



Jay Edge (left) with Abi

Labyrinths are a roundabout way of finding inner peace. But could strolling along an ancient path stop working mum Abi Foss tossing and turning at night? We put her through her paces at a women's workshop to find out



Round trip: labyrinths are universal symbols

# Follow the path to enlightenment

When I was offered the opportunity to join a labyrinth workshop for women, I was curious. I'd been told the practice could help relieve my insomnia. But how could following a maze-like pathway possibly ease my frazzled brain? My sleep hadn't been the same since the birth of my son. A part of me would always be on constant alert. Whenever I got woken in the night – which was often – I'd become increasingly irritable and snappy. Yet, despite my dog-tiredness, if I got any quiet time to unwind, my mind would bolt off in all kinds of directions. Basically, I was

preoccupied by how I could do all kinds of things better, whether it was my relationships, my writing or looking after my son. These thoughts kept me awake until the early hours of the morning. I'd lie in bed, doing my best to breathe calmly and relax, but all I could feel was a deep, all-pervading sense of fear in the centre of my chest. Yet I had no idea what was causing this anxiety. I couldn't put my finger on it. All I knew was that something had to give, but what? As I arrived at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel in Hampstead, north London, I was intrigued to see whether the labyrinth could give me

some answers. Surely even the thought of losing myself on a meandering route to who-knows-where would send my already addled grey matter into overdrive? This assumption was tackled straight away, as workshop leader and psychotherapist Jay Edge challenged my understanding of what a labyrinth is. One thing that it is not is a maze. 'A maze, with its dead ends and false starts, is designed to trick and confuse the walker,' Jay told us. 'But a labyrinth has only one path, so there are no tricks to it and no dead ends. The path meanders in towards the centre and then leads us home again. A maze is designed

to make us lose ourselves, whereas a labyrinth is designed to help us to find ourselves.' I spent the morning with the other women at the workshop, making 'prayer ties' to focus our intention for the walk. Adapted from a Native American custom using tobacco leaves, we wrote down wishes on paper and tied them up in coloured cloth. 'Please,' I wrote to whoever or whatever was listening, 'help me release the fear in my heart that keeps me awake at night.' Returning after lunch, I was growing eager to see what the labyrinth looked like – throughout the morning, Jay and her co-leader Elizabeth Clarke had kept it under wraps. Stepping back into the chapel, I was met with a captivating sight. Below the cavernous wooden ceiling and stained-glass windows was a labyrinth, in white and purple canvas, 11 metres in diameter and stretching almost wall to wall, encircled by a total of 112 candles. Jay and Elizabeth explained there are three stages to a labyrinth walk. The path to the centre is about releasing tensions and emptying the mind. At the centre, the idea is to be still and receive whatever is destined for you. This may be the answer to a question, for example, or some wisdom or insight into a certain issue. Finally, the return journey is about bringing back your gift – an answer, insight or understanding – and integrating it into daily life. By now I was itching to try the labyrinth for

myself and, being impatient, I was allowed to go first. Jay then paced others in when they felt it was their turn, making sure there were big enough gaps to stop any traffic jams. She showed us how to step aside when meeting someone coming the other way, and how to overtake someone going slowly. It was actually very easy to negotiate around people, it all seemed to flow and there was plenty of room. Everyone has a different pace, and we were encouraged to find our own. But, even after being reassured there is no right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth, I still felt rather silly about an urge I had to keep stopping to stretch and massage my shoulders. It surprised me how much tension I wanted to stretch out, especially

*'As I sat quietly in the centre of the labyrinth, an image of myself as a little girl appeared'*

as other people near me were walking meditatively. I wouldn't normally stretch so openly in public, so I felt a bit self-conscious contorting myself into all these shapes. But something about walking a long winding path seemed to be unwinding me, both in body and mind. At the centre I simply sat and closed my eyes, moved to be part of this ancient ritual. The labyrinth I'd entered is an almost life-size replica of the one on the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France, a renowned pilgrimage site. The Chartres labyrinth was created in 1200, when the cathedral was rebuilt after a fire, but it fell into disuse over the centuries – by 1991, nobody had walked it for 250 years, and it was covered by more than 200 chairs.

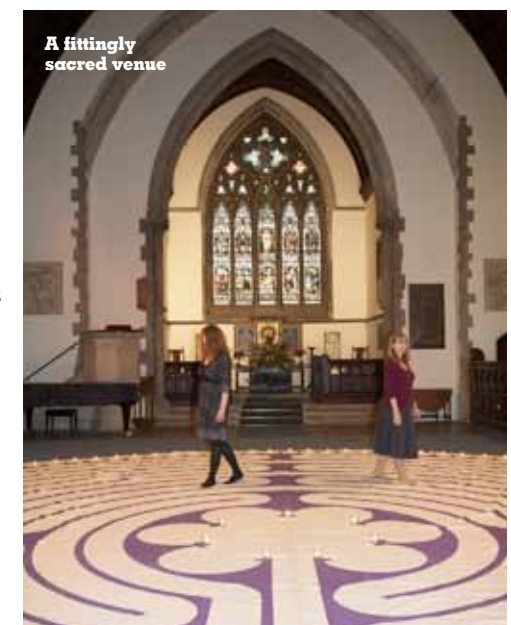
Then Dr Lauren Artress, Canon at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, visited Chartres and decided to remove the chairs and walk the labyrinth herself. It's now open to the general public to walk each Friday. And Artress has since set up Veriditas ([www.veriditas.org](http://www.veriditas.org)), an organisation spearheading a modern labyrinth revival. Over a million people have walked the copy of the Chartres labyrinth she built in Grace Cathedral, and other permanent labyrinths have been set up in schools, hospitals, prisons, private homes and community spaces all over the United States. What's extraordinary about the labyrinth concept is that it's an archetype found in cultures all over the globe, dating back to one found in Goa, India, from 2500BC. Psychologist Carl Jung described archetypes as universal symbols that act as gateways to the unconscious and can aid healing and transformation. Jay and Elizabeth's seasonal women-only workshops revolve around these themes – encouraging participants to be open to summer light and change, hold the fullness of autumn, or find a path through winter's darkness, depending on the time of year. These workshops, held on the solstice and equinox points marking the turning cycle of the year, all involve doing meditations, using the imagination and walking the labyrinth to explore the specific themes of the season – for example, new beginnings in spring,

harvest in autumn or retreat in winter. As I sat quietly in the centre of the labyrinth, an image of myself as a little girl appeared in my head. I noticed she was stressed and very frightened. She was desperately trying to 'do the right thing' in order to please her parents. They were shouting, but she had no idea what she'd done wrong. Silent tears rolled down my cheeks as I realised how familiar this painful feeling was to me, and how it has permeated so many of my important relationships. What happened next was subtle, but it honestly felt like a sensation of love, calm and relaxation was being poured into me, soothing my frightened child-self so that, finally, she could feel loved, supported and not always in the wrong.

When I came out, I felt like carrying on walking, so I circled around the outside a few times and asked if I could go back in. 'Of course,' Jay said, and I did the whole thing again. I liked walking along this winding path. There was something soothing and mildly hypnotic about it.

In the following nights, I slept better than I'd done in a long time. Although my sleep now isn't perfect, the hyper-alertness has diminished. I've also noticed a drop in my habitual 'people-pleasing' tendencies. Now, when my partner points out some household chore that needs doing, I don't take it as criticism. Or if he's annoyed that I've forgotten some grocery item, I don't take it to heart or assume I'm a bad person – I just say, 'Oh yeah, sorry. I forgot,' and that's it. It means I'm not constantly stressed about getting everything right. I've realised it's just not possible for people to be happy with me all the time. Of course they're going to get annoyed sometimes, just as I do with them. I don't think my life's journey is quite over yet, though, so I'll certainly be taking a turn around the labyrinth again. **SPIRIT&DESTINY**

- For dates and details about Jay Edge's workshops, visit [www.journeyofthesoul.co.uk](http://www.journeyofthesoul.co.uk)
- For more information on labyrinths, visit [www.labyrinthuk.org](http://www.labyrinthuk.org) or [www.labyrinthsociety.org](http://www.labyrinthsociety.org)



A fittingly sacred venue

PHOTOS ROBIN PALMER