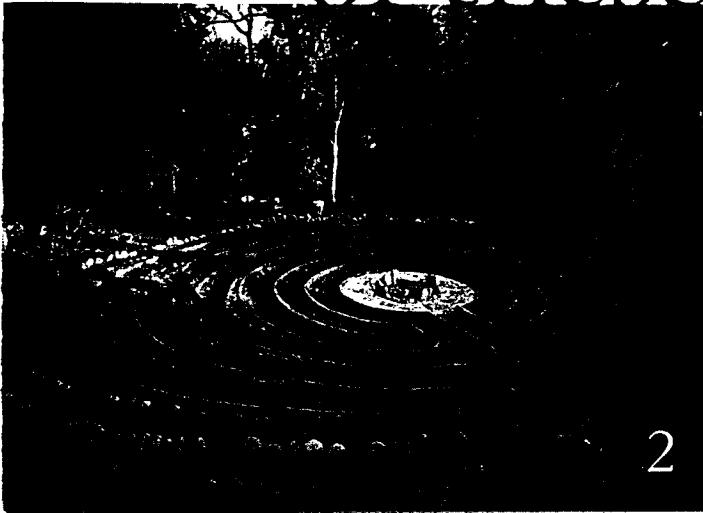


Can an ancient structure help treat some very modern ills? Betsy Bozdech explores the healing power of these sacred paths.



The 60 pilgrims stand together in the crisp night air outside the old stone cathedral. Chanting wordlessly, they pass through the heavy wooden doors. On the floor of the soaring nave lies a labyrinth woven into a woolen tapestry, its perimeter lit by 500 flickering white candles. The group forms a circle around its edge and, one by one, each person begins to follow the winding path toward the center. Some walk slowly, some stride purposefully, some almost seem to dance. Soon the labyrinth is a spiral of bodies in motion.

The scene could well be set in a European city during the Middle Ages. But tonight it's happening at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, where more than a million people have explored the indoor labyrinth since its installation in 1991, most in search of something much more profound than the center of the circle. "Walking this wonderful circuitous path takes you to your center as well," explains Lauren Artress, Grace Cathedral's canon for special ministries and the author of *Walking a Sacred Path**

Labyrinths have, in fact, become a powerful healing tool for today's hectic times. While no clinical study has been done to prove exactly how they unravel stress, some frequent labyrinth travelers call the experience "a meditation in motion," fusing movement and

1. More than a million visitors have passed through Grace Cathedral's indoor labyrinth, inspired by a version at Chartres, circa 1201. 2. Setting bricks on edge, a Sacramento, California, homeowner created a circuitous path in her backyard. 3. An English home in Leeds features a front-yard cobblestone labyrinth.

walking the Labyrinth

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Walking this wonderful circuitous path may take you to your center as well.

1. In Mendocino, California, a meadow labyrinth was inspired by a design from the island of Crete. 2. The labyrinth in Grace Cathedral's terrazzo courtyard allows visitors to embark on an outdoor meditative walk during the day or under moonlight. 3. An expansive meadow labyrinth near England's Winchester cathedral (in background). 4. A visitor quickens his pace in the chalk-drawn labyrinth at the University of California at Santa Cruz. 5. A circular turf labyrinth is the centerpiece of an English manor-house garden. 6. Tracing the healing path with your fingers on a board—or following a marble as it makes its way along the design—can facilitate quiet centering.

inner calm. Concentrating only on the course before you, your pace slows, your breathing deepens, and your mind becomes clearer as you let go of stress.

Labyrinths are making their curative presence felt at hospitals, parks, and other public sites across the country. Recently, a labyrinth was painted on the ground outside California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. "Patients want health care to be technical, but they also want their whole being addressed," explains Judith Tolson, the associate director of the hospital's Institute for Health and Healing.

Sometimes the labyrinth itself becomes a prescription for a problem. It can be an effective educational tool for children with attention deficit disorder (ADD), for example, because it engages their minds and helps them concentrate on the task before them. "It focuses and quiets them in a way they can't access outside the labyrinth," says Artress, who has led several groups of kids with ADD through the

Grace labyrinth. "There are no distracting choices to make—just one path to follow."

Cancer patients and others with long-term illnesses find that walking a labyrinth helps them come to terms with their disease, though they may not always be able to explain why. Breast-cancer survivor Renée Gibbons of San Francisco headed to Grace whenever she found the strength during her long, difficult recovery. "Something about the labyrinth made me able to accept the fact that I had cancer," she remembers. "It was almost a kind of detox."

Circular logic What is it about the labyrinth that makes it so meaningful? Unlike a maze, with its false leads and dead ends, a labyrinth has only one path, which walkers follow to the center and back. Labyrinths are generally laid flat on the ground—with stones, cut into grass, or painted on heavy canvas—and they come in a variety of sizes and shapes: circular, square, rectangular, even octagonal.



Stepping inside

To find a labyrinth near you, start with Grace Cathedral's on-line labyrinth locator (www.gracecathedral.org) or call Veriditas (415-749-6358).

Some of the best:

- **Grace Cathedral, San Francisco:** Two 11-circuit labyrinths, a woven tapestry one inside and a granite-and-terrazzo one outside, both based on a design found at the church's sister cathedral in Chartres, France (415-749-6358).
- **Cathedral Labyrinth and Sacred Garden, New Harmony, Indiana:** An 11-circuit stone labyrinth based on the Chartres model (812-682-3050).
- **The Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration, Dallas:** An 11-circuit design made of granite terrazzo (972-233-1898).
- **First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan, Connecticut:** Open for public walks about 10 times per year (203-966-5459).
- **The Grand Hotel, Mackinac Island, Michigan:** The only stone-inlaid-on-sand labyrinth in the country (906-847-3331).
- **Wisdom House, Litchfield, Connecticut:** A permanent 7-circuit stone labyrinth (860-567-3163).

The different layouts of labyrinths have been interpreted in many ways by many people. At those found in churches, the most popular design is the 11-circuit (based on the number of times the path loops around the center). For Christians, that figure has special meaning—the 11 circuits correspond to the number of loyal apostles. Some churches choose a 7-circuit design instead, symbolizing the number of holy sacraments. But these ancient structures far predate Christianity. Possibly the oldest surviving example of a labyrinth in Europe, at Luzzanas in Sardinia, dates from 2,500–2,000 B.C.; similar 4-circuit patterns can be seen in Hopi medicine wheels and in the art of the Celts. Whatever the history or culture, almost all interpretations take into account the labyrinth's connection to the circle and to the spiral, two widespread symbols of unity and eternity.

Artress—who was instrumental in con-

structing Grace's indoor labyrinth and in planning a granite-and-terrazzo one outside the cathedral—helps spread the word about labyrinths' healing potential through her nonprofit group, Veriditas, which means renewal, or "greening." The association educates "labyrinth facilitators" and sells labyrinth seed kits—step-by-step instructions on how to create an 11-circuit canvas labyrinth—to churches and other organizations for \$125.

Response has been strong, says Artress, who estimates that Veriditas receives more than 200 calls and e-mails from all over the country each day. And the time is not far off, she predicts, when labyrinths may soon become a fixture in places as diverse as retirement centers and airports, where everyone from seniors to weary travelers can step inside to find a sense of peace.

*To order this book, call 800-266-5766, department 1630.