

ABSTRACT

“Here and There: Retracing our Steps”

The labyrinth is an ancient symbol relating to wholeness and contemplation, and can be used as an opportunity to slow down, quieten the mind, to relax, to meditate, to pray, to solve problems or simply to enjoy a recreational experience. It is also, of course, related to the earth: the ground of our being.

“Here and There” was an online collaboration between artists Linda Gordon (in UK) and Carol Maurer (in USA). The aim of the project was for two group labyrinth walks to be carried out simultaneously on either side of the Atlantic, and transmitted live via the internet, between the two countries.

This commentary sketches a chronological outline of their project and its eventual outcomes. Along the way, some insights and information will be offered regarding the history and significance of the labyrinth and its present day use.



Here and There: Retracing our Steps

INTRODUCTION

‘Here and There’ was a collaborative project for “The Home and the World” between myself, Linda Gordon (in UK) and Carol Maurer (in USA). Our aim was for two outdoor labyrinths to be walked simultaneously by local groups – one at Dartington, Devon and the other at the Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, DE.

Two places, two labyrinth walks on opposite sides of the Atlantic, both with the same intent – a walking journey to the centre and out again to see what ideas and responses might emerge, and to make a live online link between our two countries, filming and transmitting events as they occurred. It would be the first time that two labyrinths had been linked in this way.

This commentary follows my recollection of the project through its various stages of development, together with some interesting background information about labyrinths. I am grateful to Carol for reading it through, and giving her very helpful comments and suggestions.



The labyrinth at Dartington. (All photos are © LGordon unless otherwise stated).

I have a keen interest in labyrinths, though would not consider myself an enthusiast – tending to make one only once a year or so when the mood takes me, usually in public, always to mark a special occasion related to the earth.

Carol, however, is more committed to the labyrinth world, and is a labyrinth facilitator and educator, and Secretary of The Labyrinth Society. Every year the Labyrinth Society runs World Labyrinth Day, when people all over the world are asked to walk a labyrinth at 1pm in their local time zone, to send ‘a rolling wave of peaceful energy as the world turns’. But labyrinths had never before been connected in the way Carol and I were planning. We felt like pioneers. Even more so, because to begin with, neither of us had much idea just how we were going to make it happen! It goes without saying that it took a fair amount of mutual trust and commitment (we had only ever met via social media).

Sat. 11th February: we start email discussions...

It seemed a straightforward and clear concept, and a case of working things out as we went along. There was a 5 hour time difference, so not much difficulty with synchronisation, and we considered our audiences might be able to view each other with smartphones or tablets. We hoped there might also be opportunities for them to share their labyrinth experiences during the live streaming.

We saw it as an opportunity to expand our awareness and knowledge, each from our different perspectives. And it was an opportunity to form warm-hearted connections, however fleeting... between ourselves, between participants, and between two geographical places. This process of co-operation and expansion, I believe, is a fundamental evolutionary drive. Very important.

For me personally, I hoped to make a direct multi-layered response to the themes of “The Home and the World” in a clear and simple way, and to inspire reflection on existential questions concerning home, place and the nature of community. It seemed natural to make full use of the latest technology to facilitate our project, whose starting point was the earth-bound labyrinth with its long tradition of highly-localised individual and group activity.

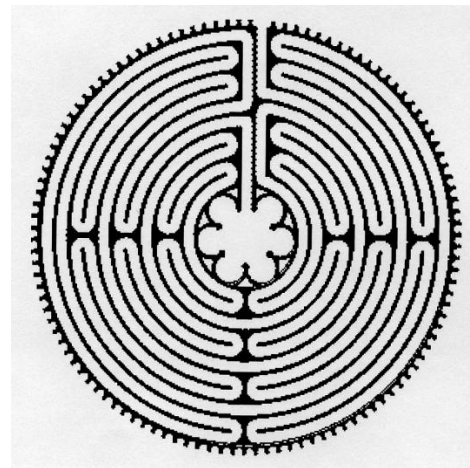
However, once Carol and I began to get involved with the logistics of setting it all up, we realised it had to be strictly timed and co-ordinated, and would take considerable technical and practical organising. Our simple idea might not be quite so simple to materialise!

We chose to work with the two dominant traditional designs in use today: the Classical 7-track labyrinth, which has origins dating back well over 4000 years, and the mediaeval type, such as that found in Chartres Cathedral, built around 1200 AD, by which time labyrinth designs had become adapted and incorporated into the Christian tradition.

Classical type



Mediaeval type



Having a particular interest in Neolithic and Bronze Age ‘Rock Art’, and an intense sense of connection with the earth, it is not surprising that I was drawn to the ancient Classical type. I planned to make a temporary labyrinth specially for ‘The Home and the World’ occasion, marked out with chalk whiting on the lush green grass of Dartington Hall.

Carol chose to work with the mediaeval type at the Delaware Art Museum. She has a close affinity with this labyrinth, having originally designed and helped to build it some years before. It is in a beautiful parkland setting, in an old granite-walled reservoir. The pathways are laid out using 7 tons of Delaware River stones.

It had not escaped our notice that “The Home and the World” was to coincide with both the summer solstice and the UN “Earth Summit” (Rio+20) in Brazil.

Here is a couple of videos of our two labyrinth settings from our preparatory documentation. There are some surprising similarities in their landscapes and general atmosphere.

Dartington – background info

<http://youtu.be/z9QszQfY4wA>

Delaware Art Museum Introduction:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8cj0s_FEmg

We had continuing email and Skype discussions throughout March and April. We talked about how the project could work, various possibilities, and the need for the walking experience to be quiet to allow the connections to arise.

And we had to be prepared for potential problems. What would happen if the internet connection failed on the day, or if it rained in either or both countries at the wrong moment? Eventually all permutations were covered by planning recordings to fill in any gaps, and a canvas shelter at Dartington, to house camera, people and equipment if necessary.

4th May: trip to Dartington to discuss practicalities of putting the project into action.

Initial planning with Aune Head Arts. Found site and measured... could make a labyrinth that would, with some difficulty just fit and still be within reach of power supply.

Carol and I arranged to do a trial Skype run between Dartington and the Delaware labyrinth, to see if it would work. It didn't. We barely connected. Other experimental link-ups between my home and Delaware were not much better. And so I began the first of several extremely short-lived forays into the world of Flash Media Encoders, Video formats and strange file types...

On her side, Carol needed to increase power to her Android and laptop that she planned to use. In consultation with the Delaware Art Museum technical advisor, it was decided she had to have a 250ft. ethernet cable – fortunately to be supplied by the Museum.

I researched the white stuff for marking out the Dartington labyrinth, which led me first to my local football team; then to the internet where I discovered their groundsman's recommendation was likely to burn the turf to a frazzle; then to a number of email and telephone conversations with line-marking companies, to discuss such matters as cost, colour intensity, health and safety issues and how to remove the stuff easily and quickly after the event. Then there came a question about whether the whiting could spread fungus infection in the grass, which led me to more phone conversations with the same companies, and a less-than-cheerful email to Carol. Fortunately, some members of The Labyrinth Society had experienced just this sort of trouble at the White House in Washington, so she was able to give me some useful alternatives should it prove necessary.

Eventually I was able to buy exactly the right material, bright white, dense coverage, waterproof, and which under normal conditions washed away after a few days. I just hoped it didn't rain too hard during my event.

We thought it would be a good idea to have back-up video material in case things went wrong on the day. Because she already had a labyrinth to work with, Carol was able to make this video of herself walking slowly and silently around it, to the accompaniment of soft birdsong:

A Labyrinth Walk at The Delaware Art Museum:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_rgP3z3Pm0

LABYRINTHS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

There is considerable blurring of boundaries between what distinguishes a maze from a labyrinth. Generally speaking though, a maze has numerous pathways and dead ends, whereas a labyrinth has only one path leading to the centre and back, with many twists and turns along the way. A maze tends to be more of a confusing puzzle, usually for purposes of entertainment and pleasure. A labyrinth invites the mind to relax, and encourages quiet contemplative walking.

It is generally thought that the labyrinth has probably always been used for spiritual purposes, though its origins in prehistoric times are unclear. This is not to say they were not used for other purposes as well, such as way markers or indications of good hunting grounds – though I suspect at that time, there was no distinction drawn between physical and spiritual dimensions.

The popularity of the labyrinth has waxed and waned over the centuries. In recent times, after a long period of neglect, there has been considerable revival of interest. Now it can be found throughout the world in community settings: parks, museums, schools, churches... Grace Cathedral in San Francisco has two labyrinths available for all visitors – one indoors, based on the famous mediaeval one at Chartres Cathedral, and another outside in the courtyard. The Labyrinth Locator (www.labyrinthlocator.org) maintains a list of over 5000 labyrinths around the world.



Photo © C.Maurer. The labyrinth at Delaware Art Museum.

30th May: visit to Dartington to meet with Tony Walker, Digital Producer at Aune Head Arts.

Discussed technical matters and co-ordination of movements between the indoor conference area and the outdoor labyrinth site. Things at last were beginning to make sense. We talked with Carol over Skype, who was still awaiting delivery of her ethernet cable.

WALKING THE LABYRINTH

The labyrinth is conducive to the relaxation of mind and body, and can be approached and experienced by any person in their own way. And, in the same way, the meandering (but purposeful) line I am following in this written journey is a reflection of my own idiosyncratic thoughts, feelings and opinions. I have not approached it as a labyrinth expert (which I am not), but as an individual.

It seems to me that everyone's labyrinth walk is different, and different for each person every time they walk. However, here are some generalities: the circle (its usual outline) is a universal symbol for wholeness and eternity – setting the tone and preparing us for the experience to come. Usually, on stepping into the labyrinth, as the pathways are slowly and rhythmically walked, the mind becomes quiet: allowing insights to arise, problems to be resolved, stress to be relieved... Sometimes it may lead to spontaneous expressions of joy, playfulness and dancing steps.



Earth Day labyrinth 09: L Gordon

It is a point of transformation. One comes into alignment and balance with our natural energies and those of our surroundings, without any effort – just putting one foot in front of the other. It can be seen as a metaphor for life's journey, or a journey into the centre of oneself and out again, emerging with a greater awareness and understanding – somehow changed; feeling different, more relaxed.

Or, one doesn't have to see it in any particular way at all, but simply enjoy the experience.



I like walking a labyrinth because, like everyone else, it makes me feel good. It gives me a direct experience of peace and wellbeing without interference from my rational mind. I like it because it enhances my sense of connection with the earth. I know who I am and where I am, located within the vast forces of the universe. Another way of saying it is that it is a realisation of the sacred nature of life.

LOST AND FOUND

This is my experience: following the convoluted pathways leading goodness knows where, one is obliged to pay close attention to the sensations of the feet and the act of walking. The breath slows down in time with the slow rhythmic pacing of the feet. One is aware of being enclosed by the circular perimeter. At the same time the continuous twisting and turning is disorientating. One feels in a safe place yet quite lost – not knowing when one will reach the centre, whether one will get back outside again, or even whether one is walking in the right direction. The everyday chattering mind loses its grip and another part comes to the fore.

Henry David Thoreau in “Walden” speaks of the value of getting lost. Walking through the dark woods at night, unable to see, he feels his way only by the sense of the pathway under his feet and by exploring with his hands the trunks of trees with which he was intimately familiar. In doing so, he stumbles upon one of life's transcendental truths:

“... and not till we are completely lost, or turned round- for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost- do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations”.

From “Walden” Ch 8, (‘The Village’).

Walking the winding pathways of the labyrinth is a process of ‘homing-in’. Reaching the centre at the end of all the wandering is like arriving home. You have found a place to pause and reflect, to take stock, perhaps to meditate, to think of the home and the world.

Brief video: Here and There – Dartington labyrinth close-up

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0W07kj1pf8>

Sat 9th June

The Delaware Art Museum receives the 250ft. cable for Carol. It is tested the following week, and works well.

Plan final co-ordination and timing details with Carol on Skype and with Tony by email. Our event is due to take place at 3pm on June 21st.

By the weekend of 16/17th June, I was packed and ready to leave to spend a few days at Dartington. I had all my requisites assembled – the whiting, the buckets and brushes, my home-made garden roller, my special measuring stick, and my nifty devices for holding the string template in place on the grass.

Mon 18th June

Planned site had to be changed for administrative reasons. New site still within reach of electronic equipment. After measuring and pegging it out with string, it turned out to be a much better fit.

The ground was waterlogged from recent rain, so as I applied the paint, it soaked into the ground almost as fast as I put it on. Over the day I applied a number of layers of paint, knowing that if it disappeared, I would have to measure and mark out the whole thing again.

Tue 19th June

In the morning, I repainted the labyrinth again until it looked bright and crisp and perfect. The geometry and alignment with the site entrance were exactly right. The conference started in the afternoon. Now, after several months of planning, we were ready.

Wed 20th June

A day of torrential rain! On the day before our event was due to take place, a deluge began which was to last for several days. It has to be said that we are used to rain here in Devon, but this was ridiculous: not so much a summer shower, but more of a monsoon – the only difference being that it was cold! I tried but failed to contact Carol, to let her know that things at our end might not be going according to plan.

Thur 21st June

It rained heavily throughout the night and during the course of the morning it became obviously impossible to bring electrical equipment outside. The rain was too heavy even to erect a shelter, and the technical team could only provide link-up to the big screen indoors. At times like this, I take the view that if you believe in a project, you have got to make it work – so I abandoned every careful plan I had made, walked about a lot and just ad-libbed.

3pm

We stood huddled in the driving torrential rain. It is not often that I have been quite so thoroughly soaked. I was grateful that the labyrinth, though no longer intensely white, was still clearly visible through the downpour.

The time came for the live link-up. A group of people moved forward to walk the labyrinth. And had it not been for Richard Povall of Aune Head Arts risking his iPhone in the rain and managing to make the connection, the cross-Atlantic link-up would not have happened... But it was made. And the Americans saw us... For a short time both sides were able to see each other and converse as the two labyrinths were walked simultaneously.



photo © J.Hayes /AHA

As I watched, I thought it might be interesting to consider where exactly was ‘the place’ during this live link-up. What was the nature of the community now being generated, albeit briefly; where was the common ground, and where exactly did I belong – maybe not on this physical spot on earth as I had thought, but maybe somewhere out in cyberspace? I thought about these questions for several minutes, before deciding not to go there. Instead, I conjured up a mental image of Carol and me, as

two separated particles spinning on opposite sides of the planet... but I decided not to go there either.

Peering through curtains of rain I became aware only of the warm bodies of those standing close to me, and a group of people with many-coloured umbrellas and raincoats moving quietly around the labyrinth. The colours of the umbrellas were soft and luminous with water, appearing to float in the light seeping through heavy grey cloud.

Standing in the rain, watching the swirling colours and the rhythmic movement of the walkers, for a moment I felt slightly dizzy, and found myself dropping into something akin to a déjà vu experience, and an unshakeable awareness that people had been making these slow circling movements for thousands of years.

We moved indoors to watch the Delaware walk on our big screen.



Video still © T.Walker/AHA

In total contrast, they were experiencing sunshine and an extreme heatwave (over 100° F). The gentle melody of a harp wafted across the Skype waves, and a sea of eager laughing children's faces clustered around the camera to say 'hello' to us, and ask questions about England. It was a happy time.

CONCLUSION

Through this project and the archetypal motif of the labyrinth, each in our own way has had the opportunity to reflect directly upon the nature of reality beyond the play of everyday life; and to relax and enjoy an enhanced sense of wellbeing.

Some years ago, I cut and kept a short artist's statement from a nature-art symposium, which seems to me relevant. The artist's first language is not English, yet his meaning is bright and clear:

Francois Geissmann *France*

Statement

Everything is rhythm. Beauty is to understand your own pace to coincide with the rhythm of nature. First, you must be yourself, and blend with your surroundings. Then, speak to the world today, find renewed connections to the original country, the essence of things and the living. Really just to escape the overwhelming cacophony.

from <<http://www.natuurkundrenthe.nl/en/artists-2005/francois-geissmann>>



A participant's view

The labyrinth can be walked alone or with others, both of great value. Take a look at this extract from a letter I received from *Here and There* participant Diana Knight, who also helped with the setting up of the labyrinth - and her different experiences on two different days:

I am sure I was not the only one to be moved by your creation, and the feelings it inspired. Walking it alone, I was amazed at how quickly it provoked a meditative state of mind. Like life, it didn't go exactly the way I had expected. i.e., it wasn't a logical progression towards the centre, but took unexpected twists and turns. I first started working at Dartington in 1982, and as I walked I thought of all the things that had happened since then, and how I now found myself surprisingly back there, at the centre ...I think that's part of the appeal of a labyrinth; it's a metaphor for life, a walk in miniature, and it's contained, a sort of holding space for our emotions, so it's neat and tidy, as it were, and encourages us to confront our feelings within defined parameters. There's an element of safety about its strict geometrical dimensions.

Walking it the following day with others felt very different.(but in a good way).I was immediately aware of our common humanity. I wasn't looking at people (no direct eye contact was sought by some unspoken agreement) but was aware of people passing me- like shadows almost - and it reminded me of those figures you see dancing on the top of a music box - moving ,as if part of a minuet, but going nowhere, all adopting the same rhythm. I felt at one with the others, as if we were all engaged in a common quest, separate, yet part of a whole.

The link-up with America was exciting too - I shared the delight of the school children skipping round- their playful approach to the labyrinth was refreshing, and emphasised the universality of the motif of

the labyrinth. I can see why it has stood the test of time - I have been to Chartres, but it was so dark inside I missed seeing the labyrinth there, all I can remember is the smoke-blackened walls from all the thousands of votive candles....

(Letter extract courtesy Diana Knight)

Short video created during the actual walk in Delaware (courtesy Kiah Graham).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asF75wPROYo>

Additional Helpful Links

Carol Maurer: For more information visit her blog at www.backyardpilgrim.blogspot.com or email spiritedplay@hotmail.com .

www.labyrinthociety.org The Labyrinth Society. This site contains a wide range of information, and includes a Research section with a comprehensive bibliography.

www.labyrinthos.net

www.delart.org

www.auneheadarts.net

http://auneheadarts.net/streaming/THATW-Linda_Gordon.mov long unedited video of the link-up and dialogue between Dartington indoor studio and the labyrinth at Delaware.

Bio

Linda Gordon



Linda Gordon, MA Arts and Ecology, has for many years carried out earth-related projects and installations both in the UK and overseas. Her practice is wide-ranging – the main threads being sculpture, land and environmental art, written text and photography. As 'Essential Nature', she also runs small public events and art walks.

Further information: www.lindagordon.org.uk. Email: lg@lindagordon.org.uk.
