



First-Year Experience

College Success Course

Labyrinth Walking Prayer and Meditation

The labyrinth is located **between Brian Hall and the Spirituality Center on the CSB campus.**

It is not visible from the road as the buses leave CSB campus, but it is close to a gazebo behind the Spirituality Center. The labyrinth is cut in the grass but quite visible once one gets close. If students can't find it, they can ask at the Spirituality Center; open hours at the Center are: 8 – 11:15 a.m.; 1 – 4:15 p.m. Of course, the labyrinth is always open to walkers; no need to ask permission to use it.

Read the information below before doing a Labyrinth walk.

What is a labyrinth?

A labyrinth is a circuitous circular path, which is unicursal, meaning the same path leads the walker into the center and out again. The labyrinth is used for meditation, prayer and meeting psychospiritual needs, involving physically walking, stepping away from daily thoughts and concerns, and entering a meditative or prayer state which opens the walker to a more creative, open, inward focused state of being. Walking the labyrinth is a contemplative meditation which results in transformation within the walker.

There are two most common forms of labyrinths, the Cretan form, named after the island of Crete in which it was first known, at least 3,500 years ago. The other form is the Chartres, named after the permanent labyrinth set in the stone floor of the Cathedral of Chartres in France. This pattern dates back to the 13th century, and is a distinctly Christian design. It has a distinct pattern of a cross formed by spaces between the circuits, and a six-petaled rose in the center representing the Virgin Mary.

A interest in labyrinths has surged since the 1990's, as people look for ways to satisfy their search for spiritual growth, balance in life, and centering peacefulness. Labyrinths exist all around the world, in many different religious settings, and are seen in Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic and Native American spiritual practices. Not all of these labyrinths look like the one we will see today, however the common link is the circular pattern, walking meditation, and seeking connection with the Divine. In the U.S. labyrinths have been built in schools, hospitals, universities, medical centers, mental health service centers, prisons, churches, temples, mosques, private homes, assisted living centers and nursing care facilities, centers to care for people with dementia, hospices and conference centers.

Labyrinths appear similar to mazes, and sometimes the two are incorrectly seen as the same thing. In a maze, the purpose is to trick or confuse the walker, there are blind alleys and dead ends, the walker cannot see the whole of the maze while in it, and it serves as a puzzle to solve which may become frustrating to the walker and create inner tension. The labyrinth the purpose is to bring transformation to the walker, there is only one well defined path in and out, it is a meditative state and is designed to be a meditative experience free of anxiety, conscious effort, and confusion. The

experience for the walker is simply the deeply meditative and symbolic discipline of putting one foot in front of the other, honoring the journey itself and the insights gained, and integrating what is learned into life outside the labyrinth.

How do labyrinths work?

The labyrinth's ancient power derives from its being an archetypal map for the healing journey. It is only taking the steps on the path, twisting and turning as it goes along, that the walker arrives at its center, signifying arriving at the center of our hearts and spirits. It allows us to experience the transformational goals such as greater union with God/Divine Spirit, release from emotional and physical suffering, offering solutions to challenges, and bringing options for peaceful resolution to conflict. As an archetype, it is common among numerous cultures, has existed over centuries, its function is understood from various spiritual traditions and those involved with labyrinths agree on its function and purpose.

During a labyrinth walk both the right and left hemispheres of the brain are balanced, leading to a perfect state for accessing intuition and creativity. The walker lets go of linear and analytic thinking. The mind's focus and energy are freed from daily problem solving to enable new perspectives, inner guidance, calming peacefulness, opening creative blocks, and creative decision making. It is possible to combine labyrinth walking with other spiritual growth practices, such as yoga, creative visualization, journaling, artwork, prayer, energy work and different forms of meditation to further enhance the effects of transformation. The labyrinth is such a simple meditative practice, it requires no long training sessions, special certification, degree, memorization and testing, stated goals or any check-off lists. It simply requires the desire for transformation and honoring this intentional meditative practice.

What are the effects of walking the labyrinth?

In her book *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide For Healing and Spiritual Growth*, Melissa Gayle West identifies six areas of life in which a labyrinth can be helpful:¹

1. Deepening Spirituality
2. Inwardness connection to the soul
3. Access to intuition and creativity
4. Simplicity
5. Integrity of body and spirit
6. Intimacy and communication

Walking the labyrinth can help gain clarity with issues such as a challenging creative or work project; emotional pain such as grief, anger depression and anxiety; physical illness; physical and ability level changes common to aging or chronic illness; focusing and centering of energy; recovery work for addiction and abuse; stress reduction; insight into conflict in relationships; self-awareness; healing on the four energy levels (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual); making complicated and difficult decisions, understanding someone who lives differently with whom relationship occurs; sexual preference and gender identity issues; childhood abuse recovery. The issues which may be addressed through labyrinth walking are as limitless as the issues faced in daily life. Being in the labyrinth is a time of being, not doing, to still the mind, pay attention to the body, seek inner wisdom which has not yet been revealed, access the unconscious and seek Divine mystery and grace.

¹ West, Melissa Gayle. *Exploring the Labyrinth: a guide for healing and spiritual growth*. New York, Broadway Books, 2000.

What might be experienced during a labyrinth walk?

During the first few walks, there may be an experience of peacefulness, quieting of the mind and spirit, awareness of being in the present moment, and contemplative contentment. However, the labyrinth may produce effects much different than this, including a sense of unease, doubt, or bringing difficult questioning about a situation the walker is involved in. These effects are a means of transformation by calling the walker to reconsider, reflect from a different perspective, go further into an issue, or examine something difficult the walker doesn't want to acknowledge. An example of this may be coming into the labyrinth to gain insight into a difficult situation at work, and realizing that the walker's rigidity in routine and controlling behavior are a significant part of the problem, rather than causes such as other personnel or work structures. The discomfort of becoming aware of this personal responsibility and staying in the issue to reach change is part of the transformational process.

Sometimes it may feel as though nothing has occurred during and after a labyrinth walk. This may be due to:

1. Rushing the experience. This happens often with both new and experienced walkers. Sometimes it's just difficulty to put the pace of daily life behind, and slow both the mind and the body to the level needed.
2. Focusing too hard on having a specific experience or outcome. The walker needs to relax and let the process flow from its own energy and timing.
3. Coming in with a specific agenda and mental to-do list.
4. Trying to find the "correct" way to walk the labyrinth. There is no correct way, other than doing it slowly and meditatively to honor the process and not interfering with any other walkers. Walkers have been known to hold their arms out in a position of openness and reception, dance lightly, stop frequently while walking to stay in a certain energy field, softly chant, or sit for a bit.
5. Expecting the lesson or transformation to come immediately. Sometimes the effect of the walk won't be obvious until later, perhaps after other experience occur related to the issues brought up in the walk or when the walker is fully ready for the lesson.
6. As with any new experience, sometimes it just takes a while to become comfortable, settle into a style that feels right, and let go of any preconceived expectations.

Usually people walk the labyrinth alone, however walking it with others may transform it into a whole different experience. Sometimes the circumstances dictate walking with others, such as in a class or retreat setting. During these walks, the walkers would probably have little awareness or connection with the others. It is common courtesy to not speak to any other walkers, make eye contact, or do anything to draw their attention away from their own walk.

Sometimes people specifically choose to make the walk with others. Perhaps coworkers who are trying to come up with new ways of doing something will walk at the same time, then gather to discuss what happened for each of them. Married couples and partners or family members may walk together to deepen bonds among them or gain insight into another's situation. People in conflict may agree to walk the labyrinth together in an effort to come to clarity, understanding, and a common ground.

This experience of addressing conflict was shared recently,

"I walked the labyrinth with someone I was having significant problems with. Throughout the walk we would come closer together and then separate again, which happened many times. When we were coming closer and I was sensing her approach, I became aware of how deeply angry I was, and gradually I understood what I was really angry about. Then I saw which parts of this conflict we were stuck in, and where the power struggle was operating. I didn't want to be close to her, or to see my part in the whole mess, so I liked it much better when

we were far apart on the path! We had agreed to stay in the center together for a while, sitting silently. We sat together for a good while before getting up and walking out. I left first, then she came out. The walk back out of the labyrinth ended up much different than the walk in. Since I understood the conflict better then, I realized the separation in our lives was not good for either one of us or for our coworkers who were affected, too. Opposite to what happened walking in, I now felt more comfortable when we were closer together on the path and didn't like it when we were far apart. Once we were both out of the labyrinth, we just sat quietly under a tree for a while, pondering everything. We started talking, continued talking over the next several weeks until the conversation neither of us wanted to have occurred, and after that the transformation everyone talks about happened. While we are not friends, we work together fine and the tension at work about this has disappeared."ⁱ

ⁱ From a conversation between the presenter and a labyrinth retreatant.