



Fallen oak leaves scratch one another's backs in a steady, warm wind. A jay calls from its perch atop a moss-capped boulder, scolding me with a sharp, heckling wra-a-ck — What? What are you doing here? What?

I'm not sure I know. I stand in a natural amphitheater of oaks at the edge of a true labyrinth: a flat concrete disk at least 40 feet in diameter, its surface artfully patterned with many concentric lines, beautiful in their convergence and simplicity.

And I begin to walk, following a path that at first looks like it will take me

straight to the middle. I discover that I have a strong desire to know in advance where I'm going. My mind thinks "I'm almost there" far too soon, for suddenly the path turns and takes me farther away from the center than I thought possible.

Of course the allegory is life. Quickly, at the beginning, you come close to the center. So easy. A child knows it all, for his world is small. Then I enter the twists and turns of adolescence. The jay is calling again. Cloud shadows move over the surface beneath my feet as I walk steadily, but slowly. I am all alone. An unsettled mood falls over me. "How much longer?" I wonder.

When I dreamt of labyrinths as a child, I pictured rusticated stone walls in an English meadow, high hedges in a formal French garden, or the terrifying sandstone canyons of a Minotaur's lair on an Aegean isle. I thought always of being lost and threatened — nightmare places.

What I envisioned were mazes, not labyrinths. Mazes once were the rage among French and English nobility. An estate's garden wasn't complete without one. Today a few paid-admission mazes exist in the United States, challenging us to enter and find our way out before dark. High walls, hedges, or thick rows of corn plants narrow our view to only a thin strip of sky overhead. Emerging from a birthlike tunnel, we're almost as befuddled by the sudden freedom of being out in the open as we were by confinement. There's a message there, and I'm not sure I like it.

A labyrinth, on the other hand, is a benign ancient archetype — a mystical pattern — found in most religions and cultures. You cannot get lost in a labyrinth. Only one path leads to the middle, and back out again. On its simplest level,

the labyrinth's quarter mile of pathway compressed into a small circle amazes you (there's that maze word again). How can I have walked so far and so long in such a small space?

But a new wave of labyrinth fanciers sees much more in a true labyrinth. Looking to the past, they cite its use as a tool for meditation by many different cultures. A Cretan labyrinth is 4,000 to 5,000 years old. Native Americans created medicine wheels that were labyrinthine. Tibetan monks draw them in sand while meditating.

Now a San Diego woman, Deborah Szekely, has brought a labyrinth to our region. She

built one last year at her Golden Door spa near Escondido. When she invited me to walk it recently I jumped at the chance, especially when I heard that she patterned it after the authentic Grace Cathedral labyrinth in San Francisco, which itself was copied directly from the labyrinth on the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France. Lauren Artress, director of the cathedral's labyrinth project, says certain qualities of the labyrinth have been lying dormant for centuries, and calls the experience "walking a sacred path."

I watch my feet move steadily. They seem detached, my mind elsewhere. When the paths follow the labyrinth's longest stretches, taking me all the way to the edge of the circle, I realize I'm "in" middle age. Career. Family. Year after year of enormous commitment and — truth be told — a certain sameness that either comforts or condemns. Here, too, this little walk is a powerful metaphor. We walk faster on the long stretches where few turns bar the way. *Tempus fugit*. How fast have the two decades — almost three — I've spent in adulthood gone by?

Fast. Very fast.

Now the path turns again, growing tighter toward the center. The sun slants down into my eyes, then warms my back after another turn. Suddenly, I reach the center. I stand in each of six petal-like indentations, facing a different direction, looking to all points of the compass. Is this the end? The thought crosses like another cloud shadow.

Then I remember. I still have an equally long path ahead of me, back to the edge, back to where it all began. I turn and head for home, the beginning, carrying less out than I did in. ■

Into the Labyrinth