



The Labyrinth

Archetype of Transformation for Global Healing

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Annette Reynolds – *Seaside Labyrinth*, 1997

My personal journey into the labyrinth began in October 1994, while on a pilgrimage of sacred sites in Britain. My home base was Glastonbury, also known as the ancient Isle of Avalon. Each morning I would venture out to some lush, magical, natural place that was steeped in ancient Goddess culture, early Christianity, Celtic and Druid tradition, or Arthurian lore. It was like a spiritual archetypal dig.

One of these places was The Glastonbury Tor Maze. This three-dimensional hillside labyrinth is an ancient, seven-circuit processional path, dating back 2,000 to 4,000BC, a time corresponding to the construction of Stonehenge. Based on the circle and spiral, symbols of wholeness and transformation, the labyrinth is an archetypal pattern found in almost every culture and religious tradition. Over time, there has been a natural progression of the labyrinth from ancient earth labyrinth, to medieval Christian church labyrinths, to modern hedge mazes. The seven-path labyrinth is the most common labyrinth pattern in the world and is often called the “classical,” or “Cretan” labyrinth. It is usually constructed on the earth and used for protection, often marking sacred

places.

Seen from above, the landscape of the Isle of Avalon, is in the form of a reclining woman/goddess. The Tor is the left breast. The serpentine labyrinth path, spiraling around the Tor, takes several hours to complete. A journey to the center of the labyrinth is like a journey to the heart, the sacred spring of the other world.

MEDIEVAL LABYRINTH

The earliest Christian labyrinth dates back to the fourth century. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, labyrinths were used in many of the Gothic cathedrals of Europe as symbolic pilgrimages to the Holy Land. When the crusades made travel too dangerous, the faithful would come to the cathedrals and walk labyrinths, the center of the labyrinth being the New Jerusalem.

The most famous medieval labyrinth today is located outside of Paris, at Our Lady of Chartres Cathedral. Although the village of Chartres is small, this cathedral was the largest, most beloved, and most famous pilgrimage cathedral during medieval times. This cathedral has always been a popular place for pilgrims because the relic of the veil that Mary wore when Jesus was born is there. There are 173 images of the Divine Feminine, in her many forms. The largest image

of the Divine Feminine is the labyrinth. Some labyrinth experts think one purpose of this labyrinth was that it was used as a lunar calendar to calculate Easter. In *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness*, Marion Woodman says that in Chartres Cathedral, the archetypal feminine and masculine energy are well balanced. The Divine Feminine, Wisdom, sits on the cathedra, the throne. On Her knee is the conscious King.

For the past 350 years, the labyrinth has been covered over by chairs along with the emergence of the Age of Reason. This corresponds to the “Madonna split,” demise of the Divine Feminine, reflected in the denigration of feminine principles such as intuition, cooperation, creative imagination. There seems to be a direct connection between the control over the life/death cycle, domination and exploitation of the earth, the marginalization of women, the defeat and exclusion of the Great Mother, and the covering over of the Creative Feminine Spirit.

WAYS TO WALK AND USE LABYRINTHS

The Labyrinth Society defines the labyrinth as a spiritual tool and a right-brain activity enhancer. Because the labyrinth path is not linear, the body is active, and the mind focused. The labyrinth provides a place where the thinking mind is quieted and the intuitive right brain flows.

Unlike a maze, which can have many paths, can be confusing, and has to be logically figured out; a labyrinth has only one path, which can be seen all at once, and leads from the entrance to the center and back out again. The meandering path that takes us to the center becomes a mirror for the spiritual journey and where we are in our lives. Every walk is different, a snapshot in time.

There are three parts to the walk, which mirror the therapeutic, healing process. As we journey to the center, the labyrinth provides a healing container where we can “let go” of excess baggage. The center of the labyrinth is home, a place of quiet rest, to listen and receive. We then walk out on the same path that brought us in, often empowered, with a renewed awareness to face life’s challenges.

There are many ways to use the labyrinth and there are no right or wrong ways to “walk” one. The labyrinth can be used as a body blessing, a prayer walk, a walking meditation, and a centering prayer. It can be used as a grounding and problem solving tool, and a stress reducer. The alternating left/right, clockwise/counterclockwise directions of the labyrinth creates a balancing, relaxing, yet vitalizing motion. Some people dance, sing, drum in labyrinths. The walk can also be a shared journey, which can unify vision and community.

HEALING POWER

The labyrinth is a three dimensional mandala, a sacred circle, with which we can have direct experience. Black Elk says that everything the power of the world does is done in a circle. In *Goddesses in Older Women*, Jungian analyst, Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D., says that one of the archetypes in women over fifty is not a goddess at all, but

the archetype of the circle. In her book, *The Millionth Circle*, Bolen encourages the regeneration of the archetypal sacred circle and quotes Marshall McLuhan’s famous expression, “The medium is the message.”

There seems to be many explanations for the healing power of the labyrinth. Geomancers and dowsers say that properly placed labyrinths have strong energy or “ley lines” and where these energy lines cross may be like charkas or energy centers of the earth’s body. Like great standing stones, labyrinths may act as acupuncture meridians, helping to channel and amplify energy.

Labyrinths have been created all over the world with the intention of peace and healing. Such places include toxic waste dumps, Columbine, the White House, and the Olympic games. Proposals have been submitted for a labyrinth to be created at Ground Zero.

THE LABYRINTH MOVEMENT

The image of the circular labyrinth with a center is very potent and the soul speaks in images. The seven-path earth labyrinth on the Tor, a large green hill in Glastonbury, spoke to me. Seen from above, the landscape of the Isle of Avalon, the Isle of Apples, is in the form of a reclining woman/goddess. The Tor is the left breast. The sinuous, serpentine labyrinth path, spiraling around the Tor, takes several hours to complete. A journey to the center of the labyrinth is like a journey to the heart, the sacred spring of the other world. This was my first encounter with a labyrinth and the image of the labyrinth stayed with me.

As my life filled with challenges, my relationship with the labyrinth deepened. Jungian analyst, Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D., came to Birmingham in 1995 and shared her spiritual autobiography *Crossing to Avalon: A Woman’s Midlife Pilgrimage*. I realized that the labyrinth was being rediscovered worldwide. In her book, Dr. Bolen shared her transforming experiences with the archetypal Sacred Feminine and Great Mother through her pilgrimage to Glastonbury and Chartres Cathedral labyrinths.

Many people were sharing profoundly, beautiful dreams about the labyrinth with me. I wondered why the labyrinth was emerging today, after 350 years of lying dormant. The archetype may be emerging today because in this new millennium filled with change, conflict and uncertainty, there seems to be much anxiety and a need for additional ways to stay whole, connected, centered, and calm. We are “cosmic amphibians” designed to live harmoniously, yet there are dichotomies between light /dark, life /death. Our environmental, political, and economic crisis may be traced to traditions that teach dominance and control. The emergence of the labyrinth serves to move us to a new level of consciousness, of holding the opposites.

In July, 1995, I practically inhaled one of the first books in print about labyrinths, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*, by the grandmother of the labyrinth movement, Episcopal priest and psychotherapist, Lauren Artress. In her book, Lauren quotes Jung who compared ancient archetypes to “riverbeds which dry up when

the water deserts them, but which can be filled again at any time.” She describes the labyrinth as a “watering hole for the soul” and the “skeleton of the Holy Spirit.” She invites communities to create labyrinths as part of a new paradigm to address modern-day issues. Her vision is to “embrace a new vision of spiritual maturity that values ethnic, cultural, and gender differences, supports creativity and the work of Spirit among all forms of life, what is needed for the global family to survive in the twenty-first century.”

A week later, the Labyrinth Project of Alabama was birthed when I co-created a seven-circuit labyrinth in my garden. The labyrinth was created for my personal use, but because it sparked so much interest in the community and Alabama, this garden labyrinth soon became a pilgrimage site for individuals and groups and I was asked to teach about labyrinths, create them and lead labyrinth events.

The same year, along with Lauren Artress, about 40 labyrinth enthusiasts from around the country and Europe met for the first labyrinth conference in New Mexico. We each thought we had discovered the labyrinth and shared our transforming experiences and stories about the labyrinth. We met year after year and learned from each other how we made them and how we were using them. National magazines, like Prevention and newspapers, such as The Washington Post and New York Times, interviewed us. Articles and books were written and photographs of old and new labyrinths were documented. One very popular photograph is “Seaside Labyrinth” ©1997, which was spontaneously created by me and candidly taken by my daughter in Gulf Shores, Alabama. It is featured on the cover of books, magazines, journals, and The Labyrinth Society website homepage (www.labyrinthsociety.org).

In 1998 these founding members formed The Labyrinth Society whose membership spans the globe. I had the honor of serving as TLS “2001 Gathering Chair” which was held at Simpsonwood Conference Center north of Atlanta. Hundreds of people gathered from eight countries—artists, crafts people, writers, educators, mathematicians, therapists, counselors, health care providers, business professionals, ministers, seekers, dancers, dowsers, singers, photographers, students, musicians with a single common interest, labyrinths.

Experiencing the labyrinth needs no translation, no need for language. To be a labyrinthian, to me, is a synthesis of every consciousness raising movement with which I have been involved: the Human Potential Movement, Civil Rights, Peace, Environment, Women’s Movement, Human Rights, and Women’s Spirituality Movement. Under the umbrella of TLS and Veriditas, the “Labyrinth Movement” connects me to an ever-expanding global consciousness-raising circle that now has a spiritual center.

As we walk the path, we are changed. My relationship with the labyrinth mirrors the evolving stages in my own life. The labyrinth has grown from being mother to me, to me being its mother, to me being a grandmother/crone, the one who “stands her own ground.”

These past few years have also been times of transformation for the world. Our individual and global “body” is filled with change, crisis, and spiritual hunger. None of us travels alone—we are a cosmic family. The labyrinth is like a large

umbrella, large enough to encompass the individual paths of all walking. To “become empty in order to be made full, to die to old habits and self-images in order to be reborn,” is the spiritual challenge and can be an arduous task. The labyrinth is a metaphor for where we are in our lives, spiraling up and down, into the center and out again. The dark lines show us the path. Artress says, “Getting to know our shadow is the most important spiritual work we can do at this time.”

The labyrinth is a profound tool and a safe container to look within and trust our inner voice of wisdom in order to survive the stressful global shift in consciousness and bring our planet and us in harmony. At the eye, heart, hand, and ground level, we connect individually and collectively, as pilgrims on a path. To travel the winding road to the inner self may be the most important journey we make. We find it by following it. The best way I have learned about the labyrinth is walking one regularly. My intention is to continue to “walk the walk” and align my life and work with the vision of my heart and spiritual path. I hope to meet you on the path soon.

References

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