

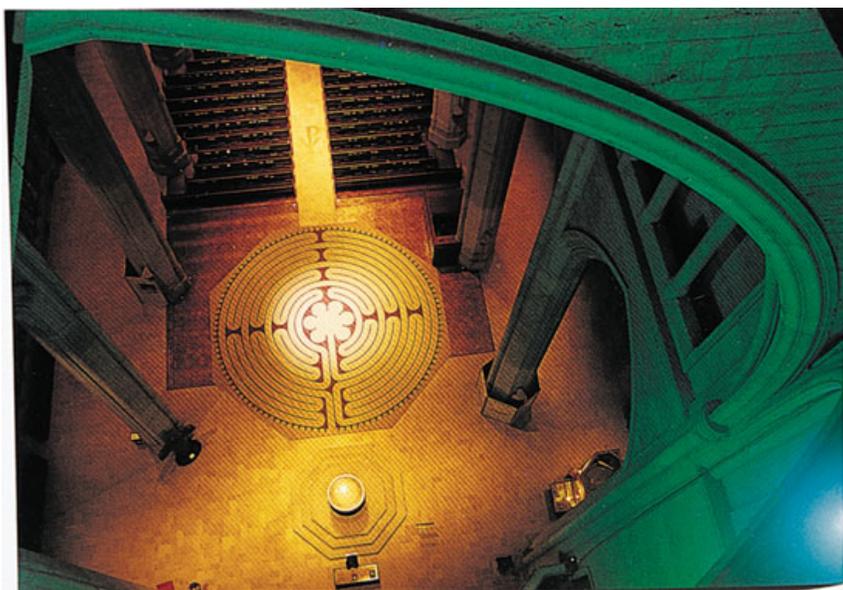
The Multicultural Tradition of the Labyrinth

From Celtic and Jewish cultures and as a Wiccan symbol, the labyrinth has a rich history that spans many cultures.

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By Robbie Cranch



Designed by Sharon Brady, the Cretan-style labyrinth at St. Gabriel's Monastery in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania (opposite), consists of sand-filled paths within the lawn. The indoor labyrinth of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco (above and below) is a replica of Chartres' eleven-circuit pattern.

Photo Courtesy of Veriditas

There are two atop San Francisco's elegant Nob Hill, and one in a garden in Pocatello, Idaho. Others are scraped out of frozen snow on an iced-over mountain lake, painted by the dozen on portable canvases, laid out in specially commissioned carpeting, spray-painted on a clergyman's front lawn. The patterns echo Hopi medicine wheels and the art of the Celts, the Jewish Kabbala, modern Wiccan symbols, and the floor design of a thirteenth-century French cathedral. It's as new as the morning, and as old as 250 b.c.: the labyrinth.

Defining the Path

What is the meaning of these intriguing patterns? Why do people walk their paths? Why are they commanding such interest?

A labyrinth is a winding pattern whose single path leads to a central core. But it is unicursal: the same path leads in and out. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth holds no false paths or dead ends. It is not a puzzle. Walking in a labyrinth, one is always certain of being on the right path.

No one knows the origin of the labyrinth, but it spans many cultures and faiths. The oldest surviving example is a Cretan labyrinth with seven circuits. Iron Age Europe produced many, most too small to be walked. France's Chartres Cathedral holds the oldest known eleven-circuit pattern. Perhaps the larger, walking patterns were considered small journeys to the center of creation and back.

The labyrinth is rich in symbols reflected in many traditions. The contemporary eleven-circuit pattern has a rosette—a six-petaled, rose-shaped area—at the center, and the rose is a symbol of enlightenment, as is its Eastern equivalent the lotus. The petals can symbolize the six days of creation, or the six levels of evolution in Christian theology: mineral, plant, animal, human, angelic, divine. Surrounding the rosette are eleven concentric circles of path that turn and fold to form ten labyrinths—the double-ax symbol of women’s power and creativity; twenty-eight half lunations or partial circles per quadrant; and twenty-eight cusps or points per quadrant. The four quadrants may reflect the quarters of the year. When viewed from above, the quadrants form a large cross, one of the most sacred Christian symbols, while the entire circle expresses wholeness and completion.

What purpose does a labyrinth serve? Answers vary: It is a relaxation technique, a path of prayer, dance choreography using both clockwise (energizing) and counterclockwise (energy-releasing) moves. It represents an opportunity to listen deeply, to walk deliberately, yet without conscious thought. It is a place for voiceless prayer, petitionary prayer, and repetitive prayer—offering an opportunity for divine instruction. It’s a chance to join the healing forces of the world and to walk with ancient peoples. It is a meditation technique for people who are unable to sit still, and sometimes unable to stop thinking.

How to Walk Your Path

Walking a labyrinth is so simple that it’s better done than described. Pause to clear and quiet your mind and steady your breathing. Step into the labyrinth and follow its path. Allow plenty of time. As you enter, you are in the “purgation” phase—shedding thoughts and emotions, quieting and emptying the mind, letting go of the busy details of your life. There is no rush; the path is surprisingly long within its twists and folds. You may wish to walk by letting go of all thought, attending only to your path. You may wish to walk with a question in mind, or a prayer. Don’t worry about doing it right, or figuring out the design of the path, just walk. The path is two-way; if you’re in a public labyrinth you may meet others. Pass by or allow others to step around you.

When you reach the labyrinth center you are in the “illumination” stage. Stay as long as you like. Stand, sit comfortably, lie down. Receive what is there for you to receive. Your return will take you through the four quadrants of the labyrinth, bringing you out where you began, and moving you into the “union” stage—with a god figure, with insight, or with healing forces. Your union may be profound or subtle, a vision of light, or a simple feeling of ease. Each time you walk the labyrinth will be different, yet with these common goals: to release and quiet, to open and be receptive, to take what is gained back out into the world.

Labyrinth Redux

A 1998 New York Times article commented that in “a meld of ancient tradition and New Age, Eastern religion and Christian ritual, labyrinths are attracting both churchgoers and church quitters, practicing Buddhists and dharma drop-outs. . . . In an age when many Americans are looking beyond the church pulpit for spiritual experience and solace, a growing number have rediscovered the labyrinth as a path to prayer, introspection, and emotional healing. While walking a labyrinth is no more magical than a walk in the woods, those who walk them often say it focuses the mind, slows the breathing, and induces a peaceful state, or helps them confront their problems.”

For many participants, the labyrinth bridges denominations and reaches those who hold no particular belief. In downtown San Jose, California, the 130-year-old First Unitarian Church recently installed a labyrinth at the center of its restored, circular sanctuary. Heavily damaged by a fire three years ago, the handsome Romanesque building is open at noon five days a week to labyrinth walkers, who, in the past four months, have included congregants, “Silicon Valley types with their badges on,” youths at risk, a cancer support

group, a Chinese healing/meditation group, members of the Spanish-speaking community, the church's coming-of-age participants, some neighborhood homeless, and members of the congregation's Buddhist Fellowship. Other labyrinths in the Bay Area include a painted one on the grounds of San Francisco's California Pacific Medical Center and one at Grace Cathedral, which has been part of an education plan for children with attention deficit disorder (ADD).

At the heart of the "labyrinth revival" are Veriditas, a worldwide labyrinth project, and Grace Cathedral's Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress. Veriditas commits ". . . to reintroduce the labyrinth in its many forms as a spiritual tool. Its deeply healing qualities have been lying dormant for centuries, so labyrinths need to be established in cathedrals, churches, retreat centers, hospitals, prisons, parks, airports, and community spaces around the world." Artress, Canon for Special Ministries at Grace, is a psychotherapist who holds a divinity degree. Involved with labyrinths since 1991, she wrote 1995's *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*. Veriditas and Artress have trained several hundred people as facilitators and builders of labyrinths around the country, including members of the Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, Episcopalian, and Unitarian Universalist faiths. New labyrinths are being built in Switzerland, Ireland, Germany, Australia, Argentina, and Brazil. At present there are more than one hundred labyrinths in the United States, and over one million visitors have walked Grace Cathedral's labyrinths alone since their construction.

Making a Personal Path

For those interested in creating a labyrinth, here is both advice and caution. Whatever your material, understand your pattern before you start! Good patterns now exist via Veriditas and the St. Louis Labyrinth Project for a 35- to 40-foot, eleven-circuit labyrinth. (You can't make a smaller one simply by peeling off a few circuits.) Patrick Smiley, who co-designed the beautiful seven-circuit carpet used by the First Unitarian Church of San Jose made and discarded many designs before he found a workable one. Even then, he and labyrinth project partner Marilynn Carstens remember that the first carpet design arrived from the manufacturer in mirror image. Find compatible people to work with—a labyrinth is a community project. Learn about the history and practice of labyrinths, so you can answer questions. Keep track of other labyrinth projects. Take care of your back and knees while you work. Build on a site where you can be generous with access.

Construction materials can be as varied as labyrinth locations and walkers. Some are planted in wide fields or mown out of standing lawn, meadow, or even cornfield. Some are built of tile, terrazzo, stone, cobbles, or bricks set on edge. Some are scribed into concrete, painted on an indoor floor, or sketched on a courtyard in chalk. Some are portable, painted on panels of heavy canvas held together by Velcro. Some are Lilliputian, finger versions cut into a wood panel for use by those who cannot access a walking model. Like the San Jose labyrinth, some are made of specially cut and fitted carpet installed in a church nave or hall. Some are cultivated as a garden. Many are created and maintained by guilds or groups of facilitators who give simple instruction to new walkers and maintain the labyrinth.

Labyrinths have gained great visibility, use, and appreciation in less than a decade. Few things in our hectic, jangling world bring so much calmness and balance, with such simplicity of practice. Even fewer bridge the wide variety of beliefs and opinions people hold.

Find or make a labyrinth—then walk to the center of creation. **NH**