

The Labyrinth: Site and Symbol of Transformation

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In these extraordinary times, we stand in wonder and bafflement as witnesses to an historical moment of evolutionary change, challenged to participate in this new stage of existence unfurling now on so vast a scale that cultural historian and eco-theologian Thomas Berry says we are living “not in a cosmos but a cosmogenesis, a universe ever coming into being through an irreversible sequence of transformations moving . . . from a lesser to a greater order of complexity and from a lesser to great consciousness.” (26)

The human role in the transition from the “terminal Cenozoic” period of earth history to the “emergent Ecozoic,” divisions marked by the impact of the human presence on the earth’s processes, (O’Sullivan 17) is pivotal: “there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless it is accepted, protected, and fostered by the human.” (Swimme and Berry 20)

Such sensitive responsibility requires our own personal evolutions, out of the late Cenozoic modernist mindset that has brought us to this pass, and into alignment with the emerging “great consciousness.” There is no shortage of evidence that the project of modernity, in which we are as deeply enmeshed as its patterns of thought are embedded in us, has reached its limit as a useful cultural paradigm. George Grant has observed that, where “technology is the ontology of the age,” the faculty we rely on, reason itself, is reduced to the instrumental in the service of the myopic: “Indeed, to think “reasonably” about the modern account of reason is of such difficulty because that account has structured our very thinking in the last centuries...The very idea that ‘reason’ is that reason which allows us to conquer objective human and non-human nature controls our thinking about everything”(427). With what faculties then can we engage in this evolutionary process? How do we get out of our own way?

From the perspective of cosmogenesis, three principles govern the formation of this emergent consciousness, and every other being in the universe as well: these are differentiation, subjectivity, and communion (Berry 162). None figure in the mantra of the competitive global market. It is time to generate a more inclusive account, with all the parts that have been up to now imperceptible to the “single vision”: a more heterogeneous understanding, less belligerent, conformist, and fearful than our contemporary myths of globalism and Progress; a new story of the world where all subjectivities find a place. This is not impossible: our species has always told itself stories and we are especially good at Creation myths. In these, we “re-member” the way our ancestors came from mud and were taught the arts and skills, the *techne*, necessary for life, as well as the limits to our powers, the consequences of our hubris, and our place in the universe. These stories, in the form of archetypal figures and situations, are so prevalent cross-

culturally (including, I will argue, in the non-verbal forms) that one could say we are hard-wired to do this: it is a faculty we can rely on, whether or not we are aware of it.

There is a sense of urgency about bringing to collective consciousness a compelling alternate vision to a blindly destructive socio-economic juggernaut. I struggle with my own impatient tendency towards a motherly but coercive “eco-totalitarianism” in the face of resignation and a sense of futility, all signs of an embattled imagination:

To free oneself from old ways of seeing requires imagination. Every important social movement reconfigures the world in the imagination. What was obscure comes forward, lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn on old maps: it is from this new way of seeing the present that hope for the future emerges. One fears that solitary and unique voices will be silenced by mass tyranny, yet this is not the only danger. In an atomized and alienated society, the imagination is endangered by the limitations of the ego...of being restricted to a canvas that is too small (Griffin 45–6).¹

As a practising artist and researcher in art-based holistic education, I deplore the systematic cutback (and simultaneous corporatization and commodification²) of public access to opportunities for encouraging and honing the creative imagination: it constitutes a mass deprivation and “internal exile” on the basis of class, in the service of profit and social control. But this sorry situation is by no means irreparable; the imagination was honoured in pre-Modern cultures, whose tools and practices remain for us now to rediscover and take up.

Imagination refers to several related functions and capacities. As the source for the language of the soul, which speaks in metaphor and “never thinks without an image,” (Aristotle Bk. III, Ch. 7, l. 15) the imagination accesses deep, resonant psychological strata. It is also the mechanism for juggling the external, imported images ranging from design specifications to the distractions characteristic of “monkey mind.” The difference between these various states is particularly noticeable during the ancient practices of meditation, which quiets and focuses the mind, and of ritual, which awakens the “old ones” inside of us, those parts of the brain that are usually ignored, the parts that do not speak in English but in images such as candlelight and colour. Discernment among these states of mind is a kind of interior mapping. As we set out to restore our fundamental connections within the ecological matrix, roadmaps of our underlying structures and patterns of development can temper the urgency that so easily slides into the arrogance of progress, that deafening wilfulness of which Lyotard warns:

The modern is all too easily snapped up by the future, by all its values of promotion, pro-gram, pro-gress...dominated by a very strong emphasis on wilful activism. Whereas the postmodern implies, in its very movement (going further than modernity in order to retrieve it in a kind of ‘twist’ or ‘loop’)...a capacity to listen openly to what is hidden within the happenings of today. (quoted in Kearney 27)

One intriguing roadmap-*techne*, developed expressly for going further and returning with an increased capacity to listen for the hidden, is the cathedral pavement labyrinth. A medieval design based in the holistic principles of Sacred Geometry, and first constructed in honour of Mary at Notre Dame de Chartres Cathedral in the twelfth century (itself built over an ancient Black Madonna site), this unicursal path is a metaphorical container for spiritual journeying, mirroring, as it winds back and forth through the eleven layers of concentric circles, the processes of human thought. While labyrinths have always represented the human quandary of how to proceed through multiplicity and confusion,³ the reports from contemporary participants in reflexive walking meditation in the labyrinth are surprisingly consistent in describing the occurrence of physiological, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive events such as release of tension, increased sense of clarity, well-being and communion, triggering of early memories and related insights, and coming to terms with difficult decisions or problems. Most often these events are revealed through symbolic imagery, auditory, sensate, and interoceptive as well as visual. Long after the walk, incubation continues in the imagination, illuminating situations and allowing “what was obscure to come forward” into consciousness.

A restoration of access to the imagination would accomplish many things: an emancipation and bringing home from exile, a healing and making whole of self and community, a sense of spaciousness and opening up to possibility, a sense of our own rhythm. When I see all these and more happen for all kinds of people walking the labyrinth pilgrimage, I feel privileged to be part of a worldwide movement to return the cathedral labyrinth to public use. Beyond the altruistic motivation, what has intrigued me is the question of how it is that this can be at all. As I review the literature and reflect on my years with the labyrinth, a list forms: labyrinth as archaeology, architecture, medieval software, liminal site, geometrical figure, public sacred art, transformative crucible, spiritual container, developmental scaffolding, spatial mnemonic, search algorithm, Zen koan, Goddess temple, Western medicine wheel, dance notation, pre-Modern social technology, *omphalos* and *temenos*. The multiple layers of meaning to be found beneath the labyrinth’s deceptive simplicity suggest to me an access route, through our contemporary imagination and that of the medieval designer-genius, to an individual and collective embodiment of that “greater order of complexity...and consciousness” where we need to learn to make our home. I invite you to trace with me some of the entry points into this mysterious and powerful site.

Meeting the Minotaur

I came to the labyrinth by way of the Minotaur, in an epiphanic moment with the catalogue from Picasso’s *Vollard Suite* exhibition of 1977. Picasso had given the Minotaur a life: girlfriends, parties at the Sculptor’s studio, a tender gaze upon a sleeping lover, but tragic too, suffering violence but never inflicting it; now he is grievously wounded, now pathetically blinded, led around by a little girl holding flowers or a dove, past sailors with a boat. What was going on here? These were not illustrations of a quaint archaic story cycle for a children’s

picture book! The way Picasso had drawn the Minotaur, he appeared to be a regular character in the neighbourhood.

There was something reassuring about the scribbly quality in the drawings and etchings, like being in a foreign country with enough knowledge of the language to understand what people are saying. The quick contouring marks Picasso had used to capture the solidity of a moving figure was a technique so familiar that, as I traced the gestures in the rhythm of the lines, I could practically feel the stiff curly mane and stocky body he'd been drawing. It was easy to see that the Minotaur's presence had felt "real" to Picasso. The bull's head was a closely observed study—Picasso was Spanish, he went to bullfights—and the man's body was drawn from the inside out, by someone who knew how living in it felt; but the pathos and desire in the creature's character took the drawings out of the genre of documentary life drawing into the realm of psychological, maybe even autobiographical, portraiture. I remember being intrigued. What experience did these marks on paper *signify*? Were they not the traces left behind sometimes when something important—a Minotaur, maybe, or the curve of your child's upper lip—has come towards you through the veil? I had spent many hours at life drawing class, enough to know the difference between practicing and performance. Practicing was that regular, faithful exercise to hone skills. But what was being "performed" in these portraits of Asterion?

I had a background in Classics; I knew the Olympians hung around mountain tops, particular groves of trees, and underground in certain caves, and that temples and cathedrals were sometimes built in places that were known to be particularly suitable in ways that had nothing to do with architecture or town planning or transportation or drainage. From Jung and Campbell I learned how myth and archetype functioned within the human psyche and in society, translated through iconography and architecture into forms accessible to anyone who paid attention. I had visited temples and cathedrals in Europe, guidebook in hand; these places were magnificent and beautiful, but my response was more one of appreciation for the skill and devotion of the builders, rather than a sense of transcendent awe. I recognised and admired their mastery and perseverance, but I could not share their apparent certitude in the holiness of the space they inhabited and manipulated. It was as if I were on the outside looking in, nose pressed against the glass. Gallery space, although similarly remote, is necessarily secular as part of the culture industry, no matter what the artist in the studio may think of what s/he is doing or for Whom. The division between sacred intent and secular context was becoming a problem of authenticity for me.

All this changed dramatically when, with no warning, during a seminar presentation for an undergraduate religious studies course in 1997, the power of created sacred space to provoke and effect profound personal transformation was made unmistakably clear to me. I had left art practice and returned to university full time, wanting to find out what was causing the students in my foundry workshops to transform before my very eyes. I was passionately interested in this question, but the impervious rationality of the school administration and the strain of

having to learn to drive the computer were, together, overwhelming. I was so tired that I started “seeing” things out of the corners of my eyes in shadowy stairwells and corridors. My apprehension about it all resolved itself into a Minotaur lurching out of the archaic darkness. I made a large “found object” Minotaur sculpture out of scrap metal and a cow skull, which expressed for me the brutal clash of human and technology, and represented also the hidden unlovable parts of ourselves (“I’ll never be able to do this! What was I thinking?”) that become huge and fearsome in the Shadow. I took the sculpture into the seminar, along with handouts and a method I had found for the class to create a temporary masking tape version of the unicursal seven-circuit Classical labyrinth (more archaic and simpler than the Chartres labyrinth, I had discovered) on the cafeteria floor. This we did, making it large enough for everyone to walk through and double back out again in one long continuous line.

Joan, one of the older students, felt very uncomfortable being in such close proximity to others. This surprised me, as no one else had commented one way or the other on that part of it. At class the following week, however, Joan reported a remarkable incident. Her husband suffered from Alzheimer’s Disease, and over the weekend, he had fallen and hit his head, then blamed it on her in a violent angry outburst. Joan had retreated to her customary pattern of thirty years of marriage, apologizing and trying to “fix” it. Suddenly she realised she was not responsible for his mishap, and even if she were, he had no right to abuse her that way. This awareness illuminated the rest of their relationship. Joan said, “I saw that our marriage was the labyrinth, and he was the Minotaur at the centre of it!” She described him as being such a bad-tempered individual that the onset of Alzheimer’s had been masked by his normally unpleasant belligerent manner. Over the weekend, she had decided to take her grown children’s advice and put her husband in a nursing home.

Joan was eager to talk, as if the experience of walking the labyrinth had broken open years of dammed-up feelings. I was astonished both at the content of the story and that she would share it with me. I knew I was witnessing an extraordinary transformation. Trying to make sense of it later, I wrote:

The power of the ancient pattern, activated by [Joan’s] physical engagement, provided her with a clear symbol with which to see and interpret her real-time situation, and she felt herself liberated — truly a coming together of the recurring motifs of maiden and monster captive in the centre. What is remarkable is that she became her own liberator, in that her detachment from the oppressive power dynamics of a dysfunctional patriarchal arrangement was of her own creation through the recuperation and identification on her terms of her strengths, which she had previously projected onto the abusive husband. In a sense, the labyrinth site/process provided the internal “communal” support for her shamanism on behalf of her liminal self.

We had unwittingly re-created a very powerful device, with life-changing potential. I had an obligation to treat it with great respect, or else stay away from it. I was full of questions: how

could masking tape on a lunchroom floor have such power? All we'd been was curious; was a degree of belief on our part not necessary? What was the operative factor anyway? The group? The pattern? The walking itself? Who had invented it in the first place? How had they used it originally? Had only Joan undergone a transformation, or had everyone? How come they weren't talking about it? How could I find out? How come nothing like that had happened to me? In retrospect, I could see I had been too pre-occupied making sure everything was taken care of to be able to appreciate the actual experience. Then it dawned on me that this was not unusual, that I was often overly controlling, if well intentioned, about social situations, and detached from the immediacy of experience as a result. It took months for this insight to come to consciousness. I realised that the labyrinth experience could be slow and subtle as well as dramatic and immediate as Joan's had been.

When I discovered that the eleven circuit cathedral labyrinth was connected with the medieval neo-Platonic School of Chartres, my questions proliferated with the entry-points. Was this the technology of a pre-modern Holistic Curriculum? Was there relevance for us in education now? Was the current interest in labyrinths another sign that were we in a transitional state similar to the one the medieval Europeans had experienced? I was reading about implicate order in the holographic universe and quantum consciousness, while in another part of the academic maze, devised with the help of my geometry professor, I was deciphering the mathematics of the labyrinth in both its 12th century cathedral setting and late 20th century topological algebra; it was an inflammatory combination.⁴ I had a clear intuition that the labyrinth pattern was somehow an analogue of synthetic thought process, and that I would need to trace an equally meandering path to see its relevance to education. Being neither a mathematician, nor a psychologist, nor a medievalist, nor even very far along in the study of education, I wondered about the wisdom of undertaking academic wild goose chases. But it was impossible to turn away from Joan's story. I needed to find a teacher. Synchronicity took over, and within six months of conjuring up the Minotaur, I was in a labyrinth pilgrimage and facilitator-training session at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

A culture in denial

The rupture in the fundamental continuity between humans and the universe — the feeling of being on the outside looking in, nose pressed to the glass — has developed out of a multitude of contributing factors, but in common is a fragmentation, discernible at every level of social organization, originating within ourselves. The icon is Descartes bifurcating human being into a reasoning intellect residing in the brain, transported by, and distinct from, a mechanistic, experiencing body.⁵ Further out in the countryside around the same time, the forced depopulation and the infamous Enclosures of common lands utterly disrupted traditional geographically based kinship patterns, relations between humans and the cycles of nature, and Christian ethics of stewardship and natural law, all of which up until then had contributed to maintaining balance and constraint in land use and labour (Northcott 49–50).

This policy created masses of dispossessed, unemployed people, whose relation to the world through the work they do was subjected to the irresistible logic of the industrial revolution in the development of the assembly line. In an economic system that uses the term “surplus labour” to describe human beings, language separates the individual from the work s/he does as well as from the moral, political, social, and emotional consequences of doing it, and from those who would be impacted by the activity. In this atomistic view, the world is made up of subjects and objects, “I” the individual agent, and everything else as objects. Linear visual perspective, formalized in Renaissance art, confirms this monocular and remote individualism, drastically different from the communal sense of space in the pre-Modern oral culture which it had superseded (Lowe, Romanyshyn). Out of these separations in all sense modalities of subject and object, dichotomies of matter/spirit, body/mind, sacred/profane, man/nature, public/private, male/female, arranged in hierarchies of power, replaced the interdependencies of the natural world.

While we may not consciously treat others instrumentally, as objects in our service, and would be horrified at the suggestion that we do, our perceptions and behaviour are affected nonetheless. Such dualism is encoded in the competitive language of a self-preserving individualism, so that the entire social discourse is distorted and inevitably dysfunctional. This is “the consequence of a cultural fixation, an addiction,” evidence, in “the profoundly degraded ecological situation, [of] a deadening or paralysis of some parts of human intelligence” (Berry 182, 115). Rachel Naomi Remen, clinical professor of family and community medicine at the UCSF School of Medicine, teaches a course called “The Care of the Soul” to medical students, and a post graduate course for physicians called “Relationship-Centered Care.” Remen notes that standard medical education perpetuates this distortion, which she identifies as a cultural valorizing of individualism and devaluing of the quality of compassion:

Recovering compassion requires us to confront the shadow of our culture directly. We are a culture that values...self-sufficiency, competence, independence, mastery and control. In the shadow lies a profound sense of isolation from our human wholeness. We have developed a contempt for anything in ourselves and in others that has needs, and is capable of suffering. In our isolation, we tend to develop a suspicion of anything beyond ourselves, anything that falls outside of our control (35).

When “that which is capable of suffering” is repressed and relegated to the shadow of both the individual and of the society and culture, what happens?

Cultural symbols, collective images accepted by civilised societies that have been used to express “eternal truths,” still carry their original numinosity, a psychic charge that evokes deep emotional responses. But rationalism has destroyed our capacity to understand these symbols, and with neglect or repression, their psychic energy disappears underground, beneath the level of consciousness. There, they give life to whatever is uppermost in the unconscious. “The dark side, the toxic waste, was denied, ignored, hidden from sight, buried” (Berry 112), within the

logic of consumerism. Where our engagement is instrumental rather than reverential, what is lost is the Earth as symbol of the sacred. With it goes anything else associated with nature, along the fault lines in the man-nature duality mentioned earlier, including actual females and the feminine generally, such as qualities, traits, habits of mind such as receptivity, and the intuitive. This denial of the external aspect into the dark side is matched by suppression of the inner life. So into the shadow go our vulnerabilities such as grief for all kinds of losses, including the devaluation of the work of our hands and minds, and the destruction of our habitat, the fear that anyone will discover these things about us, and hope that things might change.

The psychological mechanism of denial, a survival function whose purpose is to keep the organism in homeostasis through interpretive means, operates at both the individual and social level to maintain false consciousness about a given situation. Berry points to signs of “a deep inner rage of Western society against its earthly condition as a vital member of the life community... a disturbance sanctioned by the very structures of the culture itself in its present phase... [requiring] a corresponding deep cultural therapy” (165). This rage may be a cover-up for the grief of which there is so much and of which we are so ashamed. In psychoanalytic process, rage marks a state of heightened resistance to the approach of anything that might disrupt the carefully constructed shell of meaning covering the denied or suppressed reality. But when the strategy of denial becomes too costly, the individual or group is compelled, most often through the advent of some crisis, to undertake the next step. That is the point that the human species finds itself now.

It could be said of our dilemma that we are re-enacting collectively the Heroic Journey, a pattern Joseph Campbell calls the Monomyth (36). Our genetic coding informs those psychic energy constellations that take shape as the primary archetypal forms deep in the unconscious realms of the human⁶ and find expression in symbols such as the Heroic Journey, the Death-Rebirth cycle, the Sacred Center, and the Great Mother (Berry 160). These can serve as a source of guidance in the creation of the new story we need now. The cathedral labyrinth, in both form and function, recapitulates all these symbols, especially the Journey, which

contains experiences that characterize all of our mythic journeys into the farthest regions of ourselves in search of the real thing: awakening; the call; the journey; the descent; the darkness; a healing crisis; an epiphany; the ascent; accepting unlikely companions on the journey; new visions of self and world; the long integration of the experience into daily life. These are developmental steps we all face (Woodman and Mellick 17).

Denial, in the Journey schema, is analogous to the Refusal of the Call (Campbell 36). Such resistance can be taken to pathological extremes of stasis. The classic symbol is the ruler of a realm that has fallen into disorder, or into a kind of trance. All life forms in the realm suffer until the hero or heroine undertakes the journey in search of the remedy, which is often a trifle, but an extremely inaccessible one. The subsequent adventure of Departure, Initiation, and

Return, with all the tests and encounters involved, comprise the Journey or Individuation crisis. A culture in denial is analogous to the labyrinth in its maze-prison aspect: the unrecognised Shadow aspect of denial connects our contemporary crisis of transformation to the labyrinth myth, especially in regard to the strangely immortal Minotaur, target of all projected horror.

Campbell's analysis of what happened at Crete clearly embeds the mythic in the social and the psyche: King Minos was a judge and ruler of a great trading kingdom. His queen, Pasiphaë, had been seduced by a bull and bore a monster from the union, contrived with the help of Daedalus who designed a false cow in which the queen had concealed herself to deceive the bull. The queen took the blame, but king was aware of his own guilt in all of this. The bull had been sent from the sea by Poseidon as a sign of Minos' right to be king. In return Minos had promised to sacrifice the animal as an offering and symbol of service. But Minos reneged, and, thinking Poseidon would not notice, had kept the bull and slaughtered another one from his herd instead. The monstrous child was hidden away in the labyrinth as prison-weapon.

The primary guilt was the king's: he had taken personal advantage of a public event. The return of the bull was meant to symbolize his selfless submission to the obligations of his role. By keeping it, he subverted this greater purpose, giving in to self-serving impulse. Thus the divinely anointed king became the tyrant "Holdfast," looking out for himself, an example of the principle 'As above, so below,' in the realm of the self: "As the rituals of initiation lead the individual through the death of the old self and rebirth into the new, so the great ceremonials of investiture divested him of his private character and clothed him in the mantle of his vocation"(15). To refuse the rite was a sacrilege which cut the individual off from the community, thereby breaking the whole social body into fragments, who then, as the many, made war on each other, each out for himself and governable only by force. This universal monster resonates in folktales and legends as well as in the news of the world and its nightmares: the hoarder of the general good, greedy, claiming all rights to "mine"; inflated ego-aggrandizement, yet fearful, defensive of the aggressions coming at him from his own projections, isolated in self-made independence; making a wasteland wherever he is.

By contrast, the hero has achieved submission. In the story, Theseus undertakes the journey, receiving help to go underground and confront the frightful monster hidden in the dark. He delivers the Athenian people from the terror of the Minotaur, restoring the balance to society from the disorder Minos' greed had caused. Campbell links this action with collective redemption from the wasteland using the metaphor of a spring:⁷

Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream. Thus the hero is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one's visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn (20).

When we overcome our fear and resistance to the initiation process, it becomes possible to face the disowned, unloved and unlovable monstrous Minotaur parts of ourselves. The labyrinth is a technology designed to do this, instantiating architecturally the enveloping safety of the compassionate receptive principle, which is activated when we, as heroes, penetrate the site. The ring of spiky lunations round the outside circuit, a sign of both warning and protection to the initiates, articulates visually: “Do not enter unless you are willing, and once you do, know you are safe in here.” People show up to walk in the labyrinth when they are troubled, when they need to feel their way through a dilemma, when something in their lives is not working any longer—when the spring has been blocked and the realm is barren, when the old ruler’s time is up. They come because they have heard a call, in spite of how embarrassing it might seem to be following a voice no one else can hear, or how absurd it appears to be trudging in circles round and round the parish hall. Crossing that threshold, the one that separates you from caring about what other people think, is the first obstacle. The crisis unfolds with the decision to make that commitment and take the first step: “what if I go in and find nothing there for me? What if God is not there for me? What if there is nothing there at all?”

The thread running through this is the desire humans have to be whole and no longer fragmented. Campbell’s interpretation of the Minos myth evokes the origins of the word “religion” in the Latin *religere*, to tie [back] together. By giving in to his impulse to self-serving greed, Minos concretized a symbolic aspect of relationship between the divine and the people that ought to flow, causing it to distort and become corrupt. By his grasping, he objectified it as the product rather than harmonizing himself with the process: he mistook the bull, a creature he could own, for the power of which the bull was the symbol, which can only be divinely bestowed. Arrogance around divinity results in Minotaurs in the “basement.” What needs “tying back together” from the disarray is the same everywhere: all the lost parts, demonised, projected outward, and loaded with hurt and rage; the ignored and disowned, the perceptions and wisdom of the animal body, the reports from Earth, all the other names and frames for subjectivities and communions unheard, unseen, and unimagined in the wake of the juggernaut.

A phenomenology of pilgrimage

I was well prepared to be on a pilgrimage to the Labyrinth, or so I thought. For months I had studied the history of the pattern and the writings of the pilgrimage leader, an Episcopalian priest and psychotherapist, the Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress. The long flight across the continent ended at the edge of the world. I had time before the first meeting of the group to visit the cathedral and walk both the indoor and outdoor labyrinths by myself, so the place was familiar. Everything was under control!

At dusk on the second day of the pilgrimage, we walked silently in procession from the rectory to the cathedral nave, carrying candles. The neo-Gothic cathedral was lit with hundreds of votive candles. A group of musicians played medieval chant music with Oriental overtones, some were singing. We stood in a circle round the perimeter of the labyrinth, and Dr. Artress

invited us in one by one; I was in the middle of the group to enter. I expected to have a serene meditation in a beautiful setting. As I moved along the last few turns before reaching the centre of the labyrinth, a strong feeling of sadness welled up in me and tears poured down my face. They did not stop, it was more than dampness, it was a torrent. I was thick with grief throughout my chest and throat and clenched my teeth to keep from making a noise. I was very embarrassed by being so snotty and unprepared with no Kleenex to cover my face and mop up the mess. The thought in my mind was of an old family sorrow. I was shocked that I had come so far to such a place and still that grief was with me! I was irritated with myself that I could not “get over it.” Then I heard all around me people sniffing, and I saw many of them covering their faces. We all had something we could not get over. I saw that the flood of tears was a River of Sorrow and all of us humans were in it forever, that tranquil joy was a rare thing to be treasured: this was the meaning of life.

In the months that followed, I puzzled over my notes and memories, trying to understand what had happened. The experience was complex; it unfolded on many levels. At the time, I had felt constrained by a sense of having to remain “objective” (and in control), so that I was never quite sure if I was being “present in the moment.” Did I even know what that meant? Now, years later, such a split is hard to imagine. I believe that the inherent nature of the labyrinth process is so powerful that it overrides such either/or constructions; that is one of the lessons. Teasing out the subtleties of the experience through the lenses of various epistemologies, looking now for signs of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion, the prevailing image of the event is of intersecting transparent spherical orbits, the meshing of world-lines. While the sensory realm was rich and elaborate: intricate and evocative music, flickering candles, gleaming fabric drapery and banners in brilliant colours and the thick soft carpet underfoot, soaring architecture full of shadows, cold marble and polished wood and metal, smells of beeswax and burning incense, the non-sensory world, the transpersonal, the presence and movement of the Spirit in us and among us, was mysterious. With what sensors do we pick up on this? It reminds me of Christo’s “Running Fence,” the long curtain across California to the shore of the Pacific, in which you “see” the movement of the wind in the rippling fabric. That’s how you know it’s been and gone.

I wondered about the influence of instinct on the ways people behave in the labyrinth. By oneself, alone in the labyrinth, the experience is very different from walking in a group of people, many of whom may be strangers to each other. Ethnologists define instinct as a disposition towards a pattern of behaviours. Closed instincts are genetically fixed, like the honey dance of bees. Open instincts can be described as “programming with a gap” to be filled by a range of experiences depending on the circumstances within which the creature finds itself. Aggression in humans can be seen as an open instinct, and is related to dominance over territorial space. The engagement can be symbolic, the submissive party making themselves “small.” A symbolic response might be a friendly gesture. This exchange is often highly complex, but the capacity is innate in a species (Midgely 53).⁸

One of the things some people did that evening was to take advantage of the scarves provided, to use in various ways but most often to shroud their faces. I did not take a scarf, preferring to be unencumbered. But, as a sensory cue, the profile of veiled people was beautiful to see, mysterious to an onlooker, like a pupa with something going on invisibly concealed within. After I began to cry, I very much wanted to be veiled, to be physically inside such an enclosure with my snot and misery. I did not want to be seen so apparently out of control of my emotions. This was a high pitch of self-consciousness: in retrospect, objectively, who would care besides me? But in misery the body becomes an encapsulated world. I wanted to hide or run away. But the labyrinth obliged me to stay with it. Hearing other people sniffing and stifling sobs was a revelation. Here we were in public, a collection of individuals not managing! Then to see other people apparently having a wonderful time, dancing and swaying and smiling, was a shock. How could they be so happy? Then the image of the River of Sorrow arose, and the understanding that though we were all on it forever, it was possible to experience great joy and gladness, perhaps even because of the continuo of sorrow enhancing the contrast.

Confronting the socialization around aggression and competitiveness becomes necessary on a very narrow path with people whose chosen pace is different than your own. Each individual must deal with the feelings that arise when the issue of “appropriate” behaviour comes up, particularly accommodation and politeness inwardly resented, when people with varying degrees of inhibition about body gesture are together in the contained labyrinth space. Some prefer, or feel constrained into, a slow dignified pace, and are shocked and offended by those who assert their right to more expressive and expansive movements. Facilitators give permission by emphasising at the outset of each event that there is no one “right” way to walk. But often in the labyrinth I want to blow off steam by dancing, and I was brought up short when my training supervisor suggested that the more uninhibited also needed to be aware of and sensitive to the needs of others. Wasn’t that “policing”? I had to examine the source of the steam, and the possibility that my resistance, both political and psychological, was blocking my compassion. In the labyrinth, everything is metaphor.

The reason for this resonance may lie in the analogy between the functioning of the brain and the layout of the labyrinth. The triune brain, vertically and laterally inter-connected, finds “the appropriate stimulus and supportive environment” (Pearce 49) in the labyrinth experience. Parallel-processing in/of/between reptile-brain, limbic system, and neo-cortex “entities” seems to be diagrammed by the layout of the labyrinth path itself: the concentric layers of the three trans-quadrant circuits identifiable among what appears at first to be a jumble of twists and turns. Clockwise and counter clockwise circumambulations characterize the labyrinth—a corkscrew or augur whereby one walks “inward” counter clockwise, and then brings “up” or “out” and consolidates the psychic “sample” on the clockwise circuits.

There may be an analogy here also to the images and experiences of emotion/feeling that arise on the stages of the path. Jung talks about the formal elements in the process of development in the psyche and many are represented in the labyrinth pattern and so re-traced

by the walker: the chaotic multiplicity and order; the opposition of right and left, in the alternation of the turns; the radial arrangement around the quadraform, rotation, and centering process—the climax in his view (in Chodorow 46) and also in the labyrinth sequence of the Threefold Path, on reaching the middle. The welling of emotion that occurred during the event in San Francisco came as I moved towards the centre. That part of the path I know to be located in the last and outermost, “deepest” of the trans-quadrant circuits. So I had walked through all the depths of the labyrinth. Perhaps I had simultaneously traversed the depths and lateral breadth of the three brain levels. Reptile-brain reported on the “safety of the tribe,” the limbic system was full of compassion, the neo-cortex was vexed at my messy public behaviour; I was “trapped” and suspended in public exposure, yet, paradoxically, safe.

Rosenstiehl’s graph theory analysis of the labyrinth is a left-brain schematic, linear and programmatic, while a sketch of his “infinite field” diagram illustrates “the flux of global patterns of activation over the entire network” in Ashbrook’s description of right hemisphere activity (343). This evidence of coherence between left and right hemisphere patterning and product has a numinous glow about it. I am drawn to it; I think the Answer might lie there. Body-knowing and concept-forming and rational/scientific description of the labyrinth experience overlay each other in alignment: “The order was there before we were.” Maybe my tears were a response to, an expression of, the sense of home-coming. Maybe the public humiliation was a necessary un-masking. It is both private and social. Un-masking is the collective great fear, the dark side of the culture’s brutal competitiveness, which appears to be a function of left-hemisphere lop-sidedness, a cruel dualism, one bridged by the labyrinth experience.

Insights from yoga practitioners provide a radical interpretation of Western mythological heritage as literal, though concealed, descriptions of body functions as sensors and moderators of human existence. The dynamics between mythological deities and entities are analogs to breath, senses, perceptions, cognition (Sansone). Awareness of our inner workings, freed from our entanglements of desire with external objects/goals by means of the practices intended to attain trance state, will bring us in line with the harmonies apparent in all creation (as expressed by all ancient wisdom traditions and modern quantum physics). The archaic origins of trance state lie in repetitive motions, evolving later to control of breath and other body functions. In labyrinth practice, the repeated turns and runs have a pattern of concealed logic that subverts rational linear thinking—the mind “gives up” to being lost and compelled through space. Western concepts of relative value, e.g. “ahead” and “behind,” lose their meaning. One falls back on proprioceptive awareness of one’s own pace, in time with one’s own breathing. Strong emotions and realisations lie suppressed beneath normative social behaviours such as following a pace not your own. The process of adjustment can be a shock. The result, eventually, is a profound and energizing sense of relaxation.

In western civilisation, mind and body were polarised and attended to by different professional disciplines, and ranked in value. The mind was associated with spirit, clarity,

objectivity, and differentiation. The receptive feminine principle was located in the living body and that psychological repository for rejected impulses and qualities, with its personal, cultural, and collective aspects, which Jung called the Shadow. This dimension of human existence was demonised and devalued, suppressed and consequently distorted in eruption and projection. One result is that body gesture is under cultural surveillance. That is why the first step into the labyrinth, the public crossing of the threshold, is an emancipation. In this place the abandoned are found, brought back, restored.

In the Cathedral experience, the insight that joy was a rare treasure in the eternal flow of grief was offered outwards in compassion. It had calmed me; maybe by offering it, the collective energy was transformed. This points to its potential as a ritual healing tool. The *communitas* context is significant in labyrinth practice. Clarissa Pinkola Estes describes weeping as a call for comfort and support. Weeping on the labyrinth does not necessarily mean you will receive gestures of comfort, though I have seen complete strangers fall into each other's arms when a family in crisis reached an emotional climax at the centre and called soundlessly for help from the other participants. There is no "protocol" for this, it was spontaneous. Congregation—even a temporary one like the participants at an event—is "small-scale society" with frames for understanding and containing transformative process, if the individual chooses to engage with the group. Perhaps if we were more explicit about this, it would be more widely recognized as an alternative to cultural "pathologizing" of the symptoms of initiation to the rites of passage.

Finding balance

To give up on reason as the sole means of discernment allows the underlying truths of our cultural heritage to return from the wastebasket of Modernity, opening up for me the possibility of simultaneity of consciousness. Math, science, mythology, dance, all the ways that humans have understood the world, telescoped into the awareness of each consecutive moment, once I learned to "listen" to the bodyself, my own and others, and to "read" its messages. It has been fruitful to undertake this learning while maintaining a relationship to the pavement labyrinth as a constant amidst shifting viewpoints and levels of awareness. I could at least keep track of the evolution in my responses to this unchanging spatial device.

The labyrinth is unchanging, but the individuals coming to it are in ceaseless flux. Humans need some sensory cues in the immediate atmosphere to assist them in moving into a state receptive to such alternation in consciousness. Time of day, light levels, number of people present, the evocative effect of candles, music, incense, all make a difference to what ensues, even for the same individuals. The intentions of the group gathering to "create" an event can be influenced by what is said and done in the introduction, when the ringing of bells signals the onset of sacred time; otherwise the group gathers on the surface of the labyrinth to drink coffee and chat after a service elsewhere in the building, with no intention of engaging with it whatsoever—only the children running on what fragments of the path are free of Sunday

school tables remind us it is there. Then I wonder how as a species we rely on a leader to say, “Look! Listen! Touch!” so as to break through consensual oblivion, to draw the line between the sacred and the profane.

Here I am encouraged by Joan’s report on the impact that walking the labyrinth had on her life. This proves to me what a powerful tool it is, overriding all our comforting (or despairing) assumptions about our evolutionary distance from what we once been able to “know” and the “bodiness” of knowing it. That the wisdom we could gain from it was accessible through the experience of the body, rather than the machinations of reason, I had no doubt. Joan’s story suggested that the physical event of walking the labyrinth activated a template of tacit meaning: in mythological terms, she had gone into the darkness at the centre and, by integrating and reviving her inner Theseus, had rescued her own “maiden” self. I saw then that we had evoked mysterious invisible powers beyond my understanding.

I am astonished when it all comes together and takes off, when all in the group feel some peripheral vascular “rush” simultaneously, spontaneously. One Midsummer Night’s event, Taizé chanting in rounds had fragmented into some auditory architectonic structure, acentric and fluid. I had worked hard as facilitator to arrange an event, and I felt like celebrating its conclusion. I had walked alone into the centre with everyone singing round the outside. The labyrinth was vibrating with accumulated energy and my feet spun vortexes on the turns. It reminded me of the Flamenco circle where everyone supports the one in the middle, clapping and exhorting until the performer is filled with the wild spirit the Rom call *duende*. I felt myself relax finally into trusting the sense of *communitas*, dancing and singing all the way to the centre, where I sat for a long time staring into the red roses and candlelight and incense smoke. Afterwards I asked some tentative questions of the others. Everyone volunteered some version of the same physical and imaginal experience: an “electric” feeling, a surge of energy, a glowing vision of a net spread out between us, a glorious and majestic freedom in the improvisational harmonies of the music we were creating, a sense of contribution to and return from that creation.

Notes

¹ Kearney adds, “We no longer appear to know who exactly produces or controls the images which condition our consciousness”(3).

² “We appear to have entered a post-modern civilisation where the image has become less and less the expression of an individual subject and more and more the commodity of an anonymous consumerist technology” (Kearney 6).

³ “They presume a double perspective: maze-treaders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion, whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its complex artistry.” (Doob 1)

⁴ In respectively, Brunés, Critchlow, Lawlor, Rosenstiehl.

⁵ Compare in Capra: “The central insight of the systems theory of cognition, sometimes called the Santiago theory, is the identification of cognition, the process of knowing, with the process of life. . . . A brain is not necessary for mind to exist. A bacterium, or a plant, capable of perception and thus of cognition, has no brain but has a mind. Mind and matter no longer appear to belong to two separate categories but represent different aspects, or dimensions, of the same phenomenon of life. The relationship between mind and brain are clear. Descartes’ characterization of the mind as ‘the thinking thing,’ (*res cogitans*) is finally abandoned. Mind is not a thing but a process—the process of cognition, which is identified with the process of life. The brain is a specific structure through which this process operates. The relationship between mind and brain therefore is one between process and structure.” (172–3).

⁶ Jung defines archetypes this way: “In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature, there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. Whereas the personal unconscious consists of contents, which have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed, the collective unconscious is made up essentially of pre-existent forms, which have never been in consciousness, the *archetypes*. The archetypes are the unconscious image of the instincts themselves, in other words, that they are *patterns of instinctual behaviour*. . . . the forms which the instincts assume” (60–1).

⁷ The spring beneath Chartres Cathedral can still be seen in the Crypt on the north side. It is very deep and lined with bricks. The tour guide tells with relish the story of the Christian martyrs slaughtered by the invading Vikings and thrown down the well shaft.

⁸ Compare with Jung’s identification of archetypes as unconscious images of instincts, note 6.

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