NARRATIVE MEDICINE

Labyrinths Find Their Way onto Hospital Grounds as Paths to Healing

Jim Gersbach

Once found exclusively in sacred spaces from moors to cathedrals, labyrinths have been undergoing a renaissance of late. After falling from favor for more than two centuries, labyrinths are once again being installed by congregations in their churches. Increasingly, they are also appearing in secular places, including two that opened at Kaiser Permanente (KP) hospitals just last year.

To Reverend Jurgen Schwing, Spiritual Care Manager in KP’s Diablo Area, interest in labyrinths in health care settings is not surprising. “In humanity’s early years, the priest and doctor were one,” says the German-born Rev Schwing. “Then, with the discovery of scientific research, the professions split. Physicians were taught to objectify the body. But now we’re discovering the mind has a lot to do with the body.”

From Crete to California

The word labyrinth conjures up images from the ancient Greek myth of the Athenian hero Theseus. In this myth, Theseus slays the half-human, half-bull Minotaur that lived inside a labyrinth in Crete with so many twisting passages that all who entered became hopelessly lost.1

As the Roman writer Ovid described it in his Metamorphoses2:

He tricks the eye with many twisting paths that double back—one’s left without a point of reference … just so did Da-

dalus within his maze along the endless ways disseminate uncertainty; in fact the artificer himself could scarcely trace the proper path back to the gate—it was that intricate.

After killing the Minotaur, Theseus is able to escape from the labyrinth only with the help of the Cretan king’s daughter, Ariadne. Smitten by his beauty, she secretly gives him a spool of thread to unwind so he can retrace his steps.1

The word labyrinth itself recalls the Minotaur. The ancient Greek meaning is “house of the double-edged ax.” This ax—labrys—was a sacred symbol of the Minoans who lived on Crete. They worshipped a sun god whom they often depicted as a bull.

Remembering the Minotaur myth, we can be forgiven for thinking labyrinths are the same thing as mazes. But the two are not the same. Mazes employ dead ends and misleading corridors to baffle and confuse those who enter.

Walking labyrinths, on the other hand, are intended to let those who enter find their way along a single, clear path. However long and intricate a labyrinth’s pattern, anyone can trace the turnings and be assured of reaching the center and back out again.

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From India to Arizona, labyrinths can be found in numerous premodern cultures. They enjoyed great popularity in Medieval Europe, where Christians often substituted walking a labyrinth for the more arduous pilgrimage to the Holy Land (hence one of the labyrinth’s names in French—*le chemin de Jerusalem*). Later, during the Reformation and Enlightenment, many labyrinths were destroyed. Among the few to survive those upheavals was the labyrinth in the floor of Chartres Cathedral, on which the two KP labyrinths are modeled.

**Rediscovering a Spiritual Connection to Healing**

The first labyrinths completed at KP hospitals became available to walkers in the summer of 2007 at the new Antioch Medical Center in Northern California and at Sunny-side Medical Center in Clackamas, OR. Subsequently, a labyrinth has opened at the Santa Rosa Medical Center in Northern California.

### Antioch Medical Center

According to Rev Schwing, the idea for the Antioch labyrinth came from Jane Wirth. The Rev Schwing met Wirth shortly after he came to work as a chaplain at KP’s Walnut Creek Medical Center in May 2000. Wirth, who has since retired, was then a Director of Health Education for KP.

“She had long been interested in labyrinths and wanted one at KP,” Rev Schwing recalls. Her first attempt to get funding for a labyrinth, at the existing Martinez Medical Office, failed. When she met Rev Schwing, he was already familiar with labyrinths from one at the California Pacific Medical Center where he completed his clinical internship. Wirth brought up the idea of collaborating with Rev Schwing to obtain an innovations grant from KP for “finger labyrinths”—boards with the paths grooved into the wood so people could trace them with their fingers.

“In the beginning there was a bit of hesitancy in bringing spirituality into a secular health care setting,” remembers Rev Schwing. “But KP leaders were really interested in learning about spiritual care as a professional discipline that includes religion but is much larger than that and includes the quest for existential meaning.”

Wirth and Rev Schwing got the grant. They encouraged people visiting a KP hospital meditation room to try the chessboard-sized finger labyrinths. Surveys of users’ stress levels before and after tracing the paths revealed that most felt more relaxed afterward.

Rev Schwing suspected that walking labyrinths might be even more effective than the boards. “Sometimes when people are stressed they are not ready to sit down to become calm. A labyrinth can have a healing effect because as we walk its path it stills our mind. It’s a great example of how something developed in a religious context could be adapted...
to something in health care involving stress reduction.”

On the basis of the success of the finger labyrinths, funding was approved for a full-sized outdoor labyrinth at Antioch. The designers planned for the whole atmosphere to be conducive to healing.

Wirth attended Antioch’s dedication last November and became the first to officially walk the hospital’s new labyrinth. Today, Rev Schwing walks the Antioch labyrinth regularly. Staff and visitors of many different faiths ask him about the labyrinth and he often overhears children peppering their parents with questions. “I’ve seen a real interest and curiosity,” he says.

But belief in a religion is not necessary to benefit from the labyrinth, according to Rev Schwing. “It can be a very practical tool to help people in relaxing, stilling the mind, transitioning after treatment, or just as a way to reduce stress on breaks or at lunch.

Volunteers Fund Oregon Labyrinth

Sunnyside’s labyrinth stems from a trip the hospital’s future Director of Volunteer Services, Bonnie Morgan, made to San Francisco in June 2000. While there, Morgan visited Grace Cathedral and walked its outdoor labyrinth.

“I had a lot of stuff in my life at that time that was troublesome. I found walking the labyrinth very soothing and peaceful, helping me let go of some things,” Morgan says of that first experience.

A few years later, she had the opportunity to fund a labyrinth when plans were announced to turn a parking lot on the Sunnyside campus into a 200,000-square-foot patient care wing. Construction of the five-story addition created a courtyard. The hospital’s volunteers donated $200,000 from their gift shop sales to beautify the space with a garden, stone benches, a fountain and—at Morgan’s suggestion—a walking labyrinth.

At 24-feet across, Sunnyside’s labyrinth is roughly half the size of its original French counterpart but features the same tightly coiled path in tan cobblestones outlined in bluestone. Few of the people drawn to the courtyard for fresh air and respite from the busy hospital units on either side know the long history behind this centerpiece. But on any given day, some can be found stepping onto its stones, invariably silent, heads bent intently toward the earth.

That intense focus on what labyrinths have to teach us is shared by one of Sunnyside’s part-time chaplains—the Rev Susan Freisinger. She first walked a labyrinth eight years ago at an Episcopal church in Portland. No one was happier to see a labyrinth appear at Sunnyside.

“I love it that the labyrinth involves physical movement. Bringing the body into a meditation experience is important. I am reminded of what is important to me, and the daily irritations and frustrations fall away, letting me return to a sense of wholeness.”

Rev Freisinger explains that the labyrinth is a spiritual tool without belonging to any particular religion. “I can suggest to patients who are facing a difficult diagnosis that they
走迷宫有助于他们与自己的内在力量联系起来。全体工作人员可以利用迷宫来帮助患者冷静下来，从而在工作前和工作后使用迷宫。那些对于他们的亲人进行临终关怀决策而感到压力的家人可以利用迷宫来放松，并以更清晰的视角来看待事情。"

迷宫的铺设在Sunnyside医院是轮椅可及的，因此，即使有身体残障的患者也可以体验到迷宫。护士有时会推着病人沿着蜿蜒的路径前行，同时向他们解释迷宫。

“它有点窄——有时我会晕眩，”Freisinger神父说。他自己也使用轮椅。但她相信精神上的利益是相同的，无论是以脚还是以轮。她说，"我看到人们记得自己的内在力量和他们对信仰的联系。我看到人们停止斗争并放松。"  

当被问到复制一个几乎800年历史的精神路径是否对于在繁忙的现代专业医院工作和接受护理的人们来说仍然相关时，Freisinger神父回答说，"我们仍然需要与自我重新连接的工具。迷宫是关于治愈，关于进入完整性。迷宫在我们面前——我们无需知道如何正确地来走它。有时，迷宫体验是充满了洞察力和好感觉，而有时什么也不发生。这并不重要。我们只是走这条路，聆听我们的经验。"

声明

作者没有利益冲突要披露。

参考文献


网络资源关于迷宫

• www.labyrinthsociety.org—包含一个适用于迷宫地点的导航器，该导航器提供到成千上万的迷宫和它们的描述。它也提供了一个对于迷宫设计的历史的概览。
• www.veriditas.org—提供一个关于迷宫的概览，关于如何创建和使用迷宫的指南，以及迷宫相关的活动和讲座的计划。它还链接到全世界的迷宫导航器。
• www.labyrinth.org.uk/index.htm—是关于当代迷宫运动的英国指南，该迷宫运动用于替代性崇拜和冥想。
• www.crystalinks.com/labyrinths.htm—包含有关迷宫的重要信息。

光的闪烁

我设计了我的手影剧作为白墨在黑背景上的图画，因此，人的命运就像是一根在无尽的迷宫中丢失的线。我试图在受到痛苦惊吓的人的阴影中投射一些光的闪烁。

— Marcel Marceau, 1923-2007, French mime artist

Gleams Of Light

I have designed my style pantomimes as white ink drawings on black backgrounds, so that man’s destiny appears as a thread lost in an endless labyrinth. I have tried to shed some gleams of light on the shadow of man startled by his anguish.

— Marcel Marceau, 1923-2007, French mime artist