

Facilitating the labyrinth: ritual process and relational aesthetic

This article explores a facilitator's relationship with the labyrinth ritual as a relational and embodied aesthetic.

For an ancient, mathematically defined, content-free set of lines, the labyrinth does get around. Relationships between (to, with) the labyrinth and its enthusiasts, a conceptual overview that arose early on in the labyrinth movement, as Kim Saward reminds us, include the categories of labyrinth builders, labyrinth tenders, and labyrinth connectors¹. This is an elastic taxonomy and by no means exclusive; the Venn diagrams of multiple enthusiasms are lively zones.

“Builders” might include among its sub-categories one for those with scholarly knowledge of the distribution and history of the labyrinth symbol as well as its actual construction as an architectural object: art historian Hermann Kern, architect-historians John James and Keith Critchlow, Jeff Saward and Ben Nicholson in their roles as gazetteer-historian and design theorists, all belong here, along with many others. They bring depth, tradition and phylogenetic resonance to the work of those who measure out, draw, paint, dig, plant, and lay the stones and bricks of our labyrinths.

“Tenders”, also known as “keepers”, are committed to maintaining their labyrinths both as a personal meditation practice and as a ministry, a service offered to others. Keepers ensure that the labyrinth is available and honoured as a sacred space, however mundane the activity this requires may be: “keeping” at one level is a form of the Benedictine practice “laborare est orare”, as anyone can attest who has swept away the cookie crumbs or filled in the scratched surface of a painted labyrinth in a parish hall, or mowed the turf or weeded the path or daily cleared away the sticks and candy wrappers of an outdoor labyrinth.

Saward illustrates the category of “connector” with her own relationship with the labyrinth, informed by her vocation of community-building. Drawing on extensive experience of different labyrinths around the world, observing the labyrinth movement evolve internationally, she sees a need for increased sensitivity to the heterogeneous diversity of local traditions, settings and contexts. (Her example of the barbaric rudeness of going barefoot in a French cathedral filled me with retrospective remorse.) The meander at the heart of the labyrinth pattern, the base element of the symbol, signals its incompatibility with any tendency towards “fundamentalism” in practice.

This paradoxical tension between the static element of the pattern – one might say the “unchanging symbol of flow” – and the dynamic quality of the rituals created as practitioners experiment with establishing traditions, points to yet another kind of relationship between the labyrinth and its enthusiasts. This is a dialogic one, or more accurately, poly-logic, between the labyrinth, its enthusiast-practitioners, and the world. This relationship unfolds in the contemporary space between ritual and aesthetics.

2. “But what is it we actually DO?”

Barbara, my partner in Canadian Labyrinth Ventures, and I were filling in the application forms for Arts Organisations grants offered by municipal and provincial arts funding organisations. We were looking for funding for a couple of projects involving the labyrinth we had installed in the

¹ Kimberly Saward credits Toby Evans for the concept, in “I’ll Meet You There”. *Labyrinth Pathways*, 5th edition, September 2011.

parish hall of the Anglican cathedral in Ottawa. Barbara was plodding through the budget section, totting up the hours spent booking the hall, ensuring clean floors, unlocked doors, and access to the kitchen; designing, printing, picking up and distributing flyers, posters, and leaflets; writing and scheduling the electronic newsletter; finding, booking, accommodating and paying the musicians; setting out the chairs, hospitality tables, and candles; shopping for, preparing, and putting out the refreshments; minding the student volunteer; replenishing the art supplies and candles and cleaning spilled wax out of the tealight holders; documenting the participants' artwork, comments, and evaluations; photographing the musicians; writing the reports for funding organisations and the cathedral; and finally, planning the actual sequence of the events and translating the theme of the month into metaphorical language. Under her breath she muttered, "Where's the part where we get paid?" I was writing the artists' statements.

The language of government administered arts programs was a maze for us. Our proposed activities "must enhance or improve the community's quality of life... Support local professional artists of all disciplines and backgrounds... Provide opportunities to local residents to participate in the arts... Fill an artistic niche... Demonstrate high artistic merit and artistic innovation... Develop new audiences" and so on. The government wanted to see documentation of our skills and professional qualifications. It wanted to know about program content, timelines and how the artistic goals of the project related to our organization's mandate. We had been strongly advised to avoid *any* reference to spirituality or religion, being already on iffy ground because of our location at the Cathedral.

Who were we as artists in our relationship to the labyrinth and the people we invited to join us at the events we hosted? (sponsored? facilitated? conjured up?) We were both painters, but we weren't the ones painting in this project – the participants ("audience") were, we hoped. We were both sculptors, but the bronze, wood, wire, papier mâché, sticks and string that littered our portfolios would not be in evidence. One of us sang in a choir, but we were hiring musicians to provide the ambient sound. Our poetess, like Charon's boat, only "carried" people to and from the event – we were not applying on the basis of any reputation we might have as creative writers. We had both done some installation art, but the labyrinth, a near perfect replica of the one at Chartres, was already permanently in place (because of us). Yet our events were well-attended, much appreciated evenings of communal meditation and participatory art-making, with improvisational "sonic environment" created by world class musicians as part of the transcendently beautiful other-worldly atmosphere, not to be found anywhere else in the city. What *were* we doing? In artspeak?

"We're 'multidisciplinary time-based installation' artists. We *animate*. We're animateurs."

3. Ritual

The word "ritual" comes from the Latin *ritualis*, "pertaining to rites" – *ritus* – which means religious observances, customs, usage. The root word for religion is *religio* meaning "to tie back together". Rituals are required actions, or rites, performed in a prescribed order. Animals, birds and fish perform courtship and territorial display rituals instinctively, and our human need to create rituals no doubt has similar biological origins. Archaeological evidence shows the purpose of ritual has always been to mediate between the Self and the Otherworld. Images and symbols of social elements are "framed" within the ritual: what is within the frame is called "sacred", and what is outside, "secular" or "mundane". Time is significant in framing. Rituals have a definite beginning, middle, and ending, often marked off by sounds: bells, percussion, singing, and shouting signal the separation of sacred from secular time. All the senses are engaged and their messages encoded (#361 p.97)—not just any smell, for example, but frankincense, sage, beeswax. Anthropologists identify a tripartite structure in ritual: first, separation of the subjects from ordinary social life; second, being at the margin or *limen*

(meaning threshold), when the ritual subjects pass into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence; and third, 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 (#361p95). Liminals are described as being

betwixt and between. The liminal state has frequently been likened to death; to being in the womb; to invisibility, darkness, and the wilderness. Liminals are removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and leveled to a homogeneous social state through discipline and ordeal...Much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated, notably the sense of comradeship and communion, or *communitas*. (Turner in McLaren)

Traditional community rituals, associated with “tribal and early agrarian societies...[are] collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, and social structural cycles, integrated into the total social process” (#361 115). Anthropologist Malidoma Somé describes the ritual practices of his people, the tribal agrarian Dagara of Burkina Faso, in similar terms. Ritual, at community, family, and individual levels, is an obligation, maintaining the cosmic order by ensuring harmonious relations with the spirit world, ancestors and deities. The invisibility mentioned above is understood as characteristic of the Otherworld:

Visible wrongs have their roots in the world of the spirit. To deal only with their visibility is like trimming of the leaves of the weed when you mean to uproot it. Ritual is the mechanism that uproots these dysfunctions. It offers a realm in which the unseen part of the dysfunction is worked on in ways that affect the seen. We enter a ritual space because something in the physical world has warned us of possible deterioration at hand. One does not enter into a ritual without a purpose. (25)

In the Dagara view, Western hurriedness is a “fleeing from” not a “hastening toward”; a way to distract oneself from a profound misalignment of the cosmic order. Slowing down is essential as a first step to restore balance, but one next to impossible for those “indentured” to the industrialised Western “Machine world”. Social dysfunction as much as personal illness is a sign that something is not right:

Ritual is called for because our soul communicates things to us that the body translates as need, or want, or absence. So we enter into ritual in order to respond to the call of the soul. *Illness is the sign language of the soul in need of attention*. This means that our soul is the part of us that picks up on situations well ahead of our conscious awareness of them. Purpose is the driving force that contributes to the effectiveness of ritual. (25)

While for the most part we are not tribal people – we enter relationships and communities voluntarily rather than being born into them – nevertheless, our souls are in desperate need of rituals, [for all sorts of reasons: healing, mourning, celebration, gratitude to name a few](#). Anthropologist Victor Turner distinguishes between traditional liminal processes and what he refers to as the “liminal-like” or “liminoid” genres and phenomena which have emerged in conjunction with industrial cultures. While the two share important characteristics, including subjectivity, a sense of *communitas*, and temporary escape from classifications of everyday life, liminoid genres develop along the margins, apart from political and economic structures and power bases. They may be collective, (derived, like carnivals, parades, spectacles, and circuses, from liminal predecessors) or individually created and idiosyncratic (but with mass or collective effect – think of the immediate popularity of the Shepard Fairey posters of Barack Obama). Liminoid genres include creative writing, theatre, music, performance, pilgrimage (!), architecture, art, graffiti; and they are often experimental, subversive, and edgy.

We need rituals to counteract the heart-breaking soul-destroying effects of living in contemporary society in these dire times. While many of us rely on personal, private daily rituals such as morning journal writing and meditation, what draws us are rituals of the collective liminoid genre, those that restore to wholeness our fractured sense of community. “What one acknowledges in the formation of the community is the possibility of doing together what is impossible to do alone.”(Somé, 49)

Young Mars

Eight months of the year, I facilitate a “First Friday” evening walk on my “home” labyrinth, a Petite Chartres style seven-circuit I painted in the parish hall downstairs at St Luke’s Anglican Church in Ottawa, a space we share with a daytime soup kitchen and social service centre. Here the focus is on embodied presence: warming up the somewhat bleak space with candlelight and flowers, leading a simple yogic breathwork and energy medicine practice to encourage relaxation and grounding, and sharing thoughts on a theme in the group before beginning the walk. In the short introductory talk at last March, I described the symbolism of Mars, the Roman god of war and agriculture for whom the month is named. Unlike the bellicose Greek god Ares, who gives his name to the astrological sign Aries (March 21st to April 21st), Mars is associated with protecting the new growth from hostile forces. I spoke of finding within oneself the possibility of new growth after the long winter of snow shovelling and hibernation (actual and metaphorical – Ottawa is the world’s second coldest capital city after Ulan Bator), and calling upon one’s “inner Mars” to protect that new creativity and optimism from despondency, inertia, and fatalism.

Thirty minutes into the walk, who should come tumbling down the stairs from the street but two bubbling young people, newcomers attracted by the sidewalk sign outside, boisterous and cheerful in the ragtag motley of Occupy youth. Recognizing the serene atmosphere of a walking meditation, they collected themselves, read the explanatory pamphlet I offered, took a cup of tea, and asked if they would have time to walk as they still had much to do that night. They told me they were environmental protesters, here to mourn the loss of the old growth white pine woods north of the city in Wakefield that they had tried to protect from developers, and to celebrate the young man’s release from jail on that account (<http://canadians.org/blog/?p=13845>). The labyrinth looked to them like a good place to do both.

While the young woman and I held the circle, the young man joined the other walkers, making his way to the centre and sitting for a long time staring into the candlelight that flickered among the rocks and spring flowers there, before coming back out to us, calm and refreshed. From his pocket he took a document he wanted me to see: his release sheet from jail. “I am so proud of this,” he said. “Three times they offered me a condition of release to sign that would have prevented me from walking on the main street in Wakefield. Three times I refused. The fourth time I said, ‘Just put me in solitary, and I’ll go on a hunger strike and pray’, and they let me go!”

I thanked them for trying to save our environment – among the concerns about the design of the highway extension is the possible contamination of the aquifers that supply many of Wakefield’s wells, and the outdated environmental studies on which the decision to build was based. In turn they thanked me for holding sacred space at St Luke’s and then they were off into the night to visit his mother and then head out to his paramedic job. I shared the news with the other participants in the thanksgiving at the end, and, tears in our eyes, we shook our heads at how much of life as we know it and our country appear to need our protection these days from “hostile forces.” It was comforting to feel our connectedness to one another, to the land, and to all of Creation. How grateful we were for the energy of young Mars amongst us in the labyrinth!

A Relational Aesthetic

Aesthetics generally refers to that branch of philosophy that inquires into the nature and determining characteristics of art, the meaning works of art are said to have, how they may be judged, valued, or interpreted, the “specific kind of emotion allegedly felt only for works of art, and caused by the presence in the work of the so-called quality of ‘significant form’ ”(according to Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf’s brother in law) and so on – the “science of the beautiful”. Here I am drawing on an earlier meaning: the adjective “aesthetic”, which originated in the Greek word *aisthetikos* “sensitive,” from *aisthanesthai* “to perceive, to feel”, a meaning perhaps most familiar to us in its absence, as in “anaesthetic”, to be without any sense perception at all. Thus “embodiment” may be understood as the informing site of sense perception, rather than merely the dumb vehicle of impulses to the brain, and an aesthetic response to something is relational, an “I - Thou” encounter rather than the distanced subject-object dualism of what’s known as the “Cartesian gaze”. Modernist privileging of visual perception has social as well as neurological implications: “within traditional aesthetics, it is only the image that counts. Lived reality is repressed by the disembodied eye and transformed into spectacle” (Gablik p. 99).

The disempowerment of art through its subservience to power and status, structured within the art gallery system and reinforced by the myth of rugged individualist artist-genius is totally subverted by a new, liminoid genre of relational, engaged, connective and participatory art forms based in more feminine values of care and compassion, of seeing and responding to need, and exploring the healing role of social interaction. This genre creates a site for what philosopher David Michael Levin calls “enlightened listening,” a listening that is oriented toward the achievement of shared understandings. “We need to think about ‘practices of the self’ that *understand* the essential intertwining of self and other, self and society, that are aware of the subtle complexities of this intertwining”(Levin in Gablik, 1995. p80). Not spectacle, but welcoming, listening, response, connection, inclusion.

What we told the government

We are visual and installation artists who use the labyrinth — understood as a medieval form of public art — to organize a visual, sonic, sensorial and spatial environment where a participant’s symbolic journey in real space, alone or with others, brings about a sense of integration and compassion, and provokes intuitive insights, creative inspiration, and personal transformation.

The cathedral labyrinth emerged in the 12th century, an era of paradigm shifts as drastic as our own. Its creators, sharing a collective “invent-ory”² of images, were committed in their philosophy, art and architecture to experiencing and expressing a sense of the transcendent. They were intrigued by the workings and care of the imagination. Unlike us, they had not yet experienced the shift from oral to print culture, nor the impact of linear visual perspective upon perception and the construction of knowledge. Nor were they shaped, as we are, by the Enlightenment’s mechanistic world view and Cartesian cognitive split, with the resulting detachment and instrumentalism characteristic of contemporary perceptual and psychosocial norms. To walk the labyrinth is to use—we believe restoratively—an artefact created by a non-dualistic mind.

These days, freedom of imagination is beset by corporate media control of the framing and dissemination of ideas and especially images; and at the same time isolated and disembodied in a multi-channel universe of encapsulated online communities. *Intentionally shared public space and activity are increasingly rare.*

² Carruthers, M. (1998) *The craft of thought: meditation, rhetoric, and the making of images, 400-1200*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 12

In contrast, the labyrinth event establishes a site for intersubjectivity and co-created metaphor. Profound insights and life changing reflections are provoked, gently but firmly, through encounters between an open mind and this public art form. These insights tend to be triggered by symbolic and metaphorical cues and received as fragments of images and whispers. These encounters support and nourish both individual and collective imagination, including the moral imagination that compassion engenders.

We situate the experience of the communal labyrinth event in a framework of **relational and engaged art practice**, identifying our function, in community activist Laurie McGauley's term, as "Engaged artists ... [who] create processes, spaces, images and interactions that model communities of creativity and respect... practice a dialogic approach to art-making ... giving others' creativity place and voice."³ We see the labyrinth as a form of public art that invites creativity in any participant. As artists, keeping a visual record our own continuing explorations and transformations, we have learned that sensorial cues are influential: the musical environment; poetic language in the introduction; expressive gestures of the leader and fellow sojourners; attention to lighting effects and staging. There is a connection between sense perceptions, reflection, meaning making and transformation. Sensorial cues augment and stimulate the metaphorical possibilities. The contemplative objects we place around the site assume a numinous quality, provoking profound responses. Participants have described the music as "creating a shelter" as well as a mood, a thread and a trajectory.

We scaffold this experience of walking meditation with art materials for participants to record and synthesize their experience in visual form. (These are selected to minimize any tendency towards perfectionism!) The audience moves from the passivity of concert goers to an active role collaborating with the musicians and the environment of the labyrinth in support of their own self-reflective creative and expressive process.

The labyrinth is a cultural artefact resonant with significance but one that we received with very little explanation. It is a tool new to us. We have been working with it for nearly 20 years between us, and we want to explore: to come together with other artists to share our discoveries, expand on what we know, and work towards a larger vocabulary of gesture, language, narrative, sound, movement, shape, form, ritual. Our project extends our understanding of the labyrinth's capacity as site, symbol, and technology of transformation.

Labyrinth as relational art form in liminoid genre

We are all irresistibly drawn to the labyrinth; at some deep level we just *know* it is a place where our deep unspoken need for insight, forgiveness, reconciliation, solace, healing, hope, inspiration, and the thrill of potential will be met. Our multitudes of experience confirm the power of the labyrinth as a liminal space where we can slow down, breathe deeply, ground ourselves and be drawn back into harmony at levels we are aware of and those we are not.

We know it is a ritual place because the space is already so clearly demarcated by the archetypal circle, inviting us to engage with it. We feel the threshold as soon as we step up to it. We understand immediately that we are crossing into another zone altogether when we take that first step.

How subversive is that first step! We aren't rushing off to anything. We are not getting ahead, or even going anywhere. We are not multi-tasking and we are not being efficient or productive. There is nothing to tick off on any to-do list (except the one headed "self-care"). We are not

³ Vancouver Conference - *Live in Public: The Art of Engagement*.
<http://islandsinstitute.ning.com/forum/topics/1163070:Topic:2382>. Retrieved Jan 10.10

networking, or developing our organization. We are meandering slowly and mindfully, including one another within a benign, uncoded community of fellow liminars where we are all simply somewhere “on the Path”. (One of the most powerful accounts I have ever heard of labyrinth use took place in a women’s prison, where choosing which table to sit at in the dining hall was a loaded issue. An inmate recognised some other participants from a labyrinth walk. That, she knew, would be a safe table for her.)

We see, in the story of young Mars, what power there is in the invisible realm of intentional ritual space. That young man was called to us as surely as if I’d stood out on the street shouting his name. Linda Mikell’s “Little Miracles on the Path” series relates many such stories – we all have them.

As animator-artists we perform all the steps of ritual and of communal art-making: we build and tend the labyrinth and prepare it to welcome (stage 1) and support (stage 2) and restore (stage 3) the participants through our planning and publicizing, staging, candle-lighting, decorating and flower-arranging, altar-making, musical shelter-providing, accommodating and tea-making. We encourage creativity in all participants by inviting them to co-create as appropriate, by teaching and encouraging and exemplifying and providing materials for gesture, dance, singing, drumming, painting; and to integrate their experience, through invitations to journal, to join conversations or fellowship. We do this in opposition to the notion that only a few of us have the talent to be called “artists” and the rest of you can just buy tickets and watch the performance.

What can we say of our community of labyrinth builders, keepers, connectors, and animators? That we **all** contribute to this project of restoration through the inception, creation, maintenance and animation of these sites of ritual power, healing and community.