

INTRODUCING THE LABYRINTH

Welcome to the labyrinth. These brief notes are intended to introduce a little of the history of labyrinths, as well as to offer some guidance on how you might want to approach walking one. Enjoy your walk.

WHAT IS THE LABYRINTH?

The labyrinth is a single path, toward a center—there are no dead ends or blind passageways for getting lost. Usually following one of several common patterns, a labyrinth may be painted onto a canvas, mowed into a lawn, or permanently set into a floor—among many other possibilities.

Labyrinths can be found all over the world, and have a long history. Common patterns etched into the ground, paved in stone, or marked out on cave walls have been discovered in many different places, as well as in many drawings in ancient texts. They feature in many Roman mosaics, and were laid into the floors of many of Europe's great cathedrals.

At Chartres in France, for example, a famous labyrinth used to be walked by pilgrims who were unable to travel to Jerusalem.

However, labyrinth walking isn't just a practice enjoyed in the west—labyrinths feature in Native American, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and other faith traditions, and are walked by many people who have no faith too. Labyrinths have become especially popular in recent years since a labyrinth printed on canvas (rather than having to be permanently set into a floor) was made for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco in the 1990's.

Today, many people walk labyrinths to meditate, reflect, or detach from the everyday for a short while. Many people report feeling inspired, uplifted, or having flashes of inspiration during or after walking, but most commonly having a sense of peace.

Were it to offer nothing else, the labyrinth offers a safe space where you can be at one with yourself, not demanding anything from you other than that you put one foot in front of the other and breathe!

WALKING THE LABYRINTH

All that's necessary to walk a labyrinth is to start at the beginning and move at your own pace toward the center. You might want to focus on a particular thought or question as you walk, just noticing how your feet arch and move as you walk, or paying attention to your breathing.

Otherwise, try to empty your mind of busy thoughts as much as you can, but don't worry too much about whatever thoughts or feelings may come to you.

During your walk, you may feel inclined to walk at a quicker pace and sometimes slower than others, possibly occasionally wanting to stop. You may need to occasionally sidestep to pass

by someone who is walking ahead of you, or others may need to pass by you. The walk is not a race, and it doesn't matter if you don't reach the center.

Take whatever time you need to arrive at the center, and rest there a while if you wish (sit, stand, kneel or whatever feels right). When you are ready, leave the labyrinth by the path opposite the one that you entered the center from (or back along the same path if the labyrinth only has one path).

If several people are waiting to enter the labyrinth at once, the host (if there is one) will indicate when you might want to start your walk, to allow a little space between each person at the start. They'll also indicate when the labyrinth is open for walking, usually by ringing a small bell (there's no need to rush to start your walk until you feel ready—take your time).

Similarly, when approaching the end of the time that is available, the host may close the walk with another ring of the chime. Most people like to sit and reflect on their walk before rushing off, and some may jot a reflection in a notebook that they may keep with them.

Of course if you are walking the labyrinth alone, or there is no host, then simply use your own judgment about when you start and finish your walk.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WALKING

While there are no hard and fast rules for walking a labyrinth, the following might be useful guidelines to keep in mind:

- If you're able, please remove boots or shoes before walking the labyrinth, especially if they are muddy. This will help preserve the life of the labyrinth.
- Please switch off mobile phones, and avoid talking if you can while walking and while waiting for others to start or finish their walk. Don't run in the labyrinth.
- Hold your hands out, walk at any pace, and do whatever feels right on the labyrinth—but please be mindful of and respect the interests of others.
- At a hosted walk, depending on advice that the host may offer, you may wish to return to your seat in silence after your walk if others are still walking, or simply leave quietly.

The only real matters to keep in mind are to respect other walkers, and respect the labyrinth itself (so that it won't become worn or damaged too quickly). You may wish to supervise younger children while they are walking.

AFTER YOUR WALK

If you enjoyed your walk, and might be interested to find out more about labyrinths, you might like to visit the **Labyrinth Launchpad** website, www.labyrinthlaunchpad.org, where there is a range of websites, books, YouTube videos and podcasts listed (in various languages). These include 'The Labyrinth Locator', an online search facility for finding labyrinths that may be nearby where you are.