

The Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool

In the great cathedrals of France—Chartres, Bayeux, Rheims, Sens, Poitiers, Amiens—astonishing labyrinths are embedded in the floors of the church. Unlike mazes, these labyrinths have a single path in and out. There are no false entrances or dead ends in a labyrinth. For centuries, these labyrinths have been ignored, obscured, removed, and suppressed. Slowly, Christians are rediscovering the significance of this important spiritual tool, which holds such power for prayer and reflection. We are all on the path... exactly where we need to be. The labyrinth is a model of that path, a metaphor for life's journey.

Ancient Spirituality

A labyrinth is an ancient symbol that relates to wholeness, combining the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path. It represents a journey to our own center and back again out into the world.

Labyrinths have long been used as meditation and prayer tools. They have been found in ancient Crete, Egypt, and Etruscian; they have been inscribed on Neolithic tombs. They are a call to the center, a worship structure where the eternal beloved waits to be encountered. The labyrinth has always been associated with unity with God and conversation with the divine, with spirituality, worship, and the sacred mystery.

Long ago, Christians were expected to travel to the holy land at least once during their lives. But as travel was often both difficult and dangerous, labyrinths were designed as alternative pilgrimages. If travel was out of the question, spiritual merit could be gained by walking a labyrinth.

The Labyrinth in America

Across America, excitement is growing as Christians rediscover the power and resonance of this sacred space, sometimes referred to as the fingerprint of God.

San Francisco's Grace Episcopal Cathedral has pioneered much of this work under the guidance of Rev. Lauren Artress, whose book *Walking a Sacred Path* is the major statement of this movement. Other books, such as *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* by Penelope Doob, shed light on the history and significance of the labyrinth.

Labyrinths vs. Mazes

Labyrinths and mazes have often been confused. When most people hear the word labyrinth, they think of a maze. A labyrinth is not a maze. A maze is a puzzle to be solved. It has twists, turns, and blind alleys. It is a left-brain task that requires logical, sequential, analytical activity to find the correct path in and out. A labyrinth has only one path; the way in is the way out. There are no blind alleys. The path leads you on a circuitous path to the center and out again. A labyrinth is a right-brain task. It involves intuition, creativity, and imagery. With a maze, many choices must be made, and an active mind is needed to solve the problem of finding the center. With a labyrinth, there is only one choice: to enter or not.



The Labyrinth at Holy Cross

In 1999, after many months of planning and hard work, Holy Cross dedicated a Memorial Garden, which includes a brick labyrinth patterned after the one set in the stone floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France in 1220. It is a classical, eleven-circuit labyrinth that was built entirely by the loving hands of the members of Holy Cross. The stained glass pavers that encircle our labyrinth were made by the men, women, and children at Holy Cross. To all who come here, we welcome you to our sacred space and hope your soul is awakened. (Holy Cross is located at 205 East College Street in Simpsonville. For large groups, please call the church at 864-967-7470 to schedule a time to walk.)



Walking the Labyrinth

There is no right way to walk a labyrinth. You only have to enter and follow the path. Once you have started to walk, you are on a journey to the center. There is no need to rush. Some will walk faster, others more slowly. An average walk takes 45 minutes.

If others are walking with you, please respect the sacredness of the experience by maintaining a prayerful silence. Because there is just one path, you may encounter someone on your journey. Pause and let your friend pass in their prayer-centered meditation. Whatever you experience is part of the journey. Please do not feel that there is a right way to walk. Simply relax and let what happens happen.

Some walkers use the method of the classical threefold spiritual path: Purgation, Illumination, and Union. **Purgation:** As we walk in, we may experience purification. We open ourselves, cleanse our thoughts, and prepare ourselves for the encounter. **Illumination:** As we enter the center, we sometimes find clarity, insight, and wisdom. **Unity:** Exiting bearing our new peace, we may celebrate the sense of harmony, centeredness, and oneness.

Some people find that their walk frees the mind from nagging and perplexing issues, allowing them to enter a calm and peaceful state that renews the sacred space within. Some find that walking with a sacred hand gesture focuses their attention on prayer. Some walk with their hands palm up, elbow bent at right angles as if they are carrying something. Others walk with their hands folded. Whatever the method, the walk seems always to renew, strengthen, and deepen prayer.

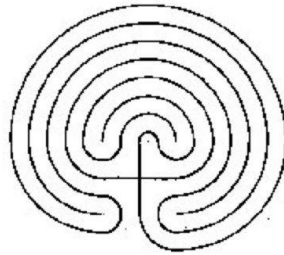
Your walk can encompass a variety of attitudes. It may be joyous or somber. It might be thoughtful or prayerful. You may use it as a walking meditation. Adults are often serious in the labyrinth. Children most often run in and out as fast as they can in a playful manner. When you walk a labyrinth, choose your attitude. From time to time, choose a different attitude. Make it serious, prayerful, or playful. Play music or sing. Pray out loud. Walk alone and with a crowd. Notice the sky. Listen to the sounds. Most of all, pay attention to your experience.

Some **general guidelines** for walking a labyrinth are:

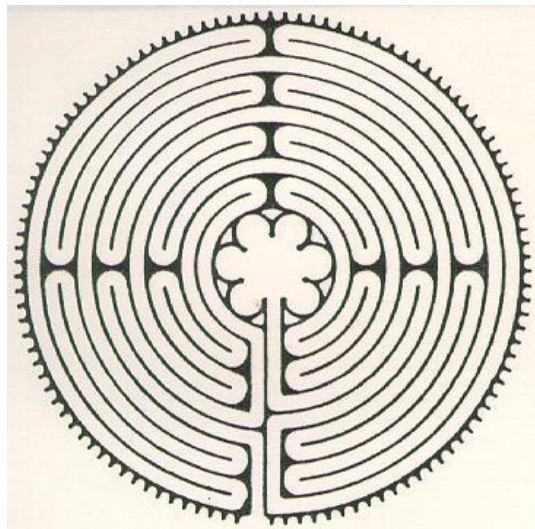
1. **Focus:** Pause and wait at the entrance. Become quiet and centered. Give acknowledgment through a bow, nod, or other gesture and then enter.
2. **Experience:** Walk purposefully. Observe the process. When you reach the center, stay there and focus for a while. Leave when it feels appropriate. Be attentive on the way out.
3. **Exit:** Turn and face the entrance. Give an acknowledgement of ending, such as “Amen.”
4. **Reflect:** After walking the labyrinth, reflect on your experience. Use journaling or drawing to capture your experience.
5. **Walk often.** Every time is a new experience. Most do not really get a feel for the labyrinth experience until they have walked it at least three times.

The Two Major Types of Labyrinths

The most well-known legend of the labyrinth tells of the one King Minos of Crete built to constrain the Minotaur. While the story describes the structure as being more like a maze, coins from ancient Crete display a one-path, seven-circuit labyrinth. Depictions of the **Cretan labyrinth** have also been found in the ruins of Pompeii and carved on a rock in Sardinia (dating to between 2500 - 2000 BCE). This pattern is often called the classical labyrinth, and it can have three, seven, eleven or fifteen paths, called circuits.



The medieval labyrinths usually divide into four quadrants. Older examples of these labyrinths are found on the floors of European churches and cathedrals. They are also found as turf labyrinths in England. They can have seven, nine, ten, eleven, or seventeen circuits. The **Chartes labyrinth** has eleven.



These patterns can be either left-handed or right-handed. A left- or right-handed labyrinth is determined by the direction of the first turn after entering. About two-thirds of the ancient classical labyrinths are right-handed and two-thirds of the more modern classical ones are left-handed. Neither is better than the other—it is totally up to personal preference.

The following page offers you a labyrinth to trace with your finger or with a pencil or pen.



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