

Introduction to the Labyrinth

There are many ways to pray or meditate. In today's world of always-on technology and long work days, there are also challenges of space and time when one wants to pray or meditate. Jesus said that when you pray, you should "go into your room and shut the door" (Matthew 6:6). Whether we literally do that or not, we understand the value of physically and mentally blocking out, or letting go of, the distractions that prevent us from hearing our inner voice or God's voice. If we are able, we try to develop a spiritual practice of prayer and/or meditation.

A few years ago, Jan Valentine gave a presentation on "thin places," where the "membrane" between the physical world and the spiritual world seems more permeable. Thin places may be famous holy sites where a miracle is said to have occurred, but they may also simply be places where we feel greater receptivity to our deeper self or to insight from God. It's a place where our spiritual WiFi signal is strong. A labyrinth can be that kind of place.

So what is a labyrinth, where did it come from, and what purpose does it serve? Here are several descriptions people have given.

"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 outer edge in a circuitous way to the center. There are no tricks to it and no dead ends. Unlike a maze where you lose your way, the labyrinth is a spiritual tool that can help you find your way." -- Veriditas

"Walking a labyrinth is a right brain activity (creative, intuitive, imaginative), and can induce or enhance a contemplative or meditative state of mind. It is a tool which can clear the mind, calm our anxieties during periods of transition and stress, guide healing, deepen self-knowledge, enhance creativity, allow for reconciliation, restore feelings of belonging to a community, and lead to personal and spiritual growth." -- The Labyrinth Company

"The labyrinth is a metaphor for life. The Christian life is often described as a pilgrimage or journey with God. In life, as with the labyrinth, we don't always know where the path will take us, what twists and turns the future holds, but we trust that the path will arrive at the center, to God. Once we reach the center, we are in a place to receive answers to our questions. On the journey out, we are sent back into the world, potentially energized

and with a broader sense of identity and ideas of how to be of service.” --
Anam Cara website

The labyrinth originally evolved from the spiral shape, a mathematical map of life occurring throughout nature. Even our own fingerprints and our DNA coding reflect this circular form. The spiral is often understood as a universal symbol of growth and transformation.

Labyrinths have been discovered as far back as 5,000 years ago. The earliest known use of a labyrinth in a Christian setting was an 8-foot square mosaic in a church in Algeria in the 4th century. For the next five or six hundred years -- the first half of the Middle Ages -- drawings and wall carvings and floor mosaics of labyrinths began to appear, most of them too small to walk. Many were designed to be traced with a finger or else used as an aid for prayer and contemplation before entering a church.

In the early 1200s, which happened to coincide with the start of the Crusades, larger, walkable labyrinths were inlaid into the floors of major cathedrals of Europe. At one point there were as many as 23 cathedral labyrinths. Only three remain today -- all in France: Saint-Quentin Cathedral, Amiens Cathedral, and the most famous one at Chartres Cathedral, which is still in its original form. The Chartres labyrinth design, which you see on the handout, is usually thought of as the mother of all labyrinth designs, and many labyrinths around the world and the United States today are based on the Chartres design.

How were these labyrinths used back in the Middle Ages? We don't really know exactly. Travelers to these cathedrals may have walked the labyrinth to mark the end of their journey. Those who were unable to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem because of the Crusades (or some other reason such as health or economics) may have walked the labyrinth as a substitute. There is also evidence that clergy would walk the labyrinth around Easter to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus.

For the next five or six centuries, labyrinths mostly disappeared or fell into disuse, though a few popped up in Spain, in Scandinavia, and even one or two in the United States in the 1800s. Probably the first labyrinth to be installed in a church in this country was at Riverside Church in 1928. It's still there, though you can't walk it -- it's roped off.

Over the past 25 years or so, there has been a significant resurgence of interest in labyrinths, especially in the U.S. Not surprisingly, it began with an Episcopal priest, Lauren Artress, who served as a Canon for Special Ministries at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. In 1991, after walking the labyrinth at Chartres, she arranged for a canvas

replica to be made for Grace Cathedral. People flocked to it and repeatedly spoke of how it had drawn them closer to God, brought healing into their lives, and more. Artress eventually started a non-profit organization known as Veriditas, and through that group launched thousands of labyrinths in churches, hospitals, cathedrals, prisons, spas, community parks, hospices and other settings. Veriditas also sponsors workshops and retreats on how to walk the labyrinth. Grace Cathedral now has a permanent limestone labyrinth built into the floor, and has been walked by hundreds of thousands of spiritual pilgrims. Artress also helped to set up a worldwide database of all known labyrinths -- labyrinthlocator.com -- so you can find labyrinths around the country and around the world.

Why is it not surprising that the Episcopal church was a part of the labyrinth's return? Episcopalians have always been drawn to the richness of symbol and metaphor to explain and express our faith. Even more, we don't simply **think** about these symbols -- we act them out with our bodies. We stand, kneel, and process as part of our worship; we eat the bread and drink the wine in the Eucharist. So also we walk the path of the labyrinth, putting one foot in front of the other, as we meditate and pray.

So, how does one approach the labyrinth and actually walk it? First, there are no rules. It is your time and your walk. There is nothing magic about the labyrinth itself; it is a tool to facilitate your relationship with God. However, many who have walked and prayed the labyrinth before have found that a few suggestions can make your walk more meaningful. Prepare yourself the same way you would prepare to pray or meditate. Quiet your mind, try to leave everyday cares and tasks behind. You may want to identify an area of your life, a situation or person you want to turn your attention toward. Perhaps there is a need for healing, reconciliation or recovery. Or you may simply want to commune with God and receive whatever God may want to say to you. An open heart, a willingness to listen, and a spirit of surrender go a long way.

Lauren Artress has offered a way of "framing" the labyrinth experience. She uses four "Rs" -- **Reflect** (beforehand), **Release** (as you enter), **Receive** (as you reach the center), and **Return** or **Resolve** (as you follow the path out). These are not rigid and can be experienced at any point as you walk or after you have finished walking. Memories or images or insights can also occur later on, in your dreams or during quiet moments.

Some people like to reflect on a passage of scripture before walking or while they are walking. Choose whatever you like. Here are a couple of examples:

Your word is a lamp to my feet

and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;

teach me your paths. ...

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness

Who are they that fear the Lord?

He will teach them the way that they should choose (Psalm 25:4, 10a, 12).

And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it' (Isaiah 30:21).

As you walk the labyrinth, you may encounter others who want to enter or have already entered. A full-sized labyrinth such as the Chartres design can allow for quite a few people at once, some moving faster than you and some slower. Again, there is no rule; it is completely fine to pass someone or be passed. Viewed metaphorically, everything that happens in the labyrinth and everything you feel can be part of the insight you receive.

Your experience in the labyrinth may be powerful and even transformative; you may also feel nothing. There is no right way to feel. Just as lightning doesn't strike every time you pray or meditate, it won't happen every time you walk the labyrinth. Remember it is or can become a spiritual practice, and as such it can offer you a fresh way to encounter the living God in your life.

-- Verne Becker

Sources:

Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice, by Lauren Artress

The Sacred Path Companion: A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth to Heal and Transform, by Lauren Artress

Praying the Labyrinth: A Journal for Spiritual Exploration, by Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion