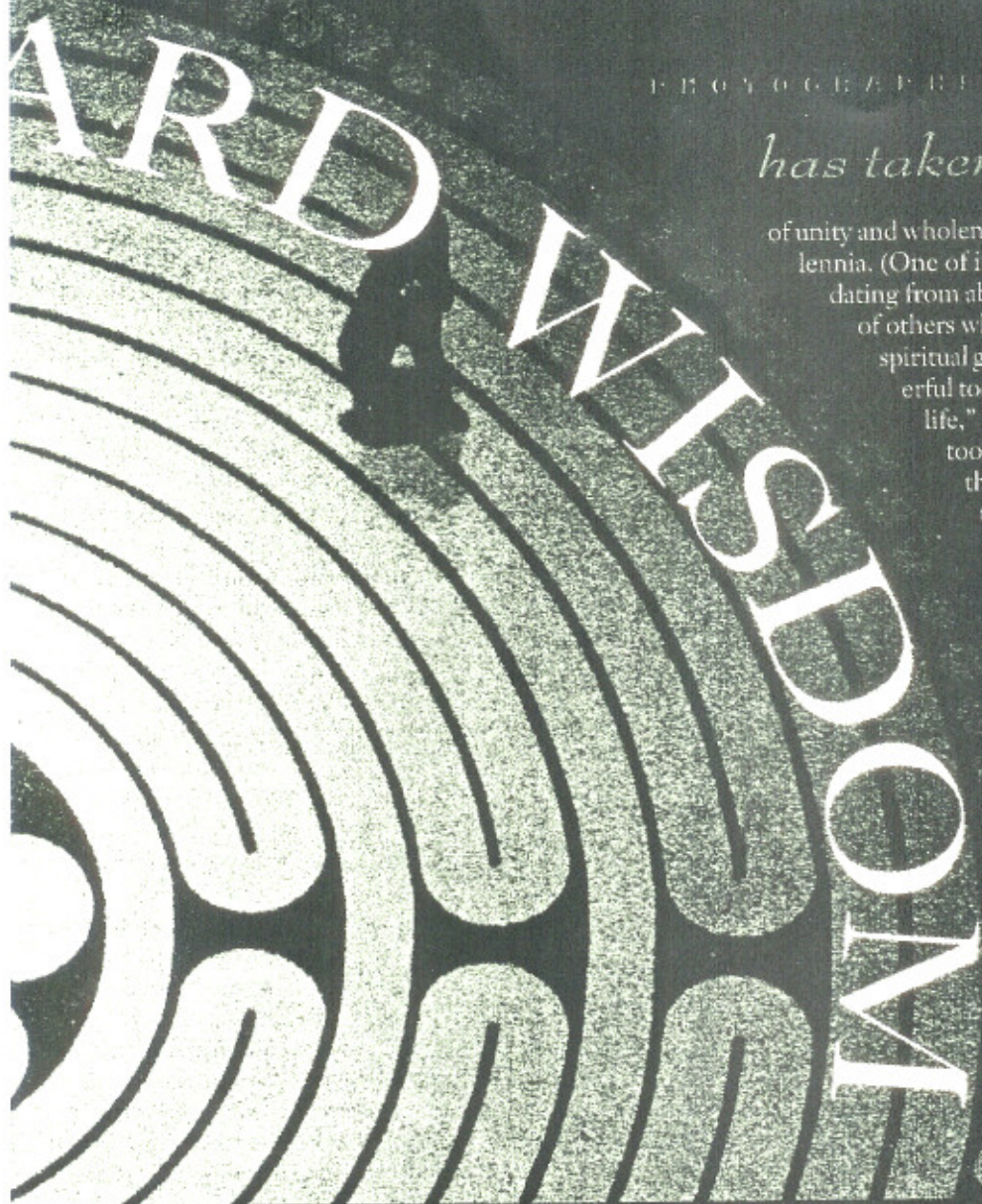
Tonight, the 51-year-old Artress — with bright blue eyes, feathery grey hair and a quick smile — has other tips, too, on how to approach the labyrinth: Wear shoes when walking it in public, at least when in Europe ("We've had some negative reactions from the French about walking barefoot"), walk in silence, walk with "soft-focused eyes," a state she feels is more conducive to spiritual awareness. And, yes, she says in response to one question, it's fine to write in your journal as you walk.

Based on the circle, the universal symbol

WENDY



WARD WILSON DOWN

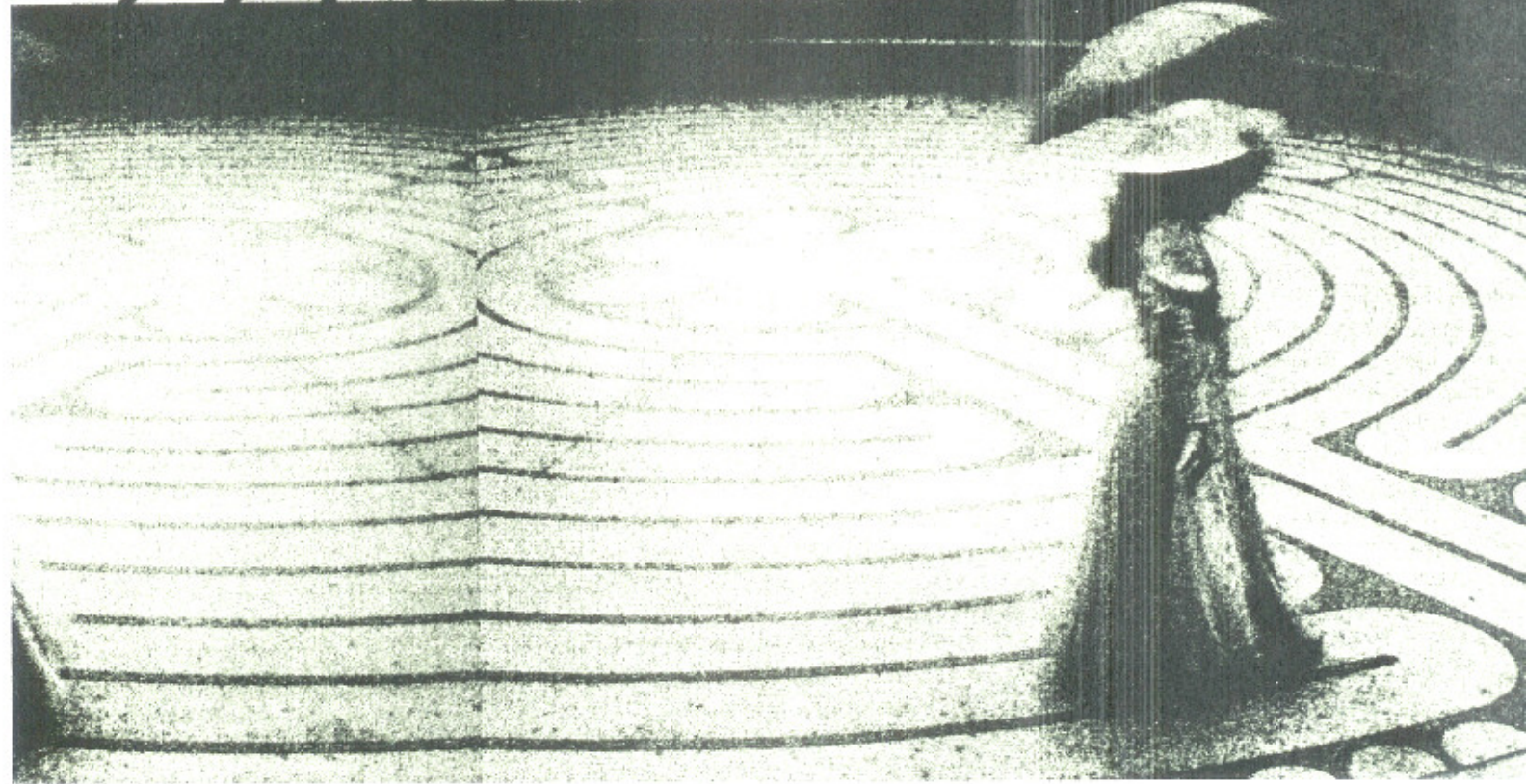


PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTINE ALLEN

has taken off all across America

of unity and wholeness, the Christian labyrinth has been around for millennia. (One of its earliest depictions is on a Sardinian rock carving, dating from about 2000 BC.) But for Artress, and growing numbers of others who have taken to walking the labyrinth as a means to spiritual growth, it's more than just a dusty symbol—it's a powerful tool for today. "It's a metaphor for our journey through life," she says. "It offers a path of prayer. It's a meditation tool, a wonderful tool that quickens the spirit and furthers people on the path... It's a sacred place that helps us rediscover the depths of our souls."

It's also a pattern traced on a flat surface. To walk it you follow a path from its circumference to the center along designated lines. (In the classic labyrinth, as at Chartres, these lines are squiggly; others, such as the squared-off Maltese-style labyrinth at Amiens cathedral, take other forms.) Unlike a maze, which typically has walls and is designed to disorient, you can't get lost in a labyrinth. The way is perfectly clear. But it's what happens to your mind as you make your way along it that's noteworthy. For an act so simple—placing one foot in front of the other—the labyrinth offers unexpected rewards. Whether they breeze through it in 15 minutes or choose to linger, many people find that through it they enter a calm and centered place, into a mood of quiet revelation. In an increasingly frantic-paced world, such escape has become a necessity.



"We're all besieged by the monkey mind," as Artress puts it, using a term purloined from the Buddhists. For those trying out the labyrinth for the first time, realizing how much noise one's own chattering brain makes may be its first, disconcerting revelation. The phenomenon of labyrinth-walking has taken off across America, largely through the efforts of Artress, who learned about the tradition at a retreat in 1991 and resolved to bring it to the world. "The labyrinth builders are copying patterns from the floors and walls of medieval Christian churches," said a *New York Times* story last spring. "They are laying stone labyrinths in backyards and gardens, rolling out canvas labyrinths at conferences, painting them on the floors of churches and mowing them in wheat fields and grassy parks."

And America is not the only place this is happening. There are reports of labyrinth-building in other countries, including Switzerland, where there's been "a huge proliferation of labyrinths," Artress says. In a country where women were only granted the right to vote in the mid-1970s, "the women of Switzerland have embraced the labyrinth as a symbol of themselves." Now, there are about 50 of them in that country, including one that's been traced into the Alpine countryside, its edges delineated by cowbells, its path encroached upon by grazing sheep.

Through Veriditas, an organization Artress founded at Grace Cathedral — the site of two labyrinths — Artress is largely responsible for this trend. Veriditas disseminates all kinds of labyrinth-related information. They've sold more than 800 "labyrinth kits," as well as table-top models and other labyrinthiana, including Artress' own book on the phenomenon, *Walking a Sacred Path* (Riverhead, 1995). They publish a newsletter and have a website (the Labyrinth Locator at www.gracecorn.org) that's logging 30,000 hits a month. In Veriditas-sponsored "Facilitator Trainings," conducted all over the country, Artress has advised close to 200 people in the organization of labyrinth walks. They also put on workshops and trips on a labyrinth theme. One of these led to Chartres last summer.

Since the early 1990s, when two classic, 11-circuit labyrinths (one, an indoor one in carpet form; the other, of terrazzo stone, set in an outdoor garden) were installed at the cathedral, on the top of Nob Hill, tens of thousands of people have come to experience them. "We finally had to stop counting," says Artress of the hordes of walkers, who range from bicycle messengers to businessmen, homeless people to wealthy parishioners. Many of them, stressed-out, make their way there to unwind. One walker, a 911 worker whose working life is one continual, unending emergency, stops by the cathedral frequently to trace the path at night. "She's always hoping her pager won't go off until she's done," Artress says, with a laugh. (At 36 feet in diameter for the indoor one and 38 feet for the outdoor, the labyrinths are large enough to allow up to 40 people to walk them at the same time.) San Franciscans aren't the only ones walking them at Grace. Visitors to the city are, too.

"We're working on the whole idea of helping tourists become pilgrims," Artress says. "Not just taking cameras but having experiences. When you walk the labyrinth, you're experiencing something, not just looking at something. It's shifting to seeing their lives with fresh eyes." The cathedral's outdoor labyrinth is the "first permanent labyrinth laid in the Western hemisphere in 600 years," Artress points out (although, at the rate they're being built these days, there must certainly now be others). People walk it day and night and in all sorts of weather conditions. In the Bay Area's annual rainy season, Artress says. "You'll see people walking it with umbrellas."

There's something endearingly child-like, almost tomboyish, about Artress. A Midwesterner by birth, she's likeable and unpretentious, surely one of the most approachable priests around. "It's a great day to walk the labyrinth," she said the first time we met, flashing her infectious smile. And she's always finding new benefits to the labyrinth. "It's a wonderful way of connecting with people we wouldn't ordinarily meet," she offered, at another point.

Artress was raised in Ohio, in a nonreligious family. Her own spiritual feelings first surfaced one day when, as a teenager, she took a walk and came upon dozens of fish in a river, moving together with mysterious synchronicity. "It was as if I were let in on some great secret," she recalls. "The sense that there was order in the universe. This sense of mystery behind it all unfolded for me." It's no surprise that, later, Artress was drawn to the labyrinth, which she describes as "very much like nature. It imprints on you slowly and unfolds slowly." Over the last few years, her life and destiny have become intertwined with the labyrinth. "Lauren herself has had a wonderful personal journey through it, without being inflated by it," as the Rev. Alan Jones, dean of Grace Cathedral, puts it. If there's any personal or professional risk in being identified with a movement that some might consider New Age or fringe, she seems blessedly unconcerned.

She has a remarkably clear sense of her place in the world. "My reason for being on the planet is to address the spiritual hunger of our times," she says, with confidence. For her, the labyrinth has turned out to be an efficient way of staving off the world's hunger. Her ambition for it seems boundless: she's even proposed that people gather in labyrinths around the world on New Year's Eve 2000.

When Artress first suggested installing one at Grace Cathedral, she blushed violently as she described the project to a colleague. "I found my face turning red. But the idea would not leave me," she writes in *Tracing a Sacred Path*. She kept thinking about labyrinths, and she kept talking about them. Finally, she approached her boss, Alan Jones, with the idea of building a labyrinth — or two — at that institution.

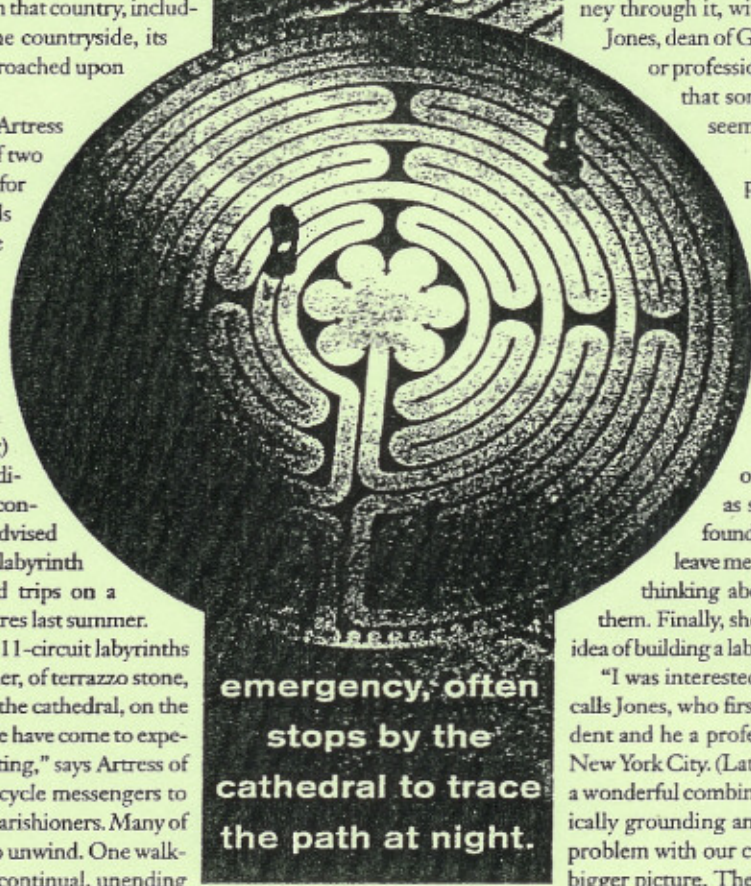
"I was interested because it was deep in the tradition," recalls Jones, who first met Artress when she was a graduate student and he a professor at General Theological Seminary in New York City. (Later, he hired her at Grace.) "The labyrinth is a wonderful combination of something that is both psychologically grounding and deep within the historic tradition. The problem with our culture is our inability to see ourselves in a bigger picture. The labyrinth combines something that's im-

mediately accessible and nonverbal with what I consider to be the best insights of a mystical tradition." Artress touches on this as she prepares our group for its walk, alluding to the "transformative energy" to be found in the labyrinth.

Just a short uphill walk away looms the great Gothic cathedral of Notre-Dame de Chartres, with its famously asymmetrical towers. Almost 800 years after it was built, Chartres is still a powerful place of pilgrimage, attracting more than four million tourists a year. Tonight, after its massive wooden portals are locked for the day, our group will enter the empty cathedral through its crypt — a holy site where the Celts worshipped long before Christianity — climb a stairway into its soaring nave, and walk its labyrinth by candlelight. Because it has been covered by chairs for decades, we will be among the few to have done so in a very long time, perhaps even for centuries. As our date with the labyrinth approaches, a restlessness seems to descend on the group. The meeting ends with the scrape of chairs being pushed back and some last-minute chatter that sounds, to me, distinctly nervous — a fitting

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reaction, perhaps, to the prospect of being let loose, at twilight, in one of the most sacred spots in Christendom.

The very idea of the labyrinth can provoke fear, Artress confirms. "People are very insecure about prayer. How to do it. Most of all, they don't know how to quiet the mind." "Will I get lost?" they worry. People are so afraid of losing their way." In the labyrinth, "you can get lost but it's not designed to get you lost. It's designed to help you find the center."

No one knows why in the Middle Ages, when the great European cathedrals were being constructed, stone labyrinth patterns were traced into some of their floors. The French historian Jean Villette has theorized that each cathedral's labyrinth provides a key to the "sacred geometry" that's said to be behind each cathedral's design. Villette also mentions the labyrinth's pagan origins, how it symbolizes the course of life, with birth at its circumference and death at its center. Artress is convinced that, before falling from active use more than 300 years ago, they were used for meditative walking, citing the way their surfaces have worn over the years and how medieval pictures sometimes show pilgrims walking in patterns. "This was created by great masters of spirit," she insists. "It's nothing accidental or decorative."

Some scholars, though, including Malcolm Miller, the author, noted Chartres expert, and leader of countless tours of the cathedral, disagree, saying that little evidence of this has come down through the years. "There's no way to know for sure if anyone walked [the labyrinth at Chartres]," Miller says, adding that such a practice "doesn't figure into the literature of the time."

Whether historically accurate or not, labyrinth-walking is definitely on the rise. By now, it's become a kind of subculture where people congregate with like-minded others. Certainly that was the case with our group, as we climbed the streets of Chartres. All we had in common, it occurred to me, was this funny quest: to walk an historic path together. It was the end of a warm, summer day in this ancient city, which is endlessly flooded by waves of tourists. The cathedral had shut for the night and people headed down the hill, talking in many languages. Our

group, making its way uphill, seemed to be swimming against the tide.

"I'm going there out of friendship," Artress had said of this trip, before leaving San Francisco. "The rector of Chartres [Francois LeGaux], has become a friend. We both hope the labyrinth can be opened in some form." Chanonin LeGaux, as he is known in France, had visited Grace and been impressed with its labyrinths, according to Artress. He'd laughed heartily when she confessed that, on an earlier trip to the French cathedral, she and a group of friends had removed the chairs covering the labyrinth and walked it, without permission, before being confronted by church authorities. To Artress' surprise, when she returned to Chartres this year, she found that its labyrinth had already been opened to the public, if only for a few weeks, and only for an hour or so each day.

Even so, in France, at least, there's been a certain hostility toward the labyrinth movement from the traditional church establishment. Artress is loath to comment on this, but others do. Malcolm Miller, the Chartres scholar, summed up his hesitations.

"There's a lot of nonsense being written about labyrinths these days," he said, adding that he was saddened by the kind of people the freshly exposed labyrinth at Chartres seems to attract. "They're the wrong sorts of people," he said emphatically. "Just today, two women appeared who looked like witches. They were dressed all in black and they terrified people."

Across from the cathedral, the owner of Penelope, a crowded tourist shop, laughed when I asked him why he thought the labyrinth had been opened. "The clergy didn't want to open it, but talk of it was in the air," he said. "They didn't have a choice." On shelves throughout his store — and in the cathedral gift shop, for that matter — there are new objects for sale, things that weren't here during my last visit, a few years back: a labyrinth-shaped tile (\$12); postcards of it in both color and black and white; a glass labyrinth paperweight (\$25). In the town itself, an enormous exhibit on labyrinths was taking place, entitled "A Labyrinthine Summer in Chartres" (one Artress wasn't impressed with because, among other

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things, it seemed to confuse mazes with labyrinths).

On our night in Chartres, a cathedral employee solemnly let us into the crypt. Didn't Artress say, "Enter the labyrinth with a dream"? The whole evening visit seems dream-like now. The crypt was cool; its history terrifying (drowned saints in its ancient well, a horrifying Norman massacre). We climbed the stairs into the cathedral in deathly silence. As we entered the transept, the stillness and dark of the cathedral, lit only by candlelight, made the space seem alive. Walking along the ambulatory, beneath an enormous cross, I had the extraordinarily tangible sense of centuries slipping away. It occurred to me that this experience, that of moving through an empty cathedral at twilight, past some of the world's most famous stained-glass windows — each ablaze in the fading light — was no different than it would have been eight centuries earlier. Time had collapsed and we were back at Chartres at a time when its nave was the center of village life, when market stalls were

placed in the midst of the cathedral, and passion plays, honoring the Virgin Mary, were enacted in its portals.

"It's like watching an [M.C.] Escher print come to life," a serious labyrinth walker from Tennessee named Ann Robinson Smithwick told me, describing the experience of watching a labyrinth fill up with walkers. "To me it's as meditative to watch as it is to do." That thought stayed with me as one after another of our group stepped into the circle and began to walk it in countless different ways, some barefoot, some with eyes closed, some raising their arms ethereally as if in a trance. One woman really did scrawl notes in a book as she walked. Watching them move through flickering candlelight was strangely calming. When my turn came, the trip around the circle turned out to be surprisingly long and winding — and also anticlimactic. For no sooner had I begun to walk than I heard the great cathedral bells tolling, nine distinct times, and had the abrupt realization that I would miss the night's last train

back to Paris if I didn't make it quick. And so, mundanely, I was brought back to earth. But I knew I would try it again, if not here, then somewhere else in the world.

I should confess to being a skeptic, with a prejudice against anything that smacks of mysticism or the New Age. But the labyrinth, with its long historical tradition, its place at the origins of Christianity, has an undeniable authenticity. And, given the collective madness that's overtaken Washington, D.C., lately, who can deny Artress' assertion that our society is spiritually hungry, even starved? If this unassuming, circular pattern can help, even just a bit, then why quibble? Whether we choose to believe in the labyrinth's spiritual power or not, there's no denying that, as Alan Jones puts it: "We need to recover mystical, spiritual forms. The mystical tradition is inclusive, compassionate, and healing. It's all the things the world needs." ◊

Penelope Rowlands is a Bay Area-based writer whose work has appeared in Architectural Digest, Vogue and Premiere magazines.

