

OFF THE COUCH: AN INTRODUCTION TO LABYRINTHS AND THEIR THERAPEUTIC PROPERTIES

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A labyrinth is a vehicle for assisting mental focus, group cohesion and spiritual connection that has been used by many cultures and religions at different times throughout history. In present day, it is believed that labyrinths serve a holistic function; to further those who are on the path to a more balanced spiritual, psychological, emotional and physical well being (Torres, 1994).

Unlike a maze, which has many dead ends and wrong choices designed to trick the mind, a labyrinth is a design with a single, winding, unobstructed path from the outside of itself to the center. Therefore, the labyrinth path (because there are no choices in direction to be made) naturally fosters introspection, and is, according to Dr. Lauren Artress, (Canon Minister at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and one of the principal pioneers responsible for the resurgence of mainstream interest in labyrinths) often seen as a metaphor for our spiritual "life" journey; many twists and turns but no dead ends. In other words, we always have the opportunity to make another choice in life or "turn" in the labyrinth (Artress, 1995).

When using a labyrinth with others, I have found that the path tends to magnify our thoughts, attitudes and emotions allowing us to see how our thinking may not be the most productive at times, thus providing an opportunity to change for both client and therapist. This magnification occurs as we walk the path watching and judging during exercise. For example, while teaching a class on labyrinths, I introduced the students to a fabric walking labyrinth and walked it with them. I had the impression that a few of the students had lost their way, since they were not walking in the same direction I was. For some reason, the thought occurred to me that I was somehow superior to these students because I was following the path "correctly" and they were not. It wasn't until a few steps later that I realized that I was the one who had somehow made a wrong turn and was heading back to the entrance rather than towards the center. What a revelation!

At first, I was upset with myself regarding my attitude and misjudgment toward those who were supposedly "lost" on the pattern. Then I found this situation very humorous. This experience taught me that if others don't appear to be traveling the same "path" in life that I am, it doesn't make their paths any less valuable than mine and vice versa. I guess it was a lesson in humility and equality that the labyrinth was willing to teach me.

A labyrinth is also a powerful tool to help your mind and body relax. There is anecdotal research by a psychiatrist, Dr. Wayne London, which indicates that a labyrinth positively effects the brain wave activity and neurological responses of some of its users. This occurs after walking or "fingerwalking" (to be discussed later) a labyrinth. This

research shows a short-term increase in mental clarity in some people with Alzheimer's, Schizophrenia, and Dyslexia, as well as greater mobility in some who are suffering with Parkinson's Disease (London, 1998). These effects, however have not as yet been studied long-term. In addition, those people who find it difficult to sit still and meditate, or pray, will find the perfect outlet in the moving contemplation that is the labyrinth experience. It is both kinesthetic and introspective, a complete mind-body integrative activity (Harris, 1998).

Labyrinths have been, and are continuing to be, considered, "Sacred Space" by many cultures and religions. The greatest interest from traditional religious circles seems to be coming from the Episcopal Church (Harris, 1997). To clarify and paraphrase, "Sacred Space is a site where people go to contact the non-physical realms that lie just beyond the grasp of the five senses. This realm is the suspected home of intuition and ancient wisdom" (Lonegrin, 1996).

In my own practice, and from a more psychological perspective, I believe that labyrinths are ancient archetypes that seem to help some people tap into Jung's notion of the collective unconscious. Thus, greater insight and understanding may become consciously available to them as they are working on their issues.

In addition, many people use labyrinths as oracles or places to receive answers to life's troubling questions. For example, in a relaxation class, where I showed the students how to use a finger labyrinth, (a labyrinth design drawn on paper or carved into wood in which a finger traces the path from the outside to the center) one middle-aged woman told the class what she experienced. She reported that she had been told that morning that she was being let go from a job that she had held for almost 25 years. She stated how angry and frustrated this made her feel and, as a result, her plan was to walk out of the class a few minutes after it started. She was so upset that she couldn't sit still, but as she began running her finger through the design, a tiny edge of her anger seemed to leave her; so she continued to fingerwalk (trace the design with her finger). As she came

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Therapist Board developed by Neal Harris

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close to the center of the design, she heard this voice inside her which said, "Now you will have the time that you need in order to take your grandchild to the pool this summer". She said at that point, all of her anger left her. She revealed that this was an answer to an issue that she had been praying about for months; "How can I spend more time with my grandchild and not miss his formative years because of my heavy work schedule?" With the layoff, now she could! What a powerful and elegant tool for personal peace and transformation.

A very specialized type of wooden finger labyrinth (developed by the author), that is designed to be used by two people simultaneously, is known as a "Therapist Board." I utilize the Therapist Board with my counseling clients to assist in the creation of a more intuitive bridge between us. The process is simple; while my client discusses a pre-selected or spontaneous issue, he is fingerwalking his portion of the Therapist Board (a full labyrinth design) while I am fingerwalking mine. The client is instructed to keep breathing and to go at his own pace as he traces the path. Because of the finger-deep grooves that make up the path, the client can keep his eyes open or closed while tracing the path. During this activity, the client and therapist are both relaxing and creating a singular mental focus that can begin tapping hidden awarenesses within each person (possibly activating or energizing the notion of the Collective Unconscious that was discussed earlier) and allowing an intuitive "flow" to pass between them. Consequently, the usual client to therapist hierarchy can begin to dissolve. This can lead to greater intuitive intimacy within the therapeutic relationship and a reduction of the time required for effective therapy.

In sum, when at the entrance to a labyrinth, the labyrinth poses a question to our rational minds, "Can the intuition come out and play?" If the rational mind agrees, it then relinquishes control to that something that is far more knowing than it can ever aspire to be. What better place than this space of "knowing" to start or continue a therapeutic relationship with your clients? Discover for yourself why many throughout the world consider a labyrinth to be "Sacred Space", a locale where the physical and esoteric worlds meet. I encourage therapists to begin to utilize finger labyrinths (especially the Therapist Board) in their practices. For information on acquiring them, call (847) 842-1752 or visit the website at www.relax4life.com.

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