

oldest evidence of labyrinths found is in 2000BC, the Chartres labyrinth dates to 1200AD. It's because the labyrinths were found in cathedrals that they have, in some people's minds, become more allied as Christian symbols." Danielle considers it a part of her work as an interfaith minister to make the labyrinth available to everyone and anyone. "My work is using the labyrinth from a spiritual and meditational angle. Not everyone uses them in the same way. My draw is to help people to access their innermost self. The labyrinth is a container, it can mirror where we are. It can give us reflections back."

Mirroring you

The concept of the labyrinth acting as a mirror, of reflecting back to me what I need to see, appeals and explains why, despite never having walked a labyrinth before, my heart is racing. As we sit in quiet contemplation and Danielle meditates in the centre of the labyrinth, I hear the familiar little voice of my inner critic inside of my head saying 'You're going to be the idiot who gets it wrong and never makes it to the middle'. I fear not knowing how to do it, of getting lost and losing control. I struggle to stay centred as visions of me stumbling around foolishly, having to cover up my stupidity and hide the fact that I am completely lost vie for my focus.

Coming out of meditation and speaking to the assembled group Danielle shares her own inner tensions with her early labyrinth walks, her desire to know where she was on the labyrinth and how close she was to the centre (her goal). It's perhaps no surprise then that my directional, practical, pre-empting and controlling left brain thinking views the labyrinth as more of an assault course than a tool for spiritual growth.

The labyrinth walk begins and others commence their slow, meditational, rhythmic movement along the paths. Despite the fear of getting lost and doing it 'wrong' I feel driven by a desire to force myself on to the labyrinth ignoring the feelings that are coming to the surface and to go into performance mode. Others appear to enter the labyrinth with purpose, confidently, like they know this path well. I feel like a five year old in the corner hugging my notepad and I know that even though I'm yet to set foot on the labyrinth my journey with it is already well under way.

I circle the outside of the canvas, having watched others doing the same. Visions of those who have walked before me enter my mind. Most present for me are the Christians making their symbolic pilgrimages to Jerusalem by walking this very route, perhaps at the labyrinth at Chartres cathedral or at any one of the many strewn among the cathedrals of Europe. I wonder why before the labyrinth was adopted by Christianity this particular symbol was so meaningful to so many people from around the world where the labyrinth in its many varying forms has been discovered.

"There's something about the archetypal pattern that resonates with people's souls, it's sacred geometry. I get people coming in off of the street who don't know anything about labyrinths, they've never even seen one.

They take one look and say 'I've got to do it'," explains Danielle.

Of the numerous styles of labyrinth the one I walk today is a Chartres cathedral-inspired, Medieval, eleven circuit labyrinth.

As I finish my circle around the outside of the labyrinth and approach the entrance I recall Danielle's words to us newcomers. "There is no wrong way to walk a labyrinth, you can skip, you can dance, you can run, you can crawl, you can do just about anything, this is your experience," she says.

A single path

I step on to the labyrinth and the anxiety drops away as I accept that there's only one path, it's not a maze after all, and this path WILL lead me to the centre. "To the centre of what?," I ask. There's no response, just my body putting one foot in front of the other shakily to begin with as I try and imitate the way I see others move.

My step quickens and I hit my stride, my surroundings fade into the background and if I meet another on the path they move out of my way before I have even noticed them. The labyrinth is a mirror alright.

As the inner critic's words of derision stop, how and when I get to the centre, and if I do at all, feels as though it is taken out of my hands. By surrendering to the experience rather than trying to second guess it, my petty self-doubt is replaced by inner quiet which I'm told is one of the labyrinth's many gifts. It is only as I circle my way close to the heart of the labyrinth that I feel a wave of something in between anxiety and excitement pass through my own heart. Arriving at my destination, for now at least, I sit cross-legged, drop my eyes closed and feel like I've just taken flight. Never quiet for long the inner critic says 'you're just dizzy from looking down at your feet for so long'. Before I can engage this thought I am bird-like, swooping through the sky free and fast, I rest upon the air as I glide. I'm reminded that one of the aspects of the element of air is communication, it's perhaps no coincidence that I'm here on the labyrinth to speak about my journey, regardless of how banal and mundane my inner critic would have me believe it is.

Silence comes and a sensation in my chest arises that feels as if my heart is widening and I'm almost afraid to breathe in case I interrupt what is unfolding. Every cell in my body feels as though it is vibrating in remembrance of a peace that I so rarely feel. I'm home, at the centre of myself, the heart, the truth, where it all begins and ends, metaphorically Jerusalem.

I embrace this blissful connection to something I cannot name, that feeling which goes beyond words and understanding, the feeling that you can't imagine losing when you're there and finding when you're not. Time doesn't exist here and I sit for what feels like a day. Gradually I become conscious of my body aching and I know that I can't stay here. Each and every day I leave meditation with the same feeling, it's like I'm being shifted from a comfortable chair and forced to my feet with my eyes pinned wide open

and looking out into the world when I'd rather stay floating in the insular peace.

According to Danielle the walk leaving the labyrinth is the integration of what we discover in the labyrinth into our lives 'out there'. I'm unsurprised by my stage fright. How different it is to bask in the glow of an insight while in the safety and comfort of meditation than it is to take it into the practice of daily life and put the show on the road.

A story of the ancient use of labyrinths that Danielle tells comes to mind. "In Scandinavian countries and Iceland the fishermen would make labyrinths on beaches. They would walk into them then run out again leaving the bad vibes and energies behind them then hop onto their boats and go back off to sea," says Danielle. Perhaps it is here that I leave the fear of speaking of my path and living it fully, the voice of criticism of myself and therefore others. Maybe it is here that I stop playing small, leave the past behind me and unreservedly embrace what is here in the present.

Holding in my mind my intention of getting some insight about what needs to happen next in my life I am confronted with the lethargy I feel, with the escape that I seek in spiritual life and how separate I see it to my everyday existence.

But as I walk my way back out of the labyrinth (albeit at a much slower pace) I feel the energy with which I move has altered. I am stronger on my feet, clearer in my mind and steadier in my heart. I am strengthened through my experience here. "My vow (as an interfaith minister) is 'to walk the sacred path with honesty, integrity, compassion and love and to hold the light for others embarking on the sacred path'. I feel that if I can show someone a path that they can follow that can be a support or sustaining force to someone in spiritual enquiry, it's ministry," says Danielle, explaining her profound work.

As the dust settles and days pass I sense an unfolding integration between my spiritual life and my daily life. Alongside this, I feel as if I'm finding the adult within me, no longer held by what I had constructed in my life to hide behind and supported conversely by nobody but myself and absolutely everybody at the same time. I am urged to walk and not crawl my life; to come off my knees and onto my feet once more or, perhaps, for the very first time. ☺

More information

Reverend Danielle Wilson facilitates monthly Labyrinth walks at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel in Hampstead. See www.daniellewilson.com or call 07802 898252 for full details. The next walks take place on 22nd November and 13th December 2009.

