

Prairie labyrinths: Meditative walking designs ancient symbols of sacred space



PERHAM, Minn. - George and Sherry Biltz often find themselves walking in circles. In fact, they seek out circular opportunities around the world.

Closer to home, prairie grass circles begin at Sunset Beach Resort on Big Pine Lake near Perham, where the resort's ownership has been in George's family for 70 years. The couple has created three prairie labyrinths, models of ancient walking meditative designs, allowing Sherry the opportunity to walk, "quiet your mind, open your heart and exercise your spirit."

They welcome the curious, prayerful and the playful. The Biltzes' labyrinth walkers include children, adults, gardeners, rock hounds and mathematicians. Labyrinths can create a heightened awareness of the human condition and aid spiritual growth.

The couple, Perham natives and high school sweethearts, lives in Minneapolis most of the year, where George, a pediatrician, teaches at the University of Minnesota and Sherry sells Scandinavian furniture.

In 2001, a Minneapolis friend introduced Sherry to the labyrinth concept and it immediately intrigued her. So much so, she eventually became treasurer of the international Labyrinth Society and now serves as membership chair and Regional Rep Coordinator. She has designed labyrinth coloring books, tee shirts,

mugs and bookmarks.

“It provided an outlet for my busy mind where I didn’t have to make decisions. I just followed the path,” Sherry says.

Ancient back story

Sherry explains that a labyrinth, an ancient symbol of sacred space, dates back more than 4,000 years. The geometric pattern appears complex, but the path remains simple with a single entrance (mouth) and a center or goal. It meanders to the center and returns to a new beginning, going back and forth and turning 180 degrees when entering a different circuit, all while also exercising left and right brain awareness.

Labyrinths occur in different times and diverse cultures in places such as Scandinavia, Egypt, India, Peru, around the Baltic Sea and the American Southwest. The seven-circuit egg-shaped classic and oldest model is connected with the myth of the Minotaur and the island of Crete.

About 800 years ago, builders constructed an 11-circuit labyrinth in the floor of Chartres Cathedral outside Paris. Medieval Christians walked the labyrinth instead of taking the hazardous pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Crusades. It remains a destination for Christian pilgrims and others on spiritual quests.

Present-day rediscovery of the labyrinth is credited to Lauren Artress of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Labyrinths can be found in churches, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, prisons, parks, gardens and private yards.

People can also carry small finger labyrinths or use a labyrinth app on their smartphone as a way to quiet the mind when no physical path is available.

Sunset Beach labyrinths

In 1995, Sherry and George began a prairie restoration project. They wanted to cultivate local prairie grasses and wild flowers to welcome butterflies, birds and bees.

In 2003, at summer solstice, the couple designed, tilled and seeded an 11- circuit, 75-foot, Chartres-style labyrinth at Sunset Beach. Circuit 12 was added as a gathering ring with entrances from the north, east, south and west. Family and friends helped “plant” 1,200 stones into the seeded pattern to define the path. A heart-shaped boulder rests in the center of the labyrinth.

“I am the idea person, and I like learning new things and expanding our world,” Sherry says. “George is the mind and the muscle. He understands sacred geometry and works out the details of the labyrinth building.”

“That night, after completing the labyrinth,” Sherry recalls, “the call of the loon, hoot of the owl and bright full moon dedicated the sacred space. It was magical.”

From the Sunset Beach paths, walkers can view bluestem grasses, leadplant, black-eyed Susan, white and purple clover, prairie smoke, and hawkweed among other prairie plants.

Two more labyrinths were prepared in 2009 for a women’s retreat at the resort. Sherry mowed the classical labyrinth into the field to provide space for a candle-lit evening walk. The Breaking Wave, designed and built by George, combines the labyrinth path with symbolic lake waves from the northwest winds.

“I stretched the paths of the classic design, allowing walkers to be pulled down the path,” George says. “Bouncing off the large boulder and onto the cusp of the wave, they are then drawn toward the receding swell to rise again to the top of the wave. The winds and waves are metaphors for daily life.”

The pilgrimage continues

George and Sherry have welcomed walkers who are joyful or hurting, celebrating weddings and baptisms or grieving deaths and divorces.

Walkers come to heal, enhance creativity, solve problems, build community or group and community building or to simply be pilgrims on a quest.

Over the years, the Biltzes have visited sacred sites in the United Kingdom, Norway, India, South Africa and Santa Fe, N.M. This fall, they will travel to Portugal, where George will present research and they will walk part of the famous pilgrim route, Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

There is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth, Sherry says. Some people stand at the beginning, inhale a clearing breath, focus, set an intention, walk purposefully, stay in the center several moments, breathe, reflect, receive, follow the path out into the flow of daily life. Sherry often repeats the names of her family members as she begins her walk.

“A labyrinth walk is a metaphor for life’s journey,” she says. “Pay attention to the earth and your surrounding and the blessings of the day. You won’t get lost. You might even find yourself.”

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