

King Minos of Crete had a serious problem. His island had been terrorized by a dreadful monster, the Minotaur. The Minotaur was a creature that was human from the shoulders down, but had the massive head and really bad temper of a raging bull. Make that raging, man-eating bull. Minos had spent a sizeable portion of his enormous fortune constructing the Labyrinth, a huge structure of twists and turns and tall, sturdy walls to imprison the monster. But, for reasons that don't need exploring right now, Minos could not allow the creature to die. So ... like most politicians, Minos passed his problem on to some one else.

Some years past, King Aegeus of Athens had been bested by Minos in a small war. Minos set cruel conditions for the cessation of hostilities. In return for a lasting peace, Athens would be required every year to send seven young men and seven maidens to Crete to be sent into the Labyrinth to feed the Minotaur. Each year, the Athenians held a lottery to choose the unfortunate victims to be shipped off to the island of Crete. Then, came the year when Aegeus' son, Theseus, came of age. Having watched the families of Athens live in fear and grief because of the lottery and the shadow of the Minotaur, Theseus declared that as prince of the kingdom, it was his responsibility to try to defeat the dreadful creature, and relieve Athens of this terrible burden. King Aegeus was bereft at the thought of his only son going off to fight such a beast, but Theseus would not be swayed from what he saw as his duty. And so it was that only six young men and seven maids were chosen in that year's lottery, and Theseus boarded a ship to Crete with the other chosen ones.

Arriving in Crete, the Athenian young people were treated to a feast the night before they were to be sent into the Labyrinth. A last meal for the condemned, as it were. During the feast, Theseus' face and handsome figure attracted the attention of King Minos' daughter, Ariadne. Ariadne did not want this dashing young man to die, and so that night, while the Athenians were held prisoner, Ariadne crept past the guards and went to let Theseus out of his cell. And even though Ariadne helped to free all of his companions and was ready to see them safely to a ship to return home, Theseus refused to leave. He knew that stealing away in the night would not solve the problem for the people of Athens. He was determined to face the Minotaur. Either he would defeat it, or he would die trying. He was going into the Labyrinth, no matter the danger.

The Princess Ariadne still wanted to help Theseus. She brought him what weapons she could find, a sword and shield. And she also gave him a skein of silken thread. She held one end, and told him that if he allowed the skein to unwind as he walked the Labyrinth, he could follow the thread to retrace his steps and find his way back out, if he were victorious over the monster.

Here I'll make a long story short, as this kind of battle scene is better suited to a big budget motion picture these days than to simple story telling. Though he was smart enough to be frightened, Theseus was determined. After twisting and turning and twining through the pathways of the Labyrinth, stumbling over the bones of several of his long dead countrymen, Theseus found the Minotaur, and through strength and courage and cunning (after all, a raging, man-eating bull isn't likely to be very smart), he managed to win the battle. The Minotaur was dead.

Theseus turned back and carefully followed the silken thread back through the twists and turns of the Labyrinth. As he walked, he could feel Ariadne give the thread an occasional encouraging tug. He emerged from the Labyrinth and he and his companions made ready for a hasty departure from Crete. While Minos may not have been pleased to have the Minotaur around, no one was really sure how he was going to react to having the creature killed. Ariadne did know that her father would be very unhappy with her for assisting the Athenians. Rather than face his wrath, she chose to leave on the ship bound for Athens, as well. And so we shall let our story come to a close as our happy band was sailing away from the island as the sun came up, relieved to be alive and headed home. The Minotaur of the Labyrinth would claim no more lives from Athens.

My deep and abiding love for all things Greek began when I was nine years old. My fourth grade class spent several weeks of our English lessons reading Greek mythology. Most of my classmates had no interest in the subject beyond the fact that at the end of the section, we got to watch Clash of the Titans and Jason and the Argonauts during school time. I will admit to having a soft spot in my heart for Ray Harryhausen's classic stop action fighting skeletons, but the movies were not the thing that excited me about Greek mythology. The stories mattered, and they stuck with me. At the time I just thought that made me a great big nerd ... and it probably did. But looking back, I realize that as a child, I already had an instinctive understanding of what a Myth was. My fourth grade teacher had tried to sell us the line that myths were made up stories used by "primitive" people to explain things they didn't understand. Like lightning bolts being thrown by Zeus instead of charged particles colliding in the atmosphere, and the seasons changing because Demeter was sad that her daughter went to the Underworld for half the year instead of being caused by the earth's rotation around the sun. I didn't buy it. I already understood, somehow, that these myths had something to say about who and what we were as human creatures. If you looked, you could see yourself in those stories, sometimes in good ways, and sometimes in bad ones.

Myth is sacred story telling. All mythological characters reflect some archetypal human existence or experience. At one time or another in our lives, for good or for ill, we are all the hero Theseus, taking on a challenge because we know what is right, no matter how difficult that might be to face. We are all King Aegeus, watching a loved one go off to face something frightening, knowing that all we can do is wait and hope for the best. We are all King Minos, hoping someone else will take a problem off our hands. We are all Ariadne, holding on to the thread that will, hopefully, guide a seeker back into the world after they have faced the monster. And we are all, sometimes, the nightmarish monster, itself. There's a little Minotaur in everyone.

The story of the Theseus and the Minotaur was one of my favourites as a kid. It's probably a good thing that in grade school, I was treated to the same quick cut-away, Hollywood style ending that I shared with you this morning. Myth, like humanity, is messy. The truth is that as you continue to study the stories of the ancient Greeks, things end badly for all of the principle players of our tale. But those are stories for another day. It was through my continued study of Greek

myth, and the resulting tangents that can crop up in web searching, that I came upon the Labyrinth as a meditative tool for spiritual practice.

The Labyrinth is an ancient symbol found in art and architecture as far back as three and a half millennia. You can see depictions of the winding pattern of the Labyrinth painted onto pots, scratched into walls, or laid in tile mosaic floors from many different ancient cultures ... from the Minoans of Crete to the Egyptians and the Romans, to the native cultures of both North and South America. The Labyrinth is a primal symbol of a journey into something unknown.

I'd like you to take a moment and think about Theseus preparing to step into the Labyrinth to seek out and try to kill the Minotaur. Now ... what, if anything, changes for you in how you think of that story when I tell you this startling truth about a Labyrinth? A Labyrinth is not a maze. In a Labyrinth there are no blind alleys, no pitfalls, no dead ends, no wrong turns. A Labyrinth is a single path ... a circuitous and winding path with switch backs and hair pin turns, but still a single path into the center, and the same single, circuitous winding path back out into the world.

In all fairness, I will say that many scholars believe that the linguistic distinction between a maze and a labyrinth developed long after the myth of the Minotaur, and that the context of the story clearly point to the mythical structure being a maze meant to confound the victims. However, there are ancient artistic depictions of the Minotaur in or near the single path-ed labyrinth, so I think the idea is worth at least exploring. So, if you will just go along with me for a little while, and think about what it might mean, in an archetypal sense, if our intrepid hero is traveling through not a multicursal maze with confusing intersections and deceptive turns, designed as a puzzle to be solved. But rather, he is walking a unicursal path, where the only choice to face is whether to continue or not, where the destination is never in doubt, and the design is for the specific purpose of guiding the traveler to the center.

If, when you enter a Labyrinth, there is only one way to go, it's pretty easy to see that you'll eventually run into the thing you've gone to confront. And if the path itself will always guide you back out, then maybe the silken thread is simply meant to remind you that there are good things waiting when you come back out.

Most of the time, when using the Labyrinth as a meditative experience, it is done as a walking meditation with the Labyrinth pattern painted or inlaid on the ground. We have a neighboring church, First Central Congregational, just up Harney street a few blocks, who have a Labyrinth painted on their patio. Last summer, they had a very clever sign hanging from that patio railing that said, "Come Walk Our Labyrinth: Meditation for People Who Just Can't Sit Still." I liked it especially because it sums up the thing I most love about the Labyrinth as a meditative tool. It takes no special skill to walk a Labyrinth. You need no book learning, no training or discipline on quieting the mind, no special instructions or equipment or practice. All you have to be able to do (figuratively) is put one foot in front of the other, and keep moving.

There are many ways to approach walking the Labyrinth as a meditation. Some go with an attitude of quiet reflection and try to be open to whatever thoughts or images come to them. Some chant mantras or concentrate on breathing patterns. Others go with a question or problem they are working on and hope for insight while they walk. But there are some things that you can be sure of when you walk the Labyrinth. You are taking yourself on a journey, and you will still be with yourself when you are done. You are going to find the center, and you are going to find your way out again. Everything else is an individual experience.

When I walk a Labyrinth, I always recognize two things. One reveals something intrinsic about who I am, and the other reveals something vital about what I believe. The first revelation comes at some point during my walk into the Labyrinth. Even though I KNOW that there is only one path, and I KNOW where that path is leading, I inevitably reach a point where I start to grow nervous about how long it's taking me to get there, and I start trying to count how many twists and turns I have left. This simply confirms something that I long ago was forced to accept about myself. I am a deeply anxious human being. As long as I can acknowledge that anxiety, I manage to keep walking my way through it. And once I calm myself down again ... and this is a profound moment for me every single time I walk the Labyrinth, every time ... if I just keep walking through the anxiety, I remember (realize all over again in an emotional sense) that I CAN'T GET LOST. I might get stuck for a while. I might get turned around and end up back where I started. But I CAN NOT GET LOST. And that is an important statement about my belief system, because I take that faith out of the Labyrinth with me. I

truly do believe that, in this life, wherever we are is always exactly where we need to be in that moment. If you don't like that moment, all you need to do is keep walking, and you'll be somewhere else, and that, also, is where you need to be in that next moment.

The Labyrinth is an ancient symbol, but its modern use as a meditative tool in America is largely due to the work of one woman. Her name is Dr. Lauren Artress. She was powerfully moved by her own experience with the Labyrinth, and took on a mission to introduce the Labyrinth to people seeking new ways to connect to their spirituality around the country. I read Dr. Artress' book about her work on the Labyrinth, and I have to admit that it wasn't an easy read for me. See, Dr. Artress is an Episcopal priest at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Her thoughts on the Labyrinth center on God the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit. Those are words that are not part of my theological lexicon. So, as I read, I found I had to constantly translate her words into concepts that more closely fit my own spiritual practice.

As odd as it may seem that an ancient pagan symbol is being used for spiritual growth in a Christian denomination is not as off-beat as it may sound. The Labyrinth has a long history in the Catholic church. In the middle ages, the church encouraged the faithful to make a pilgrimage. This was a journey to a sacred location or shrine, where it was thought that the power of prayers for forgiveness and salvation would be boosted. The ultimate Pilgrimage was travel to the Holy Land, however that trip was not feasible for many, due to the cost and the danger. The church designated several European cathedrals as "alternate" destinations for pilgrim travel. Several of these cathedrals, most noticeably the Chartres cathedral in France, had Labyrinths laid in their floors that were part of the pilgrimage process. Some travelers, paying particular penance, would even walk the Labyrinth on their knees once they had reached their destination.

You might be familiar with the pattern from the Labyrinth at Chartres. It is called a 12 circuit labyrinth because of the number of concentric circles that make up the basic pattern. And even as a simple illustration in a book, it's a really beautiful piece of art work. There are other versions of a Labyrinth; the other most common is called the Cretan, or 7 circuit, Labyrinth. While less complex than the Chartres version, the Cretan Labyrinth represents the same basic journey. In fact, the

Labyrinth is a wonderful metaphor for pilgrimage and sacred travel. I find a lot of value in the idea of intentionally traveling to a destination of particular spiritual significance to pay homage to something that speaks deeply to you. And I know that in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, not all of us consider ourselves particularly “spiritual”. Pilgrimage does not have to be to a cathedral or temple or shrine. What speaks to you? What inspires you? Perhaps your pilgrimage would be to the Grand Canyon, or Graceland, or Yankee Stadium. I have some old family friends who, this summer, finished a three year pilgrimage to follow their local triple A baseball team to every stadium in the country where they play. You can make any trip a pilgrimage with the proper intent.

I have told you that I have a deep and abiding love of all things Greek. I love the mythology, I love the food, I even made myself acquire a taste for ouzo along the line. But the thing I love most about the Greeks is their ancient Gods. The strong impression that Greek mythology left in my childhood developed into an important aspect of my personal theology in my twenties. I find great comfort in the thought that divine power comes in many personages, and that each one has their core responsibilities in the human realm. It makes sense to me. In my family, I call my mother for updates on family news. I call my dad if I need a recipe for dinner. I call my brother-in-law if my car breaks down. So, it simply seems natural to me that there is a god to pray to for good weather, another for safe travel, a goddess to call on for relationship help. I recognize that this might be as difficult for many of you to understand as I found Dr. Artress’ talk of God the Father and the Holy Spirit. For those of you whose belief structures are non-theistic, I am sure polytheism seems pretty out there. But it is important that you know this about me so that you can understand why my own pilgrimage experience took me on a tour of the crumbling ruins of the temples of ancient Greece.

I had wanted to see those incredible sights, the Parthenon, the Temple of Olympian Zeus, the Oracle’s temple at Delphi, since I was a young child. Coming to see those sights as holy only made my longing to view them in person that much keener. And I found myself falling into a very effective little mind trap. I would go to Greece when I had saved up more money. I would go when I earned another week of vacation at work. And the most insidious of all ... maybe I would go when I had met someone ... Wouldn’t it make a nice honeymoon? And then one day, I don’t remember what really brought it on, I was sitting in office, and I just

shook myself by the scruff of the neck, and said, “Go NOW! Do it for yourself.” So ... I bought a ticket to Athens. It’s not quite that simple, of course, but the end result was the same. It was February of 2003, and I had a plane ticket in my office safe that would take me to Greece in December. It seemed an impossibly long wait, but I did my best to make the most of it. I studied guide books, talked to people who had been, made a plan of all the things I wanted to see.

And in the spring of that year, I met this nice young man and fell in love. And in the late fall, I had my heart broken. So, when December 12<sup>th</sup> rolled around, and it was time for me to get on my plane, I wasn’t traveling in the elation and joy I had always expected when I finally took my chance at seeing Greece. I was traveling in the same sorrow and self-pity, and loneliness that had settled over my life in the prior weeks. I tried desperately to leave it behind me. I wanted so badly to believe that I could just be a different person when I go off the plane and breathed that Greek air. But ... wherever you go, there you are. And I was finally in Greece, broken heart and all. I was, however, determined, to make the most of every moment, and do everything, see everything I could, no matter what I might be thinking or feeling on any given day. If I was sad, I just had to take my sadness with me to the Theatre of Dionysus at the foot of the Athenian Acropolis. If I was lonely, that loneliness crossed over to the island of Aegina with me on the hydrofoil. And everywhere I went, no matter how I was feeling, I was greeted with a sense of awe and majesty and peace and comfort in the presence of the ancient temples, the sacred spots of my Gods and Goddesses.

I spent long hours scrambling around piles of broken columns and crumbled foundations. I stood in the citadel of Mycenae, where Agamemnon launched the Trojan war. I sang in the 16,000 seat amphitheatre of Epidaurus, where you can hear a coin drop on the stage from the very top row. I slept in a little pension where my French doors looked out on the summit of Mount Olympus. I’ll even fess up that I left the drapes open at night so the Gods could watch me sleeping. I encountered minor travel glitches and major acts of kindness and hospitality from people whose language I could not understand at all.

One of the best experiences of my trip came out of a disappointment. I had planned to spend a day hiking up the base of Mount Olympus. I was not an experience climber, and it was December, so I never had any delusion that I could



get to the top of the Mountain. But I was going to take the e-4 overland trail as far as I could reach in a long morning of walking, stop, have lunch from my pack, pray, leave offerings and turn back in time to be back in the village of Litoro by dark. But I promised myself two things. One, that I would not attempt anything that struck me as actively dangerous. And two, that I would turn back immediately if it started raining. I had learned during my day in AcroCorinthos that going down in the wet was much scarier than going up. At about 10:30 in the morning, only about two hours into my hike, I came across a nasty looking rock slide across my path. I really didn't want to turn back, so I thought, maybe it's not as bad as it looks. I took about two steps out to try to cross it, and looking down I realized that I REALLY didn't want to die there that day. So, I was very disappointed, but I started to turn back. And about three minutes later, it started raining. I took it as a sign. I found a nice little overlook where I sat for a bit with a snack and my thoughts before I headed back down toward the village.

As I got the start of the trail, I saw a man carrying wood into the little taverna right outside the gate to the mountain park. I thought I'd see if they were open to have an early lunch, and at least take up a little more time before going back to my room and figuring out what to do with the rest of my day. So, I peered in the window of the front door, and two older gentlemen sitting at a table waved me in. I took off my coat, and shook some water out of my hair (it was still raining) and started to sit down at a table by myself. These old men made some noises, and shook their heads, and drew a chair out for me at their table. Now, I had learned all of three phrases in Greek (Please, Thank You and You're Welcome), and being older, they spoke no English, but we communicated just enough that I understood that they understood that I was Americana, I was alone, and I had been on the Mountain in the rain. They clearly thought I was crazy, and they were probably right. The old men kept on with their conversation, in the animated way of the Greek language. They were very passionate, raising their voices, banging on the table. It should have seemed to me as if they were angry with each other, but they were clearly good friends. One of them called something rapid and incomprehensible into the kitchen, and a young man appeared at my elbow with ouzo, and we drank a toast. Then more Greek was called into the back, and a plate appeared in front of me with tapenade, skortallia and tzatziki, complete with a basket of bread next to it. It was the best meal I had in my whole three weeks there. As it turned out, the taverna

wasn't actually open for customers at this hour. This was the time when the old men got together to gossip with the owner, who joined us at the table, and spoke just a little English. When it was time for him to get back to work, the others stood up, encouraged me to swig down the last of my ouzo (a second shot had appeared at my elbow as if by magic, and I was already feeling the effects of the first one ... but I couldn't be rude, could I?) and motioned me with them toward the door. I turned to the owner and asked "How much?" and he simply shook his head, gave a little noise and made this gesture. Clearly, he was saying, it had been his pleasure. The two old men who had invited my company walked with me back toward the village. One of them held my hand. When we reached the corner where I would go back to the town square to my pension, and they would go down the side street to ... wherever they would go, each of them kissed me on both cheeks, and stood there waving me off until I was out of sight.

I had been so disappointed that my time on Mount Olympus was cut short. But if the rocks hadn't slid, and the rain hadn't come, I would have missed the old men's gossip hour, and lost the opportunity for one of the most hospitable and charming encounters of my life. It taught me that when we face a disappointment, sometimes there is a great blessing to come from it. And my broken heart started healing a little right there.

As I sat alone to dinner that night in a café in Litoro, at the foot of Mount Olympus, a gentleman at the next table looked over at me and asked, "Americana?" It had something to do with my shoes that I was so easily identified. I said yes, and he looked at me for a moment. Then he spoke to me, in a heavy accent, "You are in Litoro, the City of the Gods. The Gods, they want the very best. They come here, they look around ... and they stay." I'll never know if he was trying to provide some local colour for the tourist, or if he was a believer in the Old Gods who saw something he recognized in me. It doesn't matter. I looked at him, smiled and nodded, and said, "Yes, I believe you."

I left Greece the next day, to go back to my home, back to my life, back to where nothing had changed in the three weeks while I was gone. Except I had changed. I can't say I returned from my pilgrimage as a different person. But I had grown a little, and healed a little, and gained a new perspective from spending a time in a land where time has a completely different meaning. There was something

profoundly humbling about sleeping in buildings that had been standing longer than my country had been a free and independent nation.

But most importantly, during this trip of mine to Greece, I had tied the silken cord of my memory to all of those inspiring, sacred sites. Even now, all I have to do is close my eyes, grab onto that thread and give a tug, and I walk into the center of the Labyrinth to stand once more on the cliffs of Sounion, where the Temple of Poseidon overlooks the Aegean. And the peace of that place floods into me again, and I can return to the outer world more calm, more secure. Whenever you take a sacred journey, a pilgrimage or a Labyrinth walk, you start out with your own company, and you return with your own company. But you return with something more as well. You return with one more journey's worth of experience to draw on as you make your next journey.