

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

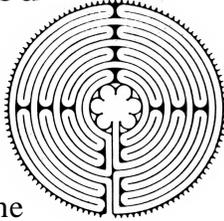
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Walking a path to God

I've recently had a series of surprising experiences. The first was at a United Methodist-sponsored retreat I attended a few months ago. I walked a labyrinth at the Catholic retreat center where the retreat took place.



I'd heard of labyrinths. I vaguely recalled a mythical story about a king of Crete who made his enemies go into a labyrinth that had a fierce beast called the Minotaur in its center. That labyrinth was really a maze. The way in and out wasn't obvious, so avoiding the Minotaur was a life-and-death challenge.

So what?

I knew a little about the kind of labyrinth design that's drawn on the ground or on a floor, which people walk as a spiritual practice, but I'd never seen one before seeing the one at the retreat center, so I walked it one afternoon. I'm not sure what I expected, but when I finished, my main reaction was, "Okay, now I've done it. So what?"

The next day a close friend came to visit me there. I mentioned having walked the labyrinth the day before, and asked him if he'd ever walked one. He was silent for a second or two, then said, "Yes," but nothing more. He's never this noncommittal about other things we talk about, so I didn't know what this meant, but I went on and told him about my "so what?" reaction. That ended his silence. "Oh, I'm so glad to hear you say that! I felt exactly the same way, and I thought there must be something wrong with me, not to have felt what everyone else evidently feels." And we were off on one of our typically lively conversations.

I assumed that was the end of my labyrinth experience, but to my surprise it wasn't.



A long tradition

Labyrinths appear in almost every religious tradition, points out Episcopal clergywoman Lauren Artress, who has specialized in finding out about labyrinths and letting others know about them. They have been known for over four thousand years. The earliest Christian labyrinth is probably the one found in a fourth-century basilica in Algeria. Evidently Christians began walking labyrinths as a spiritual practice during the Medieval period.



Christians have consistently found, Artress explains, that the labyrinth is a tool to guide healing, deepen self-knowledge, and enhance creativity. "Walking the labyrinth," she finds, "clears the mind and gives insight into the spiritual journey. It urges action. It calms people in the throes of life transitions. It helps them see their lives in the context of a path, a pilgrimage. ... To those of us who feel we have untapped gifts to offer, it stirs the creative fires within. To others who are in deep sorrow, the walk gives solace and peace." The experience is different for everyone, however, because each one brings something different to it.



Focused, spacious, and responsive

One way in which God's guidance comes, Artress and many other Christians find, is through shapes, patterns, and symbols that communicate sacred meaning. Labyrinths are one of these universal patterns that arise from what psychologist Carl Jung called the collective unconscious. Such patterns have appeared throughout history, not only in religious symbolism but also in dreams, art, and traditional stories.

Like other symbols and religious rituals, the labyrinth doesn't engage our thinking minds, explains Artress. Instead, "it invites our intuitive, pattern-seeking, symbolic mind to come forth." The labyrinth's benefits thus don't require great concentration.



Some people receive revelations in the labyrinth, Artress says, but she doesn't. Rather, she says, "I feel more focused, more spacious within, and more responsive to the people I encounter in my life." That's a result that I expect most of us would be glad to have.

Labyrinths kept turning up



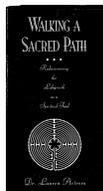
A few weeks ago my husband and I and some friends were in Santa Fe. Walking in the center of downtown, we found that on the terrace in front of St. Francis Cathedral a labyrinth was under construction. Hmmmm Why was I coming across another labyrinth? It made me want to dig into the subject more deeply, so at the cathedral book shop I bought a little book about labyrinths.

To my great surprise, a little later in the trip a Temple friend who was with us said, “You know there’s a labyrinth in Temple, don’t you?” I didn’t. She said it was now at a local church but had originally been at the home of a mutual friend of ours, and that some other friends had taken part in building it. Hmmmm ... still another surprise. All this had been happening right in my own home town, among people I knew. How had I missed knowing about it, and why was I suddenly finding out about it now?



Soon after I got home, the mail brought information about a retreat I was to speak at this fall. It would be at a United Methodist retreat center I’d never been to. Guess what. The classes to be offered during it included one about labyrinths, and a labyrinth was at the retreat center. Hmmmm ... ! Maybe all of this was more than mere coincidence.

A surprising effect



At that point I read the book I’d bought in Santa Fe. It’s *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*, by Dr. Lauren Artress (Riverhead Books, 1995), an Episcopal clergywoman who’s a pastor at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Then I phoned one of the friends who had been part of the local labyrinth project, to hear more about it. She spoke very fondly of how much it had meant to her and to other participants.

By then I wanted to walk a labyrinth again, so one morning soon after that phone conversation I went to the local one. For a couple of hours immediately before I went, I had been in an intense e-mail discussion with a friend. We were zapping e-mails back and forth like mad, and as soon as I’d send one I’d immediately think of something else I

wanted to add, so I’d fire off another one. I hated to stop in the midst of this conversation, but the labyrinth was outdoors so I wanted to go before the hot day got any hotter. I took a labyrinth break.

So much was still whirling around in my mind from the e-mail discussion that I put a pencil and notepad in my pocket before I started walking. I was sure I’d keep thinking of more things I wanted to say, and I wanted to be able to preserve them until I could get back home and back into the discussion.



To my surprise I didn’t think of anything else. As soon as I stepped into the labyrinth my mind was virtually empty. It stayed that way until after I’d driven back home. This was no life-changing experience or great revelation, but it was very far from the “so what?” that I’d previously felt.

Walking the labyrinth is a way of praying



A few days later I met with another participant in the local labyrinth project, to hear about her experience. I found she had attended a presentation by Lauren Artress several years earlier and on that occasion had walked a labyrinth for the first time. In more recent years she’d walked one again several times.

She’d experienced the walk as a way of praying. In some unexplainable way, she said, it made her aware of being in God’s presence and communicating with God. In *Walking a Sacred Path* Lauren Artress reports numerous similar reactions to walking the labyrinth. They’re much more than “so what?”.

We’ve abandoned nurture for the soul

Artress tells of labyrinths being used by Christians throughout many centuries as tools for prayer and meditation. Yet she sees that in recent years open-minded Christian churches with strong liturgical traditions have abandoned—perhaps without realizing what they were doing—the parts of their tradition that taught how to nourish and nurture the soul. Artress believes these churches have too often ignored our need and our ability to become aware of mystery. They have mistakenly acted as if the intellect were the only way to explore the sacred.



The God of much recent church tradition, Artress finds, is a God “out there”—a transcendent God who acts through history and keeps track of whether we follow the rules. This kind of God is completely outside of ourselves. The Western world, Artress points out, has mainly emphasized action in the world, with little recognition of contemplation. A God who is only “out there,” however, can’t satisfy the deep hunger in our souls.

Rediscovering the lost unity

Artress urges us to rediscover our inner sacred space—what she calls the core of feeling that is waiting to have life breathed back into it. Over the ages, she notices, we have lost our connection to the invisible world. “We turned against the imagination, grew to mistrust symbols, and devalued creativity,” Artress observes. “Our sense of the whole was lost.” Because it pictures wholeness and symmetry, the labyrinth can give us a glimpse of this lost unity.

Like other symbols and archetypal forms such as rituals, stories, myths, and shapes that reflect the invisible world we often ignore, walking the labyrinth can open us up to the movement of the Holy Spirit, God’s spark of life within us. The labyrinth pictures transformation, which happens to us when God’s spark catches fire within us.



A symbol of the spiritual journey



Lauren Artress explains why the labyrinth is such an appropriate and thus powerful symbol of the spiritual journey. It has a well-defined path that leads us into the center and back out again. “There are no tricks to it, no dead ends or

cul-de-sacs, no intersecting paths.” That’s different from a maze, which offers a choice of paths, with dead ends and cul-de-sacs that present the walker with riddles to be solved. Also, hedges or walls in mazes often limit walkers’ sight so they can’t see the exit or the center they’re trying to reach. In a maze, finding the way can therefore be hard and scary, but in the labyrinth there’s nothing to fear. We know that if we keep following the path we’ll get not only to the center but also back out into the world.



The labyrinth, like the spiritual journey, is a long, winding path even though like our life it is contained within a relatively small area. Like the spiritual journey, its path seems illogical. We get close to the center early in our walk, but we still have a long way to go, including some time spent far from the center before we reach it. Usually reaching the center is a surprise. Just as in the spiritual journey, we don’t know we’re there until we’re there.



Why does walking matter?

Why is walking the labyrinth rather than just looking at it important? Artress calls it a body prayer. For some reason we get symbols’ message more powerfully if we physically do something with them rather than just think about them. Maybe that’s part of why sacraments like baptism and the Lord’s Supper include movement. We act them out instead of just having them explained to us or hearing the scripture read.



Labyrinths are mysterious, Lauren Artress reminds us. We don’t know the origin of their design, and we don’t know exactly how they provide a space that allows clarity. Besides, as I discovered, it’s quite possible to have an uneventful experience walking

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I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

a labyrinth. Still, as many other people have found and I could perhaps find at some future time, the experience can be life-changing. At the very least, because the body is moving the labyrinth can be a big help in merely quieting the mind.



An unexpected change

When I started writing this month's *Connections* it wasn't about labyrinths. It was on a completely different subject that I'd had in mind for a couple of months. After writing quite a bit, however, I felt I was just plodding. I began thinking maybe that topic simply wasn't usable. Still, I hated to give up on it because my time deadline was

getting close. Then I remembered labyrinths. I was planning to write about them sometime soon, but not yet. I started writing about them anyway, and I was no longer plodding, I was zooming. It was one more labyrinth-related surprise.

Here's the result. I hope you've found it interesting and helpful. As for that other topic, I may write about it in a month or so. Then again, maybe I never will.

Barbara

P. S. - If you'd like to walk a labyrinth and don't know of one near you, I suggest you look for one at www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/newlocator.

Walking a path to God

September 2003



Fanning the spark and blossoming

Lauren Artress speaks of the spark of life in us, the image of God the Holy Spirit. "If we respond to the spark," says Artress, "we flower. Our task is to flower, to come into full blossom before our time comes to an end."



"Blossoming," she continues, "coming to full flower, gives quite a different sense of the Holy than we get in most churches today. ... We have confused religion with spirituality." Religion, she explains, is the outward form, the container. Spirituality is the inward activity of growth and maturation that happens in each of us.



What would our churches be like if more of us fanned our divine sparks and blossomed? How might it change the world in needed ways?

Walking the labyrinth might help some of us do that.