

Walking the Labyrinth

A Chat with Lauren Artress who already has
launched a worldwide movement of people
finding the Divine by walking a Sacred Path

BY SVEN HOSFORD



Lauren Artress (above) conducts workshop around the world on the power of the 11-circuit labyrinth, such as found on the floor of Chartres Cathedral (above right).

(Below) East Liberty Presbyterian Church has canvas labyrinths for use indoors and out. There are many events throughout the year when one is laid out in an outdoor courtyard. Regular indoor walking hours are Mondays from 10am to 3pm and Wednesdays from 10am to 9pm. Visit www.cathedralofhope.org for more information, or call 412-441-3800.

Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress never imagined, when she released her book *Walking a Sacred Path* in 1995 that she would create a worldwide resurgence in popularity of Labyrinths, or more specifically, creating and then walking labyrinths. On a visit to the Chartres Cathedral in France, she had discovered a pattern in the stones of the floor, a winding path that reversed itself repeatedly as it wound toward a center that resembled a six-petal flower. No one had paid much attention to the pattern for a couple centuries, but when she pushed the chairs aside and walked it from the beginning to the center, her world changed. Long story short, she's now widely regarded as the mother of what the New York Times in 1998 called the Labyrinth Movement.

What fuels this movement is the actual experience of walking the path, of actually losing oneself in the twists and turns until reality bends, and like Alice's trip down the rabbit hole, you enter an altered – and holy – space. While a walk on the Labyrinth is different for each person – and indeed most people will find each walk unique – the winding back and forth creates a sort of hypnotic effect that gently pushes the busy chattering mind aside and allows the still small voice within to speak with less hindrance.

To walk the Labyrinth is to comprehend the power of the metaphor. The labyrinth is a walking metaphor – you are living the metaphor as you walk. The Path of the Labyrinth

becomes the path on whatever drama is playing out in your life. During her workshop, she speaks of Joseph Campbell, who said that the soul communicates in pictures, and to not understand that – that the soul speaks in pictures – is like going into a restaurant and trying to eat the menu, not realizing that it only represents the food.

I first met Lauren and the Labyrinth in 1996 during a workshop in Pittsburgh. I remember the power and depth of what I learned from each particular walk. Over the course of two days we walked specific walks to represent our career, or our love life, or a complex problem. Real solutions would emerge while walking or while sitting in meditation in the center. And even though we knew we shouldn't eat our menus, we felt real terror at times that we might lose our way, and never reach our goal. It was only paint on canvas, but it demanded constant focused attention, and that focus eventually muted the mental chatterbox, and a profound sense of peace and oneness eventually sat down gently in our hearts.

Mother speaks

Lauren is remarkably warm, humble and approachable. She speaks passionately about the focus of her life, and can't wait to get started talking about it. "All-righty, let's dive in, hunh?" she bubbled as soon as we began talking recently by phone. She claims to love interviews because they "kinda jiggle my mind about new ways about thinking about things when people ask questions that go to the heart of it."

I asked her how, as the mother of the Labyrinth Movement, she had seen it change in the last 8 years. "Well, number one, it started," she said. We laugh. "The New York Times were the first ones to use the term. It was kind of embarrassing. When we met 8 years ago there wasn't such a thing as the Labyrinth Movement. It's gone way beyond what I had ever, in my cognitive mind, understood. But some other part of me thought, like 'Wow this is such a wonderful symbol, this is going to speak to many, many people.'"

"What's happening is my book has been like the energizer bunny. It keeps going and going and going. We're going to come out with a second edition of that this year, 2005. What's behind this is people that not only love *walking* labyrinths, they love *making* labyrinths."

While she applauds that people are making contemporary labyrinths, and believes that contemporary labyrinths have a role in the Labyrinth Movement as great tools for community building and friendship building, and she resists any attempts to "sound like scrooge, because I'm really not," she does give a gentle caution that people should be educated as to what type of labyrinth they're walking. Each type of labyrinth – and there are many – has a different tradition. They are generally known by the number or rings, or "circuits" they have. The Chartres Cathedral pattern is known as the archetypal 11 circuit labyrinth, and for Lauren, possesses a truly unique power.

"The contemporary labyrinths that are coming out are – um" (she literally hems and haws for a moment) "well they're kind of untested, so to speak. The labyrinths I'm interested in are archetypal and probably come from some kind of sacred tradition. At Chartres, we don't know the origin of the labyrinth, but my opinion – which no

Finding a Labyrinth

The Labyrinth locator at Veriditas.net currently lists about 1600 permanent or mobile labyrinths worldwide, including those made of canvas, grass, and stone. Lauren Artress is certain that they have only scratched the surface in attempting to catalog all of them. The site lists 52 in Pennsylvania, about 20 or so are in Western PA. They include:

Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Glenshaw, 412-487-3407

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pittsburgh, 412-833-2676

Kearns Spirituality Center
North Hills, 412-366-1124

Bethel Holy Ghost Animation Center
Bethel Park, (412) 835-3510

Calvin Presbyterian Church
Zelienople, 724-452-7560

The Labyrinth at Lillibridge Farm
Adamsville, 724-932-5569

Beulah Land Center for Sustainable Living
Petroia, 724-753-0174

Whispering Winds Retreat Center
Mt. Pleasant, 724-547-2550

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Johnstown, 814-535-6797

To find or post information about local labyrinths, visit www.HolisticPittsburgh.com

one has contested – is that it comes from an esoteric school that existed at the Cathedral from the 5th to the 12th Century.”

What do they teach at an Esoteric School? “I think we would look back at them and say ‘oh man, they are really New Age...’ [laughs] They understood spirit. There was a science of spirit that has been lost over the centuries. A way of being able to understand and capture in concrete form – no pun intended. Let’s put it this way, capture in geometric form – a way to create a sacred space.”

Happily for those of us who can’t make it to the original, she has found that a canvas reproduction of the Chartres pattern has as much “power” as the stones of the cathedral themselves, even though they have been in place for over a thousand years, and untold thousands of people have walked it before it was closed just after the French Revolution.

“The canvas labyrinth can be as powerful. It’s fascinating! It’s because the sacred geometry holds so well. The design has such integrity to it. If it’s replicated accurately, it’s just as powerful.”

Getting to Sacred Space

So this gets to the heart of it. Just what happens in “sacred space?”

“Well, let’s preface this and say that each person has their own unique experience. For instance, someone who’s really locked up in their head and is so cognitive they can’t step into their feelings or be impacted by other experiences other than through their cognitive mind – they’re going to miss out on something.”

“So having said that, I would define sacred space, and what happens in it, as a place where the veil is very thin. The veil between the worlds is thin in the labyrinth. That’s why it is a good grieving tool, because not only can people walk *out* their grief, walk *through* their grief, move through the *layers* of their grief, but they can also *talk to* that loved one, and feel their presence, especially if their grief is fresh.”

“Sacred Space also quiets the mind enough that the person can become in touch with their intuitive level. Some people try to push that away. One woman came up to me and said ‘Nothing happened to me except I felt a deep sense of peace.’ And it’s like ‘Ah... gee... That’s too bad that that’s all that happened.’”

“But again, people will discount the experience if they’re in their cognitive mind. That’s part of the teaching that I do. My work is to teach the process about

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walking the labyrinth, so people learn to respect, and be able to hold, that place inside them that can receive. So a lot of people receive guidance in the labyrinth. The still small voice is very active in the labyrinth for many people.”

She emphasizes that this is more than just faith, this is experience. “You can *believe* in God or you can *know* there’s a greater being. This is about *knowing*. This is what William James called ‘first hand religion.’ And this is what people want. People want to know.”

Which religions resonate most with the labyrinth? “It’s very broad. There’s a lot of Episcopal churches, a lot of Methodists, Presbyterians, several Baptist churches, the Unitarian-Universalists, the Lutherans – any tradition really that is open minded and open hearted and is based in prayer, the labyrinth is really a wonderful tool for them. I don’t think it appeals necessarily to the more fundamentalist, literalist churches, although people ask me ‘Where is the word labyrinth

in the bible?’ And it’s not the word ‘labyrinth,’ it’s the word ‘path.’ The bible uses that metaphor all throughout the Old and New Testament. The beauty of it is that not only do the Christians use it, the Buddhists use it, the Hindus, every Islamic tradition uses the image of walking the path. While the labyrinth is certainly firmly rooted in the Christian faith, it doesn’t need to stay there. It’s a broad tool for everyone.”

The Future of the Movement

While still attached to Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, where she has been based for many years, Lauren today works out of the Presidio, with the World Religion Initiative, an umbrella organization that promotes inter-faith dialog. The Labyrinth has proven to be a wonderful tool for interfaith dialog.

She still teaches worldwide, including an annual workshop at the Chartres Cathedral, “Walking a Sacred Path” in the last two weeks of October. In her near future is more international work,

including teaching in the UK, and a trip to South Africa.

The movement’s base is the people who love to walk it. “People walk it, then they begin to develop a relationship to it, so it becomes a practice in some way. I wouldn’t say a discipline, I would say a practice. Somehow it begins to fit into some kind of rhythm in their life.”

“The labyrinth accepts you where you are. It’s helpful if you take a few moments to quiet your mind. The more a person is clear about why they are coming to the labyrinth, sometimes it helps but sometimes it gets in the way. The real art of it is not to be ego-driven. You have to put that aside. And when it is in the way, the labyrinth helps you see it.”

For more on Lauren’s work, including information on how you can travel to Chartres Cathedral to walk the original Labyrinth, visit her website, www.veriditas.net.