

About Labyrinths

A labyrinth is a pattern, generally two-dimensional, in which a series of lines delineate a pathway which is meant to be walked. Labyrinths are ancient, going back to pre-history. Being mostly circular, labyrinths reflect the basic movement of creation. The labyrinth was modified by the Christian Church in the Middle Ages to incorporate specific Christian meaning and symbolism, and to be used as a means of prayer and possibly penance.

It is very important to distinguish between a labyrinth and a maze. *Labyrinth* is used to identify a pattern that has a single path which, although it may be circuitous, leads unflinching to the center without any intersections or choices to make. The word *maze*, on the other hand, we use to indicate a complex pattern with many paths, intersections, choices, dead ends, and false passages.



The Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth

What also distinguishes mazes and labyrinths is the completely opposite mental states they elicit. A maze involves a contest, a puzzle to be solved. It requires constant mental and intellectual effort. It involves a competition between the walker and the maze designer. A labyrinth, on the other hand, requires no such effort. The mind can completely relax, but because the path is circuitous, one must still pay attention. That state of awareness, combined with a relaxed mind, is typical of meditation. For that reason, the labyrinth is frequently seen as a means for walking meditation.

What happens when walking a labyrinth varies from person to person. Most commonly, people report a sense of peace, relaxation, and well-being. Some have reported emotional healing, such as dealing with grief or contemplating one's next step in life. Labyrinths are thought to restore a sense of equilibrium and balance, which can be especially helpful when our lives seem overburdened or out of kilter.

Many people are surprised by the rapport they feel with labyrinths. Often they are unable to verbalize it, only to feel it. The labyrinth takes us out of our modern rectilinear perspective. It rescues us from the busyness and pressure of schedules and responsibilities and gives us time to be with ourselves in a focused way. We may find comfort or relaxation, or come into contact with our deeper and more authentic selves. Perhaps we tap into a long-forgotten archetypal reservoir that reconnects us with the universe, our ancient predecessors, and ourselves.

With the mind and emotions calmed and the body in a greater state of balance and equilibrium, we have the opportunity to go below the surface of things. The intellect can take a break. We can go deep within, to our authentic selves. In a heightened state of awareness, insights sometimes occur when walking the labyrinth – drawing on a far greater wisdom and vision than is normally accessible.

Getting past the rational mind is the goal of most spiritual paths, using methods such as prayer, surrender, and meditation. The Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress has written, "Most of the experiences that occur in the labyrinth are unexpected. They are guided by a sacred wisdom, a creative intelligence that knows more about what we need than do our conscious selves."

The labyrinth certainly lends itself to expressing our intent and making our supplications. Stating our intent – such as our vision of peace in the world, for example – and then walking the labyrinth makes the purpose clear to ourselves and to higher powers. There is no particular experience that is supposed to happen when walking the labyrinth. The effects of the labyrinth are cumulative. The more you walk, the greater will be the benefits.

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