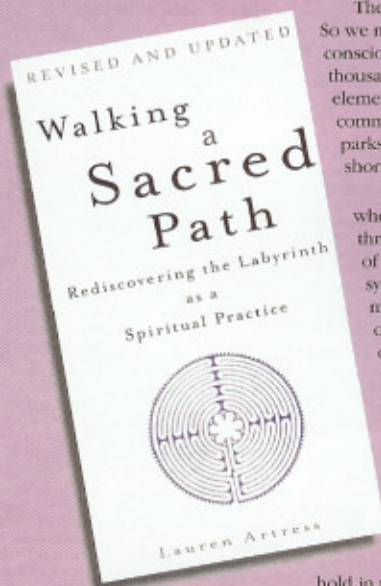


# Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice

by Lauren Artress



The labyrinth is experiencing a worldwide revival. So we must ask what is happening in the consciousness of the human race that is resulting in thousands of labyrinths being created in hospitals, elementary schools, college campuses, spas, community parks, prisons, churches, memorial parks and cathedrals during this same, amazingly short period of time?

The labyrinth is a little recognized temenos where the veil between the worlds is thin and the threshold to the sacred is palpable. The practice of walking the labyrinth evokes the intuitive and symbolic field that resides in the metaphoric mind of each person walking it. The labyrinth offers liminal, or transitional space where you can meet your Muse. The everyday linear world is set aside and the buoyancy of the inner world comes alive both for individuals and communities walking it together.

The labyrinth I am referring to is the Medieval Eleven-Circuit Labyrinth inlaid in the floor in Chartres Cathedral in 1201. The labyrinth is rooted in a lost understanding that was snuffed out when Descartes' worldview of "I think therefore I am" took

hold in the Western world. Brilliant masters of spirit

who knew the dynamics of transformation in the human psyche/soul designed the eleven-circuit labyrinth as early as the 6th century. It is based on the complex or double spiral, with twenty-eight 180-degree turns, leading the meditator in a very circuitous, yet spiral path to center. Unlike a maze, there are no tricks to the labyrinth. Succinctly put, a maze is designed for you to lose your way; a labyrinth is designed to find your way. You simply follow the path. The bodily movement helps release the thinking mind and as you surrender to the moment, the pathway to your deep, intelligent, intuitive nature is opened and available. You can discover Wisdom.

Sadly, when Western civilization began to see itself through the prism of scientific humanism, these profound intuitive blueprints became devalued; exiled by the snobbery of the Enlightenment as ornaments of a by-gone era. Many were torn up because the floors wore out or were overlaid with stone to remove them from sight. Of the twenty-two labyrinths found in Cathedrals during the Middle Ages, only two remain in original form in the nave of the cathedral: Chartres and St Quentin.

Over the last fourteen years I have worked with the labyrinth. I have come to realize that it is a form of the Grail. A Grail "meets you where you are, gives you what you need and nurtures an invisible web of relationships that connect individual destiny to service of others and to the earth, thereby granting meaning". This is exactly what the Medieval Eleven-Circuit Labyrinth does and it is bringing strength and guidance into hundreds of thousands of lives.

The Chartres-style labyrinth is an archetypal design that extends far beyond the Christian tradition. It is a universal form, which has the potential to quicken the spirit in every human being. It teaches the art of self-reflection and nurtures the connection between the inner and the outer world. When this connection is made, people find meaning in their lives. Walking the labyrinth is a practice that has broad appeal. It is non-threatening and easy to do. Like a string bass that can be in a symphony, a jazz band or a string quartet, the labyrinth is a profoundly integrative experience effective in both sacred and secular settings. To answer the question about what is stirring in human consciousness to create the Labyrinth Movement, I will highlight four areas: First, mind, body, Spirit integration; second, to meet the rampant spiritual hunger of our age; third, to order chaos within the individual; four, to create an invisible web of relationships that strengthen community.

There are over 120 labyrinths in hospitals in the United States. The labyrinth offers hospitals a method to integrate mind, body and Spirit. Many people gravitate to it to prepare for surgery. By walking they can support themselves through healthy self-talk, prayer and imagining their progression through the procedures back to health. Others may use it for post-operative support to regain strength and confidence in their bodies. Hospital personnel use it to reduce stress. Families who suddenly find themselves in the emergency rooms may walk it to break up the long hours of waiting to hear news of their loved ones. In the labyrinth, you can have a heart-to-heart talk with yourself. You can have spirit-to-spirit communion with someone on the other side. You can have direct contact with the Divine.

Second, we hunger for symbols that speak to us, that create meaning in our lives. Many of the symbols floating around on the surface of Western culture have lost their psycho-spiritual impact. They no longer resonate within us and often offer conflictual messages. The labyrinth is both a symbol and an experience that is not encrusted with traditional religions' addiction to guilt or sin. It is archetypal; it comes from the world of forms. In the unseen world, it connects us to the spiral that takes us ever deeper, the double helix that is encoded in our DNA and the circle, which is a symbol for unity and wholeness.

The Labyrinth orders chaos and is coming back into worldwide awareness to do just that: order the chaos many are experiencing during these perilous times. The movement of the body is key in labyrinth walking. It quiets the mind. Once you have a quiet mind, you can make thoughtful choices and respond intelligently to fear. The body turns left, then right, then left, then right all through out the walk. It feels like being rocked in a cradle and results in balancing the chakras, the energy centers in the body. A sense of peace and calm is established.

Lastly, walking the labyrinth in community builds an invisible web of connection between people. Walking the labyrinth can be a way of holding an ideal in your heart

and mind in the context of community. Peace walks have blossomed around the United States since the Bush administration initiated the Iraqi war. These gatherings hold a clear, quiet space for peace in the world even though people walking together may not know each other's name.

*Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice* was instrumental in launching what the New York Times in May of 1998 named The Labyrinth Movement. It was the first book to offer the Medieval Eleven-Circuit Labyrinth as a spiritual practice. It is now in its second edition with a new preface and epilogue to capture what has unfolded with the labyrinth since this book was first published in 1995. In the epilogue, I articulate four challenges that face the Labyrinth Movement. There is a lively discussion among North Americans and Europeans about labyrinths. This discussion extends from constructing contemporary labyrinths to facilitation to educating the public. My hope is that this section adds to the discussion.

I was introduced to the labyrinth through a conference with author and change-agent Dr. Jean Houston in 1991. A temporary labyrinth taped to a floor in a gymnasium intrigued me and spurred me to go to Chartres Cathedral. At that time, I was Canon for Special Ministries at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and I felt called to research the viability of putting a labyrinth in Grace Cathedral. Through my ministry and with a background in psychotherapeutic work, I was aware of the gap between the teachings of a faith tradition and the actual application of these teachings in our lives. Christians would hear the instruction to love our enemies, but no one ever taught the process addressing *how* we were to do that. The labyrinth is a spiritual exercise that allows the inner world to become transparent to us. We can see the part of us that makes people into enemies and we can perceive choices that will allow us to build bridges to friendship. The labyrinth offers a practical way to enrich and deepen our spiritual lives.

*The Sacred Path Companion: A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth to Heal and Transform* places all my teachings about the labyrinth since 1995 in one place. Growing into spiritual maturity is not an easy thing to do. It takes the support of practices such as mandala drawing, sitting meditation in its various forms or walking the labyrinth. To have a clear understanding of what maturity looks like is helpful. This book offers four guidelines to gauge your spiritual growth. Whether you stand in a religious tradition or not, the challenge remains to: deepen in compassion, increase your patience, lessen your judgments toward yourself and others and find a way to be of service to the world that enlivens you.

This book is designed to be a primer for anyone new to the labyrinth, and has new material for the experienced walker. One concept that was fun to write about I call Unconscious Override. I have seen it happen to walkers many times over the years and frequently facilitators I've trained talk about it, but it never had a name. Here's one example of Unconscious Override to

illustrate what I mean: one woman knew the path was a two-way street, but she "forgot" this, so when she met someone coming out as she was entering, she thought that she had made a mistake. This experience touched a matrix of feelings of failure and inadequacy. Mortified, she walked directly off the labyrinth, only to be guided by a friend who helped shape the insight she needed: how quickly she blames herself for the slightest thing that happens. Her unconscious overrode any cognitive information she had to allow her live out—on the labyrinth—a life experience that she needed to see. Constantly blaming herself was hindering her on her spiritual path.

*The Sacred Path Companion* can serve as a guide during times in your life when you are vulnerable and in pain. For instance, you may be ending a relationship with sadness and confusion, facing an operation, or be riddled with guilt over an unavoidable event in your life. It offers a checklist chapter called *Starting Where You Are* to journal your thoughts and experiences and to move you toward a section of exercises in a systematic manner. A second way to use this book is simply to find an exercise that resonates with you. The exercises are suggested for a labyrinth walk, the use of a finger meditation tool, or any practice that allows you to be in liminal space where your mind can be free-flowing.

Little did I know when I first walked a labyrinth that my life was to dramatically change. The powerful archetypal energy of the labyrinth birthed my creativity, led me to write books, helped me find my voice in teaching and speaking through a not-for-profit called Veriditas, Inc. It opened up the opportunity to forge a relationship between Grace Cathedral and the officials of Chartres Cathedral to open the labyrinth to the public a bit more and have the privilege of using that magnificent space for Veriditas programs. The labyrinth is a watering hole for the spirit, a crucible of change, a tool of manifestation and the womb of the Divine Feminine that awaits each of us to birth us a new.

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**WALKING A SACRED PATH: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice** (Revised and Updated) by Lauren Artress, published by Riverhead Books, £8.99 Paperback (239 pages).

**THE SACRED PATH COMPANION: A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth to Heal and Transform** by Lauren Artress, published by Riverhead Books, £8.99 Large-Format Paperback (192 pages).

*The Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress is Honorary Canon of Grace Cathedral and the Creator and Founder of Veriditas, The World-Wide Labyrinth Project. Veriditas promotes the labyrinth experience as a personal practice for healing and spiritual maturation, a tool for community building, an agent for global peace, and as a metaphor for the work of the Spirit in our lives.*

