



Marna Howie (very carefully) walks the labyrinth at Tai Chi Caledonia 2022

The labyrinth discovered Marna Howie

Labyrinths have slowly been creeping their way into my subconscious for some years, writes Marna Howie. The very word resonates a mysteriousness of something ancient which I find captivating

WALKING THE LABYRINTH

23

I am drawn to explore in a similar way to how I felt when first encountering tai chi and qigong in the 1990's. In a labyrinth there is a continuous spiral path that eventually leads to the centre. There is only one way in and one way out returning on the same path. The labyrinth acts as a metaphor for the path we walk throughout our lives, journeying to our own centre and back out again into the world. I have walked a couple of labyrinths so far. I enjoyed the experience of focusing on the path as it turns round and around. I also enjoyed that sense of being able to take time out for myself, to be with myself. This is so appealing in our busy lives, and is undoubtedly beneficial to one's wellbeing. Walking a labyrinth can be likened to a moving meditation, which in turn is like practising tai chi and qigong. I have heard the expression: 'in a maze you lose yourself, in a labyrinth you find yourself'. However I had no real understanding of the origin and history of labyrinths. "Okay," I hear you say, "look it up on the internet". Well, okay that is fine up to a point, but the internet is no substitute for 'in the flesh' learning, again like tai chi and qigong.

So, you can imagine my delight when earlier this year, out of the blue, as if by some magic, I received an email advertising a labyrinth workshop in Argyll, which is very handy to where I live. I signed up right away. This was just what I was looking for. Apparently this date was chosen because that is world labyrinth day. Who would have thought there was such a day?

The workshop was run in collaboration with Suse Coon of West Coast Wuji and Margaret Ker a local artist and jewellery maker who is also a passionate and enthusiastic labyrinth creator.

The workshop was held in the beautiful Glenan Community Woodland at Portavadie on the shores of Loch Fyne. The Glenan labyrinth, which we would walk later, was created by Margaret, using large stones gathered from the shore nearby. There were only eight of us at the workshop which made it more personal. Suse started the day with a short meditation and breathing exercises to root ourselves in the space. She then led us through the practice of taiji walking. At times this was quite challenging across the uneven grassy area. Everyone, whether familiar

with the practice or not, found this very calming and meditative.

As well as creating labyrinths, Margaret had done a lot of historical research into their origins. She had set up a gazebo tent displaying lots of photographs and beautiful images of all kinds of labyrinths including prehistoric rock art, which is likely to be the source of the first labyrinths from around 5,000 years ago. Labyrinths are found all over the world in many cultures. It is fascinating to note that researchers have found that even though early civilisations were isolated from one another, over thousands of years only one design of the labyrinth emerged, based on the classical seven circuit.

It is believed that these designs evolved out of the spirals found in nature. Labyrinths can be made with rock, mosaics, turf, anything really. They can even be traced out on the sand when the tides goes out. There was a great selection of books for us to browse on labyrinths and their history. These included how to create your own labyrinth for meditation and enlightenment: landscapes of the soul and the spirit. Labyrinths were walked in medieval times, the most famous of these being the Chartres labyrinth of 11 circuits, laid down in around 1201. It is still intact on the floor of the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France, and is probably the most walked labyrinth in the world.

We were told there is currently a growing revival of interest in labyrinths. This is largely due to the work of Dr. Lauren Artress of the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. It has been suggested that this revival comes at a time when there is something in the collective unconscious of mankind in this 21st century that recognises a need for spaces like labyrinths and how they can help us in recovering a more balanced, reflective and inclusive way of living together in these troubled times. The workshop was led in a discussion about the benefits that are being experienced for adults and children with mental health issues, general anxieties and attention deficit disorders. It would appear that walking a labyrinth can help them find answers to problems, release thoughts and feelings, clear the mind and feel more at peace with what is going on in





their lives.

At 1 o'clock we all began to walk the labyrinth joining a worldwide wave of peaceful intention for World Labyrinth Day. With guidance from our workshop leaders before entering the labyrinth, we each paused, grounded and centred ourselves, focused on our breathing to relax, release and receive as we each took it in turn to begin our journey to the centre. Once we all reached the centre of the labyrinth we joined hands in a circle.

This proved to be a moving experience for us all and afterwards we had the opportunity to be still and quiet and to reflect on our experience of walking the labyrinth.

The workshop ended with Margaret showing us how to draw a labyrinth from a very simple three circuit to the more complex seven circuit. It was great fun for us all to practise this.

By the end of this very lovely and successful workshop I



was fired up with even more enthusiasm for labyrinths and came away keen to create a labyrinth and share the experience with others. Suse and I then had a light bulb moment. Tai Chi Caledonia was coming up in July at Stirling University, this could be an ideal opportunity to create a small 'taster' labyrinth for participants. Of course it would be available for anyone on the campus to walk.

Happily, permission was granted to allow us to set up a temporary labyrinth during Tai Chi Caledonia week. So on the first day armed with white cord and galvanized pegs we set out to find a suitable spot in the campus to locate the labyrinth. We found the perfect spot en route from the

tai chi chalets to the MacRobert Centre. My husband carefully measured and helped us set out the labyrinth. We put up a notice on a stake and propped it against a tree. This gave suggestions and information about walking the labyrinth.

We let people know at the briefing session at the start of the Cally week and by word of mouth. Gradually through the week as more and more people walked the labyrinth there was a palpable feeling of growing energy around the area. The three big oak trees surrounding the labyrinth stood guard giving a sense of protection. From the centre of the labyrinth the view across to the beautiful Dumyat hill was very calming but also empowering.

The feedback is always very personal from labyrinth walkers, but even the slightly sceptical ones all said they had a positive and enjoyable experience. One lady from Glasgow who had never walked a labyrinth before said she had no expectations but decided to give it a go, and found she was able to switch off and take stock of her life in a very meditative way with no stress.

To conclude, it feels like this has been the start of a new journey, finding out more about labyrinths at the workshop day, then creating one and sharing the experience with others. So, if you have not already tried labyrinth walking, perhaps find one near you via the world wide labyrinth locator and start your own journey; who knows, it could be life changing.

Remember there is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth. To quote Dr. Lauren Artress from her book *Walking a Sacred Path* she says: "The best way to learn about the labyrinth is to walk one with an open heart and an open mind. Then allow your experiences to guide you."

Walking a Sacred Path – Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice by Dr. Lauren Artress.

<https://labyrinthlocator.com>

Marna Howie is a member of the Longfei Taijiquan Association of Great Britain and is a student of the Daoyin Yang Sheng Gong system. She is a regular attender at Tai Chi Caledonia. Marna teaches qigong and assists in teaching tai chi to OIR (Opportunities in Retirement) students.