

LABYRINTHS OFFER VIEW OF TRANSFORMATION

The labyrinth is an ancient symbol, refined by years of faith, into a tool that deepens an individual's spirituality. For centuries, the mainstream church has ignored its power to transform lives. But the Rev. Lauren Artress is determined that it be rediscovered, for the sake of the spirit and the future of the faith. Simply put, Artress explained, a labyrinth is a spiral design that is big enough to hold a meandering path to a center on which people can walk. The walking, she explained, "is a journey, symbolic of our path through life. A labyrinth is a path of prayer, a walking meditation. A labyrinth is the bones of the Holy Spirit."

Artress, a Canon for Special Ministries at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, cringes when people in the Christian community dismiss the labyrinth as "something New Age." "It's not new at all, she said. "There were labyrinths in our cathedrals in the Middle Ages." They were spiritual tools. People used them for symbolic pilgrimages. They knew then that the act of walking a sacred circle directly connected them to the divine within."

However, with the advent of the Age of Reason, the church became grounded in the intellectual. Relating to God came to involve thinking, rather than experiencing, Artress said. "We mistakenly thought that the intellect was the avenue to experiencing the Sacred, to nourishing the Soul. We discounted the imagination and our other faculties of knowing mystery."

As a result, "churches became containers, where the acts of religion were performed. But not many people were inquiring about what's going on within the container. We tell people to love their enemies. But we never teach them how. The church has stopped addressing the how of faith, it only points in the direction of the ideal. When we allow the intellect to define our experience of faith, we lose sight of the path." One of the consequences of this focus on reason is that the church seems to now be on the sidelines, baffled, and "frequently scoffing at the spiritual revolution that is taking place in the Western world," she added.

Artress' training as a psychotherapist, made her intent on using the imagination to help people journey towards God. In 1991, she traveled to Chartres Cathedral in France to walk and study the labyrinth there. After much study, she reproduced the Chartres labyrinth at Grace in San Francisco. The results surpassed her wildest expectations. Each week, between 300 and 500 people walk the labyrinth at Grace. Soon, she found herself traveling around the country, giving workshops with a portable fabric labyrinth.

Artress has "given up counting" the people affected by her work. But she cherishes the stories of healing, discovery and transformation. In 1995, she published the book "Walking a Sacred Path," which has led to an explosion of other groups seeking to rediscover the labyrinth as a spiritual tool. "I don't know how or why it works," she said. "I've resigned myself to the mystery." But she is often astounded at the presence of the Holy Spirit and how it works amid this sacred space.

The process of walking one-third mile spiral of the labyrinth, she said, is a relatively simple three-fold process. It begins with entry, and "purgation" or "relinquishing the things that we attempt to control. "At the center, is a place for meditation and prayer. Moments of clarity are often found by people in this portion of the walk. Leaving the labyrinth is a process Artress calls union, as the walker integrates what they have experienced into their life.

Each person experiences the labyrinth in different ways, Artress stressed. But for almost everyone, there is a willingness to seek, a sense of creating order from chaos, and an intuitive feeling of the presence of something holy. Walking the labyrinth has helped people "to seek the holy," Artress said. It is the interaction with a symbol that "guides people along a pathway that leads to the discovery of God within themselves." "The soul thinks in symbols," Artress said. For her, and thousands who have been inspired by her work, the labyrinth is a symbol that defines what is possible within the church. As it struggles to rediscover its soul along the sacred path.

Written by Melissa Lauber