

Meditation on the Labyrinth – Mark Rendell, June 2009



It's believed that the power of the labyrinth lies in its symbolism of the journey we take through life. The double-backs, twists and turns are said to echo our own often (apparently) haphazard approach to life, the goals we set and the wisdom we accrue on the way. It could also contain an intriguing overlay: our life laid out in a sequence that closely matches the key milestones, decades and phases through life.

This is what occurred to me as I walked the grass labyrinth in Mayfield Park, Southampton, one day last summer:

As we enter the labyrinth, we effectively step into our life. This entry point is shaped like another birth canal, albeit a metaphorical one. Immediately ahead of us, we turn a sharp corner – the birth moment? The journey accelerates unexpectedly and the 'force' of this turn catapults us into our lives / the labyrinth. At this initial part of the labyrinth (the 'birth canal'), we are very close to the centre of the labyrinth. This proximity makes for a very sacred moment as it's the last time we get such a great view and feel so close to this place until half way through life!

During the period from birth to around 9 years, we are nestled deep inside the labyrinth, surrounded by family, networks and other people who care for us and shelter us from the wider world. There are also rings on either side of us: to one side is our future adolescence; to the other, early middle age. This ring is also believed to be symbolised by Mars – raw, thrusting, undeveloped, outward, extroverted energy, encouraging us to push, explore, challenge and grow. Many of us in our early years believed the world revolved around us and that we were the centre of others' lives. We learned quickly through activity, exploration, risking and playing – establishing what works and what doesn't - and what we need to do to get something to happen.

Another really sharp turn is waiting for us at around age 9 - 10. This is a disorientating one, a full 180 degrees and back on ourselves. To one side, we can see the ring we have just travelled along; on the other, on the outward side, glimpses of adulthood and an endless horizon beyond the labyrinth – the place of dreams? This is the ring of our teens, puberty and adolescence, see-sawing between innocence and maturity; naivete and world-weariness; introspection and far horizons. A tightrope precariously balanced between the familiar and innocent time of our early years (sometimes tempting us to regress?) and the grown-up uncertainties of our long adulthood ahead.

This is the ring of Jupiter. Here, we are encouraged to dream, to expand our thinking beyond local limits. It's at this time that we become more aware of the global village, of other cultures and other ways of perceiving and experiencing the world we live in.

At around age 18 another sharp 180 degrees turn awaits us. We leave the comfort of the centre of others' lives: our families and friends. The cool winds of the outskirts of safety and familiarity greet us instead. We are on our own, on the outer edge of our lives, externally focused, 'out there'. At this turn, we are close once more to our 'birth' moment, and perhaps experience a second one – birthing into our independence and adulthood. Could this experience be affected by the manner in which we made our first, earlier arrival?

This is the longest ring to travel, easy to become distracted, immersed in the material world, other people, other lives and dramas. This is the ring of Saturn, of limitations and responsibilities, of material reality and time; of boundaries and edges. This period can bring commitments and obligations, agreements and covenants. Deeply physicalised, we may loosen our grip on the sacred path we are following as we become focused on the material: our bodies; others' bodies, 'things' and goals, on outward appearances, acquisitions, commodities. This could be the time when we form our strongest relationships to tangible matters, money and other people.

Around the age of 28 we find ourselves beginning to curve back towards the centre again. We take back in with us our experiences and learning. The materialism and 'edginess' of our twenties is left behind as we plunge back into our inner life. Maturity beckons, responsibilities and forward planning. Is it a coincidence that this period coincides with our first Saturn return? In the labyrinth, this is the halfway point, the pivot around which we can evaluate the first half and make plans for the second 'half' – although this is not a mathematical half-way point!

This next ring nestles deep within the labyrinth – deeper than our early years, with which we reconnect on one side, possibly through our own children, or through nostalgia for those earlier, safer, times or through psychological work to understand our inner child. On the other side lies our future: our fifties and sixties. Thoughts can stray when we are in our 30s towards our parents, many of whom will be travelling along this neighbouring ring.

This ring is ruled by the Sun. It's often in our 30s that we feel at our maximum potency and manage to achieve the best balance between our stores of energy and the application of our authority and accumulated learning, and possibly, wisdom. The sun reminds us of our desires, our quest in life, of our true natures, warts and all. It is in our 30s that we can tame our ambitions and intentions in line with our actions and power. Acceptance of all that we are brings greater calm and clarity.

And then we reach our late thirties – another turn, signalling a move inwards again. And here we get to be close to the centre again – the closest since we were born into this life. What does it mean to be so close once more to the ever present centre of our lives at this age? How do we experience this rare proximity to our 'destination'? It's also at this stage in our lives that we can be reminded of the fragility of life, of deaths and births and life-altering happenings. People who are important to us, lovers, friends and family members, can leave our lives suddenly, causing us to reflect deeply on the meaning of life, its 'unfairness' and unfathomable processes. It's at this time (38 – 45) that some of us can experience a mid-life 'crisis'. Questions such as 'who am I?' 'Why haven't I achieved anything?', 'Why is my life like this?', 'Is this all there is?' may plague our thoughts and create dissatisfaction, demotivation and listlessness.

But what is this crisis if not an opportunity to re-align our selves to our true purpose and values?

Being so close to the great centre of our lives gives us an opportunity to change tack, to be reminded of who we truly are, of our unique gifts and talents. If this 'crisis' is triggered by our proximity to the great centre of our lives – causing us to reassess our choices and to review our actions through a different, more forgiving lens - it would probably be encouraging us to remember who we truly are and to follow our inner truths rather than our outer obligations.

After our mid forties, we enter another ring. We move away from the centre. A respite from the questions of who we are, perhaps, or an opportunity to put into practice the new insights and courage we find to be ourselves. Nestled this time between our thirties and forties, we may see that we have less energy than those times but we may also be at more peace within ourselves, and our footsteps may feel more sure and determined. Some of us will be content and at peace, reaping the rewards of earlier efforts.

At 53 / 54 we turn outwards again, the pace quickens even more, we can survey many rings from this vantage point, all of our earliest times up until our thirties, and all from a new perspective. We may also be able to see where other family members are on their journey. Conversations with these people can be rich and fruitful, we have achieved authority and respect because we've 'been there'. And although we are unable to live others' lives for them, we can gently pass on the jewels of our learning. This ring is unlike any other in the labyrinth as it lacks a sharp turn. Instead, a gentle glide path loops in towards the centre. But where is this centre? Perhaps it expands or contracts to meet us along the path? Perhaps we enter the centre far younger than we imagine. I don't see the centre as a cul-de-sac but more like an open corridor – and although we walk the labyrinth in a two-dimensional way, I finally grasp that this isn't the true shape of the labyrinth at all.

We can access the centre (who we truly are) at any time along the labyrinth's path – more easily in those quieter moments when we are able to commune deeply with our higher selves, and those times when we quickly grasp that we are aligned with who we truly are and follow the flow and ease that manifests around and within us. The centre is all around us, within our grasp, just a thought away from where we are.