



Chris Berley for The New York Times

Labyrinths, of all sizes and shapes, are providing emotional answers for some people, like those who recently walked this one in Shelbyville, Tenn.

Reviving Labyrinths, Paths to Inner Peace

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

SHELBYVILLE, Tenn. — When the Rev. Battle Beasley spray-painted 12 large concentric rings on the grass in his front yard three years ago, he handed out fliers to his neighbors explaining that it was a copy of the labyrinths found in medieval Christian cathedrals, and he invited them to walk it.

His neighbors stayed away. One told her son it was a landing pad for space ships. But word of the labyrinth in Mr. Beasley's yard traveled quickly, and it is now drawing pilgrims from all over the state.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, 17 people paced in the labyrinth simul-

taneously, each lost in private preoccupations, each navigating the turns at a different pace. Ellen Kent Millsaps, 84, walked with a cane. Sanford McGee, an artist and massage therapist, crawled in his overalls.

Kimi Abernathy stood barefoot in the center and prayed that the baby girl she is adopting from an orphanage abroad would survive the hole in her heart that doctors had discovered. Then, feeling her burden lifted, Ms. Abernathy skipped along the circular path and out of the labyrinth, ringing the Tibetan meditation bell placed at the exit.

"I find it very healing," she said. "I seem to have a need to move. For me, reaching relaxation and a meditative state means moving. I was a

dancer for a long time, and I can't sit and meditate."

In an age when many Americans are looking beyond the church pulpit for spiritual experience and solace, a growing number have rediscovered the labyrinth as a path to prayer, introspection and emotional healing. While walking a labyrinth can be no more magical than a walk in the woods, those who walk them often say it focuses the mind, slows the breathing and can induce a peaceful state or help them confront their problems.

A meld of ancient tradition and New Age, Eastern religion and Christian ritual, labyrinths are at-

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INSIDE

Knicks Win Game 3

Shaking off the rust, Patrick Ewing scored 19 points as New York beat Indiana, 83-76. The Knicks trail in the series, 2-1. SportsSunday, section 8.

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Reviving Labyrinths, A Path to Inner Peace

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tracting both churchgoers and church quitters, practicing Buddhists and dharma drop-outs.

The labyrinth builders are copying patterns from the floors and walls of medieval Christian churches. They are laying stone labyrinths in backyards and gardens, rolling out canvas labyrinths at conferences, painting them on the floors of churches and mowing them in wheat fields and grassy parks.

A Web site lists more than 100 labyrinths in the United States, but there are many more. A woman carries a cloth labyrinth to jails in San Diego for prisoners to walk. Students at several universities in California walk them before exams.

Last year the California Pacific Medical Center, an acute-care hospital in San Francisco, unveiled a painted labyrinth outside the entrance that is now walked by emergency room nurses as well as surgery patients and their families. At least three more hospitals, including Morristown Memorial Hospital in

An answer for some people who are looking beyond the church pulpit.

Morristown, N.J., are planning labyrinths of their own.

Dr. Martin Brotman, president and chief executive of California Pacific, said that when he first proposed to his staff and board that the hospital put in a labyrinth: "I met with cynicism and criticism. We're a well-respected Western medical center. They are afraid it will taint our reputation."

Yet on sunny days, Dr. Brotman says he finds patients in bathtubs plodding along the labyrinth's twisting path. Families spot it from their chairs in the waiting room and are invited to try it.

"What are their choices," Dr. Brotman asked, "to sit and worry, watch TV, try to read a book — which is unsuccessful — or to give themselves a little mental relaxation and walk the labyrinth? They don't pretend to understand it. But it gives them something to think about other than what's going on in the operating room."

A labyrinth is not the same as a maze. A maze is a puzzle with many possible routes, and a person who enters can get lost, run into a dead end or miss the exit. Mazes are often made with high shrubbery or walls, which intensify the disorientation.

A labyrinth has only one path that leads into the center and back out. There are no decisions necessary or tricky dead-ends. They are usually painted flat on the ground or on grass

or set with stones so that the whole labyrinth is always visible. Walking them can take anywhere from a few minutes to more than an hour, depending on the pace of the walker and the size of the labyrinth.

Labyrinth designs have been found on Cretan coins and pottery, on a rock carving in Sardinia dating from 2500-2000 B.C., and made of mounded earth in fields in England, Ireland and Scandinavia. Historians believe that labyrinths were walked by pilgrims in medieval times. Some labyrinths are round, some square, some octagonal, and the patterns vary. The paths in some church labyrinths form a cross.

The modern-day bloom of labyrinths in this country can be traced to a restless Episcopal priest in California, the Rev. Lauren Artress, a psychotherapist with a divinity degree, who had already been pushing the envelope of traditional Christian practice as a canon at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Ms. Artress first encountered a labyrinth and became convinced of its potential power in 1991 when she was at a seminar taught by the spiritualist Jean Houston, a best-selling author.

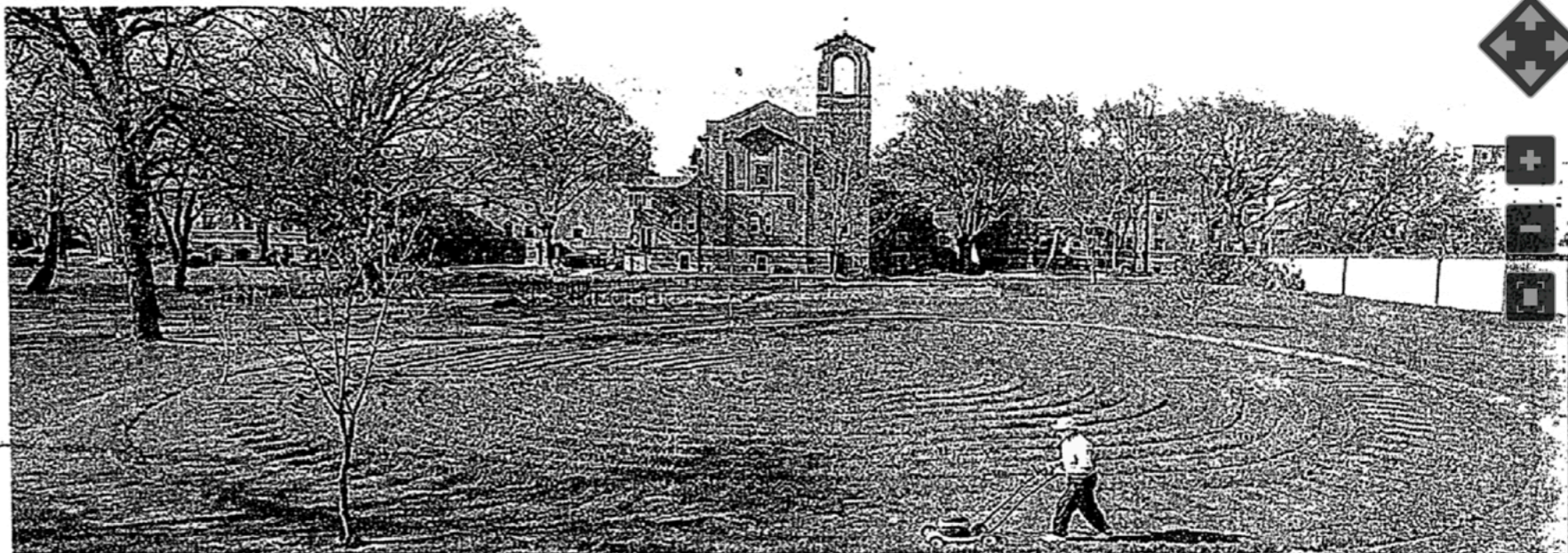
"When you walk into the labyrinth," Ms. Artress said in an interview, "the mind quiets, and then you begin to see through what's happening inside. You become transparent to yourself. You can see that you're scared, or frightened, or that you lack courage. People can see for the first time that their anger is in the way. You can see your judgments against people and against yourself."

Within months of her first labyrinth walk, Ms. Artress traveled to Chartres Cathedral in France, where a round labyrinth 42 feet in diameter had been inlaid in the floor of the nave in about 1200. The labyrinth in Chartres had long fallen out of use. It was covered by more than 250 chairs used by tourists who come to view the stained glass windows. On her visit, Ms. Artress pushed aside the chairs to measure the labyrinth's dimensions so that she could duplicate it in San Francisco.

So began a movement. Ms. Artress oversaw the building of two labyrinths at Grace Cathedral, one in the Cathedral and one outdoors in terrazzo stone. In workshops she has trained 165 people in how to organize labyrinth walks. She set up a ministry called Veriditas that has sold, at \$125 apiece, more than 800 kits on how to design a labyrinth. In addition, Veriditas has sold more than 70 canvas labyrinths in the last year.

On New Year's Eve 2000, Ms. Artress is proposing that people gather in labyrinths all over the world as an alternative to partying. She is returning to France this summer to work with the rector in Chartres Cathedral on reopening the labyrinth there. Last year, the Chartres rector visited Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Ms. Artress said, "and he saw the profound impact the labyrinth had on hundreds of people."

At Grace Cathedral, people come alone and in groups. One couple



Steve Wolf for The New York Times



Photographs by Darcy Padilla for The New York Times

A computer analyst, Stu Bartholomaeus, working on a labyrinth on the grounds of the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Paul. A cancer patient, Christina Boboschi, walking a labyrinth at the California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco and the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral, also in San Francisco.

walks the labyrinth every year on their anniversary. A pregnant woman who walked found it quieted her kicking baby. A group of women undergoing chemotherapy walks together. And many people walk as a form of mental therapy.

A computer analyst in Minnesota, Stu Bartholomaeus, said that he and his family had gone through "a lot of ordeals in the last three years and the labyrinth has probably been a grounding thing," adding: "My niece was killed in a car accident. My father-in-law almost died from an operation, my mother-in-law had multiple strokes and we had to move them into a nursing home. My two sons have gone to college and one dropped out. Lots of things have happened that I've been able to face because I've gained a place where I can meditate."

Mr. Bartholomaeus admitted he has become obsessed with labyrinths, mowing them in Minnesota fields, raking them on beaches, and building them out of Legos. He cut one with a handmower in a public park in Blaine, Minn., but it was flattened after someone told the police it was a cult symbol.

The more than 100 labyrinths listed on Veriditas Web site are in 34 states, with 23 in California and 5 each in New York, Wisconsin and North Carolina. There are 3 listed in Connecticut and 1 in New Jersey. Many in churches and retreat centers are open to the public.

Riverside Church in Manhattan, responding to popular demand, recently started laying out its canvas labyrinth for the public every Wednesday. Some are available by appointment only. Labyrinths have recently been built in New Zealand, France and Ireland.

Mr. Beasley, rector at the only Episcopal Church in Shelbyville, ordered a kit from Grace Cathedral and used spray paint for ball fields to outline the labyrinth in his yard. Soon after, he met a law student at a party and invited her to come walk it. She drove over late one night, walked it in the beam of her headlights, and left him a note thanking him for the experience. Mr. Beasley and the law student, Amy Harwell, are now married.

The couple are now the hosts of group labyrinth walks nearly every month. The labyrinth, set in a grove

of shag bark hickory and oak trees, is protected from the street by a lattice screen. On a recent Sunday, the participants began by gathering in the center for a prayer for healing, then all 17 set off silently at intervals into the labyrinth. The complete path is about a half-mile. Some walked barefoot over hickory nuts and twigs. A neighbor's car stereo blared while he washed the vehicle.

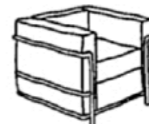
On arriving in the flower-shaped center, Johnnie Smith, 62, sat and

read from a small red book of Baha'i prayers. Mrs. Millsaps put down her cane and prayed over an icon of the archangel Rafael. Valerie Drake missed a turn and started heading the wrong direction until Mr. Beasley noticed and turned her around.

"That's like life is," Ms. Drake said afterward. "We all need to watch out and tell someone, 'You're going the wrong way.' I got myself lost due to my own fault. But I believe that's important to realize."

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