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AUTHOR Plugge, Carol; McCormick, Debby  
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ABSTRACT

Personal and spiritual transformation is emerging as a great need. Numerous societal and health concerns are beginning to surface as spiritual issues in the eyes of many professionals. A better understanding of the relationship between psychosocial-biological issues and spirituality would enhance professional capabilities. Experiential skills and techniques, such as journaling, meditation, imagery, mindful movement, and massage, can strengthen teaching and learning strategies for behavioral and attitudinal changes. The labyrinth integrates several of these techniques. This paper discusses the use of the labyrinth as a spiritual and meditative tool that can expand insight and open the imagination to transformative growth and development. The classical 11-circuit labyrinth is described in detail, along with the stages of the labyrinth walk and various methods of reflection and meditation used to promote attention to the present moment, insight, healing, or spiritual growth. (Author/TD)

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# Walking a Path of Transformation: Using the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool

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Carol Plugge, Assistant Professor, Lamar University, and  
Debby McCormick, Assistant Professor, University of Texas at San Antonio  
Box 10039  
Beaumont, TX 77710 USA  
Phone: (409) 880-8090  
Fax: (409) 880-1761  
Email: pluggecd@hal.lamar.edu

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## ABSTRACT

Personal and spiritual transformation is emerging as a great need of our time. Numerous societal and health concerns are beginning to surface as spiritual issues in the eyes of many professionals. A better understanding of the relationship between psychosocial-biological issues and spirituality would enhance professional capabilities. Experiential skills and techniques can strengthen teaching and learning strategies for behavioral and attitudinal changes. This paper will discuss the use of the labyrinth as an effective spiritual and meditative tool that can expand insight and open the imagination to transformative growth and development.

What is wrong with some people today? We are on the verge of the twenty-first century and in many ways our society may be on the brink of destruction. It seems as if some people are aimlessly going through life trying to find excitement, stimulation, and gratification using any available avenues. The costs of such a narcissistic mission are often overlooked, and individuals claim to have "no fear" in regard to the consequences of their actions, for themselves or for others. Our society is victim to the cost of destructive addictive behaviors such as alcoholism, drug use, gambling, eating disorders, workaholism, risky sexual behavior, and domestic violence and abuse, not to mention that such behaviors contribute to physical and psychological illness.

Our leading causes of death and mental disorders are stress related. Heart disease, stroke, cancer, HIV disease, and depression are all affected by stress (Health and Stroke Facts, 1996; Kune, 1993; McGinnis, 1986). For many

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individuals, stress arises from a lack of insight, purpose, and true meaning in life. Our society is filled with individuals who work long hours, climb the corporate ladder, and give up time with family and friends to become "successful." What is success? Perhaps it is having a prestigious job, making a lot of money, going to the right parties, wearing the right clothes, or having the right car. But that can't be the answer, because so many people who have all the "right stuff" are feeling empty and are plagued with disease and depression (Sollod, 1992).

Addictive behaviors are often used to cope with stress. People may find an escape in the behavior but when they wake up in the morning, the empty feeling inside remains. We can run, but we cannot hide from the urge to find insight, purpose, and meaning in our lives. The hunger, which can be thought of as a basic human instinct, will continue to return throughout time. If the person chooses to avoid satisfying the hunger in an effective manner, they may eventually find themselves in a state of despair and emptiness. "The great need of our time is for people to be connected to spirit; for people to be connected to a core of feeling in themselves that makes their lives vital and full of meaning, that makes life a mystery evermore to be uncovered" (Stone, 1980).

There is a segment of people who are aware that the world "outside" of themselves will not be able to completely satisfy the nagging hunger for spiritual wholeness. This emerging segment of people are searching for wholeness within themselves instead of masking the need by seeking stimulation and gratification through personal and societal addictions. Personal and spiritual transformation is an eminent need of our time. Many societal and health concerns are beginning to surface as spiritual issues in the eyes of numerous professionals. A better

understanding of the relationship between psychosocial-biological issues and spirituality would enhance our professional capabilities.

Spirituality has traditionally been associated strictly with religion. Individuals are uncomfortable with exploring or expanding the spiritual dimension of their lives unless they utilize a theological tradition. Actually, spirituality encompasses but is much more than merely a set of religious ideologies or doctrines. Spirituality is the human capacity to rise above the limiting ego-based ideas of control, manipulation, and competition to discover a web of transpersonal connection and love between our true selves and all other beings and a greater ability to attain our highest good (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992). "Religion is for those who are scared to death of hell. Spirituality is for those that have been there" (Artress, 1995).

Spiritual insights are heavily sought by many individuals through a variety of realms. Experiential teaching methods enhance the probability that information will be retained and integrated (Kolb, 1976). Some common experiential techniques used to enhance spiritual development are: journaling, meditation, imagery, prayer, chi gong, tai chi, mindful movement, massage, and creative outlets of all varieties. One tool that integrates several of these techniques is the labyrinth.

The labyrinth is an ancient mystical tool that has a rich history. It has been found throughout the ages in many cultures around the world, and was widely used during the middle ages in the Catholic church as a form of spiritual pilgrimage. It dropped from human awareness about 350 years ago but was recently reintroduced as a spiritual tool by Dr. Lauren Artress. Dr. Artress is an Episcopalian Canon at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and in 1991 started Veritas: The Worldwide Labyrinth Project, whose mission is to reintroduce the

labyrinth into churches, retreat centers, hospitals, prisons, parks, airports, and community spaces throughout the world to promote deep spiritual healing.

Labyrinths are usually circular geometric patterns that have one path that leads to the center of the circle and then back out again. Their appearance is similar to that of a maze, but they are different in that there is only one path, no wrong turns, and no dead ends. They are large enough to be walked on and the path becomes a metaphor for the journey of life. The labyrinth has many uses and possible outcomes for spiritual insight. "The labyrinth is a spiritual tool meant to awaken us to the deep rhythm that unites us to ourselves and to the Light that calls from within. In surrendering to the winding path, the soul finds healing and wholeness" (Artress, 1995).

Dr. Artress's book focuses on the classical eleven-circuit labyrinth whose best known example is found inlaid in the nave of Chartres Cathedral in Chartres, France. This labyrinth is perfectly geometrically balanced and is based on the prime thirteen-point star. The star determines the placement of the rosette in the center of the labyrinth and the lunation surrounding the perimeter. The number thirteen has extreme significance. Thirteen is the number of Christ, there are thirteen new moons in a year, and a labyrinth walked turns toward the center thirteen times during a complete walk. The star is based on Pythagorean theory and lends a great deal to the energy flow that is experienced during a labyrinth walk.

The center of the labyrinth is traditionally called the rosette. It resembles a flower in appearance and consists of six petals. Each petal has a different symbolic meaning. The six petals can represent the six days of creation or the six stages of planetary evolution. As an individual enters the center starting from the left and traveling clockwise, the petals represent mineral, plant, animal, human, angelic, and the divine. When an individual comes to walk into the center,

they may visit each of the petals or just the petals to which they feel drawn.

The outside of the labyrinth is surrounded by 113 cusps of partial circles that make up the perimeter. These are called the lunations. There are 28 points per quadrant of the labyrinth. Many individuals believe that the labyrinth served as a calendar based on the lunar cycles and that each quadrant represents each season of the year. It is thought that churches used this calendar to determine the timing of Easter (Artress, 1995). The lunations are unique to the Chartres labyrinth and add to the beauty and power of this particular form. Dr. Artress believes that omitting the lunation from a constructed labyrinth decreases its spiritual energy and balance.

The labyrinth walk is divided into a three-fold journey. The path into the center is purgation. Throughout the winding journey to the center, the goal of purgation is to let go of or purge any barriers we may have to our connection with the divine. It is a process of quieting the mind and spirit to prepare ourselves to receive. It is the process of humbling or surrendering ourselves to God. The second part of the walk, called illumination, occurs when we reach the center, or the rosette. After quieting and clearing ourselves, we are ready to receive insights, peace, and what we most need for healing. The third and last part of the walk is called union. As we travel the path of the labyrinth back out to the entrance (which is the same path we used to travel to the center), the meditation can provide a sense of empowerment and passion. Union helps the individual integrate the information and insights experienced during illumination. The walk out is a time to commune with the divine and a realization of action and authentic use of our gift during our continued walk of life. Basically it assists us in deciding how we will use what we have received.

There exists no right or wrong methods of walking the labyrinth. Each person, as a unique individual, will have a unique individual manner of walking the

labyrinth. Each person is encouraged to find their own rhythm and speed while walking. Some may walk very slowly as in a walking meditation, and some may feel the need or desire to run or dance, to skip or to crawl. There really are no set rules or patterns. Each person should find their own way. Before entering the labyrinth, it seems to work best if the person takes some time to reflect on their spiritual life, needs, and intentions. Several approaches can be used as a basis for the labyrinth walk.

After quiet and intent assessment, an individual can choose several approaches to the labyrinth walk. Some use the labyrinth to promote gracious thanksgiving and attention to the present moment. Many meditation practices focus on mindful attention to the present moment. The labyrinth presents an ideal place to enhance this practice. Some may use repetition, or a mantra, to facilitate their meditation; others may read scripture or additional inspirational readings. Another method is to use prayer to ask for help, healing, or simply to lift up thanksgiving.

The labyrinth is an ideal place to ask our most puzzling or pertinent life questions. Most people have significant curiosity and wonder and, in many cases, confusion and despair in regards to the many details of life. Labyrinth walkers are encouraged to enter their journey with an awareness of their life questions. The labyrinth does not provide neatly packaged magical answers, but allows our soul to quiet itself and to be open to receive divine insight. Many individuals spend great amounts of time talking to God, but how much time is spent listening for the answers?

We do not want to present the labyrinth as an answer to all of life's problems or a panacea for all difficulties. The labyrinth is a mystical divine tool that assists individuals with their spiritual growth and healing. In the words of Dr. Lauren Artress, "The labyrinth introduces us to the idea of a wide and gracious

path. It redefines the journey to God: from a vertical perspective that goes from earth up to heaven, to a horizontal perspective in which we are all walking the path together. The vertical path has gotten mired down in perfectionist associations, whereas the horizontal path communicates that we are all in this together” (Artress, 1995).

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