

*Solvitur Ambulando*<sup>1</sup>:  
Creating the McGiffert Labyrinth at Union Theological Seminary



**Kristen Leigh Mitchell**  
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<sup>1</sup> A Latin phrase, widely attributed to St. Augustine, but dating back to the cynic Diogenes of Sinope, meaning: "It is solved by walking."

## Stops and Starts

“When did you come up with the idea to paint a labyrinth on the roof?” asked a fellow seminarian who was sitting on a bench nearby keeping me company while I filled in chalk lines on the cement tiles with white primer paint.

“Oh, the first week I got here,” I answered half-jokingly. It’s true that I was somewhat dismayed upon my arrival at Union – heralded as *the* progressive, ecumenical seminary of New York City – that a labyrinth was nowhere to be found. For that matter, I could not seem to find a permanently-installed Chartres-style labyrinth that was available to the public anywhere on the entire Manhattan peninsula. “This is New York,” I thought, “don’t they have *everything* here?”

In retrospect, I can see how my journey up unto this point may have misled me as to their seeming ubiquity. I had only been a Christian for about a year when I stumbled into the courtyard of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco one night, and saw the winding path of the labyrinth for the first time, gleaming in the moonlight. The next Sunday I attended church there, and experienced for the Anglican liturgy for the first time, with the enchanted melodies of the Eucharistic prayers reverberating throughout the stone rafters of high Gothic ceilings. Afterwards I waited patiently for the crowd to die down, slipped off my shoes, and stepped onto the path of the indoor labyrinth at the back of the nave.

Both the experience of the liturgy and of walking the labyrinth left me with a feeling like God had reached down into my depths, yanked out my soul, and held it out in front of me just to make sure I got a good, long look at it. I was accessing parts of myself that I could have sworn I’d never seen before, and yet at the same time they felt strangely familiar. It was less like discovering something new, and more like remembering something very, very old... something I had always known but had long since forgotten. In that sense, walking the labyrinth was like coming out of some sort of amnesia, opening up a time capsule, or finding an old scrap of paper that contained all the mysteries of the universe, which just so happened to have been crumpled up in my back pocket all along. Something ancient had been stirred.

All of this might have seemed a bit extraordinary, except that things like this had been happening a lot lately. Since my conversion to Christianity, I’d come to know God as a playful sort of trickster character – sometimes annoying, often endearing, not always likable, but definitely trustworthy. And let’s face it, God had a much better track record at knowing me better than I knew myself. After all, who would have ever thought that I, an overly rational agnostic/atheist with no patience for organized religion and a scathing attitude towards Christianity and the church would find myself a wayward but devoted disciple of Jesus, and voraciously devouring theology books and attending sermons at Gothic cathedrals like they were the bread of Life? For goodness sakes, I had even begun to consider seminary.

My life, as it turned out, was a lot like the winding path of the labyrinth. The meandering corridors of this strange walking path fit my story like a glove. It was a physical metaphor that I could literally step into and wander around inside of, carrying with me all my questions and hopes and fears. All the stops and starts. All the seeming failures that still led in the direction of... *somewhere*. All those times that I thought I was racing to the center, only to end up further away from it. All those times that I thought I was furthest from the truth, only to suddenly find myself suddenly staring it in the face, and watching it giggle at me joyfully, knowing that it knew all along.

Two weeks after that first walk, I got a job working in the bookstore at Grace Cathedral – selling labyrinth books, key chains, necklaces, and other spiritual *tchotchkes* to parishioners and pilgrims. People came from all over the country to see the grand cathedral and walk its famous labyrinths, as well as to learn from Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress, the canon priest who had been personally responsible for the renewed interest in labyrinths among mainline Christians in the United States. A couple of years later, I found myself back in my hometown of Greensboro, NC, running a bookstore of my own at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church – another parish with an impressive courtyard Chartres-style labyrinth. There, I maintained a large section of books and resources on the subject, and regularly found myself introducing visitors to the practice of walking the labyrinth for the first time. In the fall of 2009, the Rev. Lauren Artress came to Holy Trinity to offer a public lecture, book signing, and 3-day workshop for labyrinth facilitators, an event that attracted more than 300 people over the course of the weekend. The church even had a dedicated ministry called the “Labyrinth Keepers,” a group of people who were devoted to maintaining and caring for the labyrinth as well as facilitating group labyrinth walks and events.

All of these experiences contributed to my awareness of the growing interest in labyrinths as a symbol and a spiritual practice, among Christians and non-Christians alike. My familiarity with the available writings on the subject also gave me a sense of the ideas, approaches, and sensibilities that had informed and guided the popular discourse and teachings that circulated among labyrinth enthusiasts. But despite of my own enthusiasm for the prayer practice, I also became increasingly aware of the ways in which labyrinth writers and facilitators tended to gloss over the history and mythology of the labyrinth, offering little sense of the scholarship concerning the symbol’s origins, much less its relationship to the literary concept of the maze, or the reasons why it was so widely adopted among Christians during the Middle Ages.

I *could* say that it was this awareness of the growing ecumenical interest in labyrinths, and my desire to dig up the truth about their history, that inspired me to seek out a diverse group of faculty to oversee an independent research project on the labyrinth, which would include the experience of designing and painting a permanent labyrinth on the roof of Union Theological Seminary. But admittedly, my goals were neither purely academic or altruistic. After a tough first year of seminary, I wanted a labyrinth that I could go to in prayer – a safe space in which I could enter into deep communion with God, in order to discern my next vocational steps. It was this longing to walk the labyrinth again myself that finally pushed me from idea into action.

I started by polling some of my fellow students – particularly those who I knew used the roof frequently for social gatherings. “I’m thinking of painting a labyrinth on the roof... what do you think about that?” The responses I got were very interesting. The Unitarian Universalists I spoke with, along with most others who identified with multi-faith, agnostic, or non-doctrinal spiritualities were already quite familiar with the Cretan-style labyrinth, and were *very* supportive of the idea of painting what they considered to be a “pagan” symbol on the roof of a seminary. Those committed to Buddhist meditation practices supported the idea of incorporating what they understood as an opportunity for “walking meditation.” Many students simply liked the idea because it seemed like it might add an element of mystery, fun, or medieval-inspired beauty to the roof. Everyone I spoke to was enthusiastically supportive.

But I was surprised that very few Christians – coming from a variety of different denominations – were familiar with the labyrinth as a *Christian* symbol at all, much less as a growing ministry within the church. Because I had been introduced to the labyrinth *through* the church, I found this to be rather intriguing. My fellow Christian seminarians expressed genuine curiosity and interest around the idea that the labyrinth might have historical roots or resonances within the church. But not very many people at the time seemed to know much about it. This discovery deepened my resolve not only to bring a walkable labyrinth into this ecumenical community, but to better educate myself on the scholarship surrounding its symbolism and history, so that I could better educate others about the history of its use within ritual contexts.

### **Battling Logistics (or, Everything That Can Go Wrong Will)**

Innocence is often the key to ambition. Though I had drawn labyrinth symbols on paper before (the older, Cretan style labyrinth is a fairly simple doodle, once you get the hang of it), I had certainly never created a life-sized, walkable pattern. I knew that I wanted to draw a labyrinth based on the Chartres design, not only for its metaphorical complexity, but because of its connection to Christian ritual and symbolism – since this was something about which Union seminary students seemed to know the least. Also, the Chartres design more closely matched the gothic architecture of Riverside Church that loomed overhead on the McGiffert roof, with its gargoyles and its giant rose window.

After some preliminary measurements, however, I realized that I was going to have to make some significant modifications in order to make a Chartres design work for the space. The original Chartres labyrinth is about 42 feet wide, and the roof space accommodated less than half of that diameter. I contacted Lauren Artress for her recommendations, and she pointed me to a 7-circuit variation of the Chartres design:

Chartres Labyrinth:



7-circuit variation:



Drawing a life-sized Chartres labyrinth requires you to first acquire a few basic items: a stationary pole of some sort, a rope of some sort, a marker, a tape measure, and chalk. For a stationary pole, I used a heavy bronze stanchion post from the McGiffert lobby. For the rope, I used 1mm hemp twine. The pole must be placed in the position of what will become the labyrinth's center, and the rope needs to be tied loosely enough around the pole that it can be spun around freely, but tightly enough to provide consistent measurements when stretched taut. The marker and tape measure are used to create markings along the rope that indicate the positions of each concentric circle, coming out from the center. By holding a piece of chalk at each of the markings along your stretched-out rope, you can then trace concentric circles onto the surface as you spin around the pole. The best way to ensure the design's geometric integrity is to draw complete concentric circles around the center, later erasing the interior lines to create the inner pathways. This is why chalk is recommended (for some surfaces, a pencil or charcoal would work just as well – anything as long as it can be erased).

Depending on the size of the labyrinth, the "lines" of the pattern will probably be between 2-3" wide. So in order to maintain precision with each line, it is best to draw *two* concentric chalk circles marking the interior and exterior edges of each line (which you fill in with color later). This means that for a regular 11-circuit Chartes labyrinth, you will draw a total of 24 concentric circles around the center pole. For the 7-circuit variation, I drew a total of 16 lines around the pole (which, I must say, made for a vigorous workout on a New York City rooftop in August!). Given the limited rooftop space, it was also necessary to experiment with several different measurements for the width of the path, the thickness of the lines, and the diameter of the center. The goal was to create a labyrinth that was aesthetically symmetrical, but also practical for walking. The walking path of the original Chartres labyrinth is between 13-15" wide, but it was clear that the McGiffert labyrinth's path would need to be a bit smaller. After a good bit of math and experimentation, I eventually determined that 11" was the smallest width that could make for a reasonable walking path.

In her book *Walking a Sacred Path*, Lauren Artress goes into considerable detail about the "sacred geometry" of the labyrinth, emphasizing the symbolic, numerological significance of every aspect of the design. "Sacred geometry," she writes, "is a lost art that developed a balance and serene climate for the human psyche and soul"<sup>2</sup> – in other words, something like the *feng-shui* of the medieval West. Artress explains that from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, scholars at the Cathedral School of Chartres understood geometry to be part of the *quadrivium* – the upper division of subjects in the medieval system of education that were considered to be the keys to all knowledge in the universe (the others being arithmetic, astronomy, and music).<sup>3</sup> "The sacred geometry embedded in the [Chartres] labyrinth is crucial," she insists, "and its requirements are quite precise."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in her discussion of the challenges facing the "labyrinth movement" in the church, Artress points to what she describes as an unfortunate proliferation of badly-built labyrinths.

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<sup>2</sup> Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 108.

<sup>4</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 186-190.

Determined not to contribute to this problem, I was committed to designing a labyrinth that, despite the need for modifications, maintained its proportional integrity. However it did not take long for me to begin to understand the logistical magnitude of the task before me, much less its mathematical complexities. Because this was an outdoor project that required me to create the design in chalk before immortalizing it with cement primer, it would mean that I would need to draw the entire labyrinth with chalk and then outline the entire thing with paint before a rainstorm could come along and wash away the chalk lines. However, in order to make sure that the primer adhered to the cement correctly, I was also advised not to apply it in the middle of the day when the roof tiles would be baking in the hot August sun, which made it impossible to complete the task in a single day. I knew that I only had one chance to get this right, and I was keenly aware that a stray afternoon thunderstorm could come out of nowhere and ruin everything. Taking inventory of all that could go wrong, I prayed to God for the help to see it through, placed a sign on the door to the roof saying it was temporarily closed, and sent an email out to my fellow residents informing them of the project, and asking them not to walk onto the space for the next several days. Above all, I implored them – do not to move the center pole. After all, as long as that stanchion pole remained stationary for the duration of the project, any lines that were accidentally erased could always be re-drawn.

Tracing one concentric circle after another, each one slightly larger than the last, I began to draw out the lines that would become the walls of prayer. Sally Welch's *Walking the Labyrinth: A Spiritual and Practical Guide*<sup>5</sup> is a wonderful resource that provides helpful step-by-step instructions for how to create the entrance and exit paths, and where to add and erase lines at the appropriate junctures in order to create the turns for a functional 7-circuit pattern. Following the instructions carefully, I used the top of an overturned table from the second floor common room (which just so happened to be the right size) to trace out the curves for the turns. In the end, I stepped back to look at the completed drawing, and then walked through it once just to make sure that it actually worked. I was surprised and relieved when I successfully reached the center.

I checked the weather one last time before venturing to put down any paint, but the forecast remained unchanged: clear skies, they promised, with no chance of rain until the next evening. I knew that would give me plenty of time to at least get the outlines painted. I opened the can of primer, pulled out my brush, and again took stock of all that might go wrong. I might get confused about which side of the line to fill in and color in the wrong section. I might get distracted and knock the can of paint over, making a nice white blob on the top of the McGiffert roof. Someone who was oblivious to the project might come up and walk across the paint lines while they were still wet, creating permanent white footprints. Who was I to be doing this? The project obviously required an enormous amount of God's grace, total concentration, and in a lot of ways, pure luck. I said one final prayer to the Holy Spirit: *Guide my hands, heart, and mind, as well as all those whose footsteps will enter this sacred path, and let this labyrinth be a means for all who come here to hear the voice of God, and to experience a concrete connection with the Divine. Amen.*

The golden hour had already begun when I started to apply the primer. I worked as fast as I could until the last bit of light was left. But when darkness fell, there was still one corner of the labyrinth that remained unpainted. It would have to be completed early

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<sup>5</sup> Sally Welch, *Walking the Labyrinth: A Spiritual and Practical Guide*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010).

the next morning. I went downstairs to prepare for bed. Suddenly, I began to hear something that made my heart sink: it was the pitter patter of a gentle summer rain falling outside. I pulled up the weather forecast again and sure enough, it had changed. And yet I went to sleep comforted, knowing that with the pole still at the center of the labyrinth, I would be able to re-draw the lines again tomorrow. Early the next morning, however, I sauntered up to the roof only to find that the pole had been moved back down to the lobby. Apparently, one of the maintenance guys had not gotten the memo about my project.

I went downstairs to retrieve the pole, but the damage was already done. I found what I thought to be the faint outline of where the pole had been yesterday, and tried my best to place it in the same spot. Tying another rope to the pole, I marked out the measurements for the concentric circles, and attempted to re-create the missing lines by connecting the dots as best I could. Admittedly, there was a good bit of “eyeballing it.” When I was finished, I backed up to examine my work. It looked fine to the naked eye, but internally I was still dismayed. Somehow the project seemed compromised. I felt as if the proportional integrity of the labyrinth had been lost. Would this lack of precision diminish the *feng-shui* effect of the labyrinth’s “sacred geometry”? Had I created yet another poorly-drawn church labyrinth? Would anything ever align in these arbitrary walls of prayer I had drawn? I spent entirely too much time worrying about this.

But as I began to go over my new chalk outlines with the primer, I felt a sense of peace. I heard a voice from deep within suggesting that perhaps God did not want a “perfect” labyrinth on this rooftop. Perhaps that sort of perfection was not necessarily part of the Design. I considered my friend the apostle Paul, writing in his second letter to the Corinthians (12:9) that the power of God is made perfect in weakness. I also thought of the indigenous tribes of the American southwest, who have their own history and mythology surrounding the labyrinth symbol. I remembered an old story that the Navajo tell, about how they intentionally weave an “imperfection” into the corner of every rug, which is where they believed that the spirit entered. I thought of the Leonard Cohen lyric: “there is a crack in everything... that’s how the light gets in.” I considered that perhaps this “imperfect” corner of the McGiffert labyrinth would be the place where the Holy Spirit might enter, reaching into the hearts of the imperfect pilgrims who would walk it.

Once the entire design had been filled in with the cement primer, the next step was to add the actual paint. I had originally chosen a greyish beige color that would blend in subtly with the existing cement tiles, going for a kind of barely-noticeable effect. But several students had gotten used to the bright lines of the white primer, and appreciated that the labyrinth was visible and walkable even at night. I reconsidered the context, thinking in particular of the Edible Churchyard project, which had recently transformed this industrial-urban rooftop into a beautiful and plentiful garden. This creation care context is what inspired me to go with an earthy brown color.

When I returned the next evening with my brown paint, ready to begin adding the color, I encountered one of the seminary’s faculty members relaxing on the roof. “Do you mind if I just work on this while you are up here?” I asked innocently, expecting that he must know about the project, and assuming everything would be fine. This professor, however, *did* mind. He had not been informed of the project, he was suddenly *very* concerned about the idea of having a symbol of prayer and meditation painted onto a space that had always been used for shared, convivial social gatherings. I tried to reassure

him that once it was finished, it would not be in anyone's way. But he assured me that he would be contacting the Facilities Department to appeal for its removal. And, sure enough, when I returned to the roof a few hours later in an attempt to finish applying the brown paint, the Housing Director came up and kindly asked me to discontinue working on the project until a meeting could be held to discuss the situation.

### **A Labyrinth is Not a Maze, and other dubious assertions**

How did my plan to paint a multivalent spiritual symbol on the residential rooftop of a progressive ecumenical seminary come to be perceived as a subversive act of graffiti art? It was almost two weeks until the meeting that would determine the fate of the labyrinth, which gave me plenty of time to ponder these and other questions. The controversy did give me some perspective on the lengthy defense that Lauren Artress offered in her book on behalf of mystical experiences, and the importance of finding ways to move people and communities beyond the rationalistic mindset which has dominated Western thinking in the modern era. I had not understood why she devoted so many pages to this in a book on the labyrinth, since the merits the symbol for facilitating a direct spiritual experience seemed plain to me. Now the need for clarification became more apparent.

“As we in the West learned to use our rational minds,” Artress writes, “we developed a sense of superiority that denied our intuition and imagination their rightful place among the human faculties we need to survive.”<sup>6</sup> Quoting William Blake's observation that “the enemy of whole vision is the reasoning power's divorce from the imagination,” Artress traces the history of how the imagination came to be viewed with suspicion in light of modernism's developing sense of rationality.<sup>7</sup> Lacking the tools for discernment between true mystical experience and imaginary fantasy, people began to conflate deeper intuitive paths of knowing with “superstition.” Ultimately, the imagination as a whole was placed into a kind of exile, both from the academy and from religion.

In her discussion of the three ways in which Christians have traditionally come to know God – *given knowledge* in the Scriptures, *tradition* through the writings of the saints and liturgical worship, and *continued revelation* or direct experiences of the Holy – “the third avenue,” she writes, “has always been controversial, and depending on the denomination or the tradition comes with all kinds of caveats.”<sup>8</sup> This kind of “knowledge” is, after all, not something that can be evaluated, controlled, critiqued, footnoted, or accredited. One cannot help but to wonder if this resistance to Mystery was not an underlying factor behind the eventual destruction of church labyrinths at the end of the eighteenth century. According to Sally Welch, their destruction appears to have taken place within only a few short years, and was nearly total. Those that remained, like the famous labyrinth found in Chartres cathedral in northern France, fell out of use and became just another floor decoration.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 112.

<sup>8</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 82-83.

<sup>9</sup> Welch, *Walking the Labyrinth*, 25.



While no one seems to have a clear sense of the historical reasoning behind the destruction of church labyrinths, Artress places the event within its historical context, and noting that:

As the Western world moved into the Enlightenment, we embraced reason as the central function of the mind. This excluded subjective experiences: the senses, as well as intuition, dreams, or any hints of revelation. In the eyes of both scientists and leaders of the Reformation, the religious imagination was stripped of all respect...Protestants banished symbols and images from their churches because they thought them idolatrous.<sup>10</sup>

These shifts in Western thought occurred not only in scientific and religious circles, but in the field of mathematics as well. The kind of “sacred geometry” that had undergirded the design of medieval church labyrinths was based on the ancient Pythagorean system, which had no concept of zero and was based instead around the number one, which represented the central concept of unity and was symbolized by the circle. In a mathematical paradigm more closely mirroring the natural pattern of cells, unity became multiplicity not through addition, but through division. Artress therefore speculates that perhaps the movement from Pythagorean to Cartesian thought contributed in some ways to a loss of interest in the labyrinth symbol.<sup>11</sup>

However, one of the more intriguing – and yet overlooked – factors that likely played a role in the abandonment of church labyrinths was the coinciding rise in the popularity of a recent invention: the maze. The first design of an actual puzzle-maze that contained “tricks” in the form of blind alleys and dead-ends did not emerge until 1420, but over the next few centuries, the popularity of garden mazes spread among European elites, and increasingly became a sought-after form of secular entertainment. In other words, the conflation of “labyrinths” and “mazes” in the premodern imagination seems to have played role in the labyrinth’s displacement during the modern era, in that it was seen both as a symbol of dubious religious value, and as an outdated rendering of the literary motif from classical Greek mythology that it referenced.

Most of the contemporary titles on the labyrinth go to great lengths in order to emphasize the important spiritual and symbolic *differences* between “labyrinths” and “mazes.” Authors and labyrinth facilitators alike unfailingly highlight the fact that a labyrinth offers a single path that always leads to the center, whereas mazes emphasize choice and present dead-ends as consequences for wrong choices. The spiritual qualities of walking a labyrinth are contrasted with the more secular and rational experience of being in a maze: both offer a *felt* sense of being lost, but in a labyrinth one is never *actually* lost. Sally Welch stresses that this is one of the most important points to make when introducing the labyrinth to newcomers.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, as soon as these same authors move away from discussions about how to facilitate labyrinth walking *as a spiritual practice*, and move into discussions of the labyrinth’s *history*, the two concepts suddenly begin to merge again, so that what were previously emphasized as two totally distinct phenomena are now being spoken of as synonymous. The abrupt shift from “a labyrinth is *not* a maze...” to “the labyrinth *was* a

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<sup>10</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 115.

<sup>11</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Welch, *Walking the Labyrinth*, 41.

maze...” that commonly tends to occur in the literature is usually accompanied by little or no explanation. So how do we account for this confusion?

The popular conception of the “labyrinth” as a maze-like structure that could trap an individual inside of it forever harkens back to the Greek myth of Theseus, in which the term is used to describe the ominous structure built by Daedalus at Knossos Palace in Crete to house the Minotaur.<sup>13</sup> This myth has informed the popular conception of labyrinths throughout the Roman era and the Middle Ages, and even most church labyrinths depicted the infamous half-man, half-beast at their center. This literary understanding of the labyrinth as a maze can be seen today in films like *Labyrinth*, *Pans’ Labyrinth*, and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Still, none of the labyrinth images from late antiquity or into the Middle Ages were ever depicted with blind alleys, dead-ends, or any other conceivable way of getting trapped or lost.

Hermann Kern summarizes the confusion in his well-articulated analysis of the contradiction:

The term “labyrinth” is most frequently used as a metaphor in reference to a difficult, unclear, confusing situation. This figurative, *proverbial* sense of the word has been in use since late antiquity, and can be traced back to the concept of a maze: a tortuous structure (a building or a garden) that offers the walker many paths, some of which lead to dead ends or blind alleys. This particular notion of a labyrinth derives from the many written accounts from the third century BCE, in which the labyrinth (in this context, a maze) is employed as a literary motif. By comparison, the earliest *depiction* of a maze dates from about 1420 CE. In curious contrast to the literary tradition widely accepted in antiquity and the Middle Ages, *all* depictions of labyrinths up to the Renaissance show only one path; therefore, there is no possibility of going astray. ...In fact, these two distinct notions have been obfuscated over time, resulting in unavoidable terminological confusion, which has not been accounted for until this century.<sup>14</sup>

The invention of the maze as an actual physical construct in the fifteenth century does appear to have corresponded with a turning point in Western thought. With regard to this shift, Jaskolski writes:

It is no accident that it was in the same century that the first *labyrinths in the form of mazes* were devised, that playful innuendoes of the uncertainty of humanity’s capacity for orientation [emerged], and at the same time, signals of a new relationship of man to himself and to the world. In contrast to the medieval labyrinth, which as a figure of orientation and salvation led with certainty into the middle and out again, the new mazes were symbols of a way that was uncertain through and through, on which the traveler constantly had to deal with false paths and confusion, a route that forked without warning, and often enough led into dead ends.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Helmut Jaskolski, *The Labyrinth: Symbol of Fear, Rebirth and Liberation* (London: Shambhala, 1997), 5-23.

<sup>14</sup> Hermann Kern, *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings Over 5,000 Years* (New York: Prestel, 2000), 23, emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> Jaskolski, *The Labyrinth*, 88-89.

It was from this point in history that the labyrinth and the maze diverged into two very different visual and metaphorical symbols for depicting life's journey. Mazes offered an experience that was more resonant with the rational humanism that was on the rise in the fifteenth century, which ultimately came to prevail in Western thought during the Early Modern period. Having lost its mythological, geometric, and metaphorical power, the labyrinth simply fell out of fashion, going dormant in Western culture for the next several hundred years. Only with the recent shift into a *post*-modern experience do we find the labyrinth symbol gaining archetypal resonance once again – albeit perhaps in a new way. Given our increasingly oversaturated and globalized world, characterized by the experience of constant stimulation and the feeling of being pulled in multiple directions, the singular path of the labyrinth offers a new kind of challenge for postmodern pilgrims: to focus their attention on the path immediately in front of them, staying embodied in the present moment, without becoming too distracted by how far they've already traveled, or where they stand in relation to their destination. This call to “trust the path” that winds imperceptibly but faithfully through our sense of chaos is an experience that rings truer than the individual self-determination symbolized by the maze. Interestingly, the re-emergence of the labyrinth symbol has also coincided with a further development in mathematics: from Cartesian thought to chaos theory. As we move into new frontiers of scientific and mathematical thought, as well as spiritual understanding, the meaning and metaphor of the labyrinth is speaking to us anew.

## **Art, Archetypes, and Appropriation**

The question of what the labyrinth actually *meant* to those who installed and interacted with the symbol during premodern times remains (perhaps unsurprisingly) a matter of significant debate among scholars. It seems fitting that any attempt to trace the history of practices surrounding the labyrinth would prove winding and elusive. Perhaps it is the very nature of a symbol made by the imagination and for the imagination, that it should evade or preclude historical lucidity. Of the available historical documents and research concerning the question of the labyrinth's meaning, Kern observes that:

The records contradict each other in almost every way possible, and fundamental elements are either missing or skewed by the perspective of the interested party. In addition, we are not only dealing with a symbol of the past, but with one that continues to have significance today, a fact that naturally influences our view of historical and philological considerations do not provide a comprehensive picture of this concept.<sup>16</sup>

Kern further observes that “since the etymology of the word [labyrinth] is unknown, and the earliest literary references obviously denote a derivative secondary meaning, reconstructing the labyrinth concept can be tackled only indirectly.”<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of this difficulties Kern suggests that there is strong evidence – both visual and literary – for the hypothesis that the labyrinth *design*, at its earliest conception, had a choreographic function. The earliest mention of Daedalus can

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<sup>16</sup> Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 23.

be found in Homer, where he is remembered not as the architect of a maze, but of a *dancing ground* at Knossos Palace, which was said to have been built for “Ariadne.” Knossos Palace was an ancient structure on the Greek island of Crete, dating back to the Middle Minoan period of about 2000-1580 BCE, which was widely known for its meandering, maze-like corridors, and its numerous frescoes and architectural homages to bulls, which were sacred to the ancient Minoans. Shards of ancient pottery depict dancers at Knossos performing in bull masks – as half-men/half-bulls – while holding a singular rope, perhaps even “Ariadne’s thread.” This evidence leads many scholars to believe that the earliest use of the term *labyrinthos* denoted a traditional circle dance of the Minoans, whose path was symbolized by the graphic pattern.

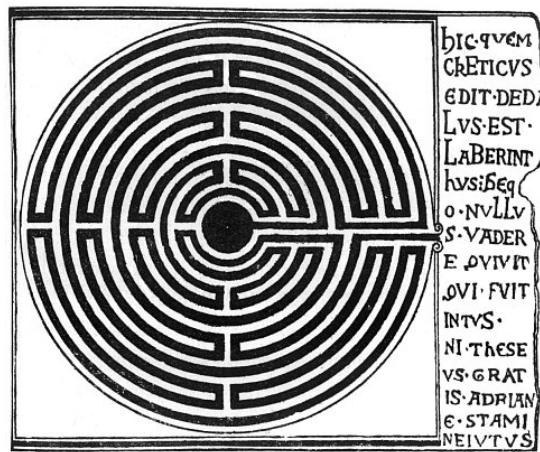
The Minoans were displaced by the Myceneans of mainland Greece by the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and eventually over the centuries, all memory of the dance faded aside from the one reference made in Homer. From there, it seems that the term “labyrinth” came to refer more broadly to any situation or place that was unpredictable or confusing in character, until the third century BCE, when Knossos Palace came to be known as the mythical the home of an elaborate underground “labyrinth” that Daedalus built for King Minos, in order to trap his dreaded half-man/half-bull monster, the Minotaur. The classical rendering of the myth tells the story of how Minos demanded that the Athenians send their 7 best sons and daughters to Knossos Palace each nine years to be thrown into the labyrinth as “tribute.” And so Theseus, hero of Athens, chooses to willingly enter into the maze, in order to defeat the Minotaur and eliminate the need for any future sacrifices. Theseus then finds his way out of the maze by following the thread he had laid out behind him, which had been given to him by Minos’s daughter, Ariadne. Later images from Athenian pottery that depict Theseus slaying the bull-headed man bear an eerie resemblance to the bull-headed dancers depicted on earlier Minoan frescoes. History, it seems (or in this case myth), is always told by the winners.

Interestingly, contemporary labyrinth authors and facilitators frequently introduce the labyrinth to newcomers with barely a cursory mention of Theseus and the Minotaur. Many ignore it entirely, leaving one with a sense that associations with the ancient myth are an embarrassment or a stumbling block, particularly when attempting to engage the labyrinth within the context of Christian spiritual practice. Artress seriously downplays any connection to the myth, saying that it simply “did not feel right” to her. In spite of the overwhelming scholarly consensus that the center of labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral originally depicted a Minotaur, she wonders with discomfort why “a figure from a pre-Christian Greek myth” would appear in a Christian sacred space.

And yet, the connection did not appear to be an issue for the medieval Christians who went to great lengths to install labyrinth symbols in their churches and cathedrals. The Greek legend of Theseus appears to have been central to the spiritual and theological significance of the labyrinth, since most church labyrinths contained some reference to Ariadne, Theseus, or the Minotaur. One of the earliest surviving church labyrinths can be found carved into the wall near the entrance of the cathedral in Lucca, Italy. The symbol is accompanied by the following inscription: “Here is the labyrinth that Daedalus of Crete built and which no one can leave who is once inside; only Theseus achieved this thanks to Ariadne’s thread.”<sup>18</sup> The wear in the stone indicates that people would frequently trace their fingers along the path; perhaps as a ritual before entering the church.

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<sup>18</sup> Jaskolski, *The Labyrinth*, 54.



Lucca labyrinth, ninth century

Unlike most other liturgical and ecclesiastical elements in the Western European Church, there does not appear to have ever made any effort to unify or dogmatize any official church teaching with regard to the labyrinth symbol, either in terms of its interpretation within a Christian theological context, or in terms of its appropriate liturgical use. The lack of documentation concerning labyrinths in the church records has led many scholars to believe that the labyrinth held little significance or value for the church beyond a purely aesthetic element such as gargoyles, or flying buttresses. Nevertheless, indirect references to its use in different locations suggest that there were a variety of traditions and practices that related to the archetypal symbol of the labyrinth. It is just that these traditions were never systematized or homogenized – an indication that, perhaps shockingly, labyrinths never became a source of any real concern or controversy in the ancient and medieval churches (that *any* aspect or element of church culture – aesthetic or otherwise – managed to escape commentary or controversy over the centuries is somewhat of a marvel in and of itself).

It is true that most people in the ninth century who entered the cathedral in Lucca would not have been able to read the words inscribed next to the labyrinth on the wall. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the allusion to the pre-Christian myth was made so explicit, particularly given the concerns expressed by so many of the early church fathers about rooting out “paganism.” But perhaps the best way to explain the presence of overt references to Theseus and the Minotaur in church labyrinths is that of inculturation. Because this Greek story was so ubiquitous at the time, it would have seemed perfectly reasonable for the Christians who inherited it to incorporate it as a Christian allegory.

In the Christian interpretation of the myth, the Minotaur is analogous to Satan, and the labyrinth itself represents death – a fate no mortal can escape. Theseus, then, is Jesus – the one who willingly goes to the center of the labyrinth to defeat the Minotaur. Jesus descends into Hades and defeats Satan and the powers of death, so that no more of God’s children will have to be sacrificed. Christ himself, then, becomes Ariadne’s thread: he is the lifeline and guide by which those who are trapped in the labyrinth of death can escape. Thus, journeying to the center of the labyrinth and back out again symbolically reenacts the journey of Jesus and God’s triumph over sin, death, and Hell. In this sense, the labyrinth image is *not* a maze – rather, the labyrinth is a depiction of Ariadne’s

thread, or Christ himself, that reveals the way to resurrection. In other words, the labyrinth is the maze that has been overcome. It is a symbol of Christ Himself.

In addition to this unique reinterpretation of the mythical motif, Kern has identified a number of different ways that Christians reconfigured the *design* of the labyrinth in order to further develop its symbolic meaning.<sup>19</sup> The most famous example, of course, is the superimposition of the cross in the design of the Chartres labyrinth. However, not all labyrinths in Christendom followed that same design. An octagon-shaped labyrinth at the cathedral in Amiens has been of particular interest to labyrinth scholars, since it parallels the same shape as the traditional baptismal font. Some therefore speculate that this particular labyrinth may have been used in the community's baptismal rituals.<sup>20</sup> This would also make sense in light of the labyrinth's symbolism as a Christian allegory, since the early Christians viewed baptism itself as a symbolic descent into death and arising into new life.



Amiens Cathedral octagon labyrinth

Other scholars have noted that several labyrinths in northern France were referred to as “*Chemin du Jerusalem*,” the path to Jerusalem, and also “*la lieue*,” meaning “the league,” which was equivalent to the distance a person could travel in approximately one hour.<sup>21</sup> According to some scholars, this suggests a possibility that the path was walked by parishioners, perhaps as a substitute for the symbolic last league of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, which was said to offer particular spiritual benefits. Parishioners who were unable to travel to the Holy Land conceivably walked the labyrinth in order to seek the same (or similar) spiritual benefits of a real pilgrimage.

Interestingly, one of the only documented uses of the labyrinth *during* a liturgy describes the labyrinth as a dance pattern/surface. There are also detailed accounts from the cathedrals of Auxerre and Sens that describe the labyrinth dances that the bishop (or dean) and chapter members would perform on Easter Sundays.<sup>22</sup> But these dances,

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<sup>19</sup> Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> Jaskolski, *The Labyrinth*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 148.

<sup>22</sup> Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 146-147.

presumably like all other ritual and ceremonial uses of the labyrinth, seem to have been regional particularities, rather than being utilized in any officially-proscribed manner. Despite the fact that labyrinths were a pervasive symbolic element in the medieval church, like today, they appear to have served a variety of different purposes, and offered a multitude of theological resonances and meanings.

Nowadays, Christians and non-Christians alike are sometimes skeptical – and perhaps even overtly critical – of the resurgence of labyrinths within the context of the church. These concerns seem to stem largely from issues surrounding the appropriateness of appropriation. On the one hand, some Christians maintain that the only Christian cultural elements that are trustworthy are those that derive from what can be found in Scripture and the writings of the first three centuries. These Christians view the presence of labyrinths in the church as a “pagan” or “trendy” secular element infiltrating the pure sanctity of orthodox church culture. On the other side are many non-Christians also would equally like to maintain clear categorical boundaries between historically “cultural” and historically “religious” groups. They view the Christian use of the labyrinth as yet another example of Christians co-opting and exploiting the symbols of cultural others.

Both of these criticisms are short-sighted in that they fail to consider not only the complexities of Christian history and cultural development, but the dynamic nature of culture itself, along with the ritual function that art and archetypes serve in the human psyche. Labyrinth scholar David McCulloch suggests that the labyrinth symbol may very well be the earliest work of human “art,” which is simply to say that it is an image spawned purely from the imagination, rather than a copy of anything found in nature. The popularity and pervasive application and adaptation of the labyrinth symbol in cultures and spanning vast distances of space and time suggests that this symbol is an archetype with deep significance in the human psyche – one that resonates both within and beyond the meaning-orientations of Greek mythology, Christianity, or any other cultural context. While the meanings and myths applied to labyrinths may vary, there is something in the symbol that seems to echo within the common heart of humanity. It is this resonance that has caused it to travel from its unknown place of origin (probably somewhere in the Mediterranean) to cultures as far reaching as India, Java, and the American Southwest.<sup>23</sup>

Everything comes from somewhere, whether we are able to identify its point of origin or not. Honest historical scholarship understands that very few, if any, of the religious symbols, stories, and traditions of Christianity are “original.” Christianity is inevitably a product of its pre-Christian roots, and this axiom is true in every religious tradition. Does that undermine the depth of meaning that emerges from these traditions? Does it water down the truth of a symbol, story, or tradition to admit that it came from somewhere else? On the contrary, I would argue that its widespread proliferation only confirms the legitimacy of its psychic power.

The beauty of symbols, stories, and archetypes exists precisely in their ability to transcend ownership by any one particular individual or culture. This is the power of *true* “sacred art.” Its purpose and its propensity is precisely to spread, because it taps into something universal at the heart of humanity. This cannot be stopped. While it is always important to understand the power dynamics at play in any given cultural context, efforts

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<sup>23</sup> Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, 25.

to restrain humans from creatively expressing their unique existential predicament through a mimetic interaction with the aesthetic forms they encounter in the world are ultimately pointless. And the labyrinth – whether it is understood as an ancient dance, a literary construct, a maze, a theological symbol for escaping the Hell, a path for walking meditation, a way of connecting back to premodern times, or just a cool visual symbol that someone wants to get tattooed on their arm so they can meditate on it from time to time – it remains a work of sacred art.

The medieval church understood the labyrinth to express a distinctly *Christian* truth, and Christians therefore openly embraced the symbol up until the early modern period. They did not set out to totally reject culture, or attempt to invent a whole new religious culture just for themselves, cut off from the rest of the world. Rather, they *embraced* the world around them for what it was, understanding it in new ways and imbuing the stories and symbols around them with new meanings. Thus, there is no reason why Christians of the post-modern period should be afraid to look once again to this ancient symbol with a prayerful imagination, perhaps even rediscovering or ascertaining anew the depths of Christian wisdom that remain hidden within.

## **Unleashing the Divine Feminine**

As it turned out, the professor's concerns over having a labyrinth on the McGiffert roof had mostly to do with anxieties over what it would mean to put a "sacred" symbol for prayer and meditation in what was ostensibly a "secular" gathering space. It seemed strange to me that even within the context of an ecumenical religious institution, there was such trepidation around the potential conflating of sacred and secular space. But the sensibilities of modern Western rationalism, of course, insist that such spaces must be separate. In order to appease the concerns, rules were put in place, ensuring that no one could show up in the middle of someone's dinner party and demand that everyone leave so that they could walk the labyrinth. I couldn't see anything like this ever happening, so acquiescence and compliance was easy, even if it did seem a bit... excessive.

But when the dust eventually settled on the controversy, I was finally given permission to complete the project. With the main path lines painted, the labyrinth was very nearly done, and already walkable. What remained were the groupings of 28 markings that surrounded the outside of the Chartres labyrinth, which Lauren Artress calls "lunations,"<sup>24</sup> along with the six-petal rosette design for the center. Both of these additions were mathematically complex, and I had not been able to figure out the formula to ensure the precision of these elements in proportion with the whole design. The recommendation offered in Lauren's book – to look for "an invisible 13-pointed star" aligning everything – was of little use to me. I could no more visualize a 13-pointed star than I could determine the diameter of six circles that must each fit equally, an inch apart, inside a larger circle. Because so much time had passed, many of the students in the community had already become accustomed to walking the labyrinth the way it was. In light of the recent conflict, and general my lack of mathematical aptitude, I wondered if perhaps it was best to just stop there.

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<sup>24</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 60.



However, Artress' description of the symbolic meaning ascribed to these elements lingered with me. She had gone into such great detail, for example, about how the rosette center symbolized the Virgin Mary, and therefore had come to be regarded generally as a symbol of receptivity, acceptance, transformation, and new life.<sup>25</sup> Certainly these were qualities I wanted to bring into the center of the McGiffert labyrinth. Artress also speculated that the "lunations" were a symbolic notches that marked the lunar cycles, which were used in the Western Church to determine the date of the lunar feast of Easter.<sup>26</sup> Of these "lunations" she writes:

Unfortunately, when people reproduce the Chartres labyrinth design the lunations are often left off. I have come to appreciate and honor the lunations. They add beauty to the labyrinth design and invite us, symbolically, to be back in touch with the lunar cycles. To include them in the making of a labyrinth takes more work, but it does add beauty and power. It completes the sense of the whole cosmos that the Chartres labyrinth conveys. I have been in labyrinths where there were simply decorative lines in place of the lunations. Walking into such a labyrinth felt like walking into a tin can with no resounding energy. When the lunations are left off a labyrinth based on the Chartres labyrinth, I wonder if the creator is unconsciously repeating what we have done over the ages: disregarding the feminine.<sup>27</sup>

Well I, for one, was not going to be responsible for creating a tin can of a labyrinth, much less one that disregarded the feminine. I had been delighted to notice in my earlier phase of painting the lines other hidden elements of feminine symbolism within the labyrinth that I had never seen before, like the way that each of the six double-ax curves create a kind of uterine shape when looked at horizontally. I decided that I simply must find a way to add these remaining symbolic components.

Fortunately, while visiting some Episcopal nuns at the Community of the Holy Spirit in Brewster, NY, the answer came to me. Bill – a neighbor of the convent – had just recently painted a full-sized Chartres labyrinth and had documented the mathematical process he used to finished the design. Even with his careful instructions and formulas, it still took me three or four tries to get the lunations just right, and at least nine attempts to get the six circles of the rosette to fit inside of the center correctly. But I finally worked it out, and when I was satisfied with the design I laid it down permanently with the paint. As a final touch, I added tiny clover designs to the inner edges of the center petal lines using my own thumb, just to leave my fingerprint as a small personal signature.

When it was finished, I stepped back to admire my design. It had only been 20 days since I'd started the project, but seeing it successfully completed seemed like nothing short of a miracle. I knew in that moment I had done the right thing – that God was now present in this space, and that it was God who had willed this labyrinth into being. That night, I invited seven of my closest seminary colleagues – all women – to celebrate with me and to bless the space. We sat in a circle on the ground around the center – with candles, fruit, prayer, and laughter. It seemed that night as though the entire rooftop was filled with the receptive energy of the Divine feminine, with the sacred and the secular converging together as one.

The next day, I was joined by eight other friends from the community who helped me add an invisible layer of sealant to the top of the labyrinth, in order to preserve it for

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<sup>25</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 58-59.

<sup>26</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 60-62.

many years to come. As they began to ask me questions about how I created it, what the history was behind the symbol, and what sorts of meanings it might hold in the context of liturgical and spiritual practice, I realized the extent to which this independent study had brought me into a new level of understanding and appreciation for the potential of this ancient sacred art form.

The rooftop labyrinth was dedicated on September 14, 2011 with the following prayer: *Gracious God, we ask you to send your blessing upon this roof and this labyrinth, that it may become a space of sacred encounters for all present and future members of this seminary community. Make this a safe path, a path of discovery. Send your Holy Spirit to be present with all its pilgrims to guide them towards greater healing, self-understanding, and transformation through experiences of Your Presence. May all who walk this labyrinth be strengthened to serve all of creation, in Your holy name. Amen.*

## **The Call of Faith: Turn Around, Keep Walking, Repeat**

At the beginning of the Fall semester, I designed and led a worship service in James Chapel that was devoted to introducing the labyrinth to the wider Union community within a liturgical context. In that chapel service, I offered a brief homily on forgiveness, repentance, and “turning.” What can sometimes feel like a dead-end, whether in life or in a conflict with another person, might actually be an opportunity to “repent” – which, I reminded everyone, literally means *to turn around*. In other words, we have to keep on walking and trusting the path. The irony is that in order for a community as diverse as Union to truly live together, we must make peace with the reality of conflict, and find ways to walk humbly and responsibly through the inevitable chaos and confusion that ensues whenever we experience a rupture in our relationships. In those moments, we must commit to taking things step by step, listening to ourselves while also making room for the other, and striving to reach a place of understanding while avoiding any expectation that we will overcome all our differences, or arrive at some place of perfect clarity. With these themes in mind, I invited the congregation at Union to make a commitment with me for that year – to *both* conflict and forgiveness, shying away from neither. We then participated in a group labyrinth walk together as a community.

What was incredible about walking the labyrinth that day, with such a diverse group of students, was the realization that even though each individual may discern vastly different religious or spiritual meanings and interpretations of the experience, we were all able to share in that experience of making-meaning together. *Solvitur ambulando*. In the end, I believe that our biggest moral and theological chasms cannot be bridged merely by talking, but even more so, by walking. We have to keep walking through the tensions, and the turns, and the messiness, disorientation, and chaos. This is my hope for the labyrinth at Union: that in and through all of its ambiguities and subtleties, it will offer a way for people from all walks of life to recognize, reflect on, and remember that God is a verb, that community is a process, and that no matter what happens, we must always, always stay on the path.

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## PHOTOS OF THE LABYRINTH PROJECT



Phase 1: Chalk lines and the first bit of paint...



Phase 2: outline with primer



Phase 3: fill in lines with primer



Phase 4: paint lines with color



Complete but still incomplete...



Phase 5: add lunations and center



Me in the finished labyrinth.