

# Labyrinth Walking as Meditative Practice

Jill S. Camell

---

In a newcomer class I attended years ago with my husband at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, the priest who facilitated our class shared a handheld labyrinth and stylus with us in his demonstration of different prayer practices. I was intrigued by that circular form, and over the next few months as I got to know this priest better, I asked him more questions about his practice with the labyrinth. These conversations lead me to discover the labyrinth at our diocese's retreat complex, the Waycross Camp and Conference Center, which I walked with great pleasure. From there, I established a deepening practice of walking a labyrinth, if I happened to come across one.

In January 2019, I began my first semester in the low-residency Master of Arts in Mindfulness Studies program at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One of my first two courses was a graduate writing course which was designed to teach me how to research a topic of interest and complete all necessary steps to write a coherent academic research paper. It was my great fortune to have Dr. Melissa Jean as not only my instructor but mentor through this process. She was the first person who asked me to create a list of topics I was interested in exploring further, which was life-changing in several ways. The first was that this felt like an invitation to explore a topic that interested me simply for the purpose of discovery. The second is that I had "labyrinth walking" at the top of my list, which provided the opportunity to explore this fascinating topic. The final way this was life-changing for me is that by asking that simple question, Melissa invited me to think of myself as a scholar who belonged on this path of discovery. This was transformative for me, and I set off to explore this topic. Could this practice of labyrinth walking I learned as a prayer practice also be considered a mindfulness practice?

It was during the research phase of this course that I was introduced to the work of The Labyrinth Society, Veriditas, Dr. Lauren Artress, Labyrinthos, the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator, and so many others. I discovered numerous published studies about labyrinth walking, from a project using a projector and iPad to display different forms of labyrinths in college libraries to the considerations of using a canvas

---

labyrinth to engage residents in a nursing home. I found a master thesis in a landscape architecture program, several studies about labyrinth walking in hospital and other health care settings, and another thesis from a Master of Social Work student who had studied labyrinth walking in an addiction treatment program. The more I discovered, the more excited I became thinking about how I might be able to contribute my own scholarship about this practice in my burgeoning field of Mindfulness Studies.

An integral part of my course was communicating with my classmates on our Blackboard discussion board. It was during one of these discussions that I mentioned that I had used the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator to find out that there was a labyrinth located in Cambridge, and it was only a few blocks away from where we'd be gathered for our residency program in July. Because my classmates had each taken a turn at peer reviewing my paper, they had learned about labyrinths, so we made plans to find time to go to this labyrinth, located at Harvard Divinity School, during a break in our program.

As it turned out, I was the first student in our young program to explore labyrinth walking as a meditation practice, and there was a block of about four hours during the residency program that needed programming. Melissa suggested exploring labyrinth walking, and our founding director, Dr. Nancy Waring, approved it. Melissa found Cinitia Cabib's *Labyrinth Journeys* documentary and asked me if I would share some of my research with my classmates and assist her in facilitating the walk at Harvard. Of course, my answer was an enthusiastic "Absolutely!"

The labyrinth at Harvard Divinity School is a Medieval seven-circuit form that is made of stone and nestled into a small garden area at the north end of Andover Hall quad. There was a construction zone very close by, and if you didn't know what you were looking for, it's quite possible that you might miss it. When I first came upon it, there were some tables and chairs sitting near it, some of which had made their way onto it. There were a few overgrown bushes on one edge, but as they brushed my side as I walked it that first time, I had the opportunity to think about some distractions that arise on my journey through life. There was a plaque explaining the labyrinth, with a miniature version of it that was perfect to use as a finger labyrinth.

Finding and engaging with this labyrinth on our first night in Cambridge was the perfect way for me to get oriented to the area where I would spend the next seven days immersed in meditative practice and community.

***The plaque adjacent to the  
labyrinth at Harvard  
Divinity School.***

***Photos by the author***

The labyrinth session at our residency was scheduled for the afternoon of our next-to-last day together. It was a hot and humid day, and it looked as if it might rain. After lunch, we gathered in our main classroom, and Melissa invited me to share a bit about my experiences with and research of the labyrinth. This gave me the chance to share words like “unicursal,” “circuits,” and “forms” with all fifteen of my colleagues. We discussed some of the studies I found and how I have been engaging with a labyrinth – either through a walk or a handheld form – as part of my meditation practice. Some of my colleagues shared their experiences with a labyrinth, including one classmate who is planning to enroll in the Veriditas facilitator training in January. It was then time to head to the labyrinth.



We made our way to the labyrinth and regrouped. It was quite hot and humid, so a couple of people opted out of participating. I gave some basic instructions, and then the walk began. It was such an incredible feeling to share this walk with my colleagues because although we had connected with each other over coursework we did at a distance, it was a whole different experience to actually physically share space and time with each other. For me, the residency felt like a sacred space, so it was quite incredible to share my growing scholarship about this practice with these friends who are on this journey with me.

After the walk, we went back to a classroom to view *Labyrinth Journeys* and discuss the film and our experiences on our labyrinth walk. It was quite interesting to hear everyone’s feedback because I had outlined three approaches to the walk. The first was the Veriditas four-stage approach – Remember, Release, Receive, and Return. The second was an approach based on a walking meditation, which we are all familiar with since we are studying and practicing mindful meditation. If either of those approaches seemed too daunting, I invited them not to overthink it and just enjoy the process, which I referred to as “You do you.”



*Walking the labyrinth at Harvard Divinity School*

Most of my classmates enjoyed the experience. One shared that she had figured out a thesis statement for an assignment with which she had been struggling. Another person shared that she enjoyed the chance to take a close look at the leaves on the shrubs that were nearby the labyrinth because in the “real” world people give her strange looks when she takes time to investigate foliage. Another person pointed out that there were other living beings on the labyrinth with us, which they had noticed because of taking the time to focus on the path of the walk. At least one of my classmates mentioned that she had seen labyrinths before but didn’t know what they were before this experience. Several mentioned that they enjoy mindful movement practices and were glad to have learned a new way to practice.

A couple of my classmates did not enjoy the experience. One said that the repetitious path reminded him of a funeral procession ritual he had experienced. Another classmate shared that this was her second time walking a labyrinth, and for the second time, she had a negative reaction, a trapped feeling, when she got to the center. Overall, I believe that everyone found the experience to be informative and interesting.

As I continue to further explore and consider how engaging with the labyrinth, either through a walk or using a handheld form, can be a mindfulness meditation practice, I am looking forward to discovering other ways that I can deepen my practice as well as inviting others to these practices.

Jill S. Carnell, Mooresville, Indiana, USA  
Email: [jcarnell@lesley.edu](mailto:jcarnell@lesley.edu)  
Website: [www.jillcarnell.com](http://www.jillcarnell.com)