

Tourists into Pilgrims

Walking the Labyrinth

by Heather Faller

Last February I had a dream. I dreamt I was riding along Highway One in California in a white convertible, with a dog on the seat next to me and the road winding around like a ribbon on a gift. There was no defensive driving necessary; no traffic lights, no oncoming cars—just me and the dog and the white convertible, and the road rolling along.

Last summer my dream came true. I went on a pilgrimage to San Francisco, California. I had read Lauren Artress's book *Walking a Sacred Path* and I wanted to walk the winding path of the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral. I wanted to find out more about Artress's journey and about the labyrinth.

While I was in San Francisco, I talked with her about her life and about the labyrinth as a spiritual tool.

Lauren Artress is canon of special ministries at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and will be coming to Princeton in April to do a workshop on the labyrinth at the Seminary. She earned a Master of Religious Education degree from PTS in 1969 and received her D.Min. in pastoral psychotherapy from Andover Newton Theological School in 1986. In between, she was ordained to the Episcopal priesthood.

Artress grew up not 10 miles from where I did, on the banks of the winding Chagrin River east of Cleveland, Ohio. We both spent many hours playing on its banks.

All the way back then, she knew nature as an important way to connect with God, and she looks back to those early days by the



Dr. Lauren Artress

riverbank as crucial to the unfolding of her spirituality. "The older I get the more I realize how foundational that was and how much it stirs the imagination and the spirit," she says. "There's a kind of path through your life...it's very much like the labyrinth—circuitous, and you just keep putting one foot in front of the other."

Artress believes there has been guidance through her life that comes from having an early mystic experience. She tells this story: "One time a light appeared, I think I was in 6th or 7th grade. I remember really talking to the light. Having a deep heart-to-heart conversation with it. Such experiences plant the seed for many of us to find our path and mission." Yet for her talk of mystical experience, Artress is also very down to earth—direct and no-nonsense; maybe centered is a good word, like a river, with direction but not destination.

Artress's early mystical experiences with nature were formed into a Christian commitment in college at Ohio State University

through the United Campus Christian Fellowship. Of that time she says, "A lot was trying to break through and one needs supports for that." Bob Russell, the campus pastoral counselor and a Princeton alum (Class of 1950), counseled her and eventually guided her to PTS.

From the first, Artress was interested in the relationship between the human psyche and the Spirit. The first question she asked in seminary was, "What's the relation between psychotherapy and confession?" She was already thinking about how to bring people before themselves and before God, and sensed that both elements were essential to growth. "I was interested in how people change. How can I become aware of my own inner world, my anger, my needs? How can I be present with people across racial barriers? How can I forge my gifts and talents in service to the world?" She warmly remembers studying with James Loder, Freda Gardner, and James Lapsley.

Artress became an Episcopalian after seminary, recalling, "I needed a church and liturgy that had more symbolism, on more than the word level." She had done field work at Trinity Episcopal Church in Princeton while in seminary, and after graduation she worked at Trinity for a year, then did a year of social work in Philadelphia. She soon realized that she didn't want to do case work, but to work with the human psyche. In 1971 she went to New York to train as a psychotherapist.

After training, she opened a private practice in New York City, where she was a psychotherapist for 12 years. She also began

teaching spiritual direction at General Seminary. “Pastoral psychotherapy was so clinically oriented at the time,” she says, “so finding the field of spiritual direction was helpful.” She felt that there was no way of moving people into the transcendent in psychology. She believed psychology brought people into better relation with themselves, which is crucial, but there was no way to bring the individual before God. She began to feel called to be ordained as a way of bringing the psyche and the spirit together and in 1982 was ordained to the priesthood. She says, “My vision was not to do parish ministry. But it felt right to be ordained as a step toward bringing the transcendent into therapeutic practice. That’s why the labyrinth is so perfect, to bring together psyche and spirit.”

Artress had taught spiritual direction with Alan Jones at General Seminary, and when he was made dean of Grace Cathedral he invited her to come to San Francisco. This was a big step. Artress says that she had known since 1983 that she needed to make a change. In 1984 she took a sabbatical, unheard of for therapists, and taught in Australia and Japan. She went to the outback knowing there was something she had to admit to herself. Physical movement through space was a way to find direction.

“You have to go how many thousands of miles just to tell yourself the truth!” she laughs. She climbed Ayers Rock, a sacred aboriginal rock called the Uluru. “Now, what is it that I’m so afraid of saying? What?” The answer was that she didn’t want to do psychotherapeutic work anymore. “The map was too small,” she says. She needed a new map for a new world she was about to discover.

So she moved to San Francisco and became canon pastor of Grace Cathedral. Here she entered the challenging life of a priest in a prominent cathedral. She practiced pastoral care and specialized in AIDS ministry. Eventually this work exhausted her, and she began to look for a new way to express her interest in unifying psyche and spirit. Knowing her prayer life was sadly lacking when under stress, she began looking for a way to help her stay centered in the

midst of her ministry. She found the labyrinth—or it found her.

When I asked how she learned of the labyrinth, she said, “I have always known about the labyrinth in Chartres, but don’t know how I first knew of it. I remember as a seven-year-old having the thought drop in that there’s a labyrinth in Chartres.”



Grace Cathedral's indoor labyrinth

Her first experience with a labyrinth was in 1991 at a workshop with Jean Houston. She notes that Houston’s work was very different from her own, but after the evening was over she stayed and walked the labyrinth alone three times, and the experience stayed with her. After that workshop she says she “felt there was some big idea that was going to break through. I was walking in a circle in my living room, literally walking and yelling, ‘What is it? What?!’ I heard, ‘Put the labyrinth in the cathedral.’”

The instructions were clear and direct. “But my next thoughts was, ‘Who could do that?’” she says, smiling. She began researching the labyrinth. She went to Chartres and took measurements of its labyrinth. When she returned to the U.S. she reproduced the labyrinth on canvas.

When the labyrinth first opened in San Francisco in 1991, the same year she had experienced a labyrinth for herself, people waited for six hours for the opportunity to walk it. “The hunger for it was powerful,”

says Artress. “Now we have a labyrinth indoors, in the church, and one outdoors, in the interfaith meditation garden.”

What is the labyrinth?

Artress rediscovered the eleven-circuit medieval labyrinth replicated on the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France. (She calls her work “rediscovering” the labyrinth because it was covered with chairs and had been

unused as a spiritual tool for more than two hundred and fifty years.) Built in 1201, this labyrinth is a forty-two-foot circular pattern with one path meandering through it to the center and then back out again.

But experiencing the labyrinth of Chartres is more than walking—it is walking a sacred pattern. As such, the labyrinth is a means of meditation. Artress calls it “a path of prayer, a walking meditation, a crucible of change.” Medieval pilgrims walked the labyrinth in Chartres as a symbolic way to go to Jerusalem, though today it is still unused except when Artress takes pilgrimage groups to Chartres. She has special permission to use it one month out of the year because of the special

relationship between Chartres and Grace Cathedral.

How does the labyrinth work?

“The labyrinth is a clear container with clear boundaries,” Artress explains. “When your body is moving, it quiets the mind; when you have a quiet mind, then you are able to direct and guide your thoughts, and metaphors often come forward. The labyrinth engages the imagination so that the symbolic world can speak. The imagination also offers us dreams. If we pay attention to dreams and get in relationship with them, then they start being meaningful. Sometimes people are afraid of imagination because they don’t understand it, and they don’t have a relationship with it. Protestant churches threw out symbols. We’ve gutted our inner world and left ourselves open and vulnerable, rather than having symbols that make sense.”

What does the labyrinth symbolize?

“The labyrinth is the journey, the path, the Way,” says Artress. But, she cautions, “Don’t take symbols literally. Jesus taught in

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parables, indirectly. Sometimes to teach directly is to distort. To teach indirectly allows room for a person's soul and spirit to reflect."

The labyrinth allows one to experience a different way of being. "Our Western culture relies on the ego to get things done. But in terms of a spiritual journey, we have to open up another part of ourselves. We have to be receptive. We haven't developed this capacity," she explains. "Walking the labyrinth is about trusting, surrendering, allowing the Spirit to work rather than attempting to do everything oneself."

Christians need reflection and imagination, an imagination informed by Scripture and tradition, by doctrine and history. Christians need to be aware of their inner state, of their hopes and dreams and fears and desires, in order to bring them before God. "We have to learn to reflect," says Artress. "People who haven't learned to reflect on their lives are at a loss in terms of letting their spirituality unfold. I'm not encouraging people to be possessed by imagination, but rather to reflect on their lives, to see where their own shadow is, to know when they're being hurtful."

But spirituality for Artress is not just inner intentions. It is also outer actions. Her definition of spirituality includes deepening compassion. I asked if the labyrinth could be a tool for sanctification, and she thought so. "It increases patience, and St. Francis said patience begets patience." If Thomas Merton is right that rushing is a form of violence, our society desperately needs some way to learn patience. "We need to be able to reflect on our sins. One of our sins is being unconscious of our ability to be cruel, to be hateful," she says. Her words seem especially relevant in light of recent world events.

In this vein, Artress notes, "The labyrinth isn't about the inner world alone. It connects two worlds, the inner and the outer, the physical and the spiritual, the psyche and the spirit, the active and the contemplative. The labyrinth motivates people. It gives you courage to take the next step."

Artress has developed a workshop called "Taking the Creative Leap, Navigating the Life Transitions." The labyrinth can thus be a tool of discernment. "I offer a prism, and the light comes through," she says. "The labyrinth is a prism through which people see their lives, where they are on the path. The labyrinth stirs people, births their next

step." The combination of walking and meditating is potent.

Artress has also seen how the labyrinth can be a tool for reaching out to unchurched people. Jesus scholar Marcus Borg used the terms "second-hand religion" and "first-hand religion" to describe the ways people experience faith. Second-hand religion is handed down in formulas and creeds, while first-hand religion is the experience that makes those formulas and creeds one's own and makes one belong to them as well. Artress explains: "The hunger is to move away from



Grace Cathedral and its outdoor labyrinth

second-hand religion, and the labyrinth is a way to get to first-hand religion. If we can offer people a way of connecting to anything in themselves, of finding out what they're really longing for, what they really could pray for...if our churches could offer this first-hand religion, people would grow rather than diminish."

As we concluded our time together, I asked her about a phrase in her book that caught my eye: "turning tourists into pilgrims." She said, "People are seeking ways of being open. There's a shift there: as a tourist you objectify, take pictures. As a pilgrim you experience and participate. It can be life-changing."

I said, "That's what people want from church, to participate and not just to observe."

"Yes, and that means you have to be available in a different way, to give something up," she answered.

"It's risky," I said, "because you might be told to put a labyrinth in the cathedral."

She laughed and said, "Yes, and the thought came through so forcefully and so powerfully that I'm still functioning off that thought. And it wasn't my thought. I was instructed to do that. It didn't stir up any doubt. The people I needed to meet and the books I needed to read—I just kept with it. It was a fascinating time. The labyrinth puts a lot of people into that kind of time, whatever it's called, creative, *kairos* time, I guess. It certainly isn't *chronos*."

There will be an opportunity to experience this kind of time in early April in Princeton. Artress will be bringing the labyrinth to PTS's Center of Continuing Education April 5 and 6 and invites people to come to her workshop, or just to come and walk the labyrinth. The labyrinth cannot really be known by standing outside of it and looking at it. If you try to follow the path with your eye, you will get lost quickly. The labyrinth can only be known step by step, moment by moment. It can only be known experientially.

I walked the labyrinth at the cathedral, winding my way. It took concentration not to lose the path. "Show me the way, Lord," I prayed. "Show me the way." What I heard as I walked step by careful, deliberate step was, "One step at a time. Keep going."

Walking the labyrinth renews my hope that life is not a maze, full of wrong turns and dead ends. It gives me hope that life is a labyrinth, a path I can follow one step at a time. And the point of walking the labyrinth is not to find the center, but to walk.

I did take that drive on Highway One, and the point wasn't *where* I was going, whether north to Point Reyes or south to the beach. But that I *was* going, that my inner world and my outer world had come together before God and that I had taken the next step on my journey. The road in California really did wind around like a ribbon on a gift, like the path of the labyrinth. ■

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