

# Labyrinth or Maze?

## Reflections 20 years later

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Labyrinth by Jackie Conradi-Robertson

### How and why to walk a labyrinth

Mary Bennett

About 20 years ago, Karen and I, with Deb Henry who now lives on Gabriola Island, formed the triumvirate who felt called to encourage Unitarians to walk labyrinths.

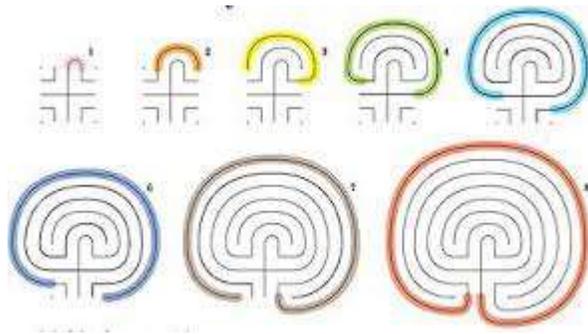
For well over a decade, the three of us created a temporary labyrinth every summer on the Fremlin side with “chalk spray paint”. Then I started experimenting with marking the paths with natural materials like rhododendron blossoms and laurel branches.

In 2015, our UCV Buildings and Grounds committee gave permission to plant a permanent labyrinth on that location. And I've been digging and planting and watering ever since. You may have seen me on Sunday afternoon out there. The cover image is a painting of that labyrinth.

Around the same time, there was a need to repave our inner courtyard and Dianne Crosbie, chair of Buildings and Grounds, recalled that the three of us had created a design for a square labyrinth in that area. With a small amount of adjustment from the previous plan, a labyrinth was created.

It's pretty subtle, so you may not have noticed it. Just follow the grey pavers between the red pavers and you'll get the idea. It's made in the pattern in your order of service insert.

This is a version of the classical style which is more often round and seven circuits – like the pattern for how to draw one in your order of service.



## My history with labyrinths

I first heard about labyrinths in the mid-90s. I heard Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress from San Francisco's Episcopal Grace Cathedral on CBC North by Northwest. She's credited as being the “godmother of the modern labyrinth movement.” She had just published her book *Walking a Sacred Path* in 1995. She has said she wanted to “pepper the planet” with labyrinths. Vancouver has the first indoor labyrinth in Canada at St. Paul's Anglican. It was created in 1997 as a replica of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth. They host many events and I always see some Unitarians there on New Year's Eve when they have a large event.

Anyhow, so there I am, in bed, listening. But without the benefit of a diagram or photo of an actual labyrinth, the phrase “a template that allows body, mind and soul to flow together in harmony” left me wondering: But WHAT exactly IS a labyrinth?

Here's what I learned.

The words “labyrinth” and “maze” are often used interchangeably, but for our purposes they're quite different: a labyrinth is a **pattern on the ground for a walking meditation that is always unicursal**—that is: there's only one path—unlike a maze that has forks in the road and dead ends.

You can see the whole labyrinth including the centre from wherever you are. The “walls” are usually just lines on the ground or marked with rocks or plants. In a maze you can't see the centre until you find it.

Labyrinths were “trending” as they say now, at least in my universe. So when I saw a labyrinth workshop offered an option at the annual Women's Spirituality Celebration at UBC, I signed up.

I had just broken off a relationship and that was the problem on my mind as I started at the entrance to the labyrinth.

I love how the creative, intuitive brain can put multiple things together that aren't considered related by the logical left brain side, something like the way dreams do.

So while I'm walking my mind goes to the movie I'd seen a few days earlier: *Evita*, about the life of Eva Peron. Words from one of the songs started running through my brain:

*So what happens now?* Evita asks.

The only response she (and I) got was: *Don't ask anymore.*

Rainer Maria Rilke says the same thing this way:

Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you  
because you would not be able to live them.

## Why walk a labyrinth?

So why walk a labyrinth is the same as why meditate. Most of us think that's a good thing to do. But some of us have trouble sitting still. Matthew Fox includes labyrinth walking, along with making art, dancing and gardening within the term “extroverted meditation”. He says, and I agree, it's often easier for us western folk to practice extroverted meditation.

## My Bollingen

I once described the “garden path” labyrinth on our site to a friend as my version of Carl Jung's building a tower at Bollingen in Switzerland. In his memoir, Jung writes:

Gradually, through my scientific work, I was able to put my fantasies and the contents of the unconscious on a solid footing. Words and paper, however, did not seem real enough to me; something more was needed.

I had to achieve a kind of representation in stone of my innermost thoughts and of the knowledge I had acquired.

Or, to put it another way, I had to make a **confession of faith in stone.**

This may sound a little grandiose, but I would say, the garden path labyrinth is my confession of faith in *soil* rather than stone.

It's also my tribute to the red-wiggler worms who have transformed the dry, clay soil full of weeds into the rich soil that now supports the many plants growing there. The plants are lovely now but it was building up the soil that took the most work. As often is the case, what's happening underneath is more important than what's easily visible!

### **Becoming indigenous**

I've recently discovered the work of Stephan Harding, an “ecophilosopher” who teaches at Schumacher College in the south of England. The college is named for E.F. Schumacher author of: *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered* published in 1973.

The college's first teacher was James Lovelock who proposed the Gaia hypothesis, which postulates that the Earth functions as a self-regulating system. As an aside Lovelock will turn 100 this year on July 26.

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, calls Schumacher college “a think tank for hope, a battery for positive vision!”

Harding recommends “becoming indigenous” - that's a small letter i—to the place we live.

When he moved from his native Venezuela at the age of six to the south of England, he felt alienated from the landscape there. So different from where he had previously lived. But when he began to connect with the environment in that place he found he “could speak to the trees” and they would speak back to him.

He recommends connecting with a particular piece of earth through the changing seasons. He posits that this way we can become indigenous to that part of earth, and if we can become indigenous to a particular piece of earth, we can then feel a part of the whole earth and even the solar system and galaxies.

I have become indigenous to that little plot of land off Fremlin. I get to watch snowdrops turn to grape hyacinths and then tulips and daffodils and on and on through the seasons. At this time of year, there's always something new each time I walk it. Some new sprout is there saying: Hey there! How's it going?!

### **So looking forward 20 years, what will the labyrinths be like?**

Dan Buettner, who researched longevity and wrote a best-seller called *The Blue Zone*, says there is evidence that gardeners live longer, often to 100 and beyond. So in 2039 I'll be in my 90s and I expect to be out there on Sunday afternoons, planting and weeding—maybe with some of you.

**I do have a wish list for the future of our labyrinths.**

- I wish there was a big welcoming sign giving the basics of how and why to walk a labyrinth.
- I wish more neighbours would regularly stop by to walk the labyrinth and that some of them would decide to check out what else happens here.
- I wish there were benches for resting. And maybe a yellow Friendship bench indicating that someone sitting there would appreciate a conversation.
- I wish that when you reach the centre of the courtyard labyrinth, you could actually be able to walk into the centre area, not have your way blocked by a big tree root.

**Some references**

UCV labyrinth web page [vancouverunitarians.ca/labyrinth](http://vancouverunitarians.ca/labyrinth)

Lauren Artress <https://www.laurenartress.com/>

St. Paul's Labyrinth <https://stpaulsanglican.bc.ca/site1/outreach-2/labyrinth/>

Matthew Fox <http://www.matthewfox.org/>

Stephan Harding on Becoming Indigenous

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwG746L3dDg>

Schumacher College <https://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/>

James Lovelock <http://www.jameslovelock.org/>

350.org <https://350.org/>

Dan Buettner: TED talk on How to Live to be 100

[https://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_buettner\\_how\\_to\\_live\\_to\\_be\\_100?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_buettner_how_to_live_to_be_100?language=en)

Small is Beautiful [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small\\_Is\\_Beautiful](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_Is_Beautiful)

World wide labyrinth locator <https://labyrinthlocator.com/>

World Labyrinth Day (First Saturday in May) <https://labyrinthsociety.org/world-labyrinth-day>

Veriditas <https://www.veriditas.org/>

How to draw a labyrinth youtube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyEwgGuWzCI>

## Meditation Introduction

For now, what I wish is ... that you might want to trace a labyrinth pattern during the meditation period and that you might enjoy the touch and smell of the sprig picked from the labyrinth during this period of silence.

There's an insert with the pattern of 3-circuit square labyrinth. You could trace it with your finger, possibly asking a question at the start and pausing at the centre before tracing back along the same pathway.

Here are words by Rainer Maria Rilke to send you on your journey of silent meditation.

...be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet



## Reading: from *The Labyrinth*

The centre that I cannot find  
Is known to my unconscious Mind;  
I have no reason to despair  
Because I am already there.

My problem is how not to will;  
They move most quickly who stand still;  
I'm only lost until I see  
I'm lost because I want to be.

WH Auden

## Labyrinth as metaphor

I've been a labyrinth tourist for over 20 years. Whenever I travel, I look to see if there is a labyrinth in the vicinity and walk it if I can. I've walked portable labyrinths in Iowa and ephemeral labyrinths at Spanish Banks. I've been to Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and walked the both the recreated Chartres labyrinth in the light of the stained glass window in the sanctuary, and the public peace labyrinth in the courtyard. I've found labyrinths in Juno, Alaska, in Sisters, Oregon, in public and private gardens in Santa Cruz, California, and in a Tibetan retreat centre on Whidby Island.

Some labyrinths are associated with churches, for example in Victoria there are outdoor labyrinths at First Unitarian and at Christ Church Cathedral; at UBC there is a labyrinth that originated with the Theology College, but is now in the home of the Economics Department (peaceful economics?) Other labyrinths were created by community members, for example, a painted labyrinth in Calistoga, California, or a rock lined path in the community park in Sisters, Oregon, or a mosaic labyrinth on Bainbridge Island, WA. Some community labyrinths blend in with the environment, having walls of salal, while others are works of art, with tiles fitted so perfectly together there is no blade of grass poking through. Some portable labyrinths are painted on silk, while others are on canvas. All are beautiful in their own, unique ways.

You may know some of the history of the "modern" labyrinth movement, and an association with Christianity (Episcopalians in the US, Anglicans in Canada), or the gnostic mysticism of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth and pilgrims "walking on their knees" as a devotional practice. You also know the Greek legend of Theseus and the Minotaur, which we will get back to in a moment. But labyrinths are found all over the world, for example: in the rock carvings of pre-contact indigenous Americans and other cultures.

What is it about this circle that is not a spiral, but a meander path, that is possibly imprinted into our human sub-conscious, that not only speaks to us today, but is finding new life outside of religion and spirituality, and even found as a therapeutic tool for people living with dementia?

Let's start with why the Theseus legend is a "thing". Scholars have suggested that perhaps older labyrinths had walls (for example, I've walked one built from cloth walls) ... after all, it's not as if you can get lost when you are walking on a flat surface!

Then there is the confusion between a maze and a labyrinth so we just have the terminology wrong on the legend. Probably. But there is a scholar, Jodi Lorimer, who examines origins of the labyrinth back to Paleolithic times, by tracing symbols found in caves in Spain, Maltravieso (64,000 years), Altamira (20,000 years), or France, Chauvet (30,000 years) and Lascaux. These caves were used as religious and cultural sites by humans living 64,000 years ago! In some caves we have record of the hands or fingerprints of the creators – a direct connection of the development of the human brain to create transcendental art. Most of the caves were only used for ritual, as there are no artifacts found which would be left behind if the people had used the caves for accommodation. In other words, we humans have a very long history making use of labyrinthine space to meet a unique need.

What is found in the centre of the labyrinth, and why would we go there? You know the drill ... Theseus was one of 14 youth sent as a tribute to be killed by the Minotaur that inhabited the centre of the legendary labyrinth. The Minotaur was half human and half bull, the result of a human dalliance of Queen Pasiphaë. King Minos contracted the genius inventor, Daedalus, to construct the labyrinth to contain this monster offspring. Sex, then as now, sells in ancient Greece, and Ariadne provides Theseus with the means to escape the maze, only to be abandoned by him a short time later on the Isle of Naxos ... but that's not part of our consideration here.

Think about what the Minotaur must have looked like, half man, half bull. Now think about how shamans are often pictured in the ancient cave paintings, pre-dating Grecian legend by some 20,000 years. Shamans are highly identifiable symbols as wearing the horns or the skins of animals, and are often pictured in ritual poses such as dancing or playing a musical instrument perhaps to induce a trance or ecstatic state. And although we tend to think of Shamans in today's terms as being wise person, I suspect that they were terrifying and perceived as inhuman in the depths of a dark cave, conducting rituals meant to insure the very existence of life itself through hunting rituals, or culture, through coming of age or family bonding rituals.

Whenever I am thinking about fundamental concepts that have survived over 60,000 years, I think about the brilliant work done by Carl Gustav Jung in exploring how the human mind works. The universal need for stories, legends and myths that have guided human development through the incomprehensible eons of developmental time, and through the individual development within one lifetime.

Jung developed language that we can use to understand (or picture) some of these fundamental concepts. For example, all humans come supplied with unconscious aspects of personality. The anima is often referred to as the feminine personality contained within men, while the animus is the masculine personality contained within women. Contained within both men and women is the "Shadow". (Sometimes referred to as ... "what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!")

In Jungian therapy, it is the work of an individual to consciously understand how these unconscious aspects of personality affect our lives. My theory is that you don't need to have read Jung to get the concept, because many great thinkers such as Joseph Campbell have done the heavy lifting already. The art, stories, films, novels, etc. that stay with us for our whole lives do so because they hit a nerve (my term, not Jung's!) but you get my meaning.

Joseph Campbell said that we humans need myth in order to fully actualize ourselves as humans and to maintain human culture.

Back to the labyrinth. We don't need Ariadne's string in order to walk the labyrinth. What we need is our intention.

We enter the labyrinth with intention, sometimes with a question in mind, but that isn't a requirement. With each walk we are re-creating the entrance to the cave, the universal unconsciousness, the labyrinth that at its centre contains the Minotaur, or Shadow, or our deepest self. We no longer need to sacrifice to feed the Minotaur or our deepest self, but we do need to make the journey. Walking in silence with ourselves, we retrace the neurological patterns that are integral to our humanity that have been part of the human brain for well over 60,000 years.

Labyrinth tourism? The explosion of interest in community-based labyrinths is a conscious decision. Some labyrinths are extraordinarily beautiful. The Chartres Cathedral and Grace Cathedral labyrinths are bathed in the colours of the stained glass Rose window. Outdoor labyrinths have the beauty of sky, and garden labyrinths have flowers and trees. Many outdoor labyrinths are called "Peace labyrinths" to invite members of the wider community to walk without dogma attached.

We're not walking on our knees to Jerusalem here, we're feeding the universality of our human condition, the community shared by all who call themselves human.

The labyrinth as metaphor? Man, Woman, Birth, Death, Infinity.

Take your choice. Happy travels.

### **Additional reading:**

Joseph Campbell *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* New World Library 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. 2008

Joseph Campbell *The Power of Myth* Doubleday 1988

Carl Gustav Jung *Man and His Symbols* Doubleday 1964

Carl Gustav Jung *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Pantheon Books 1963

Jodi Lorimer *Dancing at the Edge of Death: The Origins of the Labyrinth in the Paleolithic* Kharis Enterprises Printing 2009

## Closing words

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

*Mary Oliver #490, Singing the Living Tradition*