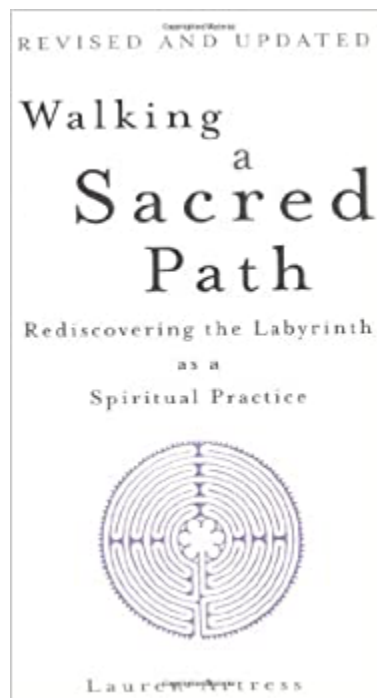


**WALKING A SACRED PATH:
REDISCOVERING THE LABYRINTH AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

Lauren Artress



Lauren Artress reintroduces the ancient labyrinth, a walking meditation that transcends the limits of still meditation, and shows us the possibilities it brings for renewal and change.

'Walking the Labyrinth' has reemerged today as a metaphor for the spiritual journey and a powerful tool for transformation. This walking meditation is an archetype, a mystical ritual found in all religious traditions. It quiets the mind and opens the soul. **Walking a Sacred Path** explores the historical origins of this divine imprint and shares the discoveries of modern day seekers. It shows us the potential of the Labyrinth to inspire change and renewal, and serves as a guide to help us develop the higher level of human awareness we need to survive in the twenty-first century.

The labyrinth is a walking meditation, a path of prayer and an archetypal blueprint where psyche meets Spirit. It has only one path that leads from the ends. Unlike a maze where you lose your way, the labyrinth is a spiritual tool that can help you find your way.

Labyrinths are usually in the form of a circle with a meandering but purposeful path, from the edge to the centre and back out again. Each has only one path, and once we make the choice to enter it the path becomes a metaphor for our path through life, sending us to the centre of the labyrinth, and then back out to the edge on the same path.

The labyrinth is a spiritual tool meant to awaken us to the deep rhythm that unites us to ourselves and to the Light that calls from within. In surrendering to the winding path, the soul finds healing and wholeness.

Walking the Labyrinth quiets the mind, opens the heart and grounds the body ... Some find answers to questions long asked, some find healing, creativity, or a sense of wholeness

THE STORY BEHIND THE REDISCOVERY OF THE LABYRINTH

The labyrinth design used by Lauren Artress is a replica of the Eleven-circuit Medieval Labyrinth from Chartres Cathedral in France. This pattern, made of Beauce quarry stone and an unnamed black stone to delineate the path, was inlaid into the stone floor in 1201. For the last 250 years, however, it has been forgotten and covered with chairs until Artress led a small group of people into Chartres cathedral to remove the chairs to experience the meditative walk first hand.

After introducing the labyrinth through the International Transpersonal Association in Ireland in 1994 and to Switzerland, Germany in 1995, her work began to focus intensely in both Grace Cathedral and Chartres Cathedral. She has led workshops around the United States, Canada, the UK and Europe. In 1997 she began to train facilitators to present the labyrinth in their communities. Now, over 4000 people have been trained in this transformational work.

Labyrinths are currently being used world-wide as a way to quiet the mind, recover a balance in life, and encourage meditation, insight, self-

reflection, stress reduction, and to discover innovation and celebration. They are

open to all people as a non-denominational, cross-cultural blueprint for well-being. The practice of labyrinth walking integrates the body with the mind and the mind with the spirit. They can be found in medical centers, parks, churches, schools, prisons, memorial parks, spas, cathedrals and retreat centers as well as in people's backyards.

TO WALK A SACRED PATH

Seeking a Sacred Path

All of the larger-than-life questions about our presence here on earth and what gifts we have to offer are spiritual questions. To seek answers to these questions is to seek a sacred path. As we find our meaning and purpose we also realize that some invisible being that has guided us, challenged us, and carried us through times of crisis...

The spiritual hunger that is present in the Western world is calling forth millions of people. They are seeking answers through a variety of paths.....

The labyrinth, in its strange and uncanny way, offers a sacred and stable space to focus the attention and listen to the longing of the soul...

To walk a sacred path is to discover our inner sacred space: that core of feeling that is waiting to have life breathed back into it through symbols, archetypal forms like to labyrinth, rituals, stories and myths. Understanding the invisible world, the world of pattern and process, opens us to the movement of the Spirit.

(Hildegard of Bingen was a twelfth century mystic, composer and author of a theology that knitted together nature and spirit, cosmos and soul. She described the Holy Spirit as the Greening Power of God. Just as plants are greened, so we are as well. As we grow, our spark of life continually shines forth. If we ignore this spark, this greening power, we become thirsty and shrivelled. And if we respond to the spark, we flower. Our task is to flower, to come into full blossom before our time comes to an end.)

Lights-On Experiences

Why does the labyrinth attract people? Because it is a tool to guide healing, deepen self knowledge, and empower creativity. Walking the labyrinth clears the mind and give insight into the spiritual journey. It urges actions. It calms

people in the throes of life transitions. It helps them see their lives in the context of a path, a pilgrimage...The experience is different for everyone because each of us brings different raw material. We bring our unique hopes, dreams, history and longings of the soul.

NEW PILGRIMS, NEW PATHS

The Path through Silence

The path through silence is called the apophatic path. It is the path of meditation or contemplation which leads us to the center of our being. We plant the seed of silence within ourselves by quieting the mind. We allow our minds to empty of thoughts so we can enter our own resounding silence, a state from which we gain deep refreshment. Gregory the Great called this "resting in God".

The Path through Images

The cataphatic path uses the imaginative process as a guide to the Light within. However, the path through images has traditionally been less honoured than the path through silence. It is enjoying a revitalisation partly because of therapeutic approaches and guided visualisation.

The Inner Way: The Three-Fold Mystical Plan

In Western Christianity the mystical path is traditionally called the Threefold Path, where the sequence is Purgation, Illumination and Union... This is the path that is energetically embedded in the labyrinth design...

Purgation, the walk from the entrance of the labyrinth to its centre, represents the first part of the mystical path...

Illumination, the second stage, may be found in the centre of the labyrinth.... After we have quieted the mind on the labyrinth's path, the centre is a place for meditation and prayer...We may come to clarity in the centre...

Union begins as we leave the centre of the labyrinth, following the same path back out that brought us in. In this stage, our meditation produces a grounded, empowered feeling...Union means communing, or communion with the Holy.

The Outer Way: Pilgrimage

The tradition of pilgrimage is being revitalised during our own times to seek answers to our longings... The pilgrim seeks to follow the spirit's compass,

which guides us to find an inner openness to the outer world of people, places, and events that become the fabric of our lives.

Co-Creation

Much of our spiritual seeking is driven by the desire to manifest our unique and individual gifts on the world... Something within us carries a deep, sometimes buried, sense that we have a special task... Many people find their way to the labyrinth in the process of searching for their own special talents.

A Wide and Gracious Path

The labyrinth introduces us to the idea of a wide and gracious path. It redefines the journey to God: from a vertical perspective that goes from earth up to heaven, to a horizontal perspective in which we are all walking the path together. The horizontal path communicated that we are all in this together.

WALKING THE LABYRINTH: THE PROCESS

Walking the labyrinth does not demand a great amount of concentration in order to benefit from the experience. The sheer act of walking a complicated path... begins to focus the mind. A quiet mind does not happen automatically. But the labyrinth experience sensitises us, educates us, and helps us distinguish superficial extraneous thoughts from the "thought" that comes from our soul level and that each of us longs to hear.

The First Walk

Nurturing ourselves spiritually is not an easy thing to do in a culture that disconnects us from our depths. [But] the simple act of walking the labyrinth invites us back into the centre of our being...

The labyrinth is especially helpful to those of us in transition who are chilled by the winds of change. It also gives solace to those struggling with painful life experiences.

There are no easy solutions to life's many difficult problems, yet walking the labyrinth imparts peace. The walk can also begin a process of insight so a "new opportunity" can come into our awareness....

Small miracles can happen in the labyrinth. We can strengthen ourselves by shedding tears, feeling the anger and hurt that keeps us from experiencing our soul level. We can decide that we have held on to revenge too long, and take action to heal our hateful feelings.

A Process Meditation

There is no right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth.... This can be a valuable lesson about control and surrendering to the process...

There is a creative tension between allowing images, memories and feelings to emerge and guiding them through a gentle, gracious, open and expanded thought process...

The walk out of the labyrinth is realistically and symbolically the act of taking when we have received out into the world.

Basic Approaches to the Walk

What seems to work best when preparing to walk the labyrinth it to take a moment to reflect on where you are in your life...

Gracious attention

One approach is simply to quiet the mind, choosing to let all thoughts go when they present themselves in your awareness. The task is to allow a gracious sense of attention to flow through you...

Asking a Question

One approach is to focus on a question that we have been asking ourselves...

Questions that we take into the labyrinth should be outside the realm of yes or no. There is nothing magical about the labyrinth. [But] it allows our conscious to open so that deeper, and perhaps new, parts of ourselves can speak to us more directly.

The Use of Repetition

Many of us meditate by repeating a word, a mantra, or a phrase over and over to ourselves. ..[People are] advised to use a word or phrase that does not stir up either positive or negative feelings or thoughts....

[Or} the other approach is to use a meaningful phrase – which lends itself nicely to the walk.

Examples pg this are “Come, Holy Spirit, come”, “I am a daughter of the Light”, “Help me God, to remember I am a daughter of the Light”, or “Guide me, Mother of God”.

Asking for Help through Prayer

Another method is simply to pray throughout the labyrinth walk...One of the things we forget most readily is to ask for help from the divine...

The labyrinth is a place where you can pour your heart out, express your anger, experience joy, express gratitude – and perhaps above all, ask for what you need.

Honoring a Benchmark in Time

Many people walk the labyrinth to honor a benchmark in time. It may be a birthday or the anniversary of a close friend's death.

We can walk the labyrinth to pray for a person who is undergoing surgery or to support and sustain a board of members making an important decision...

A Body Prayer

Many of us are shy when it comes to movement. But in the container of the labyrinth there is support for moving spontaneously as our body wishes.

The structural nature of the path seems to encourage this. It provides a safe feeling of containment...

It is important to follow the impulses as they arise within us. Some people may chant, others may dance, cry, or laugh out loud. ..

[Moreover} using the gift of breath is not only a way into clearing our minds, it is a way through the anxiety, self-consciousness, or uncertainty that we may feel while we are in the labyrinth...

During workshops [with music] some people dance, and others skip or crawl..And, [some people] use scarves, and dance with them, or place them over their heads so that they can “hide” as they go deeply within.

Allowing the Ego to let Go

Stepping into the labyrinth, we see our thoughts for what they are. We may meet the impatient, judgemental thoughts that are so much a part of us that we no longer notice them...

When we are able to see though or step being the ego, the ... people and events in our lives become part of our path, part of the invisible thread that leads onward.

We feel surrounded by the Holy. And all the pain and joy that we experience tempers us, allows us clearly to see our struggling, suffering world...

We simply present ourselves as ready to release whatever come up in us, and to receive what awaits us in the center.

The Labyrinth as Metaphor

The labyrinth captures the mystical union between heaven and earth, an understanding of death and rebirth. It is a path of faith and doubt, the complexity of the brain, the turns of the intestine and the birth canal, and the Celestial City...

The walk, and all that happens on it, can be grasped through the intuitive, pattern-discerning faculty of the person walking it...

This is the gift of being able to see the infinite in the context of the finite. And somehow we are surrounded by a gentle love at the same time.

Experiencing our Experience

Experiencing our feelings and inner thoughts without judgement is part of developing spiritual mastery. In order to reflect, we need a quiet place inside ourselves. It is from this place we are able to make subtle shifts of attitude when necessary, without condemning ourselves...

The time on the labyrinth is meant to be a reflective and meditative act when you stay in the moment with your experience.

Receptivity

Just as in other forms of meditation, it is possible to have an uneventful experience on the labyrinth. There are times when nothing significant happens, when the timing may not simply be right for anything to emerge. There are benefits to walking it anyway...there seems to be a cumulative benefit.

Finding your Pace

Each experience in the labyrinth is different... The pace usually differs each time... It can also change dramatically within the different stages of a single walk. You can pass others, in order to honor your intuitive pace... or allow others to pass you. ..

The labyrinth's winding path helps us to find our pace, allows us a spaciousness within, encourages our receptivity ... and develops our awareness of the habitual thoughts and issues we put in the way of our spiritual development. It is a road to self-knowledge.

Getting Lost in the Labyrinth

If we do get lost [on the labyrinth] one of two things can happen: we either return to the centre or return to the entrance, and usually we have learned something about ourselves,

REDISCOVERING THE DIVINE WITHIN

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

We begin to nourish ourselves spiritually when we discover the dimensions of divine/human consciousness, when we begin to discover the Divine within. We need to understand that the spirit of creation lives and evolved within each human being, as well as through the whole of the created order. Many of us sense this mysterious unfolding. And many are seeking experiences that help us respond to the changes this evolution brings to our lives.

Artress, Lauren Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice Riverhead Books, New York, 2006 ISBN 1-57322-007-8

Rose Isbell, Christchurch, New Zealand, September 2021