Labyrinths as Ritual Art: A Pedagogy of Inquiry/Witnessing/Listening to the Sacred

Barbara Bickel, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL
Nané Ariadne Jordan, University of British Columbia

The labyrinth is a symbol found in many spiritual and cultural traditions (Artress, 1996). It is an ancient art form that is found across cultures, and is newly revived in North America as a contemplative tool where one is encouraged to let go and surrender to life’s multiple twists and turns by walking its form (Compton, 2002). Its structure is based in sacred geometry designed to take one out of linear time and consciousness (Grace Cathedral, 2006).

In ancient Cretan society the labyrinth was understood as a symbol of the Divine Feminine. In Medieval times monks used the walking and turning within the labyrinth as a tool to activate both hemispheres of the brain when solving complex theological concepts and ideas (Sayward, 2005). As spiritual feminist artist/researcher/educators, we have each...
walked the labyrinth in what Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000, 1052) have identified as “sacred epistemological” contexts of our inquiries.

Sacred epistemology in our experience can begin with art, such as the labyrinth, lead to spirit through ritual, and result in education through opening to what was not known or understood prior. Ritual theorist Ronald Grimes (1995) clarifies how “Sacred” is the name we give to the deepest forms of receptivity in our experience” (69). As a contiguous structure the labyrinth weaves the past, present and future as well as art, spirituality and the moving body together. It is an integrative, embodied and spirited practice that can deepen one’s understanding of the self within the cosmos.

My walking with the labyrinth is informed by my middle name. Defying the female tradition of middle-naming from our mother line, yet perhaps unconsciously calling to ancient pre-patriarchal lineages of such naming, my mother chose to call me “Ariadne.” Ariadne is she who holds the thread, she who keeps the ancient form of the Labyrinth—she is a last standing Cretan priestess of Greek mythology. Ariadne’s story speaks to a time when women held land and ritual, before the turn towards Theseus, a hero of war, and the slaying of the Minotaur, the half-human, half-beast, who lived at the heart of the labyrinth and its ancient mysteries.

It took me years to find Ariadne in writing—I started my search as a child fascinated by traditional renditions of the Greek myths. Later, I found feminist interpretations of Ariadne’s myth that went beyond the simple abandonment of Ariadne by Theseus. From these, I developed a knowing of the labyrinth as an epiphany of human/earth interaction and sacred practice, a womb-walking of birth/death/life path of inquiry. In the last ten years, I have participated in the cultural turn towards actually walking the labyrinth.

During this time, my academic work took me to complete my MA in Women’s Spirituality and walking my first labyrinth in San Francisco at Grace Cathedral. Not personally identified with church ideology, yet in pure joy, I found myself falling down at the altars to Mary around the church, tears streaming down my cheeks—a feeling of wise presence within me. A conduit had been opened, Mary and Ariadne had curious spiritual ties to each other through time and space in the form of labyrinth. Given these embodied opportunities I explored further.

I began to build and walk the Cretan labyrinth in the sand each year at public beaches with family and friends, marking my day of birth and connection to Ariadne, land and place. These spiritual mysteries live now, within my life, how do they live and breath as education, in my own practices of learning and teaching?

In this multi-media text, conscious rational academic text is supported/disrupted by the ‘arational’ (Gebser, 1984) text of trance. Arational sites of knowing can be accessed through art making, personal narrative, poetry, ritual, meditative and altered states, trance, and the body (Bickel, 2005). The arational has historically been acknowledged within the mystic traditions and by artists and is essential for the development of sacred epistemology. Multiple texts reverberate with each other yet each text is distinct, the performing and contiguous relationship of multiple texts, invites an inter-relational and inter-textual experience.

You are encouraged to receive the multiple texts of this digital performance ritual as linear, rational and logical and/or non-linear, arational and alogical. We invite you as witnesses to listen to the multiple texts we share and to open to a place of mutual inquiry with us.
Barbara Narrating

The presence of a labyrinth on the University of British Columbia campus at the Vancouver School of Theology provided sanctuary for me as a graduate student. Too often caught up in the academic world of politics, deadlines, meetings, classes and research, the labyrinth offers a sacred space of reflection and pause in an environment that can otherwise overwhelm with its institutional demands.

It may prove, as educator Deborah Britzman (2006) reminds me, to be an impossible relationship, but I strive for a sacred context in my academic work where, as Peter Reason reflects

…sacred inquiry [“sacred epistemology”] will start with awe and love, rather than with the suspicion, skepticism, and defensiveness [fear] that is at the root of so much or our current worldview and science. (Devereau, 1967; Maslow, 1966 in Reason, 1993, 278)

When I am in the center of the labyrinth I am often called to turn my body in circles in an act of undressing my soul and opening my heart to reverential thinking. Sometimes I spin on my feet and at other times I sit and spin from my waist. Through the repetitive circular movements my mind unwinds itself, and I am in awe of the vast space that always awaits me when I let my conscious thoughts recede.

Trance

deep breath looking down at all the trees I begin to take steps down feeling my feet on the wooden stairs I take each step down left foot right foot stepping down seeing the green that surrounds me a rich green my feet are touching the sand now walking on the sand still on the path crossing the logs I’m hearing the ocean waves are crashing its early morning I’m seeing the labyrinth on the sand surface its half under water yet its not washed away I’m deciding whether I want to walk the labyrinth it feels like a gift I’m waiting for a decision do I want to walk it alone or do I want to invite others to walk it with me there’s a semi circle of women behind me they are standing still waiting for me to begin the walk the journey I begin to walk out directly to the labyrinth I don’t have any shoes I’m feeling the sand and odd stones on my feet now I’m standing at the entrance of the labyrinth I go in with the intention of letting go of old ways of thinking that no longer serve me that limit my journey my walk
I enter the labyrinth the water has risen and covers three quarters of the labyrinth I walk making tight turns walking and turning as I enter into the water of the labyrinth my whole body slips down and it is in a different environment grass surrounds it I’m not seeing the other women but can feel their presence they’ve been entering the labyrinth behind me its half made of grass and the other half concrete I weave and turn through the labyrinth stopping at one of the turns I’m hearing a choir of voices singing I’m aware of hearing footsteps that are surrounding me walking around me walking in the grass crackling twigs walking on the cement and I continue to walk continue this journey I don’t know where I am going I just continue to follow the path at times I am aware of passing through water fluid water is the air in this place it causes me to walk differently than when I am walking in air there’s resistance it slows me down but there’s still no barriers just a different pace a ripple affect on my body as I move I’m very aware of the water touching me when the other women are turning walking beside me their movement affects me their movements cause slight waves I’m not really seeing where I am going I just keep walking and following the path I can tell I’m getting close turning to the center winding my way in it’s a vessel I slide in and down into its concaveness a few more women have joined me we are all resting on our backs the women continue to come in the space expands to accommodate them there’s no solid structure really the women now all seem to be gone they are on their return journey out I’m aware of not seeing the entryway back into the labyrinth I’m by myself feeling the walls it’s smaller now that the women have all left my head feels like it’s expanding floating light that lightness washes through my whole body I begin my walk out I’m aware the women are now surrounding the outside edges of the labyrinth I walk turn I feel light at the same time I feel groundedness the solidness of my feet touching the ground I walk and turn stopping at one of the turns turn on the grass now
turning
clouds coming through the labyrinth
these clouds descended

walking washing over me as I walk through the labyrinth which is now in the midst of these clouds fog very still

feeling white clouds coming walking as I walk through the labyrinth which is now in the midst of these clouds fog very still

then coming to the exit there’s a sense of being in an elevator moving quickly not seeing where you are moving but know you are moving quickly I step onto sand seeing the ocean on either side of me here the shade has moved on the women are up by the logs close to the path that leads up to the trees I silently thank them all I thank the labyrinth and the ocean without looking back I begin the return up the steps each step bringing me closer to my beginning place climbing each step bringing me up up and out until I’m back and I’m aware of myself in the present

Nané Narrating

As learners and educators within university and community settings our experience of learning and stretching beyond comfort zones is increased when a container of artistic expression and/or ritual is held by the facilitator, or those present in the group. Ritual is a structure to create, explore, learn and teach within. Ritual theorist, Leslie Northrup (1997) in her study of women and ritual found that through ritualizing women “disrupt, demystify, delegitimate, and deconstruct both some institutional religious forces and the social structures they create and fortify” (91).

Peter Reason (1993) further clarifies that we require diverse artistic means to take experiential knowing and present it in creative performative ways prior to the application of concepts, theories, and abstract ideas (279). Reason (in press) takes the significance of arational ways of knowing further arguing “that reliance on the conscious and rational mind unaided by art, religious experience, dreams and such like is ‘necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life’ (Bateson, 1972:146; Reason, forthcoming) (3).

Barbara Narrating

Thus, aided by art, trance, and ritual experience of making and walking labyrinths, new understandings arose during our inquiry. As a pedagogy of inquiry, witnessing, and listening to the sacred, labyrinths re-claim and animate for us sacred dimensions of life and multifarious experiences within and beyond the small self and larger Self ever in relation to other Selves. As spiritual feminist educators, having a pedagogical practice in which to re-member and re-claim the sacred is crucial for us in these times of continued patriarchal
politic, global transition and uncertainty.

The labyrinth, as an art and ritual based practice, cultivates inner connection, opening to larger wisdom. We are curious about the oracular-like nature of such experiences, finding not just walking the labyrinth as centering, but the intuition that grows from using the practice at multiple sites over time. The mandala nature of labyrinth design connects this form across cultures to both Eastern traditions of mandala-making, and North American Indigenous medicine wheels.

As an Earth-based mandala, making and walking outdoor labyrinths heightens one’s sensate awareness to place and environment, elements, rocks, birds, trees..... We also became aware of visibility and invisibility, in putting up and taking down the labyrinth forms—wondering further about multiple layers of reality. What kinds of knowing are visible, what others remain hidden until revealed?