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WALKING MEDITATION

the calming and centering effects of labyrinths

by Gina McGalliard

While many of us like to meditate, some can't sit still. Walking a labyrinth provides an enticing alternative.

an archetypal labyrinth gently leads us in a circular path inward toward a center and then back out again.

Found in ancient cultures from African, Celtic and Greek to Native American, they became especially popular fixtures in Medieval European churches; one of the most renowned is in France's Chartres Cathedral.

Depictions of labyrinths have been included in paintings, pottery, tapestries and in Hopi baskets as a sacred symbol of Mother Earth. Several American tribes saw the pattern as a medicine wheel. Celts may have regarded it as a never-ending knot or

circle. While some of the oldest known labyrinths decorate cave walls in Spain, today they grace diverse locations ranging from spas and wellness centers to parks, gardens, university campuses and even prisons.

"Labyrinths can be outdoors or indoors. Permanent labyrinths may be made of stones, rocks, bricks or inlaid stones. Temporary labyrinths can be painted on grass or made with all sorts of things for a particular purpose or appropriate to a specific cause," explains Diane Rudebock, Ed.D., resource vice president and research chair of the Labyrinth Society, in Trumansburg, New York.

"Walking a labyrinth is useful

for those that sometimes have a hard time being outwardly still and drawing themselves inward. You must move your body, and because you're focused on the path while you're walking it, it's easier to drop wholly into the journey and let go of all else," says Anne Bull, of Veriditas, a Petaluma, California, nonprofit that supports new labyrinth designs to suit the spiritual needs of hospitals, schools and retreat centers. The group also sponsors a worldwide directory at *LabyrinthLocator.com*.

Individual Approaches

A labyrinth walk typically involves three stages. The first is for releasing

extraneous thoughts on the way to the center. Upon arriving in the stillness of that point, the participant opens heart and mind to receive whatever message or wisdom is intended for them. The return path is the integration phase, to make a fresh insight our own.

Participants should approach their walk in different ways: One may have a specific question or intention in mind; another may be open to whatever occurs during their meditation; yet another may repeat a meditative mantra. One might even choose to bypass the path entirely in order to sit contemplatively at its center. Unlike a maze, it's impossible to lose our way with the circular path serving as a simple and reliable guide.

Although scientific research on labyrinth meditation has been limited to participant questionnaires, future studies may incorporate the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging technology to measure brain activity and record what individuals experience. Labyrinths located in settings like hospitals and prisons lend themselves to such research, says Rudebock. As a Veriditas-certified labyrinth facilitator, she conducts workshops and observes, "Walks are unique to each individual and may not produce uniform or replicable results."

At its core, the experience is about listening to our truest self, away from the cacophony of modern life. "I believe that the world needs places where our souls can be quiet," remarks

Jean Richardson, director of the KirkrIDGE Retreat and Study Center, in Bangor, Pennsylvania, which includes a seven-circuit labyrinth. "Retreat centers and labyrinths are places where we can listen to our inner heart, feel our inner calling and tap into our own divine nature. I think deep listening is not always valued in a world where we are rewarded for being busy and keeping our schedules full."

Nearby Opportunities

Today, labyrinths—indoor, outdoor, natural, urban, secular and religious—are found in or near many communities. Following the lead of

California's Golden Door Spa, in Escondido, which pioneered the use of a labyrinth in a spa setting, many spas now incorporate them in their wellness or mindfulness programs.

Labyrinthine invitations to a mindfulness practice are open to everyone. "A labyrinth can bridge all beliefs, faiths, religions and walks of life," says Bull. "You can walk a labyrinth no matter what you believe. Benefits come in walking it with an open mind and open heart."

To find labyrinths in the Triangle, visit: www.labyrinthlocator.com

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