

Leaf Labyrinth

By DC Donohue

At the magic age of ten, eleven and twelve, I lived with my family in Fort Knox, Kentucky where my father was a Colonel in the Army and my mother stayed at home and cleaned and cleaned and wore crisp aprons and prepared really good food. In the evening my father would return home to sit behind a newspaper and my mother, having waited wide eyed and quiet until five o'clock, would mix their first drinks—an Old Fashioned for herself and, for my father, a Gin and Tonic, each with a bright slice of lime. By five forty-five, I was on my own.

In the afternoons of the autumns of those years I found consolation and mystery outside with the wind and the leaves. Into the former I would lean, exhilarated, with my windbreaker outstretched, certain that at any moment I would be airborne and away. I imagined flying over the heads of my confused and envious schoolmates, and landing among a gathering crowd of family and friends who would finally grasp my real worth and who would treat me ever after with mute admiration. Such are the compensatory imaginings of a ten year old!

As for the leaves, in the back yard I would rake them into lines forming big squares and rectangles, connected together like a floor plan in an architect's blueprint, leaving a space wherever there was a door or window. This pattern became my very own home, more wholesome and less complicated than the three-dimensional brick structure yonder, and into which no one ever wandered uninvited. A living room here, a bedroom there, a kitchen, a pantry, a breakfast nook, a bathroom—nothing was lacking and as I walked through those rooms, I was the princess, the heroine of every fairy tale ever told. With flushed cheeks and calloused palms, I'd stand back and take it all in and it was perfect.

If you read Lauren Artress's *Walking a Sacred Path** you will find early on a passage about her childhood explorations with a flashing circle of shimmering fish in the river below a cliff she had climbed (p. xx). Reading that recently, I thought about the blueprints I raked as a child, when definite patterns of my own devising had lent me a sense, however private and temporary, of autonomy, order, safe containment and meaning. Later, I found a similar reference in Jim Buchanan's *Labyrinths For the Spirit*, where Jim describes drawing labyrinths in the sand during his childhood in the west of Ireland: "The act of drawing and then making a work that engages with nature's constant flux had captured my imagination irreversibly," he says (p. 6).

It has been 35 years since I raked the autumn leaves into solace and order. Now I'm 47, the time in a life when you slow to a stop in your tracks to survey the whole, to scratch your head and wonder how on earth the child you think you are ever came to look and move like the woman you see reflected in windows and mirrors and the eyes of the people you love. And part of that wondering is a return to the time before, to collect as treasures anything from *then* that put you in touch with the mystery, and to bring it forward to this moment like a lifeline, a touchstone, a marker of meaning. For several recent years I have thought a lot about getting out and rake leaves into a pattern but since we don't have a yard, the task required a little more forethought than I was able to muster...until last month.

One morning this November, I trotted over to the Lone Fir Cemetery in SE Portland, Oregon, pushing a double stroller piled high with three little boys, aged 2, 2 and 4, my clients for that morning in my home childcare. I'd packed snacks and, balancing a rake over the stroller handles, we headed out. It was midmorning and we didn't have a lot of time before another child would be dropped off for care at my house.

At the cemetery, we found plenty of crisp brown leaves under the spreading oak tree in the southwest corner and I began to rake, circles this time, four big concentric ones which I then shifted a bit to form a simple three circuit labyrinth. While I worked, the little boys used long sticks to stir up my lines no matter how much I pointed out that there were *plenty* of other leaves around to stir up. I even raked some into an enticing pile: "Here! Scatter these!" But they wouldn't hear of it. Kids know when they're dabbling in something that really matters and they can't be fooled by facsimiles. The more they stirred, the faster I raked, all of us laughing, until finally the labyrinth was complete and we all walked it together. Here are some photos:





Then our time was up and we had to skedaddle back to my house for lunch and a fairy tale and a nap.

Later, at five o'clock, after the last of the Other Women's Children had gone home, I walked back over to Lone Fir to see what had become of the labyrinth. It was completely gone. The wind, like the rising tide on a beach in the west of Ireland, had completely reclaimed it. So I walked home, lit a candle, prepared a delicious dinner and welcomed my own children home from swim practice.

*In March 2010 LNN will have its first Book Discussion and Tea at Westminster Presbyterian in NE Portland and *Walking a Sacred Path* is the book to be discussed.

About the Author:

DC Donohue lives and works in SE Portland where she makes the occasional labyrinth.