

Walking the Labyrinth



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A labyrinth is a complex path that doubles back upon itself, leading to a center in a way that is not obvious. There is a tradition in the Christian church of walking this path while praying. Many other traditions also use the labyrinth as a meditative tool. The labyrinth can be thought of as a pilgrimage or a way of seeking the sacred. Sometimes in our lives we have times of feeling closer to Holiness and yet, at other times, we feel farther away. Because the path of the labyrinth does not spiral in but is folded, the walker is at different times, both closer to the center than farther away. The labyrinth can help us meditate on our lives, recognizing the long, gently curved passages that are easy and quick to walk paired with those places where we have to slow down because we come to a sudden turn in the road.

While praying or meditating, and walking and turning, we can become disoriented and think that we are lost. But the labyrinth is not a maze. We cannot get lost. There is one way in and one way out, retracing our steps.

Focusing Your Attention: An Invocation

The first step of any labyrinth walk is an inward one, taken before you ever make a move: being simply and fully present. This is perhaps the most important aspect. Before you take the first step, you will want to touch your inner stillness, and use your preferred method — if you have one — to turn off the brain chatter. Maintaining attention — whether you call it ‘mindfulness’ or ‘heartfulness’ or ‘prayerfulness’ — can be a challenge. This is the time to offer a prayer, hymn, or mantra to heighten your awareness of Holiness with/in you and perhaps to set an intention you might be carrying with you into the labyrinth. Listen for a word, offer confession and repentance, seek forgiveness, rid yourself of worries or burdens, seek clarity: all of these are ways to prepare yourself as you enter the labyrinth journey.

The Inward Journey: Setting Your Intention as You Enter the Labyrinth

Your intention can be anything you want it to be as long as it is authentically yours. You might want to hold a question or an issue in your mind. You might choose to walk with an open mind and an open heart, or you may even walk for the sheer joy of it. Whatever spontaneously comes to mind is fine, just as it is okay to ponder something that you may have been working on for a long time.

Shedding Expectations

Leave all your expectations behind as you enter this pilgrimage. One of the most useful ways of shedding expectation simultaneously leads to a potentially powerful intention. It can be simply to admit that you don't know: "I came not knowing what to expect," or "I didn't know why I was coming here." In explicitly stating that you don't know, you are honouring the possibility of discovery without attaching an expectation to it. That is actually a very effective place to be, particularly if you can let go of any judgment about not knowing. Let it be okay that you don't know.

Remember to pose intentions as requests for guidance or insights, not as answers, so that you are not setting yourself up for unfulfilled expectations. Shedding expectations helps you remain open to the unique gifts that each labyrinth walk offers.

Take a Measure of Your Feelings

How are you feeling physically right now? Do you have lots of energy? Are you tired? Are you experiencing any pain? If so, where? Do you know why? (There should not be any more physical strain associated with labyrinth walking than there is with any other kind of walking).

Ask yourself how you are feeling mentally and emotionally. Are you excited, nervous, bored, impatient, happy, depressed, at ease? Are you comfortable with how you are feeling right now? If not, why not?

Finally, can you gauge where you are spiritually? Do you feel a connection with the Divine in your everyday life? Can you see the Divine in others and yourself? What is your idea of spirituality, anyway?

Questions for the Journey

Consider these questions as you prepare for your labyrinth walk.

1. Why am I doing this labyrinth walk?
2. What is my intention?
3. What will my meditation or mantra be?
4. How am I feeling before I begin?
5. What baggage am I bringing along with me?
6. Do particular questions of my own come to mind as especially important for me to address?

Reaching the Centre

When you reach the centre of the labyrinth, take some time to experience the centre before stepping out on the outward journey: sing there, dance there, or have intimate conversations with your friends. The centre is also the perfect place to meditate. When you reach the centre, stop, sit or lie down, empty your mind, and simply be in the silence.

The Outward Journey: Walking the Labyrinth Out

When you are ready, begin the journey outward. Remember that the path out is of equal length to the path in. It is important to be as intentional about the outward journey as the inward journey. As you take the journey back out into the world, imagine taking a gift to the world from the centre of the labyrinth. As you return to the world bringing the gift of the centre and the gift of you back out into the world, be in a state of thankfulness and goodness. Take some time as you step out of the labyrinth to say a prayer of thanksgiving.

Some books to consider:

Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice by Lauren Artress. ©1995. Riverhead Books.

Labyrinths from the Outside In: Walking to Spiritual Insight, A Beginner's Guide by Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper and Rev. Dr. Carole Ann Camp. ©2000 Skylight Paths Publishing.

The Way of the Labyrinth: A Powerful Meditation for Everyday Life by Helen Curry. ©2000. Penguin Compass.