

The Nativity Novena

There are arenas and communities in my life that overlap, sometimes more obviously than others. Today is World Labyrinth Day and people around the globe will be walking labyrinths at 1:00 pm local time, creating a wave of labyrinth walking around the planet. Labyrinths mean different things to different people, but for many, a labyrinth walk is a time for prayer and meditation, often for peace, sometimes for protection. (I've written novena posts in the past about labyrinth walking and the rosary - they are my two main spiritual practices.)

I love thresholds - they invite me to take notice of an important step, whether it be a doorway, a step into an invitatory process, or the marking of a boundary that is about to be crossed. For me, the three beads leading into a garden feel like they are leading me into the heart of the rosary. Similarly, when we walk a labyrinth (with fingers, eyes, or feet), we begin by 'stepping' into it, crossing metaphorically from the outside world to the contained space within. There is, it seems, another threshold that is reached when we get to the centre - sometimes it feels like we step into sacred silence or communion for a few minutes; other times we are stepping across the threshold into something altogether new. Perhaps we don't always know which it will be as we approach.

There is a lovely tradition in Northern India where the labyrinth is used to magically accelerate and ease the pain of labour in childbirth. It is suggested that the seven folds of the labyrinth could be construed as a mother's womb, and the path - which clearly leads only from the inside out - as a birth canal. The child is supposed to pass through seven chambers, seven sections of the mother's uterus. With this magical aid, the unborn child is helped in crossing the threshold into mortal life.



An 18th century manuscript advises the reader to: *Rub ochre (saffron) with water from the Ganges and use it to draw a labyrinth on a bronze plate, rinse it with water from the Ganges, then give it to the labouring mother to drink, and birth will shortly ensue and the pain of labour eased.*

I would substitute any holy water for river water nowadays, but certainly this ritual fits well with the visual pattern of the labyrinth's sinuous pathways. Looking at drawings of labyrinth designs clearly brings to mind the correlation with the womb and fallopian tubes. These birthing ritual also bring to mind the idea of fertility which is a thread running through many of the labyrinth themes including spring awakening rituals and dances - perfect timing for this week!

I am well past my childbearing years but as a grandmother and great-grandmother, nativity remains an active phase in my psyche. I walk the labyrinth for others as they bring the next generations into the world. And I also walk for myself and my flourishing creativity as I move into my elder years. I pray that birth will continue as a theme in my life right up until the day I reach the threshold that will usher me into the afterlife. We never outgrow the Mystery of the Nativity.

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