

The Healing Power of the Labyrinth

When Walking Around in Circles Is Good for Your Health

Recently, I flew to Lantana, Fla, for a retreat at Cenacle, a spiritual life center. A *retreat* refers to time taken away from the hustle and bustle of work or everyday life and spent in solitude and prayer.

USING PRAYER TO COPE

For me, prayer is probably the safest, oldest, most noninvasive healing aspect in my life. For years, people have used prayer, music, ritual, imagination, and faith, together with traditional therapies, to cope with various diseases. The Western world considers these coping strategies to be alternative, complementary, or integrative medicine—terms that have been “pushing buttons” with certain allopathic (traditional) medical practitioners for longer than 3 decades.

Although certain doctors, nurses, and other medical clinicians are skeptical of the benefits of prayer in the management of chronic disease, I’ve encountered many medical professionals who support my beliefs.

A RETREAT CAN REJUVENATE

As a Sylvania Franciscan Sister, I make a retreat of some type every year. At Cenacle, I was on a directed retreat, in which a person meets daily with a qualified spiritual guide (director). My retreat consisted of 5 consecutive days of quiet and prayer—no TV, computer, or radio. Usually, the person on retreat—me!—is silent for the entire retreat, only talking once a day during meetings with the director.

Sister Brenda Rose, a fellow Sylvania Franciscan nun, was my director for this last retreat. Our daily

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meetings offered me the opportunity to reflect on my life and life events and my relationship with God and others. Sister Brenda listened to my reflections, suggested scriptural readings that would help me pray, and generally guided me on my spiritual path.

After a retreat, I’m able to see my body and health in a more positive way. Prayer and time spent in quiet reflection offers me inner peace and dissolves many of the anxieties of living with a chronic illness. God communicates to me through ordinary human experience. Because my health is part of who I am, I’m comforted by God’s presence when I live every day with a chronic disease and

find that I’m at peace with this disease.

A NEW PRAYER EXPERIENCE

At the retreat center, there were optional evening prayer activities. One night, we took part in walking an indoor labyrinth. For a person who has difficulty walking, I was somehow drawn to this prayer form that requires a person to walk a path.

I don’t know what drew me to the labyrinth; perhaps its concentric, circular design. I’d seen labyrinths before. This time, I must’ve been ready to explore. I went over to the indoor labyrinth, watched others walk the burlap paths, and bent down and touched it.

A PURPOSEFUL PATH, NOT A MAZE

Daniel H. Johnston, PhD, explains in his book *Lessons for Living*,¹ “The labyrinth is an ancient symbol that relates to wholeness. It combines the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path. The labyrinth represents a journey to our own center and back out again into the world. Labyrinths have long been used as meditation and prayer tools.”

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A labyrinth has only one path. It's unicursal (ie, the way in is also the way out). The path is circuitous to the center and out again; there are no blind alleys. Walking a labyrinth is a right brain task that calls on our intuition, creativity, and imagery.

To find the center of a maze, there are many choices to be made. With a labyrinth, there is only one: to enter or not. A more reflective, passive mindset is needed.

MEANDER ANY WAY YOU PLEASE

To walk a labyrinth, imbues it with power and meaning. The more it's used, the more powerful it becomes as a symbol of transformation.

There are many approaches to walking a labyrinth. There's no right or wrong way—one simply enters and follows the path.

Cenacle suggests that there are 3 stages in a labyrinth walk. The first is purgation. Until you reach its center, you experience a shedding as you walk—a releasing and “letting go” of your life's details, which quiets the mind.

The second stage, illumination, is when you reach the center, a place of meditation and prayer. You can stay there as long as you like.

The third stage, union, begins when you leave the center and rewalk the path—joining with God and the “higher power.”

HEALTHCARE BENEFITS

Herbert Benson, MD, president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute, Harvard Medical School, has found that focused walking meditations are highly efficient in reducing anxiety and eliciting what he calls the “relaxation response.” This effect has significant long-term health benefits, including lowering blood pressure, slowing breathing rates, reducing incidents of chronic pain, and reducing insomnia.

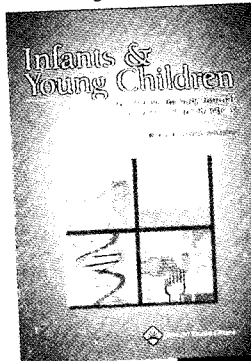
These demonstrated health benefits have led many healthcare facilities to install labyrinths on their grounds. Such meditative devices can be found at: Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Baltimore, Md; Doylestown Hospital Health and Wellness Center, Warrington, Pa; Memorial Hospital, Salem County, NJ; Whitman-Walker Clinic, Arlington, Va; Medical Center of Central Georgia, Macon, Ga; and Staten Island University Hospice, New York, NY.

If you can add a spiritual retreat to your daily regimen of working, medications, exercising, and resting, do it! Whether you use a finger labyrinth at home or a walking labyrinth at a local healthcare facility or place of worship, give it a try. Ask your pastor or church planning committee about where you might find a labyrinth locally or check out the Internet or library for more information.

This is one time that “walking around in circles” calms the mind and is good for what ails you.

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