

Wrangling Minotaurs 101: The Labyrinth as mythopoetic technology

IERG 3th Annual International Conference

Vancouver, July 2005

Vanessa Compton
OISE/University of Toronto
Department of Curriculum

Abstract

The transition we are undergoing as a species requires a fundamental shift in consciousness if we are to survive. Faced with mounting ecological evidence of the need to imagine ourselves as interconnected, mutually responsible co-creators of this world, we need new ways of perceiving ourselves. How do we restore our sense of the transcendent in the everyday, if every day we confront environments constructed in the service of instrumental reason to “format” and rationalize our minds’ activities, our bodies’ perceptions and our communal encounters? Could an engagement with a more benign technology provide a way?

This paper explores the eleven-circuit Chartres labyrinth as a pre-Cartesian technology for “incubating” intuitive thought. This medieval pattern, rediscovered as a site for walking meditation in a range of public venues, is a graphic symbol that marks transitional thresholds, beginnings and endings. The Classical myth of Theseus and the Minotaur illuminates the dynamics of change within this archetype of journeying. The experience of engaging with the labyrinth as site and symbol enhances awareness of one’s individual self in relation to and interconnected with Self, Other, and community.

Foreword

In tracing the history of a myth, more important than the date of any manuscript illumination is the idea incarnated in its imagery.

Jane Chance (1994, p. xi)

The myth of the Minotaur in the Labyrinth derives from a number of ancient sources. The reader is invited to visit the Appendix at the end of the paper for a collection of the original texts in translation.



An Educational Concern

I had the good fortune last year to attend the public lecture given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama during his 2004 visit to Ottawa. The Dalai Lama had much to say to his Canadian audience that day, but two statements stood out for me. The first was this: that education must be our first priority, so that our children learn to respond *instinctively* to the new, not in fear, but with the intention of dialogue. He was convinced that a positive disposition towards the new could be both instinctive *and* intentional, *and* that it could be taught. Is the fight-or-flight fear response one that we teach, or do we simply suppress it or condition it systematically? Can we say the same about the response of welcome, the “intention of dialogue”? Do we suppress and condition that instinct as well?

The second comment, in response to questions from the audience concerning specifics of the Dalai Lama’s own spiritual practice, was that he himself was endlessly curious, always wondering, “How does this person see things? How does this person think?” Such an attitude towards others assumes not only a perspective different from one’s own, but also implied in its profound willingness to address that difference, a respect for what Levin calls the “irreducible, unpossessable dimensionality” of other beings, with whom we are simultaneously interconnected and yet always, and properly, distinct (1989, pp. 51, 64).

In the move we are making from a modernist age — where all of us grew up and most of us were educated — to a postmodernist one, our survival depends on leaving behind the current dominator model and turning instead towards interdependence and inter-subjectivity (Eisler, 1987), relations that surely require of us an attitude such as the Dalai Lama described. We know that relying primarily on instrumental reason is not sufficient, nor is it appropriate, for the challenges facing us as individuals and as a species. Such one-sidedness leaves too much out for us to make good decisions in times like these. Palmer describes this reductionism as

One of the great sins in education... the destruction of otherness that occurs when we try to cram everything we study into categories we are comfortable with— ignoring data or writers or voices or simple facts that don't fit, lacking simple

respect for the ways in which reality is other than we want it or imagine it to be (1999, p. 23).

Counterbalancing our culture's emphasis on the rational with intentional experience in the non-rational dimensions — the mythic and the mystical — grounds us in the wisdom of our perceiving bodies and restores our connectedness to Spirit and our communion with one another. We need experiential tools and methods, including a working language of metaphor, to recognize, translate and express the insights that arise in the experience of the non-rational.

We have such a toolkit readily accessible in the stories and practices of the labyrinth.¹ One of the most significant qualities the labyrinth has going for it is that it was designed and used long before the notorious Cartesian split between mind and body, subject and object, that has caused such dualism in our thinking and a disconnect between our rational selves and the rest of creation (including our non-rational selves). The people who designed the labyrinth did so in a context that was extraordinarily sensitive and articulate about such connections: one could say that it originated in our own pre-modern Wisdom tradition.

The labyrinth is a real place at the same time as it is symbolic space, so the question is: what happens in a *mindful* walk through a labyrinth, in terms of how we physically experience our intentional bodies and perceiving selves walking in symbolic and, indeed, mythically charged space? In other words, we are looking at how the mythical dimension used as a narrative (and reflective) template combines with walking meditation as a pedagogy of embodied learning, to engage the imagination in the labyrinth and effect significant transformations of perspective and consciousness.

To do this involves considering several diverse but interconnected characteristics. Where and when the labyrinth came into being, and who designed it, reveals the medieval worldview of the twelfth century in northern France, when innovative scholarship influenced the revival and reinterpretation of Classical texts in the new universities, especially the School of Chartres, with which the labyrinth co-emerged. Then, how the labyrinth serves as an externalized spatial “extension” technology, in the sense McLuhan uses, and simultaneously as an inner technology, an example of Foucault's “hermeneutic

of the self.” The collective function of the myth narrative and the archetypal characters associated with the labyrinth, and the way these forces operate in our cultural storerooms and individual imaginations, suggest how the lived-through experience of “crossing over” into symbolic landscape can serve as an extended metaphor to probe our interpretations of events and encounters. Finally, given the analogy of the Minotaur myth to the tenuous situation in the world, it becomes clear that a skilful use of the labyrinth can be a powerful support for the imagination in subverting the “technologies of domination” and creating a different story of the world we live in. The labyrinth itself suggests ways in which we can make this happen.

Origins

The labyrinth is, first, a space delineated by a particular arrangement of lines. The earliest simplest forms were first scratched into rock at the entrance to caves and burial tombs: they marked transitional places. The more complex eleven-circuit pattern appeared in the margins of medieval manuscripts, where it usually indicated the resolution of a difficult argument within the text. In 1209 it was inlaid into the floor of the newly rebuilt cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, 42’ across, large enough to walk through. We have no record of what these twelfth century designers were thinking, but we do know that there was at that time a renaissance of intellectual thought in northern France, centered upon the School of Chartres, where a new kind of education was emerging.

Two fundamental principles characterize the intellectual achievements of this period: the reconciliation of opposing ideas within an all-encompassing unity, and transparency of means, elements, and parts. This is apparent in Scholasticism, a dialectical approach to knowledge that had a profound impact on education, marking a departure from the unquestioned memorization of texts. Of the medieval worldview in which Scholasticism emerged, the architect-historian John James has this to say:

They saw the world in polarities. Ambivalence was inherent in the first act of Creation. It was as fundamental to the universe as the world itself, and dominated all manifest reality. In philosophy as in architecture they strove to reach beyond the poles to that calm centre where all is one. To reconcile

the irreconcilable... they perfected, into a fine art that determined the form of academic instruction, the ritual of the public *disputationes de quodlibet*². (1982, p. 98)

These *disputationes*, dealing with all imaginable questions of the day, were social events, the equivalent of our public lectures. Because mathematics, humanities, and the natural sciences had not yet developed esoteric professional languages, any “normal non-specialized intellect” could follow them, nor had the growing trend to an urban professionalism yet hardened into social distinctions of the guild system. Thus “the priest and the layman, the poet and the lawyer, the scholar and the artisan could get together on terms of near equality”(Panofsky, 1957, pp 23–24). These disparate professional perspectives had in common a commitment to “*Manifestio*, elucidation or clarification ...the first controlling principle of Early and High Scholasticism” (p. 30). Their cognitive repertoire included a fine appreciation for metaphor and allegory, something that we might see as a function of imagination:

human reason can elucidate the content of revelation itself:...it can supply *similitudines* which “manifest” the mysteries by way of analogy, as when the relation between the Three Persons of the Trinity is likened to that between being, knowledge and love in our own mind, or divine creation to the work of the human artist (Aquinas in Panofsky, p. 30).

The other great breakthrough was, as James indicates, in church architecture. Here, major advances in technique and design, combined with visionary administrative initiative and concerted communal effort, resulted in more than a dozen cathedrals and hundreds of churches and abbeys built in the Paris basin in just over twenty-five years, all in the radically new, soaring Gothic style (James, 1982). The majority of these cathedrals and churches were dedicated to Notre Dame, in a resurgence of the Goddess cult in the form of the Black Madonna. Many of these had labyrinths. The iconography in the windows and sculptures, and the symbolism underlying the geometrical ratios throughout Chartres Cathedral express the idea of potential associated with Mary, who had said “Yes” to so much mystery. This symbolic material includes the labyrinth, with its central

rosette, cruciform axes, convolutions, and significant location in the nave as a stage in the initiation ritual of catechumens. Nothing is accidental at Chartres.

At the centre of the Chartres labyrinth, before it disappeared during the French Revolution, was originally a bronze plaque showing the hero Theseus fighting with the Minotaur. What could this image have meant in such a context? Medieval people would see this metaphorically, for “the spirit of the Middle Ages, still plastic and naïve, longs to give concrete shape to every conception. Every thought seeks expression as an image”(Huizinga, 1954, p.152). The only records describing how the labyrinth was used date from 17th century Auxerres, where the Paschal ritual re-enacted Christ’s harrowing of Hell for lost souls, in the days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The canon priest of the cathedral made his way, singing, to the centre, all the while throwing back and forth a black ball of wool to the monks gathered around the perimeter and singing in response. Here we see the mythic story outlined: the Mother [church] produces a Hero, who goes on a mission looking in the underworld for what has been lost. The canon stands in for the conflated Theseus/Jesus figure. The thread remains, connecting him to the outside world. But what do we make of the Minotaur? I will come back to this idea later on.

The Labyrinth as Technology

Tradition has it that the cathedral labyrinths served as pilgrimage sites when the Crusades and general upheaval made travelling to the Holy Lands too dangerous for ordinary people. The cathedral labyrinth was always located in the western end of the nave, marking the transition between secular space and sacred space, which suggests that it was part of rituals developed for that purpose. Thus the labyrinth can be understood as a technology [from *techne*, Gk, craftsmanship] in the sense of a tool for doing something, and/or a way of doing things, a standard process. This is a departure from our normal definition of technology as the hardware and software of electronic communication systems, but not all that much. Foucault refers to “technologies of mind,” distinguishing between those of the self, and those of domination:

(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

These four technologies hardly ever function separately, although each one of them is associated with a certain type of domination. Each implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of *acquiring certain attitudes*. (1988. p.16. Italics added)

One could say that the labyrinth in the manuscript margin functioned as a technology of sign system, while the cathedral type is a technology of the self, a way to transform oneself.

Relevant here are McLuhan's ideas about tools and technologies as extensions of the human body, as the pen is an extension of the finger in the dust, the car an extension of the foot, the telephone an extension of the voice, and the electronic communication network an extension, according to McLuhan, of the human central nervous system! His First Law of media is the law of Extension/Enhancement:

Every technology extends or amplifies some organ or faculty of the user.

The corollary question, which McLuhan says we ought to ask of any technology, is: "Of which human faculty or organ is it an extension?"

Theologian Matthew Fox provides a clue when he speaks of "inner technologies," by which he means, among other things, ways of integrating our three levels of brain development. He includes in this category chanting and all forms of meditation, especially art-as-process, and the mindfulness practices. These are traditional means of

soothing the oldest reptilian part of our brain, what Fox calls the “crocodile” part, so that fight-or-flight primitive response system can feel safe and stand down from vigilance. The inner technologies allow the analytical, processing cerebral cortex to disengage from the incessant activity that Buddhists call “monkey mind.” This lets the limbic, nurturing, mammalian part of the brain begin to renew its sense of being in relation (Fox, 1999; 2002, pp. 189–196). Walking meditation, like dancing, activates the first chakra, which is associated with feeling grounded and invigorated, and provides the foundation for the lower chakras, so undereducated in Western culture. The centre of the labyrinth has a point-to-point correspondence with the central chakra, known as the fourth or “heart” chakra, thus the gateway to the higher chakras of expression and justice, higher thought, and evolutionary potential (personal communication, July 6, 2005).³ The essential instructions to a person new to labyrinth walking, “Find your own pace. Pay attention to your breath.” come from this awareness. The most frequent result that participants report is a sensation of being both energized and serene, and an awareness that the others walking are “all on the same Path.”

Combining this account with the idea of the cathedral labyrinth as pilgrimage site suggests that the labyrinth is a technology to support, in the most formal anthropological sense, the three stage ritual process described by Turner of separation, liminality, and re-aggregation. While the participant, or initiate, comes out of the process with a new social identity, as a *liminar* in the middle phase, their psychological state is “betwixt and between”(1979; 1969, p. 95).⁴ Turner distinguishes between the liminal rituals of agrarian, tribal peoples, which are “collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, and social structural cycles, are integrated into the total social process, and reflect the collective experience of a community over time,” and those of industrial (and post-industrial) people, which he describes as liminoid genres:

they are historically connected with and often displace rituals which possess true liminal phases, and they also share important characteristics with liminal processes and states, such as “subjectivity,” escape from the classifications of everyday life, symbolic reversals, destruction—at a deep level— of social distinctions, and the like. Liminoid phenomena, unlike liminal phenomena, tend to develop apart from central political and economic processes, along the margins,

in the interstices, on the interfaces of central and servicing institutions... Their symbols are closer to the personal-psychological than to the objective-social typological pole... Liminoid phenomena, unlike liminal, do not so much invert as subvert quotidian and prestigious structures and symbols. (1979, pp. 115-116).

Turner includes writing and producing stage dramas, novels and poetry, painting and sculpture among liminoid genres, also circuses, parades, carnivals and other collective public spectacles within what he calls the “leisure sphere.” One could say therefore that walking a cathedral labyrinth in the thirteenth century would probably have been a liminal experience, whereas in our era, to do so is a liminoid one. Given that simply to do so “subverts the quotidian structure” of contemporary public life, it is a significant decision on the part of the participant, for reasons I will go into later.

Imagination as Contested Space

The definitions of imagination that Kieran Egan provides in his books and on the IERG website invoke spaciousness, for example, Alan White’s description: the “imaginative person is one with the ability to think of lots of possibilities, usually with some richness of detail.” It brings to mind Maxine Greene’s person who “chooses to view herself in the midst of things,” for whom then “a space of freedom opens” (Greene, 1995; White, 1990). Mary Warnock evokes a vastness both spatial and temporal when she identifies “the belief... that there is more in our experience of the world than can possibly meet the unreflecting eye ... that there is always *more* to experience, and *more in* what we experience than we can predict... may be referred to as the feeling of infinity”(1978, p. 202). Does this not sound like a well-furnished mind? Or the clutter of an artist’s studio? Or, something we could definitely use right now, a cosmology, a story of where we come from and what we’re here for, that has room for all of us?

This association with space and time makes sense when we consider that the etymology of the word *imagination* includes the Latin *imago*. The plural form *imagines* refers to wax portrait masks of distinguished ancestors of noble rank. In the Republican period of Roman history, these masks were kept in wooden shrines as part of the ancestral displays in the *atrium*, the formal public reception area of the aristocratic family

home. When any member of the family died, the portrait masks were taken out and worn by actors, costumed in the appropriate toga and regalia, during the public funeral procession, eulogies, and ritual sacrifice staged by families in honour of the departed. Such public displays reinforced the legitimacy of the ruling class and the *status quo* by appealing to traditional Roman ideals of political stability and common heritage across generations and, increasingly, social class.

This admittedly distant point of origin is a reminder that, while we may think of and experience the imagination as a private place, it functions at the interface between the public and private spheres of memory and influence — between the civic and the domestic, the Romans might say. Any optimistic discourse about social change count on the imagination as the source of unexpected insights and new visions: “imagining things being otherwise”(Greene, 1995, p.22); “[e]very important social movement reconfigures the world in the imagination. What was obscure comes forward, lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn on old maps”(Griffin, 1996, p.45).

“Imagination...is the power of constructing possible models of human experience” says Northrop Frye (1963, p.5). However, there is a shadow side: Frye, in his discussion of public discourse, traces the descent from the clichés of social “myths of adjustment”— of which the Roman aristocracy’s custom of parading the family’s ancestor portraits was an early example. Working through the rise of the use of distancing euphemisms such as “anti-personnel bombs,” to the deliberate debasement of language in outright Orwellian tyranny portrayed in the novel *1984*, he points out that

The essential thing is the power of choice. In wartime this power of choice is greatly curtailed, and we resign ourselves to living by half-truths for the duration. In a totalitarian state the competition in propaganda largely disappears, and consequently the power of imaginative choice is sealed off. In our hatred and fear of war and of totalitarian government, one central element is a sense of claustrophobia that the imagination develops when it isn't allowed to function properly (1963, p.63).

and warns that

The first thing our imaginations have to do for us, as soon as we can handle words well enough to read and write and talk, is to fight to protect us from falling into the illusions that society threatens us with (p.60).

Kearney expresses a similar concern, arguing that, “We no longer appear to know who exactly produces or controls the images which condition our consciousness.” The prevalence of mass media and global marketing ensures that “the image has become less and less the expression of an individual subject and more and more the commodity of an anonymous consumerist technology”(Kearney, 1988, pp. 3, 6). Matthew Fox says, “the Empire only wants its own images used,” and quotes from eco-poet Drew Dellinger’s *Love Song to the Milky Way*, about kids with “Nike engraved on their psyche!”(*Science, Mysticism and Faith: Cosmic Christ in Post-Modern Times*. Lecture # 2. Vancouver School of Theology, July 5, 2005). Susan Griffin distinguishes between oppression and self-censorship, or perhaps the failure-to-thrive of the un-nurtured:

One fears that solitary and unique voices will be silenced by mass tyranny, yet this is not the only danger. In an atomized and alienated society, the imagination is endangered by the limitations of the ego...of being restricted to a canvas that is too small (1996, p. 46).

What if this imagination is not only limited in imagery but is also under duress from fear, coercion, and intimidation? What becomes of the capacity of that imagination to think of possibilities? Bereft of compassion or justice, what can guide it? Here, at the edge of the metaphoric framework of the myth, one could ask what has filled the ritual space of the labyrinth with such images of defence and aggression. Who let the Minotaur out? And whose Minotaur is it, anyway? And what’s it doing there? And where is “there”? That is a matter of POV. For the other victims of King Minos, the young Athenians, the labyrinth was a doomed, hellish place. For Queen Pasiphæe, it was a closet to conceal the unmentionable. For Daedalus, it was a masterpiece so diabolical that it surpassed its creator—even he needed wings or string to escape from it. For Ariadne, it represented a dilemma calling for a strategy. For Theseus, it was an arena in which to prove his worth. For the Minotaur, the labyrinth was a prison-fort, rendering him into a weapon. Crossing now between the symbolic and the actual, if these individuals represent

projections of our collective and individual mind, can we see what the existence of all these perspectives might offer us?

Otherness

I want to come back now to the Minotaur here, lurking in the centre at Chartres cathedral. This misbegotten creature, you may recall, was the result of a misalliance between Queen Pasiphæe and the bull from the sea, instigated by the jealous Olympian deity Poseidon to punish the ambitious King Minos. The encounter, and later, the famous Labyrinth of Crete were both contrived by the brilliant designer-inventor Daedalus, who provides the perfect example of the Imagination — and creativity — in the service of evil, and could be the subject of a whole other paper on the necessity for Moral Imagination.

This is a *charged* mythic image, long after our cultural identification of cattle with wealth and power⁵ has been replaced by other symbols. Minotaurs are therianthropic monsters, animal and human forms combined, one of the few—perhaps the only one in Greek mythology, unlike the Egyptian pantheon, with an animal head: the horror lies in not knowing how far the human extends, and how far the animal. Grandchild of the sun god Helios through his sorceress mother Pasiphæe, the Minotaur provokes a powerful response. He represents “a kind of anarchic energy, a horrible distortion of nature”(Thorpe, 1992, 48). To the writer and sculptor Michael Ayrton, he was “an image of the agonies of evolution out of the animal and toward the human condition”(in Pennick, 1990, p.160)... “his instincts are double and in perpetual conflict.. His urge to murder is not a lust but his response to the uncertainty by which, so far as his slow brain permits, he is tormented”(1967, pp. 188, 189)⁶ In the poet Dante’s encounter with the monster is a key. Dante, nursing his outrage after exile from his own city, realizes at a very personal level that violent revenge is not for him: “All the rage that burns within awaits creative transformation ...the Minotaur becomes a symbol for the wrath that can consume us if we fail to find a way to acknowledge and use it”(Thorpe, p.48).

Underneath anger is fear. The Minotaur represents the fundamental dualism of subject/object relations, taken to the extreme of demonizing that which is different:

This fear of otherness comes in part from having flattened our intellectual terrain and desacralized it: people who know the sacred know radical otherness. But in a two-dimensional culture, we don't possess that sensibility any more (Palmer, 24).

Whereas, “if you met a monkey or a bull...in India you could be sure that you were in the presence of the gods” (O’Flaherty, 1989, p.22). If we are seriously to undertake the project of understanding the thoughts, worldview, and situatedness of that which or whom we observe and wish to communicate with, we have to begin with examining assumptions about “other-ness” embedded in the cultural narratives of separation and communion between gods, animals, and humans. Learning how to study and understand other people’s mythologies, appreciating the legitimacy of another perspective, while admitting the inevitability of separateness, avoids the obstacles of alienation and aversion. “Getting into the head of the fish” is an invitation to explore an alternative perspective through the not-yet-demythologized traditions of others (O’Flaherty, 1988, p. 80). “Divine animals and theriomorphic gods pervade most mythologies”(p. 80) so we can get a sense of how other groups of humans think—get inside their heads—through their use of the metaphor of animals in myth animals as “good to think with,” as well as those “good to eat” (Lèvi-Strauss in O’Flaherty, 1988, p.182, n. 28). Bull-human couplings are part of the Cretan myth cycle (e.g. Zeus as bull and the nymph Europa), but the Minotaur story has a unique sub-text of prohibition and punishment, which may say something about Greek discomfort with the a-rational.

Another approach to the problem of other-ness is Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of metamorphosis known as “becoming-animal,” part of their becoming- minoritarian ethos, which they see as a political activity of counter-hegemonic solidarity with marginalized groups. Becomings-animal are ways “which the animal proposes to the human by indicating ways-out or means of escape which the human would never have thought of by himself.” This is not anthropomorphism but an imagination-based act of willed de-subjectivizing, a stepping away from ego-identity. Arguing against unexamined assumptions, officially sanctioned interpretation and the subsequent diminution of creativity, they say: “You don’t know... so experiment...either stop writing, or write like a rat!”(in Baker, 2000, pp. 102, 113).⁷

We might learn about destabilizing our modernist assumptions about identity from recent achievements in art-making and aesthetic practice. This genre responds to Donna Haraway’s work on the “place of the human in a post-humanist landscape,” where, transformed in a historical “we are all cyborgs...theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism...a subtle and complex compound of the organic, technical, mythic, textual and political” (in Baker, p. 100). This post-modern creature is disconcerting, with the traces of transgression, like that which produced the Minotaur, being layered with the Frankensteinian disregard for consequences characteristic of scientism’s aloofness from moral concerns: “[H]ybrid forms unsettle boundaries...of the human and non-human. In the values of modernity...there was a widespread urge to homogenize and systematize, to render the world intelligible by eliminating or suppressing inconsistencies, impurities and dissimilarities”(Baker, p. 99). In this post-modernist interpretation, it is the modernist perspective that is anomalous, departing from the medieval view of difference in that

We today tend to ride over the differences so as to discover the common laws that lie within them all. We reduce the multiplicity of life to its basic common factors. The middle ages abhorred sameness and uniformity. They gloried in multiplicity as part of the Divine order (James, 1982, p.98).

Faced with the extraordinary gang of carved stone creatures frolicking around the North



Tower at Chartres, it is hard not to see that “embracing of impurity, hybridity and monstrosity could be seen as a positively *creative* move”(Baker, p. 100). Not only is the variety of forms astonishing, but even more striking is the thought that long ago some administrator actually decided to fund the process of commissioning, conceiving, planning, carving and installing — in an out-of-the-way niche in a tower hundreds

of feet in the air— such playful figures. But their hybridity also expressed the idea of being simultaneously a part of and a translator between several worlds, realms of air, water, earth, even fire. I recall thinking, as an interdisciplinary scholar, a sense of identification with them.



Beyond Monsters

Earlier we saw that, in the context of the cathedral, the labyrinth could be considered a part of the ritual of initiation. A primary purpose of liminal ritual structure is to allow the group and the individual to accommodate the upheaval of transitional states and transformational processes. It is thus an essential part of the process of reflexive “stock-taking” on the part of the community, what Dewey (1934, p. 272) would define as the imagination, “the conscious adjustment of the new and the old”:

To look at itself a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection. To do this it must set up a frame within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and if need be, remodeled and rearranged. In ritual, what is inside the frame is what is often called the “sacred;” what is outside, the “profane,” “secular,” or “mundane”(Turner, 1979, p. 96).

By walking into the protected liminal space of the labyrinth, the *temenos*, or container, and using the meditative skills of breathing and mindful awareness to calm one’s disrupted self, the walker, seeker or pilgrim, can address, with a compassionate and open mind and heart, the situation confronting her: Is it a Minotaur? Or my fugitive self in the mirror? Buddhists might ask, as does Sr Chên Không (Thich Nhat Hanh’s colleague at Plum Village in France): Is it a snake? Or is it just a rope?(Galland, 1998, p.280).

Finally, I would suggest that the faculty of which the labyrinth is an extension is that capacity we have to balance polarities, to reconcile opposites, to encompass multiplicity, to seek homeostasis, however briefly. The telling image from the myth is that escape from the labyrinth is by wings or by string: by gaining an overview or by working slowly through all the twists and turns. By experiencing journey as story — Am I lost? Or is this the long way HOME?— using narrative as the connecting thread, we can accommodate many perspectives and live-through many turning-points. We too can begin to dialogue with mystery.

References

- Ayrton, M. (1967). *The maze maker*. London: Longmans, Green.
- Baker, S. (2000). *The postmodern animal*. London: Reaktion.
- Chance, J. (1994). *Medieval mythography: From Roman North Africa to the School of Chartres, A.D. 433-1177* (Vol. 1). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Eisler, R. T. (1987). *The chalice and the blade : our history, our future*. Cambridge, MA: Harper & Row.
- Fox, M. (1999). *Sins of the spirit, blessings of the flesh: Lessons for transforming evil in soul and society*. New York: Random House.
- Fox, M. (2002). *Creativity: Where the Divine and the uman meet*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.
- Frye, N. (1963). *The educated imagination*. Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.
- Galland, C. (1998). *The bond between women: a journey to fierce compassion*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Griffin, S. (1996). Can Imagination Save Us? Thinking about the Future with Beginner's Mind. *Utne Reader*, 13(76), 43–46.
- Huizinga, J. (1954). *The waning of the Middle Ages: a study of the forms of life, thought, and art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth centuries*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- James, J. (1982). *Chartres, the masons who built a legend*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kearney, R. (1988). *The wake of the imagination: Ideas of creativity in Western culture*. London: Hutchinson.

- Levin, D. M. (1989). *The listening self: Personal growth, social change and the closure of metaphysics*. New York: Routledge.
- O'Flaherty, W. D. (1988). *Other people's myths*. New York: Macmillan.
- O'Flaherty, W. D. (1989). *Animals in four worlds*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press.
- Palmer, P. J. (1999). The grace of great things: Reclaiming the sacred in knowing, teaching, and learning. In S. Glazer (Ed.), *The heart of learning. Spirituality in education* (pp. 15-32). New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam.
- Panofsky, E. (1957). *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*. Cleveland: Meridian.
- Pennick, N. (1990). *Mazes and labyrinths*. London: Robert Hale.
- Thorpe, D. (1992). Poetry, Madness, and the Inner Ear. *Parabola*, XVII(No. 2).
- Turner, V. (1979). *Process, performance, and pilgrimage*. New Delhi: Concept.
- Turner, V. W. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Warnock, M. (1978). *Imagination* (2nd ed.). London: Faber and Faber.
- White, A. R. (1990). *The language of imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Appendix A

A collection of original sources, from <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranos/Minotauros.html>

Minos sailed against Athens with a fleet, not believing that the Athenians were innocent of the death of [his son] Androgeos [killed by the Marathonian Bull], and sorely harassed them until it was agreed that he should take seven maidens and seven boys for the Minotauros that was said to dwell in the Labyrinth at Knossos. –*Pausanias 1.27.10*

The god [Delphoi oracle] told them [the Athenians] to give Minos whatever retribution he should chose ... He ordered them to send seven young men and seven girls, unarmed, to be served as food to the Minotauros. The Minotauros was kept in a labyrinth, from which there was no escape after one entered, for it closed off its imperceivable exit with convoluted flexions. It had been constructed by Daidalos. –*Apollodorus 3.213*

Theseus was on the list of the third tribute to the Minotauros (some say he volunteered) ... [Ariadne] pleaded with Daidalos to tell her the way out of the labyrinth. Following his instructions, she gave Theseus a ball of thread as he entered. He fastened this to the door and let it trail behind him as he went in. He came across the Minotauros in the furthest section of the labyrinth, killed him with jabs of his fist, and then made his way out again by pulling himself along the thread. –*Apollodorus E1.7-1.9*

Minos aspired to the throne [of Krete], but was rebuffed. He claimed, however, that he had received the sovereignty from the gods, and to prove it he said that whatever he prayed for would come about. So while sacrificing to Poseidon, he prayed for a bull to appear from the depths of the sea, and promised to sacrifice it upon its appearance. And Poseidon did send up to him a splendid bull. Thus Minos received the rule, but he sent the bull to his herds and sacrificed another ... Poseidon was angry that the bull was not sacrificed, and turned it wild. He also devised that Pasiph  e should develop a lust for it. In her passion for the bull she took on as her accomplice an architect named Daidalos ... He built a woden cow on wheels, ... skinned a real cow, and sewed the contraption into the skin, and then, after placing Pasiph  e inside, set it in a meadow where the bull

normally grazed. The bull came up and had intercourse with it, as if with a real cow. Pasiphæe gave birth to Asterios, who was called Minotauros. He had the face of a bull, but was otherwise human. Minos, following certain oracular instructions, kept him confined and under guard in the labyrinth. This labyrinth, which Daidalos built, was a “cage with convoluted flexions that disorders debouchment.” -*Apollodorus 3.8-11*

Not long afterwards [Theseus' arrival in Athens] there came from Krete for the third time the collectors of the tribute ... an agreement to send him [Minos] every nine years a tribute of seven youths and as many maidens. And the most dramatic version of the story declares that these young men and women, on being brought to Krete, were destroyed by the Minotauros in the Labyrinth, or else wandered about at their own will and, being unable to find an exit, perished there; and that the Minotauros, as Euripides says, was 'A mingled form and hybrid birth of monstrous shape', and that 'Two different natures, man and bull, were joined in him ...

Hellanikos ... says the agreement was that the Athenians should furnish the ship, and that the youths should embark and sail with him carrying no warlike weapon, and that if the Minotauros was killed the penalty should cease.

On the two former occasions, then, no hope of safety was entertained, and therefore they sent the ship with a black sail, convinced that their youth were going to certain destruction; but now Theseus encouraged his father and loudly boasted that he would master the Minotauros, so that he gave the pilot another sail, a white one, ordering him, if he returned with Theseus safe, to hoist the white sail, but otherwise to sail with the black one, and so indicate the affliction ...

When he reached Krete on his voyage, most historians and poets tell us that he got from Ariadne, who had fallen in love with him, the famous thread, and that having been instructed by her how to make his way through the intricacies of the Labyrinth, he slew the Minotauros and sailed off with Ariadne and the youths. -*Plutarch Theseus 15.1 & 17.3 & 19.1*

Pasiphæe, the wife of Minos, became enamoured of the bull, and Daidalos, by fashioning a contrivance in the shape of a cow, assisted Pasiphæe to gratify her passion. In explanation of this the myths offer the following account: before this time it had been the

custom of Minos annually to dedicate to Poseidon the fairest bull born in his herds and to sacrifice it to the god; but at the time in question there was born a bull of extraordinary beauty and he sacrificed another from among those which were inferior, whereupon Poseidon becoming angry at Minos, caused his wife Pasiphæe to become enamoured of the bull. And by means of the ingenuity of Daidalos Pasiphæe had intercourse with the bull and gave birth to the Minotauros, famed in the myth. This creature, they say, was of double form, the upper parts of the body as far as the shoulders being those of a bull and the remaining parts those of a man. As a place in which to keep this monstrous thing Daidalos, the story goes, built a labyrinth, the passage-ways of which were so winding that those unfamiliar with them had difficulty in making their way out; in this labyrinth the Minotaur was maintained and here it devoured the seven youths and seven maidens which were sent to it from Athens, as we have already related. –*Diodorus Siculus 4.77.1*

Minos commanded them [the Athenians as recompense for the murder of his son Androgeus] that they give seven youths and as many maidens every nine years to the Minotauros for him to devour, for as long as the monster should live. And when the Athenians gave them, the inhabitants of Attika were rid of their evils and Minos ceased warring on Athens ... Theseus after conversing with her [Ariadne the daughter of Minos] and securing her assistance, both slew the Minotauros and got safely away, since he had learned from her the way out of the labyrinth. –*Diodorus Siculus 4.61.4*

Pasiphæe, daughter of Sol [Helios] and wife of Minos, for several years did not make offerings to the goddess Venus. Because of this Venus inspired in her an unnatural love for a bull. At the time when Daeadalus came there as an exile, he asked her to help him. For her he made a wooden heifer, and put in it the hide of a real heifer, and in this she lay with the bull. From this intercourse she bore the Minotaur, with bull's head but human body. Then Daedalus made for the Minotaur a labyrinth with an undiscoverable exit in which it was confined. When Minos found out the affair he cast Daedalus into prison, but Pasiphæe freed him from his chains ...

After he [Minos] conquered the Athenians their revenues became his; he decreed, moreover that each year they should send seven of their children as food for the Minotaur. After Theseus had come from Troezen, and had learned what a calamity

afflicted the state, of his own accord he promised to go against the Minotaur ... When Theseus came to Crete, Ariadne, Minos' daughter, loved him so much that she betrayed her brother and saved the stranger, or she showed Theseus the way out of the Labyrinth. When Theseus had entered and killed the Minotaur, by Ariadne's advise he got out by unwinding the thread. Ariadne, because she had been loyal to him, he took away, intending to marry her. —*Hyginus Fabulae 40-43*

Image credits

Theseus and the Minotaur were photographed by Maria Daniels.

The Chartres hybrids were photographed by Peter A. Peterson II.

Endnotes

¹ These are the unicursal ones, a single path into the centre and back out again, with many turns. These labyrinths are meditation sites, not mazes: there are no walls, no puzzles, and no getting lost: “You lose yourself in a maze, but you find yourself in a labyrinth.” But you don't know that at first glance, and the tension in this binary opposition is certainly a factor. On that note, the exotic, extreme and compelling qualities of the thing also should be noted – it is irresistible to kids.

² In philosophy or theology: a question or argument that is put forward for discussion or debate. Latin: *quod* what + *libet* it pleases

³ These are *very* rough accounts of the different chakra qualities.

⁴ Arnold van Gennep, originator of this theory of ritual, distinguishes between the three stages as: (1) separation (from ordinary social life); (2) margin or limen (meaning threshold), when the subjects of ritual fall into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence; and (3) re-aggregation, when they are ritually returned to secular or mundane life — either at a higher status level or in an altered state of consciousness or social being. Turner, 1979, p. 95.

⁵ *pecu*: cattle, the Latin root of pecuniary, impecunious etc.

⁶ The Minotaur in Picasso's Volland Suite comes to mind, who had girlfriends and went to parties, but, alas, ends up blinded and being led about by a little girl with flowers, wounded and eventually killed. He suffers violence but is never shown inflicting it.

⁷ In her Deep Ecology practice, Buddhist and eco-activist Joanna Macy has developed a consciousness-changing ritual called the Council of All Beings, which connects with and extends Deleuze and Guattari's creative and political concerns in extraordinarily sensitive ways. See <http://www.joannamacy.net/html/deep.html#>