

The Practice of Walking on Earth:
My Personal Experience Walking the *Labyrinth of the Woods*

What is a labyrinth? No, not the serpent-like maze of the Middle Ages with a half-man-half-beast Minotaur waiting at the center. “A labyrinth,” according to Haven Shores Community Church, “is a contemplative path that turns and winds around into a center. . . .For many, a labyrinth is a sacred path that provides contemplative space for a prayer walk. It has a wonderful theological rhythm of the inward and outward journey.” As I walked the *Labyrinth of the Woods* on the property of Haven Shores Community Church in West Olive, Michigan on a bright Wednesday afternoon in late October, I tried to imagine the faithful who had made this journey before me, in some cases thousands of years ago. I attempted to tap into the holiness of shared experience. This is my journey.

The first thing I noticed as I wandered slowly down the trail that led toward the *Labyrinth of the Woods* was the absolute silence. I was, as far as I knew, the only human around. The only physical presence other than my own was that of the woods itself—the tall, swaying trees; the leaves and branches crunching underfoot; a few winter sparrows singing sweetly from above, the first birds I had heard—no, the first birds I had *paid attention to*—since the summertime chorus. As I walked, I could smell the leaves turning to dust on the ground; I could feel the crisp bite of winter in the breeze that ruffled my hair and kissed my skin with its cool lips. I paused for a moment partway down the path, just watching the red and yellow leaves fall like rain whenever the gentle tug of the wind so called them. I stood marveling at the beauty of it all, the beauty I walk right past every day without so much as a second glance.

Before I even reached the labyrinth, I felt a tugging on my heart to pray for God to speak to me. Looking back at my experience, I’m not sure whether I simply imagined this call to pray

because I desperately wanted to hear God or whether what I felt was really the whisper of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps both can be true simultaneously. Either way, I paused to bow my head for the first time in a long time. My prayer was simple: “God, I want to feel you in this place. I need to know you are with me. Please help my heart to be open to your presence. Please help me to hear you speak. Please show me the truth. Amen.”

Now as I consider this, the first of several prayers during my walk through the nature trails and labyrinth, it occurs to me that this might not be the “correct” way to pray. Not that there is a right and a wrong way, but just that I never really learned any method at all. Growing up first in a Methodist and then a Baptist church, I was always told to pray but never really knew how. So I gave it my best guess, and I’ve been guessing ever since. I’m never really positive that my prayers have made it all the way to God’s ear, which is probably the reason I stopped talking.

I walked and I paid attention and I prayed, the best I knew how, the whole way to the labyrinth. The second thing I noticed was that I was walking very slowly. I felt the overwhelming need to slow down, and this awareness of time was so acute that it was a physical force pushing back on me, a slow heaviness settling into my limbs. I was also distinctly aware of every crushing step I took atop the fallen twigs and leaves, and from this awareness came the need to be quiet—not just physically quiet, but to find a quiet peace within myself. This was something I would struggle with throughout the remainder of my walk. My mind, I found, was resistant to the idea of being silenced and found every opportunity to interject. As Barbara Brown Taylor suggests in her book *An Altar in the World*, “Things like that can happen when you give your mind a time-out so your body can embark on the journey” (59). I kept trying to silence my mind, but I couldn’t. I did, however, manage to stop worrying, to stop thinking about

the trite things that normally occupy my thoughts, to think more about what I was doing rather than where it was leading or how I was going to get there. I felt the need to take my time, to leave my watch unchecked, to walk slowly and deliberately, to be aware of my own presence, to allow myself to be led.

I approached the labyrinth slowly, quietly, and with a new consciousness of my surroundings. The placard at the entrance read, “Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this place. —Song Lanny Wolfe.” As I paused to read the pamphlet provided in an information bin near the entrance, I felt compelled to again pray for God’s presence. I knelt to do so. When I straightened, I turned tentatively toward the labyrinth, hesitating at the mouth, but I couldn’t bring myself to make the journey. Not yet. Like Taylor, I had expectations for the experience and felt the threat of disappointment looming: “I did not want to hurry. I did not want to share the labyrinth with anyone who might distract me. I did not want to be disappointed” (57). Instead of entering the labyrinth, I was drawn to another placard positioned to the left of the labyrinth’s winding circle. I wandered over to it. “Be still and know that I am God,” it commanded. “Psalm 46:10.” The nature trail seemed to continue around the back of the labyrinth and through the woods, out of sight. I couldn’t be sure there was a trail at all because the entire forest floor was covered in a thick carpeting of fallen leaves, but I felt compelled to be still with God for a moment before doing the thing I had come to do. So I began to walk.

I spent the majority of my time walking from placard to placard, considering what each had to say, feeling myself drawn forward on the path. The meditation trails turned out to be quite extensive, and I found myself looking forward to each bit of wisdom that the placards provided—bread crumbs that assured me I was on the right track. This was probably the more spiritual part of my experience. As Taylor explains, “I walked...with my own particular

compulsivity, which gave me a chance to notice my own distinct anxieties and longings” (58).

As I continued on the trail, I was reminded of the time I spent in the woods behind my childhood home. The woods had always been a part of me growing up, a way for me to escape from the demands of life (whatever they might have been) and to be myself, to imagine other worlds, to connect to something bigger. I hadn’t realized how much I missed them.

After about a half-hour, I came to a bench next to a placard that read, “Did you know trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they talk to you—if you listen. Trouble is—people don’t listen, but I have learned a lot from trees—about the weather, about animals, and sometimes about the Great Spirit. –Walking Buffalo, a Stoney Creek Indian.” So I sat on the bench for a moment and I listened to the trees. I asked them what they had to say. And, eventually, I heard them. They said, “Shhhh. (Quiet your mind and spirit. You are not alone.)”

Strangely comforted by the presence of the trees, I began my walk again. I noticed the sunshine (which had been conspicuously absent for days prior) burning through the tops of the nearly-bald pines, and the thought occurred to me that God’s Creation *is* heaven. I am *in* heaven. Maybe the punishment for those who do not know God is not eternal, but an earthy Hell—a life without Him. A life without comfort, without peace, without a source of strength, without a good to confront evil. Maybe our loving God does not condemn lost souls to eternal punishment, as I had interpreted via the Methodist teaching. Maybe He only yearns to see us come to Him during the most difficult part of our existence, our time on earth. Maybe.

I met the trail where it looped around and started back toward the labyrinth. I felt refreshed, ready to continue my encounter with Truth. As I avoided a tree branch that hung down like a barely visible trap into the center of the trail, I considered it as a metaphor for the traps of evil things in our world. These traps are always hanging in our path, and we must watch

closely for them. We must see them for what they are and duck around. As I neared the end of the nature trail and the labyrinth again came into view, I doubled back and bent to examine a leaf sprinkled with drops of water which sparkled in the rare sunlight like diamonds. “Don’t pass this beauty by unacknowledged,” came the Voice of Wisdom in my head. The Holy Spirit? Perhaps. I marveled for a moment at the intricacies of the leaf before continuing on. God was surely here.

Finally it was time to do what I had come to do—to walk the *Labyrinth of the Woods*. According to the pamphlet, “The path of this labyrinth is lined with broken concrete. Each rock represents moments in our individual or corporate lives of brokenness, joy, pain, or hope. The rocks also represent the people and experiences that shape our lives and guide our way.” As I walked, I thought of each rock and its significance. I thought of the Holy Ground on which I was treading. I tried to pay attention to the beauty around me. I readied my heart the best I knew how to hear God. I remembered what Taylor wrote, “All it takes is the decision to walk with some awareness, both of who you are and what you are doing” (56).

About halfway to the center of the labyrinth, I felt drawn to close my eyes and to continue my walk without the sense of sight. I have no idea where the inspiration for this idea came from—it wasn’t an *idea* so much as it was a *compulsion*. So I closed my eyes and attempted to “walk by faith.” But I missed the point.

In her book, Taylor describes a walk through a darkened trail with her husband: “Pretty soon Ed and I were walking by faith and not by sight. The faith was not in an unseen deity, however. It was faith in this exquisite physical fine-tuning that neither of us had known we had, which allowed us to find our way in the dark without flashlights” (55). I had forgotten about this passage when I was drawn to “walk by faith” through the labyrinth. But maybe this is where I went wrong. I grew frustrated when I tried to meditate on God and failed because I was

simultaneously trying to employ my other senses to keep on the path. When I wasn't led flawlessly through the twists and turns of my walk, I opened my eyes and wondered if this was what I was supposed to be doing. For the first time, I felt silly. I counted my "failures" when my foot would bump into a rock marking the wall of the labyrinth, and eventually I grew so frustrated that I just gave up.

It has taken me several days to come out on the other side of my frustration, and still I could not make sense of it. But Taylor's experience "walking by faith" tells us that it isn't the laurels brushing against your cheek or the rocks against your feet that are your failures—these are simply your guides, telling you how to stay on the path. Cues from God. "When I strayed too far to the left or right, I could feel the laurels practically breathing on my face, and when I did I found my way back to the center of the path again" (55). My real failure was in refusing to recognize God's hand. So tuned in I was to trying to "feel" God that, yet again, I completely missed Him.

When I finally reached the center of the labyrinth, I felt tired, heavy, and defeated. I sat on a slab of concrete and wrote this prayer in my journal:

Dear Lord,

Here I am at the center of Your walk. Before I entered, I prayed for truth, for guidance. I tried to get here by faith and stumbled. You told me to try again. Will You not come to me because [my own expectations and failures] keep getting in the way? I need the truth, Lord. My brain has been tuned to many stations at once, which is Yours? I need to know who You are, what You are trying to tell me. I don't know how to hear You.

Amen.

My walk back out of the labyrinth was plagued by fears and deflated expectations. For the first time that afternoon, I felt the weight of being alone in the woods. Fear. Thanks to the many horror films of our time and to my particular weak shield against fear, the prospect of walking alone through the woods for an extended period of time would normally frighten me. However, I was not afraid, nor did it occur to me that I might be afraid, until I began to feel frustrated on my walk out.

Despite the unfortunate end to my otherwise delightful afternoon, I was compelled to mull over my experience for a while before writing it down. As Taylor explains, “Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are” (56). It occurred to me when I was leaving the woods that I hadn’t once thought, in the ninety minutes I had been there, about Brandon, about school, or about the looming question of my future that seems to plague my every move these days. I can remember thinking about the woods as a place of comfort and sanctuary from the difficulties that life might throw me in the future, but never about the difficulties themselves. So perhaps my effort to tune into God’s peace was not so in vain after all.

Thus concludes my first experience with the *Labyrinth of the Woods*. I do not intend for it to be my last. My biggest mistake, I see now, was in the expectations that I brought with me—however subconsciously. Taylor advises, “It will help if you do not expect God to speak to you. Just give your full attention to where you are, for once” (67). Even though I tried not to expect to hear God, I realized at the end of my journey that I had been desperately longing for Him to speak. And in doing this, I missed God’s presence. Luckily, I have been able to recover some of what I overlooked in my reflection on the experience. But when I walk again, I hope to discard

my prior expectations, to take the experience for what it is. “[The labyrinth] trusts those who enter it to stay on the path voluntarily. . . . It includes switchbacks and detours, just like life. It has one entrance, and it leads to one center. . . .The journey is the point. The walking is the thing” (56).