

BOOK REVIEW

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SACRED

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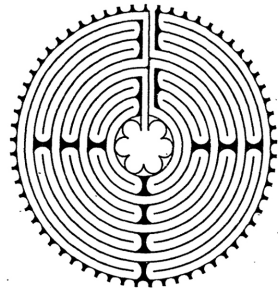
ing her own first experience, in 1965, Artress writes that she "was overcome with an almost violent anxiety. Some part of me seemed to know that in this ancient and mysterious archetype, I was encountering something that would change the course of my life."

Later, "as my feet became surer of their way, my mind began to quiet. Walking, running, moving through the winding pathways as my instincts dictated, I felt joyous one minute, burdened the next. I seemed to step beyond time to where each moment stood triumphant in its own right."

It was the same at Chartres. "The cathedral seemed to come alive with excitement during our walk. The mood became light, fluid and joyful in the dark and quiet space... I feel we had touched the Holy Spirit. Each of us had ventured to the center of our beings..."

The fact that tourists of unknown religious backgrounds joined the labyrinth walk at Chartres was also significant, Artress indicates. As founder of Quest, Grace Cathedral's outreach program for people seeking a spiritual path outside traditional religions, Artress believed she had found a new yet ancient means of "encountering the divine within" that could be experienced on many different levels.

Thus part of the fun of reading "Walking a Sacred Path" is to feel "the great dignity of the symbol" regardless of one's own reli-



FROM "WALKING A SACRED PATH"

The pattern of the labyrinth as seen from above

gious background. Artress explains the labyrinth's 4,000-year-old history and philosophy, its relationships to everything from the cosmos to the calendar, its significance in the Hopi medicine wheel, Tibetan sand painting, Eastern mandala, Jewish kabbala.

Here, too, we find a lucid and accessible definition (although superficial, she admits) of "sacred geometry," a lost art once used to "develop a balanced and serene climate for the human psyche and soul." Master builders once used sacred geometry to help

Best of all is Artress' mastery of the ancient forces within the labyrinth that have lain dormant for centuries. "With the shift to Cartesian thought," Artress explains, "the labyrinth fell into disuse. The map of the cosmos with the Earth at its center was discarded. In our drive to embrace the new religion of empirical science, the value of this ancient tool was dismissed." By the late Middle Ages, she adds, "the church became embarrassed by the intense devotion to Mary, and worship of her was banned." Dismissing mysticism and embracing empirical science, the church turned patriarchal, making the traditional God the Father a God "out there," as Artress puts it.

The labyrinth brings us back to "the God within," she says. It "recaptures the feminine sense of the Source... [in] our male-dominated world so integration can begin to occur — between feminine and masculine, receptive and assertive, imagination and reason."

While the church "frequently scoffs at the spiritual revolution that is taking place in the Western world," Artress writes, church leaders still have the chance to "improve programs rather than work from a script." The labyrinth, which Bay Area readers can see and walk inside Grace Cathedral (a permanent labyrinth is under construction outside), is one way to "address the spiritual hunger of our age."

Patricia Holt is book editor for The Chronicle.



Lauren Artress stands inside the labyrinth set in marble at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco

PEACE UNDERFOOT

Taking an
ancient walk to
find serenity in the
modern world

or impolite act, Artress figures. Back home "at Grace Cathedral, we would not provide a warm welcome to tourists who came in and moved our chairs," she writes. Some time before, "we had attempted to contact Chartres officials by letter and fax, but to no avail." Once at Chartres, "we asked at the gift shop if we could speak to a church official" but received no response. Now, having "come all this way... it was clear that we were on our own."

Artress writes that she had discovered the spiritual character of labyrinths in 1965 at a psychology seminar where she was invited to walk the simple medieval pattern-within-a-circle "whose path would lead each of us to our own center." Unlike a maze, which tricks the walker with stops and starts, the labyrinth offers a single meditative path that weaves and winds its way through all four quadrants of the circle before delivering the walker to the center.

At Chartres, having "bolstered our courage" with coffee and pastries, "we decided to take things into our own hands," Artress recalls. "Two members of our group did not get involved in moving the chairs, in case we got into trouble and needed their help. The other four of us moved all the chairs without anyone asking any questions. Once the labyrinth was cleared, we held hands and said a brief prayer."

After they each walked the labyrinth's path, 25 other tourists, curious at such goings-on, took the walk as well. Everyone, says Artress, "felt an awesome, mysterious sense of grounding and empowerment from the walk." No wonder. Recall-

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WALKING A SACRED PATH

Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool

By Lauren Artress
Riverhead/Putnam; 201 pages; \$18

REVIEWED BY PATRICIA HOLT

Here we are at the famous Chartres Cathedral in France, where

Lauren Artress, canon for special ministries at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, has brought a small band of pilgrims.

Their mission, as Artress poignantly describes it in her very personal yet scholarly book, "Walking a Sacred Path," is to find the "classical labyrinth," a 42-foot example of sacred geometry that has been embedded in Chartres' stone floor for centuries.

Alan Jones, dean of Grace Cathedral, has joined the pilgrimage, as have several congregation members, and all of them are suddenly a bit "anxious." What might have been a resident example of ancient spiritual design at Chartres appears to have been entirely forgotten — in fact, standing on top of the labyrinth they seek are 256 chairs.

Pushing the chairs aside to get a better view of the labyrinth — let alone walk its sacred path — might be considered a rash