

# 101 Ways to Use a Classical Labyrinth

Medical Center of Central Georgia - Macon, Georgia

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Recently I was reading a book on how to make effective presentations. It suggested that you first needed a good title—one that would appeal to people by promising results. There were several suggestions such as “10 Ways to....” and you can fill in the blank. Maybe—make money, relax, or win the lottery. Many book titles and magazine articles use this approach. It is sort of a “top ten” list. Another suggestion was “101 Ways” to do something. I liked that one. So that is our title—*101 Ways to use a Labyrinth*. The book I was reading went on to point out that if your title is “10 Ways” then people really expect 10 examples and are disappointed if you do not give them. If, however, your title is “101 Ways” and your audience realizes that you actually intend to cover 101 items, they will be dismayed. Don’t be dismayed. I don’t have 101 Ways. I have one general way and seven basic categories. I have 15-20 ways but with your help and some discussion we may together generate 101 Ways or more to use a labyrinth.

## What is a labyrinth? Why walk one?

These questions seem redundant at a labyrinth conference but a brief answer follows. It is from an introduction I wrote for a healthcare grant proposal to fund a community labyrinth.

*Where can you seek healing of the mind, body, and spirit? Where can you go to become centered and strengthened as you confront a chronic disease? How can you emotionally prepare for surgery? Where can you get the strength to support others through illness? How do individuals look deeply into themselves and gain helpful insights? Where can you go to celebrate life? Where can you have a ritual of remembrance? Where can you find a needed peaceful moment? Where can you learn about the journey of life and where you are in the process? The answer is in a labyrinth. The process of mindfully walking a labyrinth can bring aid or answers to all these concerns.*

A labyrinth is an ancient symbol that represents wholeness. It combines the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path. It looks like a maze but is not. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has no dead-ends. You cannot get lost. You just follow the path to the center and out again. You walk a labyrinth to learn its lessons. The labyrinth symbolizes a transformative journey to your own center and back out into the world. Labyrinths occur in all cultures and have long been used as tools for meditation, centering, and healing. Labyrinths bring people together on the common path of life.

Labyrinths and mazes have often been confused. When most people hear of a labyrinth, they think of a maze. A labyrinth is not a maze. A maze is like a puzzle to be solved. It has twists, turns, and blind alleys. It is a left brain task that

requires logical thinking and analysis to find the correct path. A labyrinth is a right brain task involving intuition, creativity, imagery, and the search for possibility.

A labyrinth has only one path. The way in is the way out. You cannot get lost even though you may feel lost. The path leads you on a circuitous route to the center and out again. It slows you down and helps you become centered. With a maze many choices are required and an active mind is necessary. For a labyrinth a receptive mindset is required. There is only one choice to be made. It is to enter or not. The choice is whether or not you will walk an inner path towards healing, health, and wholeness.

## **Types of Labyrinths**

Labyrinths come in many designs with lots of variations but two main styles have been in contemporary use. These are the 3500 year old Cretan classical seven-circuit style and the Chartres' style from 1225 A.D. that is found in the Chartres Cathedral in France. For a variety of reasons, some people prefer one style over the other. A poll on my web site found that 57% of the respondents preferred the Chartres' style while 43% choose the classical style. The different ways of using a labyrinth that I am presenting can be adapted to either style, but my experience is with the classical labyrinth so it will serve as my example.

Why do I like the classical style? I think that it may be imprinting. Like baby ducks that adopt the first moving object they encounter as mother, we may adopt the first labyrinth we walk as ours. My first labyrinth walk was on a classical labyrinth at a weekend spiritual retreat. The labyrinth was hastily drawn on the grass with a bright, yellow surveyor's paint. Irregular and lopsided as it was, it spoke to me.

Someone showed me the seed pattern to draw the labyrinth. I was fascinated with it. When I finally had walked the labyrinth and returned home I began collecting stones and constructed one in my yard. This was in the Spring of 1997. A few months later I invited friends over for a candlelight, Summer Solstice walk and a minister who attended was interested in having a labyrinth at his church. Soon other churches wanted one. More and more people wanted information. I added a labyrinth section to my web site ([www.lessons4living.com](http://www.lessons4living.com)), created a labyrinth screensaver, and wrote two grants: one for a canvas labyrinth and one for a labyrinth in a city park. I became a labyrinth ambassador. Some would say nuisance. It all started with that first walk where a labyrinth seed was planted in me.

Other than imprinting on the classical labyrinth, I like the seven-circuit labyrinth because it is easy to layout, quicker to walk so if a group has limited time it goes faster. It has the symbolism of seven. Looks like a tree and looks like a brain and offers these images as metaphors for walking. Also, it is easy to show others how to construct and to thus plant the labyrinth seed in them.

## Ways of Walking a Labyrinth

### Free Style

Set up a labyrinth. People come and walk and take away whatever they get. They may leave relaxed, centered, with a sense of peace, or a new insight. You can provide brief written instructions and informational brochures. Basic information can describe the three phase of walking a labyrinth as releasing, insight, and integration and can suggest useful prayers or meditations to use. In my community we have two churches with outdoor labyrinths set up in this manner. Many people come and go and sometimes leave notes of appreciation.

### The Journey of Life

A fundamental approach to the labyrinth is as life's journey. With this in mind, I often use this quote from Caroline Adams.

*"Your life is a sacred journey. And it is about change, growth, discovery, movement, transformation, continuously expanding your vision of what is possible, stretching your soul, learning to see clearly and deeply, listening to your intuition, taking courageous challenges at every step along the way. You are on the path... exactly where you are meant to be right now... And from here, you can only go forward, shaping your life story into a magnificent tale of triumph, of healing, of courage, of beauty, of wisdom, of power, of dignity, and of love."*

The basic introduction I offer to the labyrinth is as a metaphor for life's journey. A labyrinth is an archetypal symbol for life's journey. An archetypal symbol is one embedded into mankind over a long evolutionary history. It develops out of the almost infinite repetition of typical human experiences. Similar symbols arise in all cultures and that is what makes them archetypal. An archetypal symbol is a container of energy. It can bring motivation and meaning to life. Archetypes are deep within us and await awakening. An appropriate life situation acts as a stimulus calling forth the energy of the archetype that then flows into our lives. We are enlivened, challenged, and changed by the energy as can be seen in the influence of the archetypes of the lover, the parent, the hero, and the labyrinth.

As an archetypal symbol, a labyrinth has power. It has an energy with which we can have a direct experience. Unlike many other archetypes, which remain abstract, we can physically get into and walk around in a labyrinth. It is a symbol that creates a sacred space and place and takes us out of our ego to our "Deeper Self." If you are open to the process, walking the labyrinth calls forth its energy for your life.

As with all symbols, the labyrinth’s meaning is not clear. A symbol always points beyond itself. There is no one answer for, “What does it mean?” As with all symbols you must determine what it means for yourself. With a labyrinth you do this by walking, experiencing, and processing.

- **Appropriate Groups**

The Journey of Life Walk has worked with groups ranging from children as young as six to teenagers to senior citizens.

- **Atmosphere**

If appropriate use candles or other means of dimming the lights to provide a setting conducive for reflection. Also, add flowers or fragrance if possible.

- **Music**

A variety of music can be helpful. I usually chose meditative music such as Tai Chi Sunrise, the arrangements of Daniel Kobialka, or Feather on the Breath of God by Erin Jacobsen. Any slow, soothing music would do.

- **Procedure**

Briefly explain the difference between a labyrinth and a maze and pointing out that you cannot get lost as long as you just follow the path. The labyrinth, like life, has a goal towards which we journey. Ask participants to walk the labyrinth and think about their individual journey. Ask participants to walk mindfully and consider this question, “How is the labyrinth like life?”

While there is no right way to walk a labyrinth, I suggest that the first walk be done slowly and quietly. Wait at the entrance and center yourself. Focus on your intention. If someone is ahead of you, let them make the first circuit before beginning as this spaces people out and allows them time alone in the center. The leader often walks first to model the procedure. Ask the participants as they finish their walk to wait around the labyrinth until the last person is through.

- **Group Processing**

After the walk, divide into small groups of 4-6. Supply flipchart paper and markers. Ask one person to serve as a scribe. The group task is to discuss and list the many ways in which the labyrinth is like life. Reassemble in a large group for sharing and discussion.

- **Typical Insights**

Begin with a focus on the ego – “Am I doing it right?” – “Will I mess up?” – Life is circular. You end where you start – Someone has been where you are going – You feel lost but are not- Twists and turns - People help you -People come and go - You choose your own pace - Everyone is at a different point in life- Some people's journey is longer than others - You walk with people you never expected to walk with - On the journey through life you cross paths with many people - Other people go through the same things you go through – We are all on the same path- Feel relaxed, at peace, centered- Look up too much and you miss the details – Look down too much and you miss what is ahead-

One person arriving late rushed into the labyrinth carrying her large purse which looked like a pack and later realized how burdened she was by all she carries through life. Another woman who had a rock in her shoe early in the walk continued all the way without removing it because she did not want to inconvenience anyone. She realized that this was her style in life as well.

Two common judgements are made as people walk the labyrinth. At the first encounter with another person going the opposite way it is either “I am wrong” or “They are wrong.” The initial labyrinth walk is often at the level of the ego. It is a new experience and walkers are self-conscious of how they are doing. The judgement you make is probably your typical style and the challenge is for you to let it go. Open to the possibility of a nonjudgmental life path.

Following group labyrinth events, participants are invited to return and walk a labyrinth alone as it allows a very different experience.

## **Labyrinths of Team Building**

People who work together on a common task, those who compose a team, can benefit from examining how they work together. How do they cooperate or fail to cooperate? How do their joint efforts help them to reach the goal? What are the obstacles to progress?

- **Appropriate Groups**

People who are in relationship with one another. Who work together on common task. It could be a job, club, social organization, sports team, church groups. Coming to a labyrinth serves as a retreat when people venture out to a community labyrinth such as one at a church or teaching center. Bringing the labyrinth to them with music, candles, and flowers creates a special place for time out from the workday.

- **Procedure**

Brief explanation of the labyrinth followed by the Journey of Life Walk and group discussion. A second labyrinth walk as the Journey of Work. Place the group goal or task in the center and walk towards it. Group discussion of insights gained

- **Suggestions for Discussion**

Are some people too fast? Are some too slow? Do some feel blocked buy others? Do walkers help each other? Do they greet each other? Do they ignore each other? Will they ask for help? Do they recognize their common journey? What does the labyrinth say about cooperation?

- **Hospice Example**

A local hospice organization wanted an afternoon retreat for morale building with its nurses, social workers, support staff, and volunteers. It had a small staff with a large caseload. Staff were frequently on call and at great risk for burnout from the demanding and emotionally draining work. There was some sense of frustration from feeling overworked and that others are not doing their part.

In discussion after the labyrinth walk they were able to show empathy and concern for others. Realized the need to care for themselves. Appreciated the value of support. Saw others as on the same journey but in a different place. Became aware of judgements made. Felt closer together because of the shared experience. It provided a vehicle and metaphor for discussion.

- **Women’s Center Example**

The Medical Center of Central Georgia where I work has a separate Women’s Service program. It is located across town from the hospital. It offers screening, counseling, and educational services. As a team building activity the leadership decided to build an outdoor labyrinth for their clients, the community, and themselves to use. I was asked to help.

I planned to use my typical construction model of laying out three tons of granite stone in the classical labyrinth pattern. The 300-350 stones only weigh about 10-15 pounds and provide an inexpensive but strenuous way to build a labyrinth. I told the staff that that I would help laid out the pattern for them but that I would not help build it because it was their project. I emphasized that we would use three tons of granite stone so they would all know what was expected.

A morning in June in Georgia was chosen for the staff retreat. The entire staff of 10 women was to be involved. No one was excused. As the retreat day

approached some grumbling was reported to me about, “How will we move all of that rock?” “It is going to be too hot.” “What about my hands?”. When told to bring gloves one participant wanted to know if her white gloves would do?

When the day finally arrived the 3 tons of stone had been delivered. The temperature was headed towards 95 degrees. Early in the morning I laid out the pattern on the grass behind the clinic. The participants arrived about 8:00 a.m. and we gathered in a conference room where a canvas labyrinth was placed. Most knew nothing of the labyrinth so we walked it as the Journey of Life and discussed it’s meaning. Afterwards we went out to build the labyrinth. To some the large pile of stones looked overwhelming but they soon discovered that with cooperation and teamwork the task went quickly. In 45 minutes we had built the labyrinth. Everyone helped. There was a deep sense of accomplishment. After a brief refreshment break they dedicated their labyrinth and walked it for the first time as a Labyrinth of Celebration. There was a sense of unity and purpose as they continued with their day of retreat and team building.

The labyrinth now is used by the clinic and the community and teaching sessions are held.

- **Inadvertent team building**

In my community I offer one-day Saturday workshops on the labyrinth. I have also worked to have a labyrinth built in one of our city parks. For this project, I met with the Head of the Parks Department to discuss possible locations and left some general information on labyrinths including a brochure describing an upcoming workshop. A few days later I got a call from the Parks Department. They wanted to send up to 20 people to my next workshop. I was excited. This was more people that had ever come before.

On the day of the workshop, I arrived early at the church where it was to be held. Starting time was 9:00 a.m. By nine o’clock only three people had arrived: one woman from Macon, one young woman who drove from Columbus, Georgia, and one older woman from Jacksonville, Florida. All were white females. No Parks Department workers had arrived. Over the next 30 minutes, one by one, nine employees of the Park Dept. slowly showed up. There were seven men and two women. Men hardly ever come to these workshops. There were six Black men, one white man and two Black women. Few Black people ever came and I don’t think any Black men had ever been. I though this is great. At last, some diversity. This was before we introduced ourselves.

I begin each workshop, this one now about 45 minutes late, by asking participants to introduce themselves and tell why they came. My three early arrivals told of their life journey, their spiritual struggles, and their search for meaning. Eight of the Parks people told me they were there because they had been told to come —on Saturday —their day off. They were given no choice

because it had been decided that *somebody* would come and that decision had been passed down the line until it could go no further. Those with the least control were told to come. They also had been given the wrong directions which is why they all were late. One woman admitted that she did read the brochure and somewhat interested in attending. So, I had 12 participants nine of whom were angry and resentful.

Now, my first activity is a brief description of the labyrinth and then a walk as the Journey of Life followed by small group discussion. We went out to the labyrinth and I explained what we would do. I decide to walk first and as I stood there preparing to walk, I thought, “The labyrinth teaches about the unity in diversity and brings people together on a common path. It either works or it doesn’t. I will trust that it works.” So I began walking and was soon followed by the others.

When we finished, I divided the participants into small groups to discuss the experience. As I walked around and listen I was amazed. Deep meaningful discussion of the labyrinth experience was occurring. Significant insights had been gained, and people were sharing. Our large group processing was powerful. Resistance had fallen away and people were excited. The Labyrinth worked.

Over the course of the day the Park’s workers shared with each other out of their life stories and grew closer. Team building was happening. Everyone participated. By the end of the day the Park’s workers were asking that I offer the workshop to their coworkers and have a follow up session. One of them, a woman in the midst of a divorce, asked to take one the rocks of because of the healing she had received. Inadvertent team building had taken place.

The labyrinth always teaches us, and on that day I learned several lessons. One was to trust the labyrinth, and the other was another lesson about my own judgmental nature. My assumption about these workers for the city was that they must be uneducated to be in this job. So, as we are discussing the meaning of the labyrinth after the first walk one of the older Black men says to thr group, “You know, I was struck by the similarity of the seven circuits of the labyrinth to the seven levels that Dante discusses in the Inferno.” Well, so much for judging. Live and learn. Here was an interesting insight into the labyrinth that I had not previously encountered.

## **Labyrinths of Joy and Celebration**

Sometimes people approach the labyrinth too seriously. It can and should be done this way sometimes, but waking a labyrinth is also joyous. People may need to be reminded of this.

- **Joy Walk**

Appropriate for adults, teenagers, and children

Supplies needed – Colorful scarves, bottles of bubbles, percussion musical instruments, rhythmic music

Procedure - Some participants with bubbles surround the labyrinth and blow bubbles to those who walk. Those walking the labyrinth dance, wave scarves, beat drums, make music, and celebrate. As those walking finish they take the place of a bubble blowers who now walk the labyrinth. All celebrate.

This is a good energy building activity and a good closing activity.

- **New Year's Eve**

If possible construct a special labyrinth for the celebration. Invite the community to come and help build it. Get news coverage of the construction. Use an existing labyrinth. Use a canvas labyrinth. Light the labyrinth with luminaries. Invite participants to make a New Year's resolution, wish, or prayer. Have them write it on either a craft stick (looks like a tongue depressor) or a slip of paper and carry the resolution, wish, or prayer into the labyrinth as they meditate on it. Have available outside the labyrinth a burning bowl with a small fire. Participants drop their sticks or paper slips into the fire to burn them releasing the energy to the universe to speed the resolutions, wishes, and prayers on their way.

If you have a First Night program, coordinate with them. See if a newspaper or television station will help to sponsor the event.

- **Celebration of Life**

Once a month I bring a canvas labyrinth to the hospital where I work. It is available for staff, patients, and visitors. The labyrinth's availability is announced in our weekly newsletter, by email, and over the public address system. The labyrinth has been used in many different ways. One of these was for the celebration of life and life's joy. The labyrinth was set up in a common area with flowers in the center. Along with the flowers was an empty glass bowl. Outside of the labyrinth slips of paper and pens were available for participants to write out their celebration, wishes, accomplishments, and joys. As they walked the labyrinth participants were asked to meditate upon what they had written and to leave the paper in the glass bowl at the center. At the end of the day all the slips of paper in the bowl were gathered and ritually burned to release them to the universe.

- **Color the Labyrinth**

If you have a group who has time to process the experience of celebration, ask them to color the labyrinth. Provide a variety of crayons and markers and a labyrinth printed on 8"x11" paper. Ask participants to color the labyrinth in any manner they desire. Afterwards ask each person to talk about his or her choice of color. See if there are any group similarities in color choices for different areas of the labyrinth. What could this mean?

## **Labyrinths of Compassion**

Walking a labyrinth, we circle to the center of our lives. Sometimes that journey is through loss towards grief, as we seek consolation and comfort. Letting go is required. The path of the labyrinth can take us towards release, acceptance, and compassion. Individually we can walk into and out of our grief. Communally, we can show support and express our feelings of empathy and sympathy on the labyrinth.

- **Grief, Loss, and Letting Go**

On New Year's Eve of 1999 one of the employees of the Medical Center where I work was tragically killed in an automobile accident. One of her young children was also killed. Joyce was a nurse manager on our cancer treatment floor and had been with the hospital over 20 years. Her death had a powerful impact on our staff and our community. At her funeral the church overflowed with mourners.

Several days after her burial we used our portable canvas labyrinth to help the hospital staff grieve. It was setup in a common area. Flowers and music and were provided. It was announced to the hospital as a Labyrinth of Compassion. From 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. staff were invited to walk the labyrinth. Slips of paper were provided for writing down prayers, memories, and wishes for Joyce and her family. The messages were carried into the labyrinth and deposited in a glass bowl as a gesture of letting go. At the end of the day the contents of the bowl were ritually burned to release the energy of the expressions to the universe. Many hospital staff walked this labyrinth and informally reported that it was a meaningful experience for them.

- **Memorial Labyrinth**

In July of 1999 the two sons, ages 18 and 28, of one of my neighbors were tragically killed in an automobile accident. The two boys were travelling together in Texas when the driver may have fallen asleep and lost control of the car. One year later on the anniversary day of the funeral the parents, family, and friends built a labyrinth in celebration and memory of the two young men.

Following the loss, the mother, Julie, in her grief would walk the neighborhood with her friends. They walked past the stone labyrinth in my front yard. With encouragement from her friends, she began to walk the labyrinth and found it to be a very meaningful and healing experience. Some months after the deaths, Julie contacted me about building a labyrinth on her property. She wanted it as a memorial and as a place to be with her sons. She also wanted to offer it to others. Julie is a longtime swimming teacher and offers classes to very young children whose mothers come and wait through the lessons. Sometimes, they anxiously wait. Julie thought that the labyrinth would be a good place for them to “unwind” during these stressful periods.

We set several dates to build the labyrinth, but each time it rained. Julie had begun collecting stones for the labyrinth from a nearby construction site, but later decided that these were not the right stones. She lived on several acres that had old farmhouses with crumbling stone walls. When young boys her sons had played there. These stones felt right, so she began to collect them. As the anniversary of the loss was drawing near the Julie planned a gathering for celebration with family and friends.

On the spur of the moment she called me the day before the gathering to see if I could help with the labyrinth. So we gathered on July 4, 2000, laid out the labyrinth pattern, and family and friends placed the stones one by one into the healing pattern. Afterwards, we walked the labyrinth for the first time being lead by Julie and her husband. Later there was a cookout and a continued celebration of the lives of her sons.

Julie tells me that she frequently visits her labyrinth and always feels the presence of her children by which she is comforted. She has offered the labyrinth as a gift for her neighbors to come and walk.

- **Individual Letting Go**

Letting go of the past can be done individually. It is not necessarily a group activity. A friend of mine asked his sister to walk the labyrinth at our church. She knew very little about the labyrinth but was in significant stress with her work and in turmoil over a conflictual relationship with her son-in-law. She reported to her brother that as she walked the labyrinth and neared the center she felt all of her anger towards the son-in-law fall away and knew what to do about her job. Following the walk she returned to her home in another town, took time off from work, visited her daughter and estranged son-in-law for two weeks, and even ironed his shirts for him. The relationship was healed because of what she was able to release in the labyrinth. Later, she resigned her well-paid but overly stressful job.

## **Labyrinths of Healing**

In many ways the labyrinth represents the journey to healing. Healing is not only physical but also occurs on the emotional, mental, and spiritual levels. A physical healing is often described as a cure. While a cure might not be possible, healing is always an option. To be healed means to be made whole, and wholeness is fundamentally a psychological and spiritual process of finding meaning. The labyrinth can be used as a tool of healing to help people find meaning in their suffering.

- **Heartworks**

Heartworks is an outpatient cardiac rehabilitation service where patients come for structured exercise such as walking, using a bicycle, or mild aerobics. The patients are frequently recovering from cardiac bypass surgery. On a preannounced day during National Rehabilitation Week, the portable canvas labyrinth was brought to the exercise floor and participants were invited to walk it as symbolic of the journey to recovery and healing. They were asked to think about their lives from diagnosis through treatment up until the present moment and to relate their journey to the labyrinth walk.

Several questions were suggested for consideration:

- What is the most important lesson your illness and recovery has taught you?
- How has your illness had a positive effect on your life?
- How has it affected your relationships?
- In what ways are you more whole than before you illness?
- What about your illness are you grateful for?
- How has your spirit been influenced?
- What is required for continued healing?

After walking the labyrinth the participants gathered in a small group for discussion insights gained of how the labyrinth walk represented their healing journey. Some told of the shock of diagnosis and a sense of wandering lost trying to find direction. Other people on the path were seen as representing helpers along the way. Some people were ahead of you and knew where you were going. They could give advice and support. Other people behind you, you could help. The path towards healing is not straight and often you feel lost. Perseverance is required to complete the journey. The center represents treatment and the journey out is toward recovery and acceptance. People come and go on the journey. The whole process occurs in the container and context of love and spirit. Participants felt more connected to each other and also reported feeling more relaxed. Many said they would come to one of the local outdoor labyrinths.

This same process was conducted for one of our cancer support groups with very similar discussion and results. Once I led the members of a chronic pain support group through the labyrinth and they learned much about themselves and their daily journey with pain. I have also taken patients from the psychiatric floor of the hospital to the labyrinth and then had a fruitful group discussion with them about the relationship between the labyrinth journey and their life journey. One day a month the labyrinth is available at the hospital and individuals seeking healing walk it but without the benefit of group discussion.

- **Camp Little Shot**

Each year for 20 years Dr. Tom Jones, an endocrinologist in Macon Georgia, has held a Summer camp for diabetic children offering them the opportunity to enjoy the camp experience, but also to learn more about their illness and how to cope with it. Dr Jones and his wife, a nurse who co-leads the camp, had walked our Millennium New Year’s Labyrinth and were struck by the power and meaning of the symbol. They invited me to bring the labyrinth to the year 2000 Camp Little Shot.

A decision was made to first offer the labyrinth to the adolescents of the camp. This group was composed of about 20 boys and girls ages 13 – 17. On the first evening of the camp I set up the canvas labyrinth in a large room. After a brief explanation, the participants were asked to walk it as the Journey of Life. Several of the younger boys were openly angry and resentful, and they reluctantly took part. Their anger was most likely at their illness and being sullen was their adaptation. As is usual, the kids walked fast and playfully. There was much laughter and noise. After the walk that were divided into several small groups and asked to discuss how the labyrinth represented life. One young boy was especially angry was quite disruptive with teasing and inappropriate jokes. He demanded to know why he had to do this and complained it was silly. The other kids were cooperative and came up with the usual insights about the labyrinth and life.

After the discussion the campers were told that on the last day of camp they would build their own labyrinth. I showed them the “seed pattern” for the labyrinth and had them practice drawing it. Once they understood it, they were sent on to the next task – painting wooden blocks with bright colors and healing words.

Their labyrinth was to be constructed of one-foot sections of 2”x4” wooden planks. Each camper was given eight blocks. Brushes and paint were made available. As a group project, they were to choose colors and words meaningful to them and to paint the blocks. They were asked to think of words representing healing and hope and to use bright colors.

On the morning of the third day of camp, I returned to direct the construction of the labyrinth. The angry young boy met me and said, “Why don’t *you* build the

labyrinth, and we will watch.” I had already decided to make him the labyrinth leader by giving him the responsibility of measuring the path width with a yardstick and showing where the blocks should be placed. He reluctantly agreed, and we placed the first few blocks out in the seed pattern. Soon he was caught up in the action and with some gentle teasing from his fellow campers, he led them in laying out the labyrinth. It took about 30 minutes. When we finished, the angry young man wanted to be the first to walk the labyrinth and to test it out. He had taken ownership and wanted it to be done right. He seemed much more relaxed and energized.

Once the labyrinth was complete, and the campers posed for a photograph, we set it up for walking. A “burning bowl” was set in the center of the labyrinth. Slow peaceful background music was played. Each camper was given a slip of paper on which to write a healing wish or prayer for himself or herself. The wishes and prayers were carried into the labyrinth, and at the center they were dropped into the fire releasing the energy of the intention.

This walk was the first time I ever experienced adolescents actually walking quietly and slowly. The labyrinth was beautiful with its bright colors against the grass. The healing words were wonderful to read. Words like hope, love, and peace. Mom and dad. The names of friends. Pizza. Nascar. It was a very special walk, and I was quite moved when I entered the path to join them.

After the Healing walk there was a celebration with upbeat music and the Appleton Dance which is a patterned way of walking the labyrinth while holding hands with a partner. It is lively and fun and generates laughter, excitement, and joy.

That night before the closing of the camp the older counselors, who has also participated in the labyrinth building and walks, chose some of the younger campers to walk the labyrinth. One of the young campers chosen was a nine-year-old boy who was recently diagnosed with diabetes. At the beginning of camp when introductions were made the campers had been asked their nicknames, and this young boy had said that his was “Skeeter.” Several days later when asked how he got this nickname, he admitted that he made it up on the spur of the moment because everyone had one and he wanted one too. Skeeter sounded right to him, and so this is what he was called.

On the night of the labyrinth walk, Dr. Jones noticed that Skeeter was very serious when his turn came. Skeeter was crying when he came out of the labyrinth. Dr. Jones took him aside asking what was wrong. Skeeter said that walking the labyrinth made him think about his brother with whom he had a difficult relationship. Skeeter and wanted it to be better. Dr. Jones comforted him and made some suggestions for opening communication with his brother. Soon Skeeter was off having fun with the rest of the campers.

I have known the labyrinth to bring up issues of relationship for adults as they walked it but this was the first time I saw it with a child. For me this added another level of healing that can occur, even for children. Such unresolved issues can arise and time is needed for discussion.

## **Labyrinths of Ritual**

Angeles Arrien in *The Four-Fold Way* tells us that, “Ritual is recognizing a life change, and doing something to honor and support the change.” The word ritual comes from an Indo-European root meaning “to fit together.” Change by its nature pulls things apart and loss always occurs. You cannot change and stay the same. You must let go of something to move towards the new experience. Arrien says of ritual, “In this way, human beings support the changes they are experiencing and create a way to ‘fit things together’ again.” Thomas Moore in *The Education of the Heart* tells us that rituals are, “... any action that speaks to the soul and to the deep imagination whether or not it all has practical effects.... Even the smallest of rites of everyday existence are important to the soul.”

A ritual is a structured experience designed to celebrate life. It creates a container in which we can learn more about ourselves and our relationships with others. A ritual deepens our connection to our psychological and spiritual center. With the labyrinth many rituals are possible. There are many ways of “fitting” the changing events of life together to make things whole. Some rituals are useful adaptations from traditional experience and others are created as new changes arise and need support.

- **Traditional Rituals of Christianity**

- Communion, The Eucharist

Several times I have helped to facilitate a candlelight communion service using the labyrinth as the mindful path to the key elements of the ritual. The procedure is to place candles around the outside of the labyrinth and along some of its paths. Quiet, peaceful music is played. A small table is set at the center of the labyrinth. On it are placed a candle, flowers, and a goblet of wine. Participants gather near the entrance of the labyrinth. The priest or minister initiates the ritual with traditional readings and prayers. Standing at the entrance, the officiator gives each person the bread with a traditional statement such as, “The body of Christ broken for you and for many for the forgiveness of sin.”

Once receiving the host, the participant must journey towards the center to the wine, the Blood of Christ, to complete the sacrament. In the typical communion service receiving the bread and wine are almost instantaneous occurrences. With the labyrinth there is a long thoughtful journey with the bread towards the wine. It requires concentration and care. You must guard and protect the host and make your way in the gathering darkness towards the light of the candle. There is

ample time to become aware of your responsibility in this process. Other people are passed in the coming and going rhythm of the labyrinth. At the center the participants partake of the sacrament, and on the way out have time for more reflection, celebration, or thanksgiving.

An opportunity for small group discussion of the process can be provided although often people are quite content to just take away the peace that they have received.

- Christmas

Another use of the labyrinth in the Christian context is at Christmas with a symbolic “Following of the Star.” As the wisemen and shepherds were guided by a star in their spiritual quest, so we can follow a light in our search for spiritual awakening and rebirth. This is again a candlelight service and luminaries are beautiful when placed around the labyrinth. At the center of the labyrinth is set a lantern with star shaped holes through which the light shines. Participants gather at the entrance and are given unlit candles that they carry into the center. The candles are lighted at the star lantern and then slowly brought out of the labyrinth as a symbol of the light of spiritual enlivening.

The first time I did this walk it was on a unexpectedly windy Christmas Eve. Once the candles were lit at the center, it was very difficult to keep the young flame burning. You had to protect it carefully using your hands and body as shields against the wind or the flame would be blown out. This challenging walk was a wonderful metaphor for spiritual awakening in which the initial flame is fragile and must be nurtured. Also, it highlighted one’s personal responsibility for guarding the spiritual process and ensuring its development.

- Easter

Similar walks could be done at Easter as the Journey Towards the Cross or as the Walk to Amais. Group discussion could be used to help explore the insights gained.

- **Other Spiritual Traditions**

- **Judaism**

The labyrinth could be walked as the Wandering in the Wilderness, Journey of Joseph, or the Flight from Egypt.

- **Chakra Walk**

Sig Lonegren, author and labyrinth authority, has written of a labyrinth walk based upon a Chakra meditation. He notes that the classical labyrinth with its

seven paths which can be correlated with the seven chakras of Eastern thought. A chakra is an energy vortex in the body often pictured as a spinning wheel of light. These energy centers can become blocked in their function, and energy flow is disrupted. Physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual symptoms may then develop.

With the correspondence of the seven chakras and the seven paths, it is possible to walk the labyrinth with each path as one of the Chakras. For each Chakra-path you consider how that energy is working in your life. On the labyrinth the Chakras are not walked in a sequential order. The labyrinth paths are numbered 1-7 from the outside in towards the middle. When you walk the labyrinth you begin on path three which is the Third Chakra. This is the level of ego with its current issues and concerns. As you walk you move out of the ego to other areas of focus. You progress to the Second Chakra which is the area of emotions and then to the First Chakra concerned with survival needs. From the First or Root Chakra you reach the Heart Chakra and then ascend into the upper levels through the order of Seventh, Sixth, and Fifth Chakras. It is through the Fifth or Will Chakra that you reach and finally approach the center. A reverse meditation is done on the way out as you review any insights gained. Detailed instructions for this meditation are provided in Lonegren's book, *Labyrinths: Ancient Myths and Modern Uses*, and on his Mid-Atlantic Geomancy web site ([www.geomancy.com/](http://www.geomancy.com/)).

#### □ **Palms Down, Palms Up, Palms Together**

A very simple walk that is appropriate for any spiritual tradition and can be done with no preparation other than brief instructions is one of releasing, receiving, and thanksgiving. The first half of the labyrinth is walked as the letting go of worries, concerns, and fears. This is symbolized by walking with the hands palm down in a gesture of release. At the center of the labyrinth the palms are turned up in a gesture of receiving whatever gifts of insight and peace are offered. Leaving the labyrinth the palms are placed together in a gesture of prayer and thanksgiving as you walk towards the exit.

#### ● **Marriage, Baptism, and Other Life Transitions**

The labyrinth can be walked as the journey towards union. When used in marriage ceremony the groom walks in first and is followed by the bride. The officiator greets them in the center for the wedding. They walk out as husband and wife and are greeted by well wishers. For a baptism the infant can be carried into the center for the labyrinth for the anointing and blessing with holy water.

Other life transitions could be ritualized with the labyrinth. For example, birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, a new job, a move, or a divorce. Plan a ceremony with a beginning, middle, and an ending process and use it to honor the change and integrate it into your life.

- **Hello and Goodbye**

Recently Kate, a friend and member of our healing group, was moving away to another state. At our last meeting together we wanted to say goodbye to her. Since we were at our church where we have a labyrinth, we all gathered in front of it. Kate was asked to walk in first. Others followed after she completed the first circuit. We were entering with about one minute separating the walkers. When Kate arrived in the center, she had time alone as she waited. One by one others entered the center with her and had a few moments to say a private goodbye. They then turned and slowly walked out. After the last goodbye, Kate walked back out of the labyrinth to a group hug.

The labyrinth became the container for the emotions of parting and provided a safe and sacred place to share those feelings. It was a very meaningful and emotional experience. Such a ritual would work as well for saying, "Hello." It would be a warm welcome into any group. Gifts of parting or welcome could be given.

## **Labyrinths of the Beach**

The classical seven-circuit labyrinth is very simple to draw and once you know the “seed pattern” you can draw a labyrinth anywhere you go. I find it especially fun to draw one on a beach. Anne Reynolds of the Labyrinth Society has a well-known photograph of herself drawing a labyrinth in the sand. It is now on the cover of Melissa Gayle West’s labyrinth book.

Whenever at the beach, I draw a labyrinth and then sit back and see what happens. Adults are curious. They look and point at it as they talk to each other, but they usually walk right past it. However, any child younger than 10 and, especially, around than the age of six immediately runs into the labyrinth and follows the path to the center and back out. Usually more than once and until their parents come and pull them away.

One of my most powerful "labyrinth lessons" came through the experience of sharing the labyrinth on a beach. I had agreed to meet with some of my daughter's friends in St. Augustine, Florida. Our plan was to draw the labyrinth on the sand and to walk it as a group. I was staying in Jacksonville Beach some 30 miles to the North. As I wanted to be sure that everything would go well, I practiced drawing the labyrinth at Jacksonville. The tide was low. The beach was long and flat with soft, wet sand. The labyrinth was easy to draw and was clearly visible.

The next day I traveled South to St. Augustine. High Tide was still hours away. I met with my daughter and her friends. We briefly discussed the labyrinth and the various lessons it could teach and then drove a short distance to the beach.

I quickly learned that 30 miles can make a big difference. This was not the long, flat beach of Jacksonville. This beach was short and steep. It had coarse, dry sand. And, even though high tide was hours away the beach was almost covered by the rushing waves. Hastily, I tried to draw the labyrinth but the dry sand would not hold the pattern. Particles of sand would flow into the groove I was making and the pattern would be lost. I recruited others to help create the labyrinth. We found that the group effort of repeatedly tracing the pattern would make it hold.

The labyrinth was becoming visible, but the ocean was rushing in. With waves crashing we began to walk the labyrinth. Just as the first person entered the path the waves reached the outer ring of the labyrinth and washed it away. Those not walking the labyrinth were stationed near the ocean and given the task of redrawing the labyrinth as the waves obliterated it. This task became more and more demanding as the tide continued to advance.

Those walking the labyrinth were having an unusual experience. As they neared the ocean side of the labyrinth the path would suddenly disappear. The "Guardians of the Labyrinth" would rush in to redraw it. The disappearing path had to be walked on faith that it existed even if not seen and that it would reappear. Protective forces, the Guardians, were at work maintaining the labyrinth and ensuring the continuity the process.

Upon exiting the labyrinth the walkers now became the "Guardians" who protected the path for others. With a group effort we did hold the tide at bay at least long enough for all to walk the labyrinth and to take away valuable lessons. After the experience we all sat and talked about the many metaphors of the labyrinth.

The most outstanding lesson of this day was of needing faith that the spiritual path existed and that it was being protected. Some times in life the tides of darkness rush in and threaten. It may become difficult to see the path you are on and you may feel lost and alone. You must travel in faith that the path is being maintained. The good news is that there are real Guardians to help you. Meeting others who are returning from the center provides some assurance that the journey can be made. Reaching out to others is necessary on this spiritual journey.

Above all, God's Grace remains the primary protector of the labyrinthine spiritual journey through life. This journey is taking you to your "Deep Center" for true insight into yourself as it prepares you to bring your gifts back out into the world. The fundamental teaching of the spiritual journey remains, "To love your neighbor as yourself." You must first find and accept your true nature so as to love yourself and then go forth into the world empowered to love your neighbor.

The next time you visit a beach try drawing a labyrinth in the sand. I drew one on the beach at Hilton Head, S.C. every day for the seven days of the NICABM Conference on the Psychology of Health, Immunity, and Disease. Many of those attending the conference were introduced to the labyrinth for the first time when, during the two-hour afternoon breaks, they found it on the beach. Of those who walked the labyrinth, many told me that they found the experience relaxing and meaningful. The result of my efforts on the beach was an invitation to return to the December 2000 conference and present a lunchtime workshop on the use of the labyrinth In Healthcare. So, always draw labyrinths wherever you go. You never know what will happen?

## **Labyrinths with Children**

Using labyrinth with children is invariably fun. It is full of excitement and challenge and always provides the unexpected. Whenever I work with children, I first help them learn the difference between a maze and a labyrinth. I provide them with pencils and a very simple maze that almost anyone can complete. I continue to give them several successively more difficult mazes until everyone has made wrong turns and become lost. Next, I give them a simple three-circuit labyrinth. When they complete it, I ask what is the difference between a labyrinth and a maze. Someone always recognizes that you cannot get lost in a labyrinth. I give them a more complex seven-circuit labyrinth and have them again trace the path and discover that there are no dead-ends. With this as an introduction we then walk a labyrinth together.

I tell the children that the labyrinth is like life and ask that they think about this possibility as they walk. I also suggest that they walk slowly and quietly. This never happens. Even if I walk first to model how to do it, someone is catching and passing me before I reach the center. After the walk I get the children together to talk about what they learned about life. If the children are old enough for independent work, I place them in small groups for discussion before we all talk together.

One of the first times I did this was at an Episcopal Church where I had helped built an outdoor labyrinth. The children, ages 6-11, were in a bible school class. When we met for discussion after the labyrinth walk, I was amazed at what they had to say about the labyrinth. The children told me that life was like a labyrinth because:

- ❑ Sometimes you felt lost
- ❑ It had twists and turns
- ❑ Some people went slow and some fast
- ❑ People came and went
- ❑ Some people try to help you
- ❑ It was longer then you thought
- ❑ You end where you start

- It is fun

One young girl, about six years old, said that the, “Labyrinth was like life because if you followed you heart you couldn’t get lost.” I was also struck by the children’s recognition of losses in their lives as relationships some and go.

The most profound insight for me came from a young boy, and it was not what he said but what he did that was striking. I wrote a brief article about it for my web site. The following excerpt for it begins as we were going out to walk the labyrinth.



## The Labyrinth Map

As we were preparing to go outside, one young boy, about eight years old, held up his paper labyrinth and asked if he could take the “Labyrinth Map” with him. I hastily said, “No. Just leave it here. You don’t need a map.” And, with that said, we all went out to walk the labyrinth.

I told the children that they could walk a labyrinth anyway they wanted, but that for *today* we would walk it slowly and quietly. I had several parents with me who were helping to monitor the children. I decided to walk first, so I could model “slow and quiet” walking. The children were to follow me, and then the parents would walk.

Now, I have never actually seen children walk a labyrinth slowly and quietly, because the labyrinth has its own energy that calls to children and asks them to run and shout. All went well for a few moments of slow walking, but as more and more children entered the labyrinth the energy of it caught them. The noise level went up. There was running and stumbling, laughing and shouting, and “high fives” were being passed all along the path. Parents, both those already walking and those waiting to enter, were loudly whispering to the kids to slow down and be quiet. They made a valiant effort at control but to no avail. The joy of the labyrinth was contagious. A few parents even smiled and walked faster.

Several children, who had run through the labyrinth, wanted to do it again. One was the young boy with the “Labyrinth Map.” Secretly, he had put it into his pocket and was now taking it out for comparison. Back he went into the labyrinth with his map. He was carefully comparing his position in the labyrinth to the map, so he could tell where to go next. At each turn he evaluated where he was and how much progress he had made. He looked at his map to see where to go next. He would occasionally seem lost, but with the aid of his Labyrinth Map he made the journey to the center and back out again, where he seemed quite pleased with his success.

I watched this young boy with amusement as he struggled to find the path he was already on with the aid of a map he didn't need. Suddenly, I realized what a wonderful image! What a metaphor! This is what we all do. We try to solve the Labyrinth of Life. We seek the experience of life in our minds through our thinking. We want to understand the journey in advance. We want to be prepared and to avoid surprises. We want the security of a map. We want the map of intellectual concepts with the left-brain logical, sequential, analytical assurance that we are going in the right direction.

In reality, the right or correct direction is always right before us, if we will just give up the distraction of the map. If we move from left-brain to right-brain, open our eyes, and drop the illusion of the map, we can clearly see the path and recognize that we are already on it. It *was* there all the time. It *is* there all the time. The path is one of intuition and faith. It always involves risk. The path is full of creativity and surprise and always takes us off the beaten path, the well-known path, towards where no map can go, and where no map is of use. Each path in life is unique. My path is not yours, and yours is not mine. We must each find our own way.

There is no Labyrinth Map, nor is one needed. This is an extraordinarily difficult lesson to learn—we already have what we need. We are where we are supposed to be. *This is it*, if we drop the illusion that *it* is not. The map is not the territory. It never was. The map is not the experience. The map only points you towards it. Excessively relied upon, the map takes you away from the experience.

We are all like the young boy with the Labyrinth Map. We all have our strategies and plans and our schematic diagrams of where life either *is* or *should* be going. While clinging to the Labyrinth Map robs us of the lived labyrinth experience, such clinging may also be needed in order to lead us to the precipice where the trail disappears, and we are thrust onto our own resources. We may need the safety of a map until we learn to trust our experience and ourselves.

Such trust may begin at the entrance to one of Life's Labyrinths, often disguised as one of life's crises, where we are forced to discard the Labyrinth Map and step into the journey to our own deep selves through a leap of faith.

*“A bit of advice given to a young Native American at the time of his initiation:  
‘As you go the way of life, you will see a great chasm. Jump. It is not as wide as you think.’”*

*~ Joseph Campbell*



## One Step at a Time

*Suzanne Moody, March 1999. Macon, Georgia  
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Rows of ragged rocks outline a path for  
healing?

Brown, decaying leaves hug the winter  
ground – a blanket to transform?

The labyrinth awaits the sojourner--  
almost calls her name--  
Will you enter my simple boundaries  
and journey my paths  
One Step at a Time?

Straight ahead, yet winding and crooked  
The curled road beckons to be trod --  
reinforcing the uplifted  
blessing the downtrodden  
Maybe tears, maybe joy, maybe peace  
One Step at a Time.

All who are heavy laden, come stand at  
the gate  
All who are fragmented, place one foot  
down  
and the other in front  
All who find wonder in the commonplace,  
Come travel the narrow rows  
One Step at a Time.

Give up your burdens, your middle of the  
night worries  
Lay a care on a silver, craggy rock as  
you pass  
and move on to the next,  
the monotony will soothe you  
One Step at a Time.

Moving inward,  
The trail winds in and out  
Muscles untensing,  
The walker's job seems easy,  
The cares tumble down

and hit the ground with imagined force  
lightening the load on contact  
One Step at a Time.

Step 48, step 49, many more follow  
while curling toward center like a  
snail into its shell  
Motionless at last,  
a wooden cross is sighted,  
God's presence overwhelms  
and envelopes the inner sanctum--  
His peace now a cloister  
on the journey half over  
One Step at a Time.

The pause to discover  
new perspectives to ponder  
fresh eyes, lightened heart  
the world is a wonder  
with steps unencumbered  
the pilgrimage rewinds  
One Step at a Time.

The breathing is slower  
the feet touch down lower,  
and easier on the road well-worn  
The unknown, now familiar  
the end is the beginning  
the sad is now glory  
All happening unexpectedly  
One Step at a Time.

A twist inward  
A transformation outward  
A fresh view from fatigued eyes  
All part of a simple design  
of much complexity  
with the whole greater  
than the sum of the steps  
All the while traveling  
One Step at a Time.

## Labyrinth Resources

### Books

- Artess, Lauren. *Walking a Sacred Path*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1995.

This is the book that began the current interest in labyrinths. It is beautifully written and inspiring with its presentation of the power of the labyrinth as a tool for transformation. Focuses more on the Chartres' style labyrinth. Highly recommended.

- Lonegrin, Sig. *Labyrinths: Ancient Myths and Modern Uses*. Glastonbury, Gothic Image Publications, 1996.

Gives a good history of labyrinths. Focuses mainly on the classical seven-circuit labyrinth. Has interesting suggestions for using labyrinths

- West, Melissa Gayle. *Exploring the Labyrinth. A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth*. New York, Broadway Books, 2000.

Very informative with much practical information. A good section on creative and healing uses for labyrinths. Detailed instructions on how to construct your own labyrinth.

### Articles

- “Treading ancient paths” Prevention, September 1997, pp. 143-146.
- “Ancient spiritual and meditation design may have marketing overtones for today’s healthcare.” Healthcare Marketing Report, June 1999, pp. 16-17.
- “Pathways to peace.” House Beautiful, December 1999, pp. 64-66.
- “Myths and magic of labyrinths.” Natural Home, October, 1999, pp. 50-53.

### Web Sites

- Awakenings Web Site

<http://www.lessons4living.com>

A web site for psychological and spiritual growth. Online tests for burnout, stress, and depression. Has a special section on the labyrinth and its uses. Free labyrinth screensaver.

- The Labyrinth Society  
<http://www.geomancy.org/tls/>  
Official web site of The Labyrinth Society with the mission of supporting all those who create, maintain, and use labyrinths and of serving the global community by providing education, networking, and opportunities to experience transformation.
- St. Louis Labyrinth Project  
<http://www.labyrinthproject.com/>  
The site of Robert Ferre' with useful information on the making of labyrinths. Also has labyrinth products.
- StoneCircle  
<http://www.stonecircledesign.com/>  
Very useful information about the healing power of labyrinths in healthcare settings. StoneCircle specializes in the design, development, and promotion of environments that enhance health and well being.
- Veriditas, The World Wide Labyrinth Project  
<http://www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/>  
Web Site of Lauren Artess and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Home of the Labyrinth Locator where you can find a labyrinth near you.
- Mid-Atlantic Geomancy: Labyrinths Section  
<http://www.geomancy.org/labyrint/labyrint.html>  
Excellent material on labyrinths and other sacred spaces. Web Site of Sig Lonegrin, author of *Labyrinths: Ancient Myths and Modern Uses*.
- Caerdroia: The Journal of Mazes and Labyrinths  
<http://ilc.tsms.soton.ac.uk/caerdroia/homepage.htm>  
Recently redesigned site. Excellent information. Good general resource. Get uses and Ideas from the group