

THE LABYRINTH AS A PATH OF WISDOM, WONDER, AND HEALING.

*Solvitur ambulando...
It is solved by walking...*

—Saint Augustine

It's a typical weekday morning in downtown San Francisco: stockbrokers are already at work on East Coast time, streetcars are rumbling along on their own time, and up on Nob Hill, in the midst of high-rise office buildings and high-rent hotels, labyrinth walkers are stepping silently right out of time.

A tall, elegantly dressed woman, certainly on her way to work, removes her shoes and carefully places them on the bench at the edge of the terrazzo labyrinth. She walks slowly and gracefully around the soft curves of this ancient shape. Her hands meet gently behind her back.



Janet Thomas photos

Early morning walkers on the labyrinth at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral.

Her head bows slightly as she loses herself in the privacy of her path. Once in the center, she stands without moving for a long time—perhaps seven or eight minutes. Then she comes quickly to attention, turns and walks in a straight line directly to the labyrinth entrance. She's all business as she slips on her fine shoes and heads purposefully off to work.



“Our souls hunger for the lost connection to our intuitive nature expressed through myths, dreams, stories and images. We long for a creative, symbolic process that nurtures our spiritual nature, that feeds our soul.”

—Dr. Lauren Artress
in *Walking the Sacred Path*

In her book, *Walking a Sacred Path* (Riverhead Books, 1995), Dr. Lauren Artress writes about the history of the labyrinth and its commonality in such diverse spiritual paths as the Jewish mystical tradition, the Hopi medicine wheel and the Tibetan sand mandala. In the Christian tradition, the first labyrinths were found in Gothic cathedrals and were symbolic paths where the sacred pilgrimage to the Holy Land could be made closer to home.

This particular labyrinth is in the garden pavilion at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, where there are actually two labyrinths, the terrazzo one outside and a woven one inside. They were introduced by Dr. Artress, who

was inspired by her 1991 experience with the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral, in France. Upon her return from that trip, Artress was provoked by a spiritual (and physical) restlessness that abated only when she realized that her task was to bring the labyrinth to Grace Cathedral. “I blushed to my roots every time I talked about it,” says Artress who is the Canon for Special Ministries at Grace Cathedral as well as a psychotherapist. “But it was what I had to do.” Now she leads labyrinth pilgrimages and workshops throughout the world and is dedicated to spreading its ancient wisdom as a spiritual tool into the new millennium.

The labyrinths at both Grace and Chartres cathedrals are classic 11th-circuit labyrinths—11 concentric circles with the 12th being the center of the labyrinth. They are based on sacred geometry, which, according to Plato, “draws the soul to truth.” The path meanders throughout the whole circle, making 34 turns before it reaches the center.

Labyrinth walkers include everyone from spiritual seekers to the simply curious. After more than 250,000 visitors had walked the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral, the staff stopped counting. And they come not only to walk—early morning activity also includes a group of elderly Chinese women who do their tai chi exercises around the perimeter. It is simply a sacred place that draws people to it—kids and grandparents, teens in love, parents in doubt, and overextended adults of all beliefs and disbeliefs. It is an oasis in the midst of life at its most complex. There is one way in and one way out, and there are no tricks.

A labyrinth is not a maze. A maze

confounds you with dead ends and challenges your wits. There are no dead ends in a labyrinth. It does, however, jolt your expectations—curving in another direction just as you think you can see where it's going. But its gentle curving path always holds you secure and goes straight (in winding, circular fashion) to the heart of it—the six-petaled rose in the center—the place of prayer and meditation. Or rest and reflection. There is no wrong way to walk, crawl, run, sit, think, pause, pray or play in a labyrinth. It represents all that we are and all that we experience. It can be a metaphor for anything from the way we drive to work to the way we experience the Divine—which might be during the drive to work.

During a four-day weekend workshop with Dr. Artress and the Grace Cathedral labyrinths, members of our group shared experiences from the profound to the sublime. One man walked in skepticism, sat in the center and immediately heard a voice inside his head say, loudly, clearly and gently, "You're very angry at me, you know." It was utterly unexpected and he had no idea who it was or where it was coming from, but he did some mental asking around. The answer was more than he could accept and, unable to use the word "God," he grudgingly referred to a divine presence that loved him beyond measure. "If I am angry at God, then there might be one," he said, in some state of shock.

One woman faced the absurd depths of her "niceness." She raged in frustration. "I am so polite," she



Chinese elders do their morning exercises around the edge of the outdoor labyrinth.

said, "when I walked, all I could think of was making way for, and greeting, those coming out. And I couldn't bring myself to pass anybody. I couldn't walk outside the lines." She had a powerful realization that the cost of being so nice was that it really did—literally and otherwise—block her path.

Many walked the labyrinth for healing: grieving lost loved ones, facing their own struggles with illness, coping with change. Walking the labyrinth doesn't always make life's experiences better, but it can make them more real—which opens us to vulnerability and connection with others. Some also walked it for play, to



"The circular path inward cleanses and quiets us as it leads us in. The unwinding path integrates and empowers us on our walk back out. Walking out of the winding path, we are literally ushered back out into the world in a strengthened condition."

—Dr. Lauren Artress in *Walking the Sacred Path*

celebrate a freedom of movement and their own sense of spirit and vitality.

Although there is no "right" way to walk the labyrinth, there is a protocol. We were encouraged not to interfere with another's experience. If someone cried, leave him or her alone. Likewise if someone laughed. There was one person who roared with such ferocious laughter that some of us were spellbound; others wanted to run for cover. It would come out of nowhere and end just as abruptly. She was encouraged to follow the laughing completely, to see where it went. Which was to grief and tears, much to her surprise.

At one point, sitting quietly in



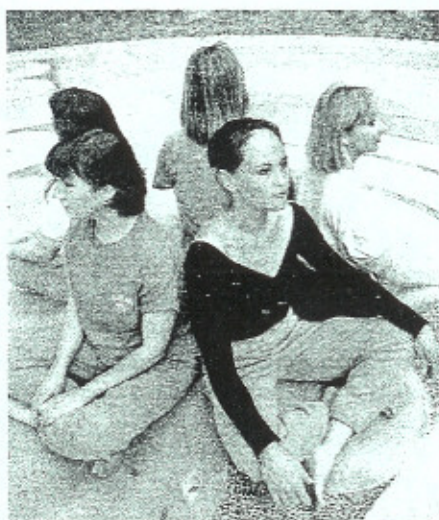
Moments of meditation in the five-petaled center of the labyrinth.

the heart of the labyrinth, I was caught by the shape of it all, moving at the edge of my peripheral vision. The movement of those walking was

THE LABYRINTH— A MEDICAL ADVANCE

At Mid-Columbia Medical Center (541/296-1111) in The Dalles, Oregon, where you get everything from a massage before surgery to symposiums on spirituality and healing, the labyrinth is an integral part of the patient-centered care commitment. Mid-Columbia was extensively featured on Bill Moyers' PBS documentary *Healing and the Mind* and is routinely visited by medical professionals from around the world.

Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco (415/563-4321) was the first medical facility to create a labyrinth for healing purposes. It is walked by a diversity of people: cancer support groups, patients in need of stress reduction, family members waiting for new babies, and staff looking for a meditative moment.



Sitting in circles on the labyrinth at the Golden Door.

elliptical within the circle—like planets moving around both their own sun and the center of the universe. This 40-foot square became a universe of comfort and possibility. The tangible sense of others walking their own unique path yet all of us being on the same path left me feeling both included and secluded. Safe and adventurous. Safe and sound.

There was music: "The Feather on the Breath of God," by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who composed and ministered in the 12th century—when the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral

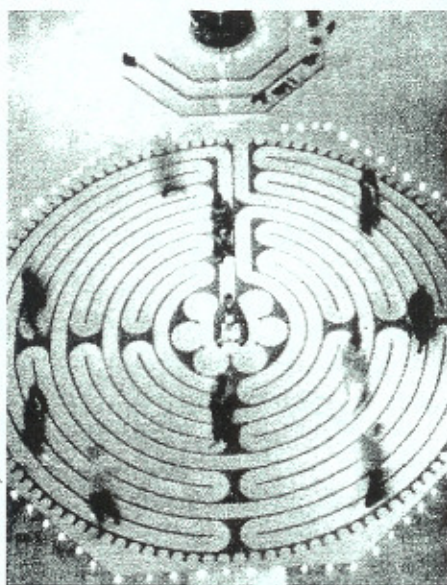


Photo courtesy of Veriditas

The indoor woven labyrinth at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral is open to the public on a regular daily schedule.

was being built. And the soaring songs and sounds of *Mysteries*, performed live by Musica Divina. Haunting, beautiful chants that we could sing along with while we walked.

On the pews we could sit and dream, lie down and sleep, or simply watch others walking the labyrinth. It was powerful and humbling to watch others in a continual flow of prayer. To see tears, laughter, faces rapt with private moments of realization. We felt like family, and we didn't know one another's names.

Dr. Lauren Artress and her labyrinth movement are in the forefront of a spiritual renaissance in which the boundaries between organized religion and self-styled spirituality



"Upon entering the labyrinth, we sense that it is a symbol representing the whole. Our world of splits and divisions disappears for a few contented minutes."

—Dr. Lauren Artress in *Walking the Sacred Path*

are forging new territory. Her labyrinth vision is far reaching and integrating—encompassing joy and rejuvenation as well as profound realization. A time to play as well as a time to explore the subtle and soft choices that honor what's going on inside each of us. The labyrinth is a path where we are pulled into the present while entering the eternal. Where every curve is a curve home, even with the local streetcar rumbling over your right shoulder.

For information regarding a labyrinth near you, contact Veriditas, The World-Wide Labyrinth Project: Grace Cathedral, 1100 California Street, San Francisco, CA 94108, tel: 415-749-6356. The web site, at www.grace.com.org (click on Veriditas) is an excellent source of information.



Dr. Lauren Artress

IN SPA CIRCLES

"It was really profound," says Dr. Lauren Artress. And she's not talking about the labyrinth, she's talking about being cared for at the Golden Door. Artress arrived at the spa in June 1997, reeling from years of non-stop traveling, workshop facilitating and writing deadlines. "I was dead tired when I got there. So drained, and in trouble," she says. It was a week of nurturing that would literally help make the continuation of her work possible. And, as there's a labyrinth at the Golden Door, Artress had the support of the sacred path she had worked so hard to re-establish.

Deborah Szekely, founder of the Golden Door, had attended a labyrinth workshop with Dr. Artress. "She's a visionary," says Artress, about Szekely's immediate affinity for the labyrinth and its subsequent installation at the Golden Door. Dr. Artress now leads labyrinth workshops at the "Door" and at other spas throughout the country. She packs up her portable canvas labyrinth, negotiates it through airports and on and off planes in cheerful "Have Labyrinth, Will Travel" style.

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