

There Are No Wrong Turns
in the Labyrinth of Life
Rev. Lilli Nye
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The reading is drawn from a book called *The Maze and the Warrior* by Craig Wright:

"Standing in the cathedral of Chartres, France, on a sunny afternoon ... I looked westward to enjoy the extraordinary beauty of the stained glass, as I had on so many previous occasions. But this time something was different. The chairs usually covering the floor had been removed, and gradually I came to focus on the original thirteenth-century pavement. There beneath my feet was a maze. What was a maze doing here? What function did it serve in the religious rites of the distant past? Pursuit of this question carried me not only deeper into the liturgy of Chartres and other churches, but also into the study of theology and ultimately anthropology.

"Labyrinths have appeared in societies around the globe. The Hohokam Indians (who, centuries ago, lived near what is now Phoenix, Arizona) played a ball game in a labyrinthine circular enclosure that resembles a maze on which the game of the pilota was danced at the medieval cathedral in Auxerre, France. Is this influence or coincidence? From Italy to Iran, from the Hebrides [Islands] northwest of England to the New Hebrides of northeast of Australia, complex designs, multiple concentric rings, spiral-form patterns and cerebral-form convolutions abound in locations that seem infused with ceremonial significance. They appear painted on walls, carved as graffiti in rocks, cut as chambers in subterranean grottos. Are all of these intricate constructions truly labyrinths?

"... Not only must complexity and confusion be inherent in the pattern, but the design must have a single, clearly defined entrance, and single, equally defined center. An intricate, ever-winding path connects the two. Implicit ... is a goal-oriented challenge, a linear quest, no matter how tortuous the route. The eternal allure of the labyrinth is its seemingly unattainable center."

Years ago I remember a friend of mine telling me about a bicycling trip he went on with his young nephew. My friend, Roger, was in his fifties, a smoker, and a newly sober recovering alcoholic. His nephew was in his early twenties, strong as a young bull, full of the exuberance and cockiness of someone who had never really been tested in life.

After they returned from a week of cycling and camping through the state of Maine, Roger laughed with me about his own lunacy at thinking he was any match either for his nephew's strength or for the mountains they took on with two wheels, ten speeds and a load of gear weighing them down.

With a wan smile, he said that much of the time, as they were scaling some endless incline, when his legs and his lungs were burning with a strain he was sure was going to kill him, he would just fix his eyes on the pavement creeping by under his wheels and say to himself, over and over, "It's just another patch of the road."

If he looked up and saw how much farther he had to go to get to the salvation of the top of the hill, or if he strained to see what hell or heaven was around the bend, all the heart would have gone out of him. So in those hard places, he just kept his eyes on where he was: "It's just another patch of the road. Just keep pedaling. Just another patch of the road."

Edwin Muir's poem, "The Way," dramatizes the doubts of the "traveler"—meaning, each of us—who has to walk a blind path.

"I have lost the way!"

The voice of wisdom says, simply, "Keep going, just keep going forward." But the traveler pleads, "Isn't there another way? Can I go back, retrace my steps until I can figure out where I lost my self? Well, if I can't go back, maybe I could just stay here, forever. I don't necessarily like this place, but at least it's familiar to me now, I could settle in here so that I never have to step into the unknown."

Wisdom says, "Sorry, can't go back. There is no going back. Can't stay here, because the way always takes us forward, even if slowly, even if begrudgingly."

Suddenly the traveler is filled either with remorse for past errors or with nostalgia for the things loved and lost—"Oh, the places I have passed!"

Wisdom says, "Let go, that passage of your road is done. What's right in front of you is what matters."

The traveler longs for certainty, wants to know how it will all turn out before risking the movement forward, strains to see what is around the bend, a future that no human being can see. "How will it all turn out?"

Wisdom says, "Just keep going. This is just another patch of the road."

This morning we enter into the labyrinth as a metaphor for the path of life that we must each walk with unknowing. From the point of view of the traveler, the way is blind and linear through the Maze of Life, the Labyrinth of the World. It takes us through unexpected U-turns and long detours that seem to pull us very far away from where we want to be going.

But the labyrinth is also a metaphor for faith, trust, and mindfulness. Seen in hindsight, or seen as a whole, from above, so to speak, it suggests the possibility that all those harrowing turns and frustrating digressions are part of a needful process of unfolding, of learning—not a pointless series of reversals, but a mandala of discovery that brings each of us unerringly toward self-knowledge and maturity.

In the first reading, Craig Wright explains that labyrinths appear with strange consistency in cultures that span centuries and continents.

Take a look at the first two images on your insert. These labyrinths are part of traditional Hopi iconography. At the top is the symbol for Earth, or Mother Earth. The one below is the sign for Mother and Child, and the process of birth.

These seven-ringed labyrinths, still alive in Hopi religion and art, are almost identical to images that were stamped into coins in the city of Knossos on the island of Crete in 350 BC.

At the time that those coins were created, that symbol was already mythic, reaching back more than 2,000 years. It refers to the story of the hero Theseus and his journey into the Labyrinth, where he meets and kills the Minotaur, a dangerous being that was half human, half bull.

How did an image of a seven-ringed labyrinth find its way into these two cultures, cultures separated by 15 centuries as well as by oceans and continents—one from an ancient island culture, the other having existed for hundreds of years in the middle of the North American desert?

There is surely a long answer to that question involving prehistoric ancestors and migrations, but I want to focus more on the labyrinth as a common human symbol, a basic archetype of the journey into, or through, the world.

Note the labyrinth below the Hopi and Cretan ones: This is another seven-ringed labyrinth from the shrine of Kataragama in Sri Lanka, this time flanked by totem animals, a deer and an elephant. In this case the labyrinth represents a hidden passage that links the world of profane existence with the realm of the gods, and the difficult journey that the spiritual seeker must undertake to traverse that path and uncover secret knowledge of divine things.

At the top middle of the page is a complex diagram from the Tantric tradition in India, dating back 300 years. Its design suggests the convolutions of the brain or the intestines, but also represents the difficulties of the spiritual journey. I set this beside the more familiar Chartres labyrinth because, side by side, you can see that they actually echo each other in their switchback form.

The Chartres labyrinth superimposes the image of the cross on the pre-Christian symbol because, in the Middle Ages, the labyrinth became associated with the journey toward salvation.

You will see that the labyrinth is quite distinct from its trickster cousin, the maze, one example of which is on the lower right side of the page. The maze is designed to thwart and test and confound the seeker. The maze leads you down tempting but fruitless corridors. It takes you close to your goal, then suddenly dead-ends. It provides you with false entrances that quickly become exits.

The labyrinth is a different thing altogether. Its course is also puzzling, but it is ultimately correct. It confounds the traveler not into an experience of failure but into an experience of surrender and trust.

The maze and the labyrinth represent two different theological or existential views of our journey through life. The maze emphasizes human choice in response to a capricious, problematic world. The maze signifies the ever-present possibility of error or failure. The labyrinth tells us that progress is inevitable, no matter how slow or circuitous the process. It emphasizes the wisdom of the journey, even the wisdom of error, in that all mistakes, failures and digressions belong as an indispensable part of the path, for they reveal what needed to be learned.

We might easily spend a service exploring the metaphor of the maze, but today we will spend time with the labyrinth and its hopeful, compassionate outlook.

Let yourself enjoy these images you have in your hands. Let your fingers trace their way through the puzzle and allow your imagination to put yourself inside the figures as if they were three-dimensional physical environments.

The labyrinth shows that, from the subjective view of the traveler, the path is blind. Yet it is also without error. Your journey may be one of creativity or

invention, or of life partnership and deepening love, or of spiritual awakening, or of discovering your true calling in life, or a path of healing, maturing and developing emotional understanding, or maybe just trying to get from one day to the next ... but the process of each will follow similar necessities.

As the traveler in a landscape of learning, you are compelled to follow an arduous set of turns. You travel inward then outward, then inward then outward again. For a long while, you are repeatedly led past the goal that you are seeking to reach. It takes you teasingly close, then sends you far out to the extremities for a while.

These tortuous turns can be seen as a protection from being able to enter too easily, too quickly into the center. The path will eventually lead one to the center, but perhaps there is wisdom in the delay.

As an aside, it's interesting to note that in the ancient Cretan myth, the Minotaur that lurked in the labyrinth's innards was monstrous and dangerous, being half human, half animal, and yet he also inspired wonder. He had another name, Asterious, which means "star-being," something wonderful and amazing. In fact, he was often depicted by ancient artists as having a body spangled with stars. There are always many layers and paradoxes in mythic stories and symbols. The labyrinth suggests that what we meet in its depths can be both dangerous and illuminating, and is not to be taken lightly.

In the world of work and school and institutions, there are deadlines and there are externally imposed schedules and protocols. But, in the inner life of an individual, in the process of learning, growing, maturing, deepening, gaining wisdom, feeling one's way to truth, there is no schedule, and the rules are entirely different. With inner work, there is no such thing as a shortcut. We cannot orchestrate our internal development. We cannot plan to have achieved an insight or skill by a particular date. There is no official timeline or schedule for healing from a trauma or from grief.

And we cannot force a right decision before we are ready. Maybe what we need in order to make a right decision is first to make a wrong one, so as to learn from it. Therefore, was it a wrong decision? Perhaps frustration is a necessary part of moving us toward action. Therefore, is it wrong that we were frustrated?

The labyrinth, for all its peculiar meandering, says that the path unfolding under your feet will not betray you. Through a mysterious logic, it takes you gradually but unerringly toward your destination. It uses all turns to that end. Every turn is a necessary part of the unfolding pattern. Every turn is a necessary part of the unfolding. There are no wrong turns in the Labyrinth of Life.

James Hillman, in his book *The Soul's Code*, explores the idea that each individual's life is driven from the inside by a unique nature that must necessarily express itself. Every choice and every turn of circumstance is a vehicle for our essential character to reveal its personality and purpose. Hillman writes,

The point is that there is no escape from necessity. It will not yield, cannot submit: ne - cedere (to refer to the Latin roots). Kant defined necessity's German equivalent, *notwendigkeit*, to mean that which "could not have been otherwise." This makes the understanding of our lives remarkably easy:

Whatever we are, we could not have been otherwise. There is no regret, no wrong path, no true mistake. The eye of necessity reveals what we do to be only what could have been. T.S. Eliot writes: 'What might have been is an abstraction/ Remaining a perpetual possibility/ Only in a world of speculation/ What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present.'

Hillman goes on to say:

I may know what had to be, had to be, yet nonetheless, I feel remorse. Necessity says that remorse too, is necessary as a feeling and belongs to your yoke, but it does not refer to what you might or should have done otherwise.... To understand necessity this way makes mistakes tragic perhaps, but not sins to be repented nor mistakes to be remedied. Inexorably, everything belongs, flaws and all."

This gives us some freedom to accept not only the organic unfolding of our own lives and natures but the lives and natures of others as well. How often do we think we know what is best for someone we care about, while their own sense of necessity is pulling them somewhere entirely different? Perhaps we can find some regard for the wisdom of seeming errors.

The labyrinth suggests that you are where you must be, that this is just another patch of the road. It offers a possibility of trusting the course, trusting that the current experience or struggle will yield up what your soul is struggling to learn.

Theodore Roethke speaks to this in his poem, "The Waking." He writes:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me, so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

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I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

May we each find a way to trust the road that is unfolding under us right now,
and learn by going where we have to go.

May it be so.

For all who seek God,
May God go with you.
For all who embrace life,
May life return your affection.
For all who seek a right path,
May your true way be found
And the courage to walk it, step by step.