

Preparation Within

By Anne Buck

How do you prepare your heart for 47 grieving campers ages six to sixteen? Half of them have never been to any kind of camp before; three quarters experienced the death of a parent; half of the deaths were sudden, half of the deaths were anticipated. These are children who have experienced the death of a loved one by cancer, heart disease, infections and nine suicides.

Preparation takes a full year - interviews, meetings, trainings, organizing, arranging and pulling together volunteers and donations. Camp lasts only 48 hours but it is filled - swimming and campfires, fishing and face-painting, handmade quilts and special bears, laughter and tears, memories shared and stories told. Luminary candles float in the darkness of night honoring those who have died.

It is easy and exciting for everyone to get caught up in the preparation and work of a weekend camp because there is so much to accomplish and endless tasks to do in anticipation of a smooth journey.

Repeat to self ... "Trust the process." The labyrinth is set up in a gym where candles are not allowed. Four 'touch-lights' sit on the canvas corners; 20 'realistic flickering flame' battery operated candles sit in each of the labyrys and four sets of Christmas lights encircle the labyrinth. "This isn't the way that this should be done. This isn't right. This can't be happening." I can hear the approaching laughter and feel the full energy of the counselors as they finish their tour of camp. Only forty-five minutes until campers arrive. "There isn't time. This isn't going to work. How can I get through this? Here they come..." They abruptly enter the darkened gym to gentle music and an invitation to breathe, be present, and prepare. "Can I let go?" "What does this mean?"

"The labyrinth helped me transition from my "working" mind set to a "healing" mind set. I had been so focused on camp set-up, logistics, time and what must be done. The second I stepped into the room, I felt a calm and refocusing of my energy to accepting the children and their needs for the weekend...instead of my own. Walking the labyrinth allowed me to breathe, let the outside world go and be present in the moment. I also felt a fun connection with other volunteers and it was one of the most memorable experiences of the weekend for me...even before any children got to camp."

"As a counselor anticipating the arrival of our campers (and having a bit of trepidation about how well the weekend would go), the labyrinth provided a wonderfully calming and centering experience. This quiet period

of reflection and repetitive movement gave me a chance to guide my thoughts and energies away from the outside world, and it provided me with a gentle and peaceful focus for entering into the spiritual realm of Camp."

"The thing that hit me the most was how much the labyrinth mirrors life (and therefore, death). I'd be on my path and someone would suddenly appear in my "personal space", I'd need to adjust one way, or the other and then continue on. Or, someone would suddenly appear next to me, we would walk together for a while. I was aware and felt their presence, adjusting to, they would be gone and I sensed the change or loss of connection. Again, very much like what we all experience on our daily and life-long walk with others."

So, how do you prepare your heart for children who grieve? How do you prepare to enter an experience of grief and loss? Once again, it is often in the heart and soul of activity, the place of anxiety and eager anticipation where we walk together, centering and quieting ourselves and trusting the process.

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Anne Buck, Is a Veriditas Certified Labyrinth Facilitator and also attended Robert Ferre's Labyrinth Facilitator Training, April 2008 in Tualatin, OR.

Anne is a chaplain at Legacy Salmon Creek Hospital, a certified spiritual director and a licensed massage therapist. She says, "walking and working with the labyrinth can be an invitation to integrate body, mind and spirit." Anne also painted her own 36 ft. Chartres Labyrinth.