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The Labyrinth: A Brief Introduction to its History, Meaning, and Use

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By John Algeo

Labyrinths are ancient patterns found all over the world. They are of many types sharing a single overall design. Their origin is as mysterious and their uses are as varied as their patterns are. All labyrinths are a kind of game, but that does not negate their seriousness. According to Hindu lore, the universe itself is a game, a lila, that the gods play. Walking a labyrinth is following in the steps of Shiva Nataraja, the Divine Transformer who is Lord of the Dance.

What Is a Labyrinth?

A labyrinth is a complex and circuitous path that leads from a beginning point to a center. There are two primary varieties:

1. a Maze, with repeatedly dividing paths, forcing the traveler to choose among options, some of which may be dead ends, while others double back on themselves, so that the traveler has no assurance of ever reaching the goal and is constantly faced with decisions and frustrations, but also may experience the relief and surprise of having made the right choices leading to the goal; or
2. a Meander, with a single, undivided path and no choices to make other than traveling onward through the winding pattern to an assured goal. The meandering pattern may tease the traveler by leading now inward, then suddenly outward, but eventually it arrives surely at the goal. Of meandering labyrinths, the two best-known types are the seven-circuit Cretan pattern (used for the labyrinth at Olcott) and the eleven-circuit pattern on the floor of the cathedral at Chartres (chosen by many churches today).

How Do I Walk the Labyrinth?

You walk the labyrinth by entering from the northwest, where the path begins. You follow the path to the center, where you may wish to pause for a few moments. Then you reverse your direction and retrace your path back out to the starting point. In walking any labyrinth, you should always complete the pattern by following the path both inward and outward, rather than cutting across the pattern at any point. The inward movement needs to be complemented by a corresponding outward return.

If several persons walk a labyrinth together, they may pass one another, going in either the same direction or opposite to each other. They may pass in meditative silence or quietly salute each other by a nod of the head or a raising of the hands. The effect of meeting fellow pilgrims on the path is part of the labyrinthine experience. The labyrinth is a joyfully sacred space. You do not need to be somber around it, but if someone is walking the labyrinth, it is courteous to respect the need they may have for quiet concentration.

As you enter the labyrinth, you may focus your thoughts on a question or concern. You may walk the labyrinth with a quiet mind, sensing without particularizing the wonder of the pattern. Or you may walk it with some of its many symbolic meanings held in your mind as seed thoughts. In the labyrinth, as in life, there is no single right way to follow the path.

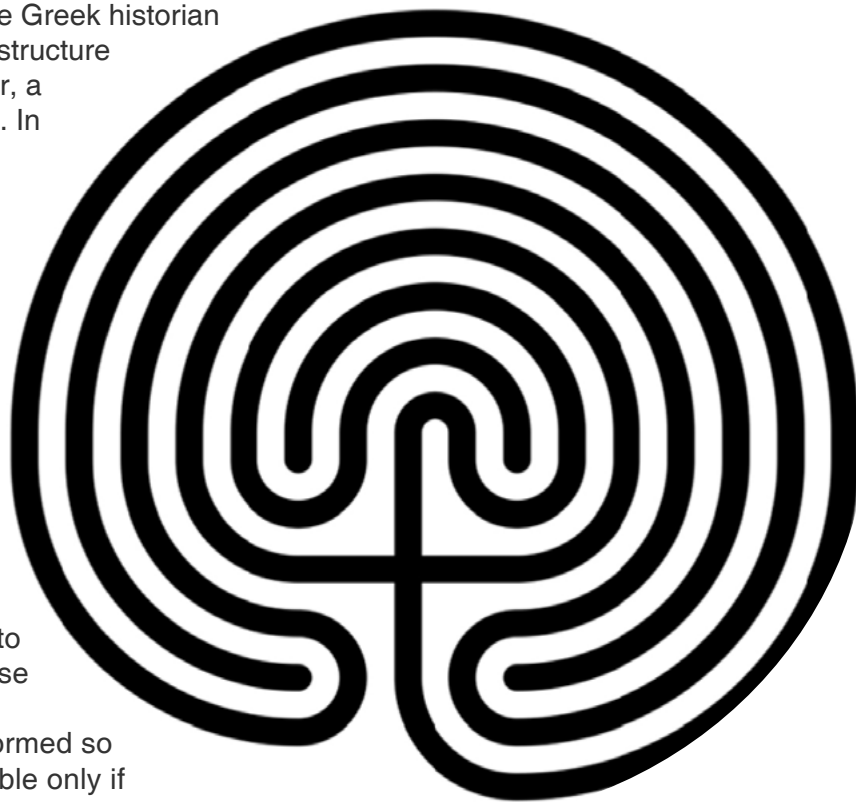
The labyrinth is available for walking by individuals throughout the entire ILA conference. You may walk the labyrinth during hosted times as well. The labyrinth will be hosted each day of the conference. Please take a cord and index card from the basket outside the labyrinth as you enter. The cord is to help you 'mark' your path and recall thoughts that occurred to you along the path. The index card is to jot down what you learned during your time in the labyrinth. Those who have spent time in labyrinth's know the value of jotting down lessons learned while walking the path.

Where Did Labyrinths Start?

The labyrinth pattern had no particular start that we know of. It is an archetype in the human mind. Labyrinth patterns are universal, being found as archaic petroglyphs, Amerindian basket-weaving designs, and paintings or drawings from all over the world. The earliest reported labyrinth was a two-story stone building in Egypt, described by the Greek historian Herodotus, but the name comes from the Cretan structure in the myth of Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur, a pattern that also appears on ancient Cretan coins. In the Christian Middle Ages, labyrinths were often formed with colored paving stones in the floors of cathedral naves, especially on the Continent. Later, labyrinths were sometimes constructed of turf, herbaceous borders, or hedges--frequently in maze patterns and especially in England.

What Are Labyrinths For?

Some labyrinths are chiefly for entertainment (especially mazes with their challenge to the ingenuity of the traveler to discover the successful path leading to the goal). Such playful labyrinths are often provided with surprises along the path, fountains or obstacles to be overcome. Other labyrinths are artistic because of the elaborately beautiful patterns they make. Contemporary maze labyrinths are sometimes formed so that their paths and borders outline a picture visible only if looked at from high above.



In the Middle Ages, walking a cathedral labyrinth was a substitute for going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Not everyone could make the long and arduous journey to the Holy Land, so walking a labyrinth in a church was a devotional activity. Today meandering labyrinths are often used as walking meditations, to focus the mind and put the walker in tune with the greater reality metaphorically represented by the labyrinth.

All labyrinths are symbolic, some richly so, such as the Cretan labyrinth, which is connected with a complex of myth, symbol, and allegory. At the heart of the labyrinth waits the Minotaur, half human and half bull. Through its winding passageways, the hero Theseus advances toward the center, guided by the inspiration of the priestess-princess Ariadne. The myth of the labyrinth is the story of these three characters.

What Does the Cretan Labyrinth Symbolize?

The seven circuits of the Cretan labyrinth correspond with the seven spheres of the sacred planets, the seven principles of the human being and the cosmos, the seven days of the week, and other such sevenfold meanings. Passing to the center of the labyrinth and returning to its circumference represents the involution and evolution of the universe, the coming into birth and the passing out of earthly life of an individual, and--most important--a journey into the center of our own being, the achievement there of a quest for wholeness, and the subsequent return to our divine source.

The winding pattern of any labyrinth also represents the circulation of vital energies within our bodies, and that pattern suggests the convolutions of the brain and the intestines--two poles of our body corresponding to our consciousness and its physical vehicle. To traverse the labyrinth is to bring into one wholeness all parts of our being. Walking the labyrinth is thus a type of Yoga.