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Ancient circles

by Norma Smith Olson

When Lisa Gidlow Moriarty, aka the Labyrinth Lady, attended a workshop in the late 1990s, she thought she'd come home with a nice labyrinth design for her husband to mow into their meadow. But something deeper clicked for her and she's co-created over 100 labyrinths since then. She shares the 14 labyrinths she built on her property. In August she talked with the Minnesota Women's Press about her work with these ancient circles.



"There's something about the labyrinths that opens us up to creativity. When we are walking the labyrinth with a concern or an issue, often an idea will happen that you hadn't thought of before. To me that's creativity. That's getting to some opening that's there but you just haven't allowed it to blossom yet."

- Lisa Gidlow Moriarty

What drew you to labyrinths?

As I watched the people at the workshop walking labyrinths it became quickly evident to me that there was something much more powerful than just a design painted on [a canvas]. People were responding at a much deeper and emotional level. Some were crying, some were joyful.

I was very intrigued. I came home and started researching labyrinths and built the first labyrinth on our property two weeks later. I've been building labyrinths ever since.

What do you think it is about labyrinths that resonates so deeply with people?

Everyone's experience is individual. I think that's part of the beauty or the mystique of labyrinths. Two people can walk the same pattern, the same path, at the same time and have entirely different experiences.

I would suggest that it has something to do with the form. Most labyrinths are circular. The labyrinth as a whole is a symbol. Part of [walking] is engaging physically in a symbol, actually stepping into that symbol. That's powerful. It takes [you] to a whole different level. It takes [you] out of the imagination mind and down into the body. It has something to do with the turns that you take. There would be some physiological effect possibly from the turning and the walking. Certainly the walking moves your body. The turnings could have some balancing effects in the hemispheres of your brain.

The circle is a universal symbol for unity, for wholeness. So, even though some labyrinths are other shaped, in my experience, people tend to be drawn more to a round shape. The idea of being almost embraced or encompassed in this circle is what makes it feel so complete. It holds that space for us, makes us feel whole, round, circled, encircled, balanced and centered.

Do you have a preferred way to "walk" a labyrinth?

I will often circumambulate the design first, simply walking around it. I think of that as warming the space or pulling the energy in to that spot. And, it's about preparing myself for stepping into that experience, [I think about] slowing down, letting go and focusing on what is important, what is present for me.

When you walk a circular labyrinth, generally the goal is at the very center of that circle. There's something quite intriguing by standing in the center. You feel as though you are in the middle of the universe. You can look out around and see the journey that you've come in its entirety. There is something very sacred about that.

If you are walking with another person or a group of people, if you are standing at that center, everyone else is walking around you, there's a sense of holding that container. It creates a sacred place and a sacred community; the sense of all being on a journey, while having an individual experience.

There are so many ways of walking a labyrinth. And, although the walk itself may be quite similar, what goes on for me experientially is going to be very different. If I'm grieving something, that labyrinth walk is going to be very different than if I'm celebrating something. Sometimes I'll be called to dance the path, sometimes I feel that I need to go very slowly. Part of it is listening to how my body wants to move and engage in this experience.

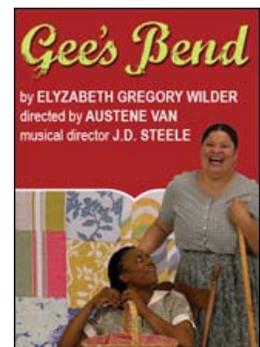
It's really about listening for what feels right at that moment and time. I call it sacred listening. It really is not just opening my ears to what's going on outside, but opening my heart to hear what this experience could be for me and

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