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POI

Labyrinths find converts in the modern world

BY CHERYL ANDERSON • POST-CRESCENT STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 14, 2008

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The Rev. Chrystal Reichard has devoted a portion of the mowing season to walking in circles.

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She does it in the backyard of her Sherwood home and recently began doing it at a Menasha church, Our Redeemer Lutheran.

"I set the mower on low to mow the path, and then set the mower on its highest setting to trim the walls," she said, explaining her process. "Within a couple weeks there was enough difference in the height of the grass, I could see the path."

Reichard created labyrinths, an ancient circular symbol relating to wholeness she discovered a dozen or so years ago. "And I love walking them," she said. "So when we bought a house and had enough of a yard to mow one, I mowed it in so I could walk it any time I wanted to."

And when she sees other spaces large enough to accommodate a labyrinth, she gets the itch to mow again. Our Redeemer had just the space.

"Several of our members have tried it and come back again," Reichard said. "One member has seen people walking it who are obviously not from our church. And I know a gentleman who lives in the area who was ecstatic to have it ... so he didn't have to travel."

A labyrinth is a form of a maze, but unlike a maze there's only one path leading to the center with no dead ends or false turns. It is a meditative tool used to quiet the mind. Labyrinths serve as a metaphor for a person's inward spiritual journey.

"I've had experiences where I've felt like I was in the presence of the holy one, in the hands of God. And that's what a labyrinth is — a spiritual tool," said Reichard, an Anglican priest who directs the St. Bridget Spirituality Center in Sherwood with partner the Rev. Ann Barker, a permanent Anglican deacon. The caring ministry offers spiritual direction, retreat leadership, Reiki, a wedding ministry and life transition ceremonies.



The Rev. Ch with some cr in Menasha.

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A Long History

Labyrinths have long been used as meditation and prayer tools dating back before the birth of Christianity. They have been found in ancient Crete, Egypt and Etrucia and inscribed on Neolithic tombs.

"There's an idea it's been part of every culture," Reichard said. "It's prevalent in Scandinavia and all of Europe. They found it in the Middle East and in Asia. It's everywhere and yet, theoretically did we have contact with one another? No. These cultures independently wound up with this kind of symbol and walking pattern."

One of the most well known labyrinths is embedded in the floor of the Chartres Cathedral of Notre Dame in France. Long ago, Christians were expected to travel to Jerusalem at least once in their lifetime. Travel, however, was difficult and dangerous. So labyrinths were created as an alternative pilgrimage to gain spiritual merit and became a symbol of the journey to the Holy Land.

Martyn Smith, Lawrence University assistant professor of religious studies, has a sense of how labyrinths fit into the idea of pilgrimage.

"Going to a physical place is a fairly different process in the sense you are seeing the place Jesus actually walked or Mohammad received his revelation, Abraham in Mecca," Smith said. "So I think there is a thrill of going to the place itself. And when you get to these places there are things you have to do. In Jerusalem, it's the Stations of the Cross ... and getting finally to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. ... So there are these ritual scripts in some ways set up around these places people go to. It's a way to meditate and think through the story that surrounds these places."

Spiritually Fulfilling

A labyrinth is something that also demands attention, allowing the same meditating experience.

"I think we often don't think of spirituality as something that's kind of in a place that has to do with our bodies," Smith said. "But that's the attraction of pilgrimage, and also these labyrinths are filling that same need — finding a place where body meets up with spirituality."

"It's not supposed to be a walk of exercise," said Jane Kolosso, an instructor at Monte Alverno Retreat & Spirituality Center in Appleton. "It really is a walk of discovery. At least in Christian tradition, it's always begun in prayer, and concluded in a prayer of thanksgiving."

The first stage of the labyrinth experience, from beginning to center, is known as shedding or purgation. It's a time to quiet the mind and prepare the heart and soul to be open as you reach the second part of the journey in the center of the labyrinth, known as illumination. Visitors are encouraged to spend as much time in the center as allowed. Many find insight into a life situation or clarity about a certain problem. The center can represent God.

The final stage, union, begins when you leave the center and retrace the path back to the beginning. Union is said to join you with your higher power and bring new insights, thus empowering you.

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Three tree stumps identify the beginning of the labyrinth at Monte Alverno. A bench signifies the end of what's been called a three-fold mystical path. All that's required is slowly placing one foot in front of the other. And, of course, breathing.

"There aren't any instructions, you just walk it," Kolosso said.

Like Reichard's yard, the labyrinth at Our Redeemer and a permanent labyrinth at First Congregational United Church in Appleton, Monte Alverno also replicated the Chartres labyrinth.

A Sense Of Peace

Labyrinths, found mostly in churches, are spiritual helps on life's journey, said Sister Marlene Weber, a trained spiritual director at Monte Alverno. "As you walk slowly around all these various ins and outs, it's kind of how life is. You get into the middle and it's just kind of the place to be. You go deep within and then you come back out."

Laura Tews, business manager of both St. Denis and St. Patrick parishes in Shiocton and Stephenville, respectively, fell in love with labyrinths while doing a project on them through a commissioned ministry program. Her first experience was at St. Norbert's Abbey in De Pere.

"After reading about the purpose and the history of labyrinths, the journey inward and the peaceful, meditative walk, there is no beginning and no end," said Tews, who also had a labyrinth in her backyard for a number of years. "As you walk you don't know where the next turn is going to take you. Like life is. It's a mini-journey of life. And once you get to the center, it's like this sign of, I made it. I can do it. Whatever is on your mind in the beginning is lifted. If it's some trash or baggage that you have to get rid of, it is truly lifted.

"If you are in a celebrating mood and walk a labyrinth, it's amazing how you start walking the labyrinth and it's a slow walk, but by the time you're out of there, especially if you're in the celebrating mood, you are practically running. It's a freeing of your spirit and soul. It really is a wonderful practice."

Reichard has gone into a labyrinth with a concern or feeling of heaviness and spent some time alone in the center.

"But on the way out I'm actually hopping or feeling very light," she said. "Walking in may be a very slow process. They call it a releasing time where you let go of the world, and then coming out is reconnecting with the world."

New Interest

There has been somewhat of a renaissance in the uses of this ancient spiritual tool throughout the world. Labyrinths can be found in churches, retreat centers, hospitals and private yards. Walking a labyrinth aids in finding harmony with self and others, but that path of self-discovery and healing also can be accomplished using smaller hand-held labyrinths that can be carved into wood, printed on a piece of paper or located on a Web site.

"(Labyrinths) fell out of existence and nobody knew about them until the '80s or '90s when Lauren Artress (a psychotherapist and ordained minister in San Francisco) rediscovered the Chartres labyrinth in France," Reichard said. "It's been on the floor since the Middle Ages. But nobody realized it, used it or knew what it was all about. So she brought it forward again and it has been spiraling since. And people are finding it a very comforting and a very useful tool on their own spiritual journey."

Much research has been done on the benefits of meditation, which has been shown to do everything from

reduce anxiety to cure psoriasis, said Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, associate professor of philosophy and Edward F. Mielke professor of ethics in medicine, science and society at Lawrence University.

Some of the best research has been done at the University of Massachusetts and its school, the Center for Mindfulness in Health Care, Medicine and Society, he said.

"They were the first to start doing a significant amount of research on the types of meditation."

The two most popular forms of meditation, Boleyn-Fitzgerald said, are ones that focus on some form of concentration and others that focus on love, kindness or compassion.

"Most forms of walking meditation would be considered a form of concentration, and sometimes people do integrate love and kindness compassion into walking meditation," he said.

The key to doing anything meditative, Kolosso said, is the more often you do it the less likely you are to be distracted.

"The less likely you are to come to it with expectations because some people come to it thinking they are going to have this huge revelation and are in fact disappointed if they don't. And that's not the idea of anything with meditation. And, in some cases, a labyrinth is a little easier for people starting off in meditation.

"For me the slow pace of the walking helps me stay in that reflective stance more than sitting in a pew in church," Kolosso said. "Plus you have all the atmosphere of the outside. It is supposed to enhance. It's the idea of being open to everything. As you quiet yourself down, what am I to learn now?"

Once you've walked and experienced a labyrinth, Tews said, it becomes almost like a need.

"It's a peaceful journey that's available to anybody at any time," she said. "Take a break and find yourself. Let yourself go back inside so you can deal with the world on the outside."

"I use it intentionally to meditate, to call my attention to God," Reichard said. "I dedicate that time. It's a matter of what works for you and to have the experience you want and need."

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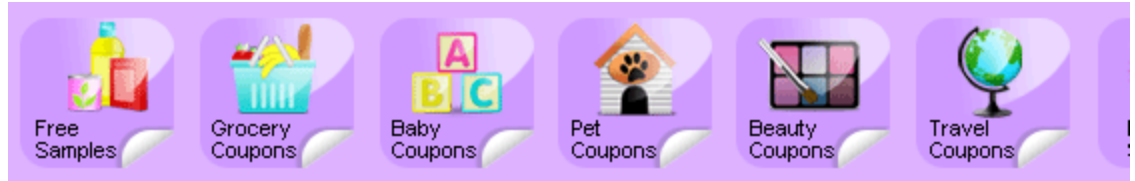
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