

ON A PILGRIMAGE OF TRANSFORMATION

Walking a path to personal and planetary insight

BY DONNA MOSHER



Eight hundred years ago, an eleven-circuit labyrinth was laid in the floor of Chartres Cathedral. Just over a decade ago, a revival of this walking form of meditation and pilgrimage swept through the hearts and souls of spiritual seekers. Representing a metaphor for one's individual journey within the collective process, labyrinths have been emerging everywhere, crafted of most any resource: from pieces of limestone laid in a field at a retreat center, to carnelian granite, meticulously carved and precisely placed in the garden of a spiritual sanctuary; from monkey grass and even lavender edging curving gravel paths adjoining a country church, to paintings on canvas to be transported to any location.

The day Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, construction was scheduled to begin on the labyrinth at Audubon Park. Dedicated a year ago Easter, the labyrinth was the first project to be built and completed after the hurricane devastated the city.

"As the city of New Orleans rebuilds, we must also rebuild our souls," is the fitting dedication to the

possibility of hope and renewal this meditative symbol offers a city still struggling to rebuild lives and celebrate new life, says Dian Winingder, chairman of the Friends of the Labyrinth at Audubon Park. Winingder names as "godmother" of the labyrinth Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, who stood with her years earlier in ankle-deep clover to bless the land on which the labyrinth was to be placed.

Artress has been shepherding the labyrinth revival since she "discovered" it in the early 1990s.

"It was a time when so many of us were involved in AIDS work," Artress says. "My inner life was a shambles from the stress of it. Sitting meditation and inspirational reading had worked for me in the past, as long as I didn't have a high stress level. At this time, just when I needed a practice, I didn't have one."

Artress visited with scholar and philosopher Jean Houston, who introduced her to the labyrinth. Artress found a spiritual practice that could support her in times of stress. "When the body is moving, your mind has a chance to grow quiet," she says. "This movement of the body takes us to our heart center.

When you take a question into the labyrinth, the ego can't get hold of it. The ego will evaporate in the walk and your heart can speak."

Little did she know at the time that she had taken the first step on a journey that would mushroom into a worldwide movement.

"Jean planted the seed. I knew at the time something significant had happened, but it took several months to come into consciousness. I find you don't necessarily know what you're doing when you're doing it. If you try to get hold of the big vision, you get into trouble."

But "the hand of heaven was hunting me down," Artress says. She brought the labyrinth to Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, where she was on staff as an Episcopal priest. Since then, more than a million people have walked the indoor and outdoor labyrinths there. In 1996 she founded Veriditas, a non-profit organization dedicated to the healing, meditative powers of the labyrinth. Now the organization's Web-based labyrinth locator points the way to nearly 2000 labyrinths in the United States alone.

alone and together

Artress attributes the labyrinth's popularity to a pervasive spiritual hunger and emptiness. "Our culture today is devoid of meaning," she says. "We're immersed in shallow entertainment, computers and iPods. We're divorced from tradition and symbolism. We're looking for depth.

"The labyrinth is a metaphor for the journey, the pilgrimage that is life. It especially serves those who are burned out or wondering 'what good is my spiritual practice?'"

Artress says that when insights come in walking the labyrinth, one experiences a deep sense of integration. Patterns emerge and are assimilated. "Somehow the great, brilliant masters of spirit that designed this eleven-circuit medieval labyrinth knew how to integrate the world of the mind, body, and spirit."

Artress observes the dominance of our left-brain, analytical, intellectual orientation to life. "And here's this whole other world that we must integrate to meet the challenges of the next century. All of the sudden, we are realizing that we have some 20 years to really learn how to live together on this planet, in light of our diminishing environmental resources."

And that integration can open a door to sacred activism, a movement that is calling forth a spiritual solution to the seemingly insurmountable problems facing the planet today.

"Activism can create a 'disconnect' from contemplation," she says. "Activists are out in the world, working for change, whereas contemplatives see the world as 'me and God alone,' because the traditional model of meditation is done alone. Activists tend to have a deep suspicion of meditative practices. They see contemplatives as not bringing their good into the world in an active way.

"There is no more powerful tool than the labyrinth to bring the two together. The labyrinth offers us an opportunity to see ourselves walking the path together. And the result is sacred activism."

Artress has also seen a desire among those she works with to connect with others. "How do we connect and find meaning? The labyrinth offers a lesson in tolerance, because you may have many people walking it in a small space." The labyrinth movement has coincided with and fueled the growing interest in the concept of the Sacred Feminine. "Traditional religion has long been devoid of anything that's feminine," Artress says. "It's as if we've been infected with a 'patriarchal virus.' As I work to break projections that God is male, I find those who haven't had a lot to do with traditional religions are drawn to the labyrinth.

Artress says that a labyrinth meditation allows consciousness to shift from linear to non-linear. The ego – that manager of our personality that helps us get through the day – takes a break and allows the emergence of the deep, intuitive, non-linear part of ourselves that, in Western culture, is called the "feminine" or receptive principle.

"The Feminine is about learning to be in the world in a receptive way, opening to a more compassionate society, to revelation through creativity. Unfolding creativity and compassion takes in others and other world traditions."

More than fifteen years after encountering the labyrinth and dedicating her work to it, Artress still finds it a vibrant spiritual practice.

"The labyrinth experience is still changing, evolving, unfolding for me. I'm still passionate about it. I grow with it. We all need it. The quiet mind is like letter writing – almost archaic in this day of email and telephones."

Thanks to the work of Lauren Artress and countless others who are building labyrinths in their communities, this ancient tool of walking meditation is as vibrant in the world today as it was to the craftsmen who installed it in Chartres Cathedral in 1201. It can awaken our inner awareness and inform our actions for change. It can help one fill any pervasive sense of void and guide motivations for right action. It can offer a path to those on a pilgrimage of revitalization and transformation – from New Orleans to San Francisco, from division to unity, from oneself to one's God, from individual consciousness to planetary revolution. **AL**



Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress will be a featured speaker and guiding a labyrinth workshop at the national conference, Sacred Activism and the Power of Inclusion, in Tulsa May 10-12. www.wisdomuniversity.org.

Learn more about Veriditas at www.veriditas.net The labyrinth locator is at www.veriditas.labyrinthsociety.org/home