

Way of the Labyrinth: Opening to the Sacred Journey

Did you see it? Up in the sky? It happened last week. The Great American Eclipse cast the moon's shadow across this nation, and captured the attention of millions across the globe. I enjoyed watching the reactions from folks who witnessed the total solar eclipse. Some described it as the most beautiful thing they have ever seen. That it exceeded their expectations. And that it was personally transformative. My favorite response was from a 4-year-old girl who described the unfolding convergence of the sun and moon as looking like one emoji swallowing another emoji. Voices of the young are so good at giving us another perspective.

Needless to say, it stirred the imagination and gave me hope that folks are deeply interested and curious about the universe. In something that takes us out of our normal routine and into something beyond ourselves.

Perhaps it has affected your life in ways that surprised you. I know I was quite relieved and emotional to see the sun and its light emerge and shine on us again. Whatever the lasting impact, it was truly fascinating to be alive to witness something that has been observed by humans for millennia.

It's very good to be with you today. I have always enjoyed this congregation and this sacred space. This community holds a special place in my heart, as this is where I was first introduced to Unitarian Universalism in 2002. You have a welcoming spirit here, and you invite the wandering pilgrim inside for a place of growth and community. Thank you.

It has been a pleasure to be invited to travel from Portland and present a workshop on labyrinth walking yesterday with my friend, Joyce Gotsch. You have a beautiful labyrinth here behind your church adjacent to your

memorial garden. It is made from stones brought here by members of this community. Thanks to Georgette Thornton, your labyrinth caretaker, the energy of your youth group, and volunteers, your labyrinth is now spruced up and always available for you to use.

And as you may have read, I am here today to talk about labyrinths. Now, when I say the word Labyrinth, I know folks can immediately create images in their mind of what a labyrinth may be, so here are some common ideas. Some may think of mazes made in lush, green, English gardens of wealthy aristocrats. Others may think of the 1980's movie, *Labyrinth*, starring David Bowie. In case you didn't know. Others may be reminded of history and the labyrinths that were found in large medieval cathedrals in Europe, like this one in Chartres, France. We know that the Chartres labyrinth is the largest labyrinth ever constructed during the middle ages. Pilgrims have travelled to the cathedral and walked this labyrinth since the early 13th century. Or in mythology with the story of the youth Theseus journeying into the underground labyrinths and killing the Minotaur.

Like witnessing eclipses, labyrinths have been a part of human history for a very long time. They have captured the curiosity of anthropologists, mythologists, historians and the public alike. Much of the ancient history about the purpose of labyrinths remains a mystery, but we have images, artifacts, history, and science which help point the way.

Earlier this year, I attended a seminar and training about labyrinths from Dr. Rev. Lauren Artress at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. She is an Episcopal priest who has studied for more than 20 years to discover and teach about the significance of the labyrinth. She has also founded a facilitator training program called Veriditas to help bring awareness of this ancient tool back into our modern culture. There are now over 3,500 labyrinth sites in the US alone.

Travelling to Grace Cathedral in San Francisco was a bit like going on a pilgrimage for me, flying into the Oakland airport, traveling by train on the BART under the bay into the city, and then walking up steep Nob Hill to be greeted by the majesty of the Cathedral. I was hungry, tired, and my feet were very sore, but there was something meaningful about making it to the top of that hill and to my pilgrimage destination. But I knew the inner work I was doing was not just about the destination, but about my journey to arrive there as well.

The journey and workshop were life changing and brought home the importance of sharing the labyrinth, as I feel we need more tools as to how to live in an uncertain world.

Since the election, I have been exploring my need for more spiritual relevance through direct experience. These times we live in have been challenging to say the least. We are all learning how to digest the daily news about how our political leaders are harming our world. I have felt the need to go deeper into the activities and people that matter most in my life, and that includes my own spiritual journey.

When we go through periods of change in our lives, it can be helpful to return to books and authors that have brought us insight for the journey. For myself, I've been reading more of Joseph Campbell again. As you may know, he was an American mythologist, writer, and lecturer, best known for his work in comparative mythology and religion. He is perhaps best known for his book, *The Power of Myth*.

Recently, a quote from that book spoke to me.

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical

plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”(Campbell, 1988).

We could probably all agree that both meaning and experience are important to us, but finding the time to create meaningful experiences that make us feel alive, can be a little challenging. After all, many of us have to work, keep up our homes, nurture our relationships, of course follow our friends and family on Facebook and Instagram, feed the kids, and the list goes on.

For many of us, it seems in order to experience feeling alive, we have to go on vacation, to get away from it all. That perhaps the time away will help reconnect us with our true essence. Help us unwind and relax. Now, if I am seeking an experience of being alive, apart from my normal routine, it makes me wonder, “Why I am not usually alive?” After all, I am still breathing.

Throughout the centuries, I suppose folks have asked this question, and sought out ways to experience life in deeper and meaningful ways. Particularly, to have spiritual experiences. The expressions of spirituality and religion formed in part to bring greater depth of experience into one’s life.

One such way has been through the spiritual practice of going on a pilgrimage. Traveling the ***El Camino de Santiago*** or *The Way of Saint James*, is one example. It is a path in Spain that has been walked by pilgrims since the Middle Ages to the shrine of the apostle St. James, where tradition shares it is where the remains of the saint are buried.

Today, folks still take pilgrimages for spiritual insight and growth. They may not always be religious or to other countries, but taking time to intentionally break out of our normal routines and experience life at a deeper place does have value. And if each of us could share, I bet we’d

hear countless ways that we have found to recreate a sense of aliveness. For folks who have a desire to have a spiritual practice, many have found solace in practicing meditation, Yoga, Qi Gong, creating art, being out in nature, or coming to church.

From my own attempts at trying various spiritual practices, I have found there are many helpful forms that provide an experience through the body. Embodying something seems to provide a way for us to know and feel it on another level.

Even in community, as we worship, volunteer, and even dance together, it seems by doing these activities, it helps bond us closer together. I think of how this congregation has a tradition of standing as you are able, holding each other's hands, and singing together at the close of each service. It helps us to embody our experience of community and feel the rapture of being alive, as Joseph Campbell describes it.

Children seem to have much better access to having embodied experiences on a daily basis. My husband's family lives here in the Spokane area, and for many years, I enjoyed the opportunity to play with our young nieces and nephew. I have fond memories of playing newly-invented games on playground jungle gyms or expanding my repertoire of the various forms of tag. Now that they are older, and I am older, playing tag leaves me feeling like I'm going to keel over from pure exhaustion! But those times of play are memories I will always cherish.

Being that we were all children once, looking back at our experiences of daily play and using our imaginations, give us an insight into how to be embodied. That even though we have matured and aged since then, the need for embodied experiences still has the possibility of transforming our familiarity of life.

Over the past couple of years, I have become more interested in providing opportunities for Unitarian Universalists to have spiritual experiences. As our first Source of Our Living Tradition reads, “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” *Unitarian Universalism’s Six Sources of Inspiration and Spiritual Growth*. (2016, October 18).

Wow! Often this statement of having a direct experience that moves me to a renewal of the spirit, has, shall we say, been challenging for me. Perhaps for you as well.

One of the main reasons I attend church is to find renewal. And to reconnect with the space within myself where I can feel peace and receive reassurance from my community that we are all in this together.

Because of my own need for renewal, I chose to become involved in one of the ways our church supports experiencing mystery. And that is through the labyrinth. Participating in this ministry and walking it more consistently, has become a way for me to go deeper into my experience of the Sunday worship service and into a clearer understanding of my life.

Now the labyrinth is not for everybody, and I’m not here to channel my conservative evangelical upbringing to convince you this is your path to salvation or enlightenment. If you’ll allow me your time, I would like to share what I have learned about using the labyrinth as form of pilgrimage, and as a way to quiet the mind and bring more clarity and peace into one’s life.

Walking the labyrinth is basically a metaphor for the journey of life. As one enters, you just follow the path before you. Unlike a maze, there are no wrong turns or wrong choices. While walking the path, one is taking a

pilgrimage to the center of one's own heart and mind. That sacred place within yourself.

It allows you to be present to observe your thoughts and to tap into your intuition. The embodied experience of walking the path, allows your mind to relax, helps you connect to your imagination, and gives you the potential to discover what may be there to learn, uncover, and explore.

Now, you may be saying, that sounds pretty cool. Who knew that walking the path at the back of the church had so much to offer? Well, let me give you a practical example.

My own story includes being raised in a conservative Christian religious home. I attended church-based schools all the way from first grade through graduate school.

It was during my clinical training to become a chaplain that I decided to leave the safety of my conservative upbringing. It was time to deconstruct my theology and build a life that was more authentic. Talk about a radical shift in direction for my ministry! My family did not know what to think, and I suppose they are still recovering to this day. It was challenging to say the least, and it created a point of disconnection that I have felt for many years as a Unitarian Universalist.

When I started walking the labyrinth, I found that those feelings and images of my past started coming up for me. As I would make the turns along the path, it felt like the path was a metaphor for my life. I felt angry, hurt, and sad. The turns on the path became ways to see myself and my choices more clearly. To turn and turn, again. To learn to keep walking, to keep walking. And to keep walking. My past was becoming more embodied, and I felt a sense of integration with parts of myself I had disowned. It was healing for me, and I began to see the labyrinth as a way to learn and accept my life's path, in a secure and safe container.

Dr. Artress writes, “Within the labyrinth, your interior world can become clear to you. You can see through the otherwise obscured thoughts and blocked feelings. Time can disappear and the busy world around you becomes a muffled backdrop. In this world we can experience emotions, images, and memories within us we never paid attention to before.

When I first visited your labyrinth in May over Bloomsday weekend, I was taken back, as I had never encountered a Spiral Labyrinth pattern before. It caused me to want to learn more, so I did some research after I returned home. And I have to say, your labyrinth is very special.

One of the first examples of the spiral pattern is found at Newgrange in Ireland. Newgrange is a Stone Age (Neolithic) monument that was constructed about 5,000 years ago which makes it older than Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids of Giza. There is no agreement about what the site was used for, but it is believed that it had religious significance as a burial site. *Newgrange*. (2017, July 13)

Your labyrinth is made from this pattern. All three spirals are connected by one path. It has no beginning and no end. When one walks it, you are always connected to the other spirals. They function to create a flow and a rhythm as one moves in and out of them and from one quadrant to another. (Labyrinth society, n.d.)

As you enter the labyrinth, from any starting point, you are entering this flow. Exiting where you chose, allows you to stay inside its borders for as long as you desire. You begin by simply taking one step to enter.

The labyrinth pattern’s broad archetypal nature reaches beyond any faith tradition. Being found in cultures throughout the world for millennia. Some examples include the Chartres style found in the Cathedral in France to Grecian Labyrinths, Early Bronze Age Labyrinths, and Native American

labyrinth symbols. The fact that images of labyrinths have been found for this long in so many places affirms that we are connecting with our ancestors in ways, rarely accessible in our modern day culture.

More than 5,000 labyrinths are now used in more than 80 countries around the world. They are used in religious communities as a path for prayer and contemplation, as a tool in hospitals to promote healing and reduce stress, as a way to inspire creativity in corporations like Apple, and even a place for sacred ceremonies like weddings and memorials. There is no wrong way to walk a labyrinth. You can walk it alone or with others. It's important to note that labyrinths are not just for abled folks, but that many labyrinths are accessible and are used by folks who have a disability. I invite you to use it as you need to, without expectation from yourself or others.

And if all of this sounds a little inaccessible or esoteric to you, I would simply invite you to walk it as a peaceful mediation. There is a peace pole there as well, to guide your journey. If, after you walk it, you do not feel drawn to it, take what you can and leave the rest.

As Dr. Artress has said, "Labyrinth walking supports flow, not force; cooperation, not competition. The symbolic takes precedence over the literal and offers a vision of how people can walk together and live together in harmony.

"The labyrinth teaches us that if we keep putting one foot in front of the other, we can quiet our mind and find our center. The journey may be difficult, and the lesson is to trust the path." (Artress, 2006)

Whether it be through viewing eclipses, doing yoga and meditation, singing, or walking the labyrinth, as Unitarian Universalists, we need direct experience to renew our spirits so we may have the stamina and courage to work for our values of protecting the environment, defending the rights of the marginalized, and creating a peaceful world for all.

May your labyrinth be a source of strength and renewal for this congregation. It's a sacred path which can stir hearts and the imagination to help guide us as we journey together as a beloved community.

May it be so. Amen.

References

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