

It's More than Walking in Circles!

by M.E. (Beth) Langley

Walking a labyrinth may look like walking aimlessly in circles, and until you look closely, it's easy to see why. The path meanders, twists, turns, and you may not know how close or how far away you are to the end of the path. Notice, though, it is "path" in the singular. It isn't a maze where you must choose which of several paths to follow and try to remember where you've been and wonder how to get where you want to be. There are no wrong ways, dead ends, or blind alleys, no decisions to make or puzzles to solve. It's a self-correcting lesson in concentration! Pay attention, trust the path, and you will get to the goal. Finding the way out is just as simple. And, if you do happen to lose your focus and forget which way you're going, you may end up back at the beginning, or at the center again if you were on your way out! Like other lessons, you know you can try again.

But why walk a labyrinth at all? What makes it worthwhile? Labyrinths are truly a natural complement to Montessori environments—Montessorians who consciously incorporate peace education in the curriculum encourage children to grow internally. We seek positive outcomes for ourselves and our children when faced with personal and interpersonal decisions. We honor and respect all, and find ways to recognize the good and reflect on where we are. The labyrinth can be a valuable tool in all those things—whether helping a child regain self-control, friends work through a problem, or a group celebrate community. The labyrinth is a special symbol, and can be a powerful spiritual place, and the many schools who are now installing labyrinths in their outdoor landscapes, providing them in the peace corners, and utilizing them in counseling are developing labyrinth rituals, activities, and ceremonies in their school cultures and rediscovering the beauty and effectiveness of walking "within".

Although labyrinth symbols are ancient—thought to be at least 4,000 to 5,000 years old—they have had a marked resurgence of interest in the last couple of decades that has placed them in schools, churches, retreat centers, public spaces, private gardens, and practically anywhere and everywhere. That labyrinths cannot be "claimed" by any one religion, society, or culture, allows free use by any for spiritual



intentions and growth—both secular and religious. Labyrinths offer a safe place for experiences... for personal and group uses including meditation, celebration, self-discovery, and community building. Walking a labyrinth alone or with others can be grounding and calming, enlightening and uplifting.

My labyrinth interest began when I had a great conversation with an exhibitor after a Montessori Educational Programs International (MEPI) conference while giving her a ride to the airport in Charleston, SC. (Thanks, Sara, for sending me off on this labyrinth journey!) Several years of simmering later, I was at the Montessori Foundation's and International Montessori Council's (IMC) Peace Academy where on the program was a workshop focused on building a labyrinth on the beach. I signed up and was hooked. I began studying labyrinths passionately, and just a few months later, I gathered a few friends and with them presented at the next MEPI conference. Since then I've facilitated workshops on labyrinths at many Montessori conferences for MEPI, IMC, South Carolina Montessori Alliance (SCMA), as well as at many schools both public and private (Montessori and conventional), a church, a conference for art educators, master gardeners, and at a health symposium. From just that short list of venues, it's apparent that many people have become exposed to labyrinths and are interested in learning more. I've given workshop on topics such as building a temporary labyrinth, creating finger labyrinths from clay or painted on placemats, incorporating labyrinths in the class room, and using labyrinths for special occasions. I've led several conference ceremonies that incorporate the labyrinth as a metaphor for our entwined lives and Montessori experiences.

This symbolic journey, regardless of whether it is a physical walk of your whole body or a simple finger labyrinth that guides your way can be a meaningful experience. It is very freeing when you let your body (or finger) carry you along a path and you allow your mind to relax, accept, or search. Many refer to a labyrinth as a walking meditation and for some it is as affective and effective as stationary meditation—or more. When a group walks a labyrinth together the feeling of camaraderie grows and individuals often become aware of relationships that may mirror the ones that affect them in their day to day lives. Walking a labyrinth doesn't "make" you see things or feel things differently...what happens inside of you is instead what you allow by being open to your inner voice and the spirit within us. Walk with intention and leave expectations behind.

Most labyrinths are special and unique to their setting. Labyrinths seem to take on energy of their own, changing the environment and affecting the

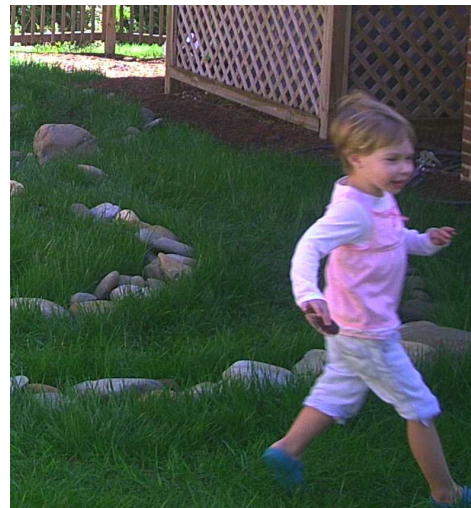
people who build and walk them. The labyrinth at Five Oaks Academy (FOA) was my first permanently installed labyrinth and is in Simpsonville, SC. Kathleen Truwhella-Grant, FOA's director, was sharing a ride to the airport in Tampa after another IMC Peace Academy (there must be something with me and car conversation), and brought up the possibility of a labyrinth being installed at FOA. FOA has a beautiful campus, and had one eyesore between two of the buildings that was sloped, narrow, full of weeds and scrub, had water issues, and was definitely in need of beautification. Kathleen wanted a labyrinth there, both to beautify the campus and to provide a special place for the students and school community. After consulting with them, I designed a labyrinth that would fill the space, a construction element that would address their drainage issue, and materials for the blend in and add to the natural beauty of the campus. I came back a week later, visited in all of the classrooms in the morning as a special guest. In just a few days, with the help of students and staff, we design plan, installed and placed the rocks, and installed the sod. Since that time, I have returned to Five Oaks for several special programs and events. One of my favorites was the Harvest Festival. Again, I visited each classroom, briefly reviewed labyrinth basics, and then we talked about the things for which we were grateful. The younger children spoke of parents and pets, friends, homes, and school, as did the older students who added other interesting things—



including shampoo, air-conditioning, stores, rivers and jobs. After that, the children and teachers created symbols of their gratitude and carried them through the labyrinth. The next day was the special event, and parents came for the Harvest Festival. They had activity booths, pony rides, food of all sorts, and a performance... and on the side porch, we formed a labyrinth out of our symbols of gratitude. Parents and other guests were invited to add to our creation. The paths of this colorful labyrinth were narrow and it took concentration to stay on the path.



Kathleen says, "Our Labyrinth is a beautiful addition to our campus as it provides a unique and meaningful way to honor the child and to explore international studies at Five Oaks Academy. We use our labyrinth for Birthday celebrations. The labyrinth provides an opportunity for each student to have a quiet walk to reflect with classmates and to honor a student's special day. Students are invited to walk the labyrinth when needed any time. The stones we have placed with names on it in our labyrinth remind us of our connections to others at our school and to our connections to such an ancient ritual. We study labyrinth locations as we explore continents and cultural curriculum. We find labyrinths on 6 continents, bringing a global perspective and unity to our studies. Each year we have a school wide labyrinth ceremony honoring the new stones placed in the labyrinth. This ceremony has become a celebration of life as we create memorial and tribute stones to people, and to animals that have made a difference in our lives."



Indeed, each labyrinth I've ever visited or designed has added character to the place—is a point of interest—that draws attention to similarities of culture and recalls distant mysteries of the past. They provide a place for remembering our personal past, contemplating the present, and envisioning the future. Building and walking a labyrinth as a group is an opportunity for incredible community building. The process is ongoing, as the labyrinth matures and the community draws together using the space over time for many purposes. In the world we live in today, people more and more are recognizing the need to connect—with one another, the planet that is our home, with the sacred life force inside us. To make these connections, it is important to take time to build community, to spend time acknowledging our natural gifts, and to allow time for reflection. Kathleen expresses this succinctly, "The labyrinth makes us slow down to enjoy life's journey."

Another labyrinth that is special to me is the Man in the Maze Labyrinth at Clay Platte Montessori School in Kansas City Missouri. I was invited there to build a labyrinth in conjunction with another MEPI conference. I had a few pictures of where they thought they wanted the labyrinth, and when I got there we had a pile of rocks. We didn't really know what we would create, and then I learned of the Native American connection to the land there, the seven circuit classical labyrinth in the style of the Native Americans was the design I kept returning to for inspiration.

There are several stories of the man in the maze, and the one we chose to tell was the one of Elder Brother, a symbol of wisdom. Clay-Platte's man in the maze greets you as you enter the labyrinth.



Creating this labyrinth with the students, staff, and conference attendees was incredible. From the impromptu "claiming the land for the labyrinth" chant and stomp with the older students to the closing ceremony of the conference



when many of us chose to add small stones to the center pile of "spirit stones"—the entire experience has left me connected to the school, the land, and the community there.

Think of building a labyrinth at your school. Labyrinths can be as simple as mown lawn or painted on concrete like the one at the Colegio de Montessori Quetzalli in Puebla, Mexico. They can be elaborate like the Chartres style labyrinth at Christ Church Episcopal School in Greenville, South Carolina, or creative and unique as is the one in the shape of a sweet gum leaf at St. Andrews Montessori in Macon, Georgia.



The form and materials may vary; however, the function is the same. Labyrinths are tools for personal and interpersonal growth. They nurture a culture of peace and understanding. Everyone can enjoy the feeling of sacred space that is created by a conscious effort to honor the community—

people and land. Having a labyrinth allows the community to recognize connections and the people to grow inward as well as outward.

I'd like to invite you to walk a labyrinth next chance you get and enjoy a journey to the center of yourself.

M.E. (Beth) Langley

Beth Langley was introduced to labyrinths over ten years ago, and began studying them through books, internet research, walking them, and participating in workshops. Soon this calling from the labyrinth became practically an obsession, and much of her time is now spent on all things labyrinthine. Designing labyrinths and classroom materials for exploring labyrinths has become a favorite means of creative expression. Beth truly enjoys sharing her passion for labyrinths with anyone who is interested to know more.

Her workshops presentations at [Montessori Educational Programs International](#) (MEPI) Conferences and [International Montessori Council](#) (IMC) Conferences are always well received. For several years she has led groups as they experienced labyrinths in South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, California, Missouri, and in Mexico.

Beth has a BA from Columbia College and holds a certificate from MEPI at the Early Childhood level. She has served on the boards of MEPI, the [South Carolina Montessori Alliance](#) (SCMA) and other non-profit organizations. She is a member of [The Labyrinth Society](#), an international organization whose mission is to support all those who create, maintain and use labyrinths, and to serve the global community by providing education, networking and opportunities to experience transformation. Beth is a [Veriditas](#) Certified Labyrinth Facilitator.

Beth's position as Executive Coordinator at the [Institute for Guided Studies](#), (IGS) a Montessori teacher education organization, allows flexibility in her schedule permitting her to attend conferences, visit schools, and enjoy other activities sharing her passion for labyrinths. IGS serves schools and individuals providing Montessori teacher education and consulting SC, MO, GA, UT, and other locations around the globe. The office of IGS is located on the campus of [The Montessori School of Camden](#), an authentic Montessori school serving children ages eighteen months through twelve years.

To learn more about Beth Langley and labyrinths in general, visit her website, www.LastingLabyrinths.com. From her links page you can find www.labyrinthlocator.org to find labyrinths to walk all over the world, or print a finger labyrinth from resources provided by www.labyrinthociety.org. You can see photos of labyrinths she constructed on her gallery page, and for the best photos of labyrinths everywhere visit www.labyrinthos.net.

"We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity."

-Dr. Maria Montessori