

Lenten Labyrinth Lessons, Part 3

I've walked a labyrinth every day now for almost six weeks. By and large, it's been a pretty solitary experience and I've relished that, even experiencing some minor annoyance the few times I've approached that day's labyrinth to find others around (usually not walking it but *there* all the same— with barking dogs, conversation companions, or even just a silent presence that has felt like an invasion of my privacy—how spoiled am I!). That said, I know that the labyrinth, among other things, is meant to be a metaphor for life, and I'm not a hermit living by myself in a cave on top of a mountain. So I did actually look forward to broadening my Lenten experience last week by moving from public, outdoor, always- available labyrinths to private labyrinths that required permission to walk. This would ensure that, at the very least, I'd have to communicate with *someone* at each day's labyrinth!

One thing I noticed, whether the labyrinth was part of an institution or a private home, was that the owners/overseers tended to express regret for the “less-than-perfect” condition they judged their labyrinth to be in. The chaplain of a private school wasn't even confident the path would be visible. “I'm sure it needs a good power washing,” he confessed. It was fine. Or the homeowner who apologized for the handful of twigs that “littered” the pathway. It was fine! Or the woman who bemoaned the fact that her labyrinth—which completely encompassed her front yard, butting right up against the public sidewalk parallel with Walther Ave—had originally boasted herbs and plants as the path dividers but due to age and time restraints, she and her partner could now only handle grass maintenance. It was *fine ... really!*

This particular labyrinth in northeast Baltimore is included in the book *Labyrinth Journeys* by Twyla Alexander, published in 2022. Apparently, over a couple of years, the author walked a labyrinth in every state and this Baltimore offering was the only urban experience she'd had. Go Baltimore! This labyrinth also had a peace pole—a common site at several of the labyrinths I've walked this Lent—right beside it. The owner told me that her mailman had expressed some skepticism when he saw it: “Do you really think that's going to make a difference,” he'd asked her? “Well, during rush hours, there's often a line of traffic jammed up out front. If even one person sees it while waiting for the cars to move, maybe that's enough. I mean, it can't hurt, can it?” She actually called herself a minister of peace. I hope to get the fuller story on that someday. But the very fact that this labyrinth, with its peace pole in multiple languages, practically begs pedestrians to enter the sacred space and walk it (and she confirmed that she does indeed get spontaneous walkers every now and then) was heartwarming, especially since I always found my daily labyrinths devoid of people (which, while enjoying that on one level also saddened me because these great resources didn't seem to be fully utilized).



But then I walked the labyrinth at Georgetown's Waterfront Park in DC yesterday. As I approached, I saw multiple people walking it. My default kneejerk reaction was to be disappointed, but I quickly set my selfishness aside and opened myself up to how this walk would be different from all the others.

A few people seemed to get it and know what to do. Many were children who saw it as a game of sorts and/or a race. One boy, about 10, was a rule follower—and apparently competitive!—because he kept reprimanding his sister for “cheating” when she'd mischievously step sideways onto an adjacent circuit, which he perceived as putting her closer to the center and thus threatening his chance of “winning.” One family (maybe Pakistani or Indian?) cut across all the circuits by walking straight to the center first, thinking that's where they were supposed to start. Others thought reaching the center was the end so would then leave walking a straight line from there to the perimeter.

I gave permission to a trio of tween girls (perhaps in town for a dance contest—they were wearing very short, somewhat shiny lycra skirts) to pass me as they were clearly not interested in taking a contemplative stroll. In fact, their patience was tried enough just going in; on the way out they eventually started running and then just gave up completely by cutting across the circuits to the outside when it was taking too long to finish. During my journey inward, I encountered a young boy on his way out. He met me face to face with widening, slightly apprehensive eyes that silently asked, “Uh oh, what do we do now?” A little smile appeared, and he shyly dropped his gaze, once I grinned at him and gently stepped aside. I explained to an older trio of teen girls the difference between a labyrinth and a maze and encouraged a large group of Latino adults to “Give it a try; it's relaxing!” as I finished up. And they did.

It ended up being a delightful walk that was much more real to life. And not just to life in general, but to the specific complexities of life ... the multinational, intergenerational, confusing, compassionate, and chaotic aspects of life. We live in a diverse, varied, multidimensional world. And that, perhaps, makes those inhabiting it more prone to misunderstandings, disagreements, conflict. Sadly, that kind of divisiveness is all too prevalent across the globe, and especially in our own country, today. Humanity is in desperate need of “peace pole reminders” or “labyrinth encounters” to consider another way.

I find it very interesting that it took me exactly 40 days of daily pilgrimages to finally experience this *fuller* labyrinth metaphor for Life (capital L). And that feels gratifyingly appropriate to a biblical storyteller who knows the significance of the many references to the number 40 in the Bible, particularly in how it relates to the multiple understandings of “journey” (among lots of possible examples ... the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years; the 40 days and 40 nights of rain for Noah and his family on the ark; Jesus appearing to the apostles and speaking about the kingdom of God over a period of 40 days after his resurrection; Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the wilderness—the story that actually kicks off Lent each year!).

Regardless of whether my own 40-day journey was a coincidence or not, it feels notable and important to me. Look, I'm never going to complain about having a labyrinth all to myself where I can enjoy peaceful, quiet, calm contemplation. But even Jesus eventually rejoined civilization after his solitary wilderness sojourn. And he changed the world. So from now on, I'm also committed to

not grumbling if I encounter others along those temporary journeys—even boisterous, uninformed, disinterested others. After all, a labyrinth is meant to be a metaphor for Life (capital L), and I'm not a hermit living by myself in a cave on top of a mountain. Maybe I, too, can change the world.