



Labyrinths: A Pathway to Reflection and Contemplation

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Labyrinths are among the oldest man-made tools that encourage reflection, contemplation, and transformation. They were created 4,000 years ago, and evidence of their existence has been found in many cultures where they are believed to have been important in rituals and ceremonial dance. In medieval Europe, labyrinths were a symbol of the Christian faith; the labyrinth walk often was a substitute for the long pilgrimages of the Crusades (West, 2000; Westbury, 2001a). Over the years, labyrinths have been used for prayer, ritual, initiation, and personal and spiritual growth. Their current popularity has been called a “labyrinth renaissance” and attributed to the contemporary need to search for simplicity, deepen self-awareness, access intuition and creativity, and connect to the soul (West, 2000).

Labyrinths no longer are curious objects found only at spiritual retreats and wellness centers; they are being built in increasing numbers in a wide array of settings throughout the world, including in the United States. Labyrinths can be found in school playgrounds, hospital courtyards, public gardens, community parks, and even some prisons (Kern, 2000).

Designs and patterns of labyrinths vary, but the most popular used today are the seven-circuit Cretan design and the 11-circuit Chartres Cathedral pattern. The Cretan design comes from the Bronze Age and is named after the island of Crete, home of the mythical labyrinth in which the Minotaur lived. Many labyrinths are variations of this classic model. The eight-century-old Chartres Cathedral pattern is so named because of its location on the floor of the cathedral in France. It consists of 11 circuits, or concentric paths, which wind

around four quadrants of a circle (West, 2000).

New patterns have been designed to fit smaller spaces, and a variety of materials have been used. Handheld models made of stone, acrylic, leather, and wood are available. Outdoor designs have been made of earthen mounds; garden hedges and flowers; mown prairie grasses; rock, brick, rope, and sand; mosaic tiles; and simply paint on pavement (Lonegren, 2002). Some labyrinths on the World Wide Web can be “walked” by a finger tracing a pathway on a computer screen.

Labyrinths differ from mazes, which have more complicated designs, are designed to tease and trick users, and often result in dead-end passageways. Mazes have been called left-brain puzzles because they offer choices and require decision making. In contrast, labyrinths are considered by some experts to be right-brain activity enhancers because they encourage movement along a single pathway in synchrony with “the music of the soul” (Labyrinth Society, 2002). Other experts assert that labyrinths involve the entire brain.

The power of labyrinths lies in their simplicity. A curving, winding pathway typically flows from the entrance to the center and then reverses along the same pathway back to the entrance and exit site. While walking, the body develops a peaceful rhythm as it follows the winding pathway inward (a process that some labyrinth experts call “journeying in”). This pathway leads to the “resting place,” the center of the labyrinth, a place of reflection, contemplation, and illumination. The pathway then is followed in an outward direction (a process called “journeying out”) toward union with

the everyday world, which some experts call “rebirth.” Thus, the pattern aids in attaining an inner meditative state (Curry, 2000; Sands & Ferre, 2001).

In addition to walking labyrinths, a variety of laptop finger labyrinths are available. Using the nondominant hand to move along a labyrinth pattern is thought to open intuition and promote reflection and relaxation. Finger labyrinths are well suited for home use and as aids to introspection and journaling. Another recommended use is with patients in hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes and with visually, physically, or cognitively impaired people who are unable to complete traditional walking labyrinths. For patients with cancer, for example, finger labyrinths can be used for guided meditation before chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery. Double finger labyrinths also are available for group activities and exercises; using labyrinths may help promote the understanding of others’ views (West, 2001; Westbury, 2001b). Labyrinths also have been used with seriously ill and injured children and sometimes are included as part of their physical or occupational therapy sessions (Rossetta, 2001). Lastly, labyrinths may have an additional role in assisting healthcare providers in coping with personal or job-related stress.

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