

The Labyrinth as Heart and Holder of Personal Pilgrimage

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Abstract

Labyrinths have woven a meandering path through the human psyche for thousands of years. From ancient Ariadne and Medieval cathedral pilgrimage floors to modern movies and computer games, labyrinths are often at the heart of the quest for self-knowledge, creative awakening, personal integration, community building and transcendence. The labyrinth as a metaphor for the journey of life could be considered a localized concentrated pilgrimage and alternative exploration to exotic travel and the physical challenge usually required for breakdown/breakthrough growth. Unicursal, single pathway designs, like the seven-circuit Classical Cretan and the eleven-circuit Chartres, engage the body while freeing the mind. The physical turnings of the path, alternating right and left, disorient so the walker must quickly surrender control of the experience and trust the journey. Most labyrinth walkers find themselves in a heightened state of receptive discovery very similar to pilgrimage. Walking the labyrinth in a state of focused contemplation while holding a question or an intention of quiet attentiveness is a core pilgrimage practice. Both can evoke an almost visceral recognition of one's own truth, a profound surprise of the potential for reimagining one's life as a coherent story of meaningful events and cohesive purpose. We are called to the journey. Walking the labyrinth as personal pilgrimage is a powerful practice to find our way home.

Key Words: Labyrinth, maze, pilgrimage, Ariadne, contemplation, depth psychology, hero's journey, home, kinesiology, meander, Minotaur, neuroplasticity, paradox, sacred, transformation, transpersonal, walking, wayfinding, wander.

1. Labyrinth Reawakening

Labyrinth images and tales of entrapment and escape have woven a meandering path through the human psyche for thousands of years. The challenge of solving a puzzle to reach a central treasure while avoiding deathtraps was built into palaces, temples and pyramids dating back to ancient Egypt. On Minoan Crete, the Priestess of the Labyrinth Dancing Ground, Ariadne, gave the warrior prince Theseus a ball of golden thread, a clew, so he could find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth prison. This archetypal story of a hero's quest aided by a divine helper to show the way and the subsequent claiming of one's true purpose, has survived for millennia. Labyrinth designs were struck on coins, laid in Medieval cathedral pilgrimage floors, dug in English village greens and more recently, reimagined in modern mysteries, movies and computer games. Solving the labyrinth has often been central in the quest for self-knowledge, creative awakening, self-actualization, individuation, personal integration, puzzle solving, enigma unveiling and transcendence of the ordinary.

The meandering labyrinth pathway could be seen as a metaphor of the journey of life. Walking with the intention to revisit one's life can invite memories to appear and reform with new connections in the neutral ground of the held safe encircled place of the labyrinth's sacred space. The act of attentive path walking could be considered a localized concentrated pilgrimage, an accessible alternative to fatiguing travel and the ensuing mental, physical and spiritual challenges usually required for breakdown/breakthrough growth.

A unicursal, single pathway design, like the seven-circuit Classical Cretan coin design and the eleven-circuit Medieval Chartres Cathedral floor, engage the body in simple repetitive movement while freeing the mind to meander. The physical turnings of the path and the alternating right and left weaving quickly carries the walker through all the quadrants of their spacial awareness, immersing them in a heightened state of receptive discovery by opening all areas of knowing to contribute integrative coherence to the the experience of the quest. Most recognize this state as one of pilgrimage. Disconnecting memories from habitual triggers and expected consequences sets up a state ripe for change. Life's desire to grow and thrive pushes past resistance into new organizations of order and meaning.

Each labyrinth walk begins with the first step across the threshold into the pathway. Each new walk invites a new beginning, an opportunity to discover fresh perspective on one's story. The practice of repeated labyrinth walking can build an environment in which to loosen habitual pathways and offer a sort of safe arena in which to reroute undesired ruts into a

better course, to rewrite episodes in one's life, piecing together a more compassionate narrative. Rewriting physical, mental and emotional associations actually rewires the brain and promotes neuroplasticity and holistic health by building resilience and recovery.

Labyrinth walk participants have reported profound healing of painful memories as the turnings revealed different viewpoints, showing how each step is a new opportunity to begin again. They spontaneously rewrite, choose a different beginning, imagine a different critical choice, picture a different ending, or simply surrender into acceptance that whatever happened, happened. The re-empowering choice is to acknowledge, accept, forgive and re-frame in a way that retains the memory, or releases it, while freeing us from its unhealthy hold on us. We find our way out of the labyrinth to emerge victorious.

The reawakening interest in labyrinths in the last decades and the resulting building boom of thousands in parks, churches, schools, hospitals, prisons and private homes around the world speaks to a deep need for personal pilgrimage¹. The hunger for meaning is fed by the fundamentally integrative practice of regular labyrinth walking as a seeker of authentic experience. Stepping into a labyrinth crosses the threshold from the ordinary into the extraordinary. A journey is initiated that follows a meandering path of archetypal integration that millions have walked before. The labyrinth walker is invited to surrender individual self to merge into the flow of lucid, luminous humanity. The single pathway labyrinth holds the walking pilgrim in the unifying context of sacred space, opening an accessible route into the heart of grace. Pilgrimage teaches compassion and the recognition and appreciation of walking one's path with presence, heart and peace. We are called to the journey. Through pilgrimage, we find our way home.

2. Labyrinth Paradox

Labyrinths embody duality and paradox. Our perception of them flickers between the pattern and the path. Inherently unstable, labyrinths appear to simultaneously show order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, structure and story. Change your perspective and the labyrinth itself seems to change. What you see and feel and understand in one moment can shift completely in the next. Encoding the very principle of contrariety, the major paradox inherent in the labyrinth is that it is simultaneously an ordered work of artistic geometry and a frightening maze of endless wandering.

Labyrinths are characteristically cryptic, holding both the clear pattern and the unclear path. Viewing the design from above, one can map the journey, trace a single route from the first step across the threshold to the last step into the center. Seen as a whole, the complex artistry of the design embodies order. Seen from the path, however, one sees only disorder. On the ground, one quickly loses aerial viewpoint, falling into ambiguity and courting confusion as the circuitous path doubles back repeatedly on itself. Dazed and disorientated, the walker's only choice is to keep walking and surrender trust to the path. The labyrinth walker's vision of the way forward is limited by the turns to just a few steps ahead and behind. This fragmentation is fundamental to the process of the journey. By leaving the familiar, one is forced to innovate and release attachment to set patterns, to become vulnerable and invite transformation.

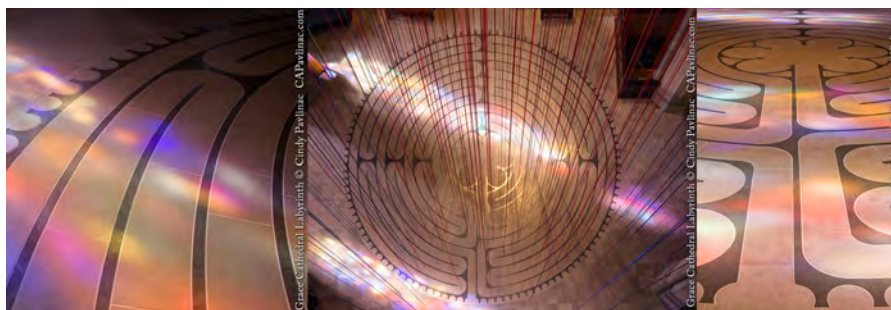


Image 1: The Grace Cathedral Labyrinth in west entrance nave, San Francisco, CA USA.
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Labyrinths are also simultaneously fixed and in motion. They are perceived as a static pattern from an onlooker's point of view or a dynamic path from a walker's perspective. What you experience depends on where you stand. The dilemma of

acknowledging that the labyrinth path is a fixed pattern everyone can see yet everyone experiences differently, is the same tough acknowledgment that every person is somehow the same while being simultaneously absolutely unique. This paradox is at the very heart of identity, the quest for meaning and of being human.

By stepping into the labyrinth one enters an agreement with oneself to go on a journey of discovery. This receptive state promotes trust in the process and encourages letting go of expectations and specific results. The simple task is to follow the path and continue to the center, no matter what appears, external or internal. As with any pilgrimage, initial clarity of intention will be challenged by the subsequent twists and turns of the actual journey, of physically walking the path, of moving through unfamiliar and unpredicted circumstances. Unexpected considerations will arise as interior concerns collide with exterior reality and conflicted priorities roil over each other. As challenges bring up memories of the past and hopes of the future, everything eventually collapses into a singular moment of surrender and vivid presence where all there is, is now. All we know is now. And all there is to do, all there is ever to do, is to keep going, to continue on this unknown trajectory, grasping for balance, reaching for meaning until even that last desire is released in complete surrender. Labyrinths ask for the most profound trust. Cross the threshold from the known into the unknown. Step into the path and continue to the center. Trust the architect, trust the pilgrims who have trodden this way before, trust yourself, trust whatever you define as the divine, trust the process, embrace the enigma. Life is a mystery. Pilgrimage is a path to awaken one's core Self.

3. A California Campus Labyrinth

This past Spring 2015, I taught the Wisdom of the Labyrinth course in the Art History Department at Dominican University in San Rafael, California, just north of San Francisco. As part of the course, the students installed a temporary labyrinth on campus in a large lawn area. They selected an agreeable location and in about an hour, had constructed an unicursal 40 foot, seven circuit, medieval cross pattern labyrinth design using metal surveyor flags and colorful ribbon tape. We gathered at the entrance and I paced them in one at a time, giving each person space to walk at their own speed. I suggested they turn awareness to their physical body to calm their mind from the frenetic activity of calculating measurements, laying out geometry and coordinating teams and to take a few deep breaths and open their senses to the natural world all around. Most were barefoot so I invited them to wiggle their toes in the lush grass and celebrate the completed installation of an ancient contemplative pathway amongst the campus spring blossoms and birdsong. Since it happened to be Valentines Day, I handed each student a rose and invited them to drop petals as they walked the path, naming a person they love with each petal release. I gently suggested they not repeat any name, inviting a deepening reach beyond the obvious to open to possibilities to less obvious connections. The third suggestion was to name those who love them.

As the students entered our plastic tape labyrinth, there was a profound shift from laughing at silly flappy flags to considered seriousness and genuine gratitude. Everyone was astonished at the immediate change in attitude. Afterwards we sat on the lawn and quietly shared experiences in a mood of deep respect and reverence. Each had felt an unexpected shift. Many were surprised at who came to mind to be named with a rose petal. Several moved beyond individual people and pets to include groups and other entities of the greater environment. All were shocked how a simple labyrinth walk could drop them immediately into personal pilgrimage and the inner landscape of their deep truth.



Image 2: Meadowlands Lawn Labyrinth created by Wisdom of the Labyrinth Art History students, Dominican University campus, San Rafael, CA USA, Spring 2015.
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The Meadowlands Lawn Labyrinth was in place for five weeks. During that time, course students walked the labyrinth, brought their teachers and other students and worked on creative responses to the labyrinth pilgrimage experience. Besides the gratitude walk, I proposed other walk foci: asking a question, carrying in something to be released, holding a hope that grows stronger with each step, inviting imagery, humming a song while inventing new lyrics, moving through each turn with Tai Chi or Qigong concentration. Basically taking something familiar to see where it might lead opens up tremendous possibilities for self-exploration. When we met for further sharing, all reported profound insights, resulting in everything from shocking clarity about a major life decision to reframing separate painful tragedies into a unified story of their own personal hero's journey. They reported greater meaning and purpose in their lives as they spoke with empowered tone and new self-assurance. I was struck how once again, a minimally directed labyrinth walk could facilitate transformative experiences similar to extended pilgrimages, vision quests, rite of passage rituals and other transpersonal self-actualizing events.

Some students made art, others wrote stories. All reported surprising insights and cognitive shifts during their labyrinth walks. Their final reflective papers included the following written comments:

Taking this class was the best thing that happened to me this semester. I have found a part of myself that enjoys peace and quiet. I value my time alone much more now than ever before after finding out what can happen when I take a walk alone versus with other people.

Labyrinths have changed how I view myself.

I have walked out of the labyrinth a different person and see the world in a whole new light.

All the things in my head like my stress levels were high when I entered but when I exited my head was clear and focused!

I thought of Tolkien's famous line, "Not all those who wander are lost" because when you walk a labyrinth you aren't lost; you are wandering and moving through a different plane of existence or thought.

A labyrinth is a season; the same way you enter is basically the same way you exit, except you leave a different person, a different person who has a new view on life.

Labyrinths have helped me discover a part of myself that I never saw before. They opened up a part of myself I had never connected with before. This class taught me about the importance of meditation, balance and connecting with my spirituality more than any yoga class has done.

When the labyrinth we constructed was up at Dominican I noticed a change. More people used the Meadowland's space and several classes visited the labyrinth to walk it and talk about things like mindfulness, meditation, environmentalism and spirituality. I believe that it is at the heart of Dominican's ideal of service to foster these discussions and that building a permanent labyrinth on campus is the best way to do so. I, for one, would love having that resource available to me.

Creating a labyrinth was a valuable asset to my education for my Art History degree.

The labyrinth symbolizes the home I created on the Dominican campus. It was a once in a lifetime experience that I will never forget.²

Walking a unicursal labyrinth in a state of focused contemplation can emulate pilgrimage effects. Stepping into a well worn design drops us into precincts sourced from nature and sacred geometry that can facilitate profound realignment. My students reported sudden insights into difficult decisions and shifts in their world view, from the immediate tangle of everyday concerns into a much expanded perspective of their choices and their life trajectory. Their level of awareness moved from the small personal to the grand transpersonal, connecting them with greater purpose, mythic story and a global perspective. They became the hero and heroine of their own life story and were empowered to make brave decisions based in deeply personal subjective truth, often at odds with peer pressure and society consensus. Walking the labyrinth revealed their own truths and emboldened them to act with the courage of conviction.

4. Labyrinth Reawakened

Pilgrimages are journeys of metacognition. Contemplative walking in the sacred space of a labyrinth can facilitate a pilgrimage state and resulting benefits. The labyrinth blurs the boundary between the known and the unknown, encircling a safe place to explore, discover, step into the unfamiliar, be held in the center of grace and return to the known refreshed and with expanded perspective. By physically meandering left and right, backwards and forwards, towards the destination and away, the labyrinth touches, teases and awakens awareness in every direction. The meandering path echoes life's ever turning road, carrying us through the challenge of constant change and shifting perspectives.

Walking in, shed what no longer serves. Journey inward through the private interior landscape of personal memory. Pause in the center, held in grace, solace and quiet expanded presence of receptive expectation. Walking out, thoughts rebalance and turn memories into healthier alignment, revealing fresh connections held in a transpersonal context. Experiencing one's life story in a context greater than oneself shifts focus to greater meaning framed in acceptance, forgiveness and gratitude. Mythic knowledge reactivates and sings its song anew.

Walkers exit the labyrinth path where they entered and know it for the first time. Refreshed and renewed, many feel they have been on a deep journey and have been long away. They have traveled in mythic time. The simple act of walking a labyrinth can have profound lasting effect. By leaving the ordinary to step onto an unfamiliar pathway, we can touch the extraordinary. A focused labyrinth pilgrimage can lead us to know our deep, authentic self. It can channel our heart's longing and seeking into quest and return us to the self we long to be. We are called to the journey. Through pilgrimage, we find our way home.

Notes

¹ See Cindy Pavlinac Photography | Labyrinths, an online gallery documenting 30+ years of labyrinth installations, walks and events. <http://cindypavlinac.photodeck.com/-/galleries/labyrinths>.

² Excerpts from final written assignments of the Wisdom of the Labyrinth course participants, Spring 2015, Art History Department, Dominican University, San Rafael, California, USA. Student quotes used anonymously with permission.

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