

A calling

In: Compton, V.J. (2007) *Understanding the Labyrinth as transformative site, symbol, technology: An arts-based inquiry*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, pp 54 –58. Collections Canada. <http://www.collectionscanada.ca>

I had returned to university for undergraduate work, intrigued with the way my high school art students seemed to grow and flourish, some quite dramatically, during the workshop sessions I had with them. Although the assignments were challenging, the metalworking tools demanding, the material recalcitrant, the students had been almost without exception cheerful, inventive, and tenacious. Often coming in early and staying late, each class developed an effervescent sort of *esprit du corps* that spilled out of the art studio into the school hallway, along with the haze of burning wax and cuttlebone and the screech of power tools on metal, as they raced towards completion and the triumphant final exhibition in the front hall display case. It appeared to me that some individual and collective shift was going on during the learning process, and I wanted to find out what factors might be involved and how they were related.

Back in school fulltime again after many years away, I could feel my own foundations shifting. To pursue the question of contributing factors in my students' educational experience from as many angles as possible, I had switched from a part time Arts degree by distance education to Independent Studies, a self-directed learning program, tethered only by my academic advisor's approval. I completed the *Hot Metal/Hot Words* project, on the links between language, eidetic imagery, and experiential learning in adolescence from a Vygotskian perspective.¹

What should come next? My advisor was an architecture professor, so my proposal to look at the physical context of learning and the parallels between art practice and spiritual practice, creativity and religious experience made sense to

¹ Compton, V.J. "Hot Metal / Hot Words: Event and interpretation as developmental tools in adolescent self concept." *The Journal of Experiential Education* 20, no. 2, (Fall 1997). ISSN: 1053-8259. A multi-dimensional content analysis instrument of twenty high school art students' stream-of-consciousness journal material produced while participating in an intensive art/technology (metal foundry) workshop showed that frequencies of selection of particular journal topics and references to affective states (e.g. excitement, fear) correlated positively to statements of personal resolve in the face of perceived obstacles. Results suggest that participation in the process of sequenced foundry practice ("extreme" art class), reminiscent of the "vision quest" ritual initiation traditional to adolescence, combined with reflective writing, provides an arena for teenagers to experience and reflect upon their successful grappling with challenging situations. The content of their writing indicates that their insights transfer to areas of their lives outside the art classroom.

him: sometimes the appearance of a piece of sculpture really does seem miraculous to its artist, as well as being ontologically *numinous*.

In a religious course on sacred places, I decided to do my seminar presentation on the Minotaur and the labyrinth, knowing these only through art history and classical studies texts. I had located a method on the Internet for making a seven circuit Classical labyrinth that looked simple enough to do during class time, and Dr. Bird² was all for experiential learning. Accompanied by a collection of Minotaur sculptures I'd made over the years, and armed with rolls of tape, balls of string, instruction sheets, and a stack of handouts on mythology and Carl Jung quotes, we laid out the unicursal labyrinth pattern in masking tape on the floor of the college refectory, a big bright room with tall windows along one wall. Working in teams, we completed it in time for everyone to walk through it and double back out again in one long continuous line. One of my fellow students, Joan, an older woman with a hesitant demeanour, participated with growing discomfort. It was a large group. Most were undergraduates in their early twenties, who enjoyed working together on the layout and racing each other along the finished path in what I later learned was a time-honoured tradition of northern European village festival celebrations. But the close proximity of so many people made her uneasy, Joan said. She had felt crowded during the walk, anxious and a little dizzy and queasy. I did not know what to think of this. It was my first time in a labyrinth, as well. Not knowing what to expect, I had been too pre-occupied with the preparations and construction to attend much to my own experience.



Making a seven circuit labyrinth with tape

The following week, at class, Joan was sitting alone, apart from her friends.

² I was fortunate to study with the late, great Dr. Michael Bird of the Religious Studies Department, Renison College, University of Waterloo. A brilliant scholar, beloved teacher, fine musician, irrepressible wit, visionary, mentor, and friend, Dr. Bird was a gentle soul, on Earth with us all too briefly. It is hard to believe that he is gone. He is sorely missed.

“I’ve had an awful weekend, don’t ask,” I heard her reply when they greeted her. I approached her and enquired whether she had thought any more about her experience with the labyrinth the previous week. She looked at me appraisingly, and then said that yes, she had. Would she tell me about it? I asked. She thought for a while again before replying. Yes, she would. She then described what had happened on the weekend.

Her husband had fallen and hit his head, and, in an angry outburst, blamed the mishap on her. She had started to apologize, trying to smooth things over, “like I always do,” when she suddenly realized that it was not her fault and therefore not something to apologize for. Then it occurred to her that very few of the things she had apologized for over the last 30 years had been her fault either. The insight flashed through her mind that her long disappointing marriage was a labyrinth, and her husband, whose habitual bad temper masked early symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease, was the Minotaur at the centre of it. She had decided on the spot to listen finally to her grown children’s urgings, and that weekend had begun the arrangements to have her husband institutionalized. She seemed relieved to be able to talk about it.

I was taken aback by this extraordinary story and by its implications. Henderson’s comments about initiation, which I had included in my seminar handouts, resonated with the details of what had happened: “In all cultures, the Labyrinth means the entangling and confusing representation of the world of Matriarchal consciousness; it can be traversed only by those who are ready for a special initiation into the mysterious world of the collective unconscious” (1964, p. 117). Initiation, for women as well as for men, requires trials of strength that lead to sacrifice for the sake of the birth of a new self. “This sacrifice enables a woman to free herself from the entanglement of personal relations and fits her for a more conscious role as an individual in her own right” (p.126). Coming to terms with the Beast, the masculine principle as animal-man, for “older women ... can be the expression a certain kind of woman's initiation ... when the union of spirit and nature is disturbed” (p. 132). By that account, Joan had finally made operational sense of the central dilemma in her life, gaining the necessary perspective by re-enacting, metaphorically one could say, in the sense that she

I first encountered the labyrinth at a Mystery School seminar with Dr. Jean Houston.

This little-known medieval pattern was described as a powerful spiritual tool whose path would lead us to our own centre.

...

I was hardly prepared for the force of my own reaction. As soon as I set foot into the labyrinth I was overcome with an almost violent anxiety.

...

That evening I felt drawn back to walk the labyrinth alone three more times.

Artress, L. (1995). *Walking a sacred path: Rediscovering the labyrinth as a spiritual tool*. New York: Riverhead Books. 2

was becoming her own liberator, a ritual based in myth—and was making significant life-changing decisions on the basis of this knowledge.

That was a distinct shift in the epistemological landscape for me—no longer was the labyrinth merely an archaic pattern in a Larousse Encyclopædia, and I was not so sure that the Minotaurs were all behind the picture plane either. Just because the horns were invisible did not make them any less monstrous. These mythological characters are cultural representations of archetypes, powerful forces when they are activated, influential in the lives of real people, whether they are conscious of the source or not.

Most significantly, we had set off these forces quite inadvertently. Intention, or lack of it, did not seem to be necessary for efficacy. This was unnerving! I had simply assumed that the Academy automatically provided the distance of objectivity towards any activity going on in its domain. We were studying sacred space, not actually creating it! I felt a bit like Mickey Mouse in the role of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, naïvely invoking invisible forces I knew very little about, in spite of my preparations, research, and handouts. Although it is clear, in retrospect, that my colleague was ready to enlarge her perception and make some far-reaching changes in her situation, still I had the sense that I had stumbled onto, or into, some powerful catalyst of psychological transformation. Things could have gone quite differently for Joan under the circumstances, and I had an ethical responsibility to study it far more extensively before I tried it again.

Later that week, I had a phone call from an individual who had received one of my bracelets as a gift, and was calling to find out more about it. We got talking about art, and therapy, transformation and the labyrinth. It turned out that she was an art therapist whose specialty was working with people, especially those with dissociative personality disorder, whose distorted perception of their body after trauma interfered with the process of their recovery. She was familiar with the labyrinth, which she used in her practice. She suggested that I read Lauren Artress' book, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*, based on her work with the labyrinth as Canon Pastor and Canon for Special Ministries at Grace Cathedral (Episcopal) in San Francisco.

At the time I discovered the labyrinth, Artress had been working with the eleven-circuit Chartres cathedral version since 1991, establishing Veriditas, a non-profit organization dedicated to introducing people to the labyrinth in 1996.³ Artress had developed protocol models for practitioners in ministerial and

³ "The Voice of the World Wide Labyrinth Movement."
<http://www.veriditas.net/about/index.html>.

therapeutic settings, offering training sessions at the Cathedral and at workshops, known as “Theatres of Enlightenment,” at retreat centres around North America. In collaboration with Keith Critchlow and environmental designer Richard Feather Anderson, Artress had put together a kit that detailed the installation method developed by the team from Grace Cathedral. This made the pattern widely available to communities interested in building their own labyrinths. Such initiatives in an institutional context need the support of visionaries at the executive level. I was fortunate to belong to such a congregation at St. Paul’s Westdale, where the Rev. Paddy Doran officiated. Within six months of first encountering the labyrinth, I was in San Francisco to participate in the training program with Dr. Artress, with the understanding that when I returned home I would be welcome to install a labyrinth and develop the related activities.

Out of the blue my search for factors of transformational events in education was becoming an international adventure. Looking back years later, I wonder what would have happened if Joan and I had not had that conversation. I am deeply grateful that she had shared her story with me—and that I had got up the nerve to ask about it. After the phone call with the art therapist, I realized that, although synchronicity occurred frequently in my life, the incidents concerning this labyrinth had an intense quality, not easily dismissed. Both connections had been made because someone had reached out. Someone had taken that first step towards encounter. My life was shifting too.