

Walking the Labyrinth

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*Did you find the labyrinth? Or, did the labyrinth find you?
~A popular question in the Labyrinth Movement*

Over the last fifteen years walking the labyrinth has become a modern day spiritual practice to reclaim a quiet, focused mind. This simple spiritual exercise can open our intuition so the inner voice of wisdom can be heard. It can offer healing and solace and provides guidance when we least expect it.

Labyrinths have ancient roots, beginning in mythology with the famed Minotaur on the Isle of Crete. The Classical Seven Circuit labyrinth, which is based on the single spiral, is found in the Celtic tradition. It also serves as the Hopi Medicine wheel. These early labyrinths are found on 3rd century BCE coins, pottery, and in mosaic tiles in Roman buildings usually at the site of an earlier sacred site.

In medieval times, labyrinths were placed in the floors of cathedrals concentrated in France, Northern Italy, and Germany. Of the eighty cathedrals that were built during the flowering of the Middle Ages, twenty-two of them had labyrinths of various patterns. We understand that they represented a metaphor for the journey to God. The narrow, circuitous path of the labyrinth becomes the Path of Life.

The labyrinth was also used for religious rituals. One medieval liturgical text documents that every Easter Monday at Auxerres Cathedral, the clergy tossed a golden ball in the air to celebrate the risen Christ while hymns were sung by all. The Pelota, often referred to as the Crane dance, was danced on these medieval labyrinths.

The labyrinth that is my heart song is the Medieval Eleven-Circuit Labyrinth, often called the Chartres-style labyrinth. Unique to this labyrinth are the six center petals and the 111 lunations—the cusp and foils—around the outer edge to mark the lunar months. This design was placed in the floor of Chartres Cathedral in 1201. It survives today because of the quality of the Beauce limestone which continued to harden over the centuries. Because it still exists, we know more about it than the others that were torn up when the floors of the Gothic cathedrals needed to be replaced. Cathedral officials rarely speak about this labyrinth, but it is generally accepted that pilgrims coming to the cathedral—when it became too dangerous to travel to Jerusalem due to the Crusades—used it. Hence, the center of the labyrinth is named the New Jerusalem.

With some exceptions, this labyrinth has been closed to the public since the French Revolution, covered by a sea of chairs. Now, due to the rising interest in labyrinths worldwide, it is sometimes open to the public on Fridays during the summer season.

A labyrinth is not to be confused with a maze. A maze has many exits and entrances, cul-de-sacs, and dead ends. A labyrinth has only one path that leads in a circuitous way from the outer edge to the center. A maze is designed to lose one's way. A labyrinth is designed to find it.

Walking the labyrinth takes us into the world of metaphor, art, and poetry as the literal path of the labyrinth becomes the figurative Path of Life. The mind moves from clock time to dreamtime—from *chronos* to *kairos* time—in the process of walking. We can find our way into the space in between the worlds, the middle way, that liminal space where our muses come out to play.

*The deep chord touched, the spirit unleashed,
connecting to dignity, sacredness. For this I am grateful.*

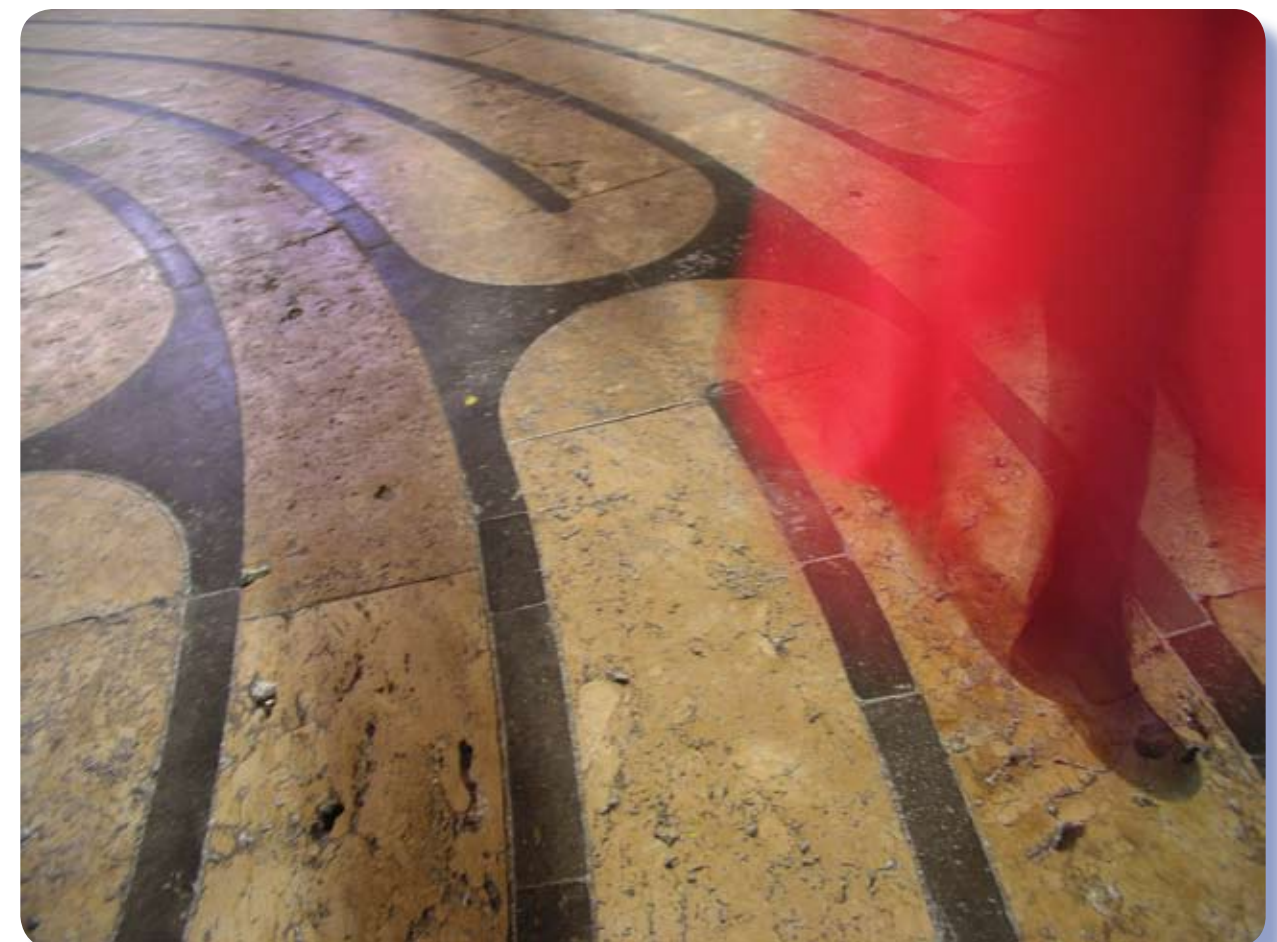
Participant Theresa Heidrich, Peoria, IL

Walking a labyrinth is easy to do. First, take a few moments to prepare for the walk. Collect yourself and take a moment to acknowledge what is drawing you to the labyrinth at this time. It may be the concern you have over an elderly parent or a scheduled job interview. It could be in response to the emptiness you currently feel in your life. Or, perhaps you're looking for an answer to the next step to take. Whatever it is, acknowledge it as best you can. This is a good time to journal your thoughts.

There are three stages in walking a labyrinth called the Three "R's": release, receive, and return. As you enter, allow your mind to release all extraneous thoughts and your body to release any unnecessary tension. Remember this is only a map; you can release anywhere in the labyrinth; often people experience tears. I know that it is not always easy to release thoughts. It may take a few minutes or even, in stressful times, a second walk to do this.

The second "R" is receiving. Once you have emptied, you can receive. Symbolically, this happens at the center, but can happen anywhere during—or following—the walk. Sit or stand, and stay as long as you want in the center. When you are ready, simply follow the path that led you into the center, back out. Here begins the third stage of the walk. This is the third "R" called returning or "reflection." When you walk the same path back out, there is a sense of strengthening. You carry whatever you've received—a sense of calm, peace, an insight—back out into the world.

Two other important things: follow your own natural pace. This means the pace your body wants to go, not how your mind thinks you should walk. Your pace will most likely change as you move through these three stages. If there are other people on the labyrinth, feel free to move around them or let them move around you. Walking the labyrinth can be a collective, cooperative cosmic dance.



Second, it is a two-way street. You will meet others on the path if they are coming out as you are going into the center. Do what feels natural. If you know them and want to acknowledge one another in some way, feel free to do so. There is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth. Simply be thoughtful of others.

Trust the experience you have in the labyrinth. Embrace your own experience. Gently direct your awareness to what you might have discounted in your experience. Expectations, just as in life, distort our experiences. If you expect to get “shazzammed” in the labyrinth, you are reducing your chances considerably.

Modern research on meditation discriminates between concentration and awareness methods. Both avenues can be used to the labyrinth. The path of the labyrinth is narrow by design. The narrower the path (to a reasonable degree), the more intense is your focus. If you want to concentrate the mind, allow it to become quiet, then let thoughts flow through like a river without getting attached to them. Return to your breath and your bodily sensations if you find yourself caught up in thought. Labyrinth walking is a form of mindfulness meditation. The more you stay in the moment, the more that moment is refreshing. Huston Smith once said, “To the still mind, the world surrenders.” Keep your eyes down if you want to hold your focus. Or, if you are distracted, allow the others on the labyrinth—or your surroundings—to become your meditation.

If you want to use the labyrinth as an awareness meditation, allow yourself to become quiet. Usually the eyes are soft as well. Once this occurs, allow your mind to be receptive to the thoughts, sensations, and images that flow through you. As in typical visualization methods, you can focus on what seems significant to you and then receive, amplify, and reflect on it. People remember dream fragments from the night before, or recall a dream from childhood. Another may feel a pain in her shoulder. As she encourages the expansion of this sensation into metaphor, the insight of how much responsibility she is “shouldering” allows her to make decisions about asking for help and delegating tasks. Active imagination methods work very well in the labyrinth.

Every experience in the labyrinth is different and unique to each person. The knack of walking a labyrinth is to allow your soft-eyed, receptive, intuitive nature to be present and receive what is there for you to receive. Mystical experiences, as much as they are misunderstood in our culture, do happen in the labyrinth. The “veil is thin” in the labyrinth and there is a portal that invites us through.

In a Washington Post article “Under a Full Moon,” Sally Quinn reported a story about a woman who was part of a volunteer team creating a labyrinth along the banks of St. Mary’s River in Southern Maryland, an area known as a historical Native American habitat.

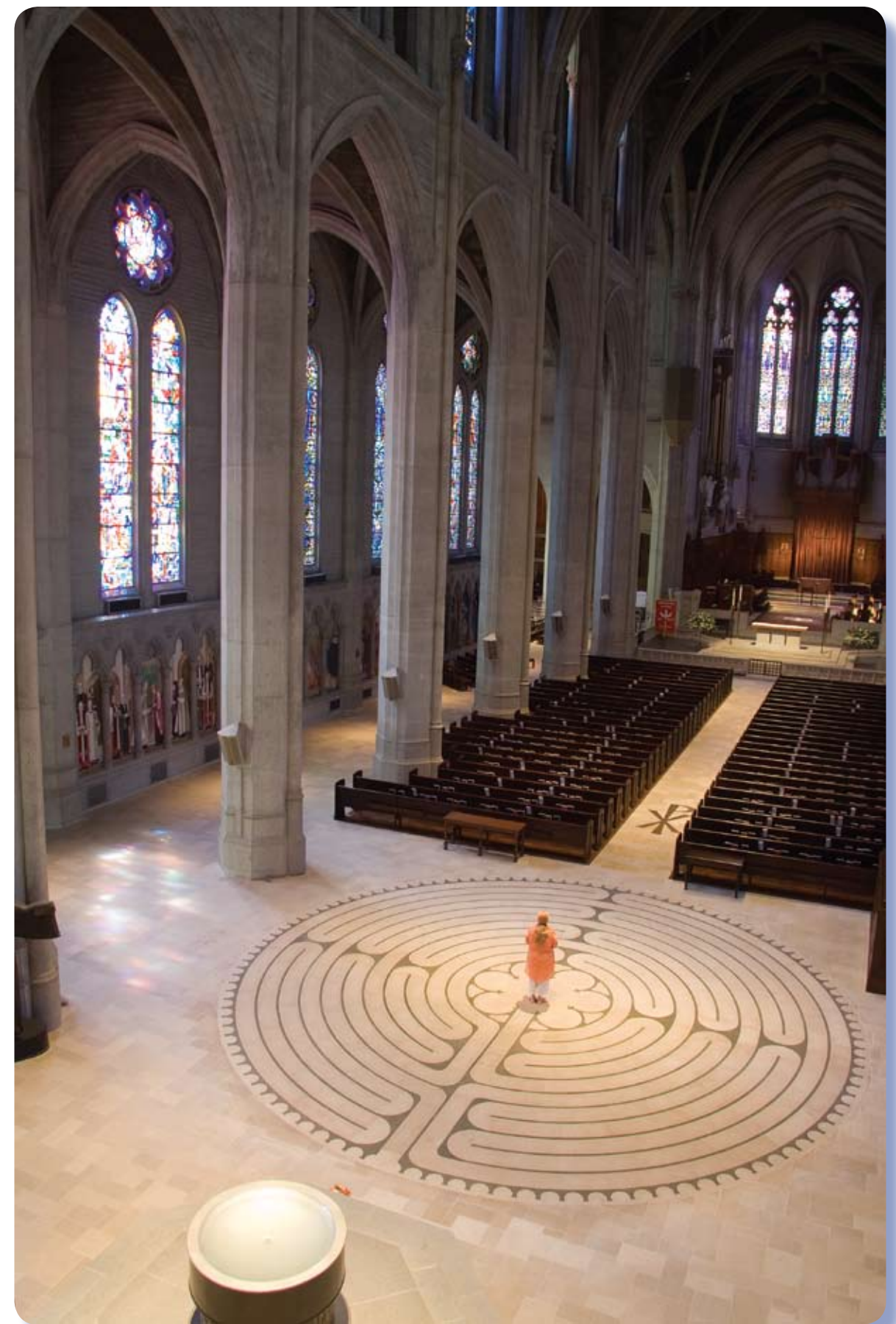
“Suddenly I was in a very bright light. I had a vision of an Indian face with long straight hair, blowing in the wind. He had uplifted arms. He kept telling me to look up. I kept looking up. I was engulfed in light. He asked if I was committed to walking the labyrinth. I said “yes.” He said, “If you are, you must leave a footprint.” When I got to the center I left two deep footprints. As I was walking out he said, “Now you are walking out, you must go out in the world and leave a footprint.”

This story captures a pressing image for our times. Often I am asked by someone considering a spiritual practice, what are the benefits. A brief answer is to 1) deepen in compassion for ourselves and all sentient beings, 2) to increase our patience with ourselves and others, 3) to decrease our judgments of ourselves and others, and 4) to find a way of being of service to the world. Walking the labyrinth can help those of us who are challenged with sitting meditation to find a peaceful, spacious place inside. From there the rest unfolds with each step.

This leads us to a bigger question: How does the labyrinth provide a portal to the liminal world? What elements in its structure, placement, and sacred geometric design make it effective in transforming the human psyche and spirit? After working with the Eleven-Circuit Labyrinth for years, I know that this design was created by great masters of spirit who knew far more than we do in these postmodern times about how the human psyche works, but also about how the immanent and transcendent spirit weaves in and out of our lives.

The Chartres-style labyrinth, like all archetypal labyrinths—defined by Hermann Kern in *Through the Labyrinth*—was created in some (now lost) sacred tradition and passed down through generations and perfected over time. According to labyrinth builder Robert Ferre in a small pamphlet *Origin, Symbolism and Design of the Chartres Labyrinth*, the Eleven-Circuit Labyrinth was found in a rugged, early form in the manuscripts of Heiric of Auxerre in 860. It went through many versions before it wound up in stone in the floor of Chartres Cathedral. It indeed was passed down through the generations and perfected over time.

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Pilgrimage is a physical act that moves the pilgrim out of his or her normal cultural domain and routine levels of consciousness into liminal conditions that expose the mind to realms where mythic memory and visionary experience can be provoked, because pilgrimage typically involves movement through symbolically charged landscapes along a choreographed route. A pilgrim will stop at a shrine here and there, pass by locations associated with miracles and visions, stay at wayside hostelrys for pilgrims and there share stories and experiences with others on the same inner/outer journey, and when finally nearing the desired destination, he or she is granted beckoning glimpses of the journey's end, be it a holy peak, sacred rock, cathedral spire, or gleaming temple dome. A call to remind the soul "where the traveler's journey is done." (William Blake)

Pilgrimage is a deep human instinct that has never left us, and never will.

"And proclaim unto mankind the Pilgrimage ... That they witness things that are of benefit to them." (Qu'ran, Surah 22:27-8)



Notes

¹ Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (Indianapolis: John Wiley, 1975).

² James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

³ Philip O'Connor, *Vagrancy* (New York: Penguin, 1963).

⁴ Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1992).

⁵ Satish Kumar, *No Destination* (Devon, UK: Resurgence Books, 1992).

⁶ Kim Taplin, *The English Path* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press edition, 1984).

⁷ James Cowan, *The Mysteries of the Dream-Time* (Bridport, UK: Prism Press, 1989).

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Research in meditation verifies that when one is walking in a spiral pattern toward a fixed center, the mind quiets. Within the context of a circle, often 40 feet in diameter, is a complex spiral. A simple spiral moves directly to center. A complex spiral doubles back upon itself, but continues steadfastly, as well, to center. This labyrinth also provides a feeling of safety for the walker. It has a clear boundary that delineates consciousness. The walker has a different awareness when she is in the labyrinth and when she has exited it.

There are many free-spirited artists and labyrinth makers creating contemporary labyrinths. However, they are like cooks in a kitchen surrounded by ingredients, but without a recipe. The hope is to create contemporary labyrinths that affect the human psyche and spirit as powerfully as the archetypal labyrinths. The width of the path, the pattern of the turns, the feeling of a balanced center, and many more facets go into creating a labyrinth that really works.

How do we define "works"? A labyrinth is working for you when it quiets your mind, creates a sense of peace, a sense of joy, a sense of gratitude, opens you to insight, allows you to be in the world with fresh eyes, and allows old memories to surface and dream fragments to show themselves outside the gate of conscious ego control; to name only a few things.

And here is another fascinating thing: one labyrinth may not work for you, but does work for your friend. Or, a labyrinth may not work for you one time, but it does at another time. No matter what labyrinth you walk, you are the receiver of your experience, no one else. So walk every labyrinth you find, or that finds you. Allow yourself time to walk into another world if only for a few minutes. You will be nourished and enriched.



Overcoming Tourism: continued from Page 23

for no amount of money can pay for hospitality. The true traveler is a guest and thus serves a very real function, even today, in societies where the ideals of hospitality have not yet faded from the collective mentality. To be a host, in such societies, is a meritorious act. Therefore, to be a guest is also to give merit.

The modern traveler who grasps the simple spirit of this relation will be forgiven many lapses in the intricate ritual of *adab* (how many cups of coffee? where to put one's feet? how to be entertaining? how to show gratitude? etc.) peculiar to a specific culture. And if one bothers to master a few of the traditional forms of *adab*, and to deploy them with heartfelt sincerity, then both guest and host will gain more than they put into the relation and this more is the unmistakable sign of the presence of the Gift.

The dervish is not a Gnostic Dualist who hates the biosphere (which certainly includes the imagination and the emotions, as well as matter itself). The wandering dervish however manifests a state more typical of Islam in its most exuberant energies. He indeed seeks Expansion, spiritual joy based on the sheer multiplicity of the divine generosity in material creation. (Ibn Arabi has an amusing proof that this world is the best world—for, if it were not, then God would be ungenerous—which is absurd. Q.E.D.) In order to appreciate the multiple waymarks of the Wide Earth precisely as the unfolding of this generosity, the Sufi cultivates what might be called the theophanic gaze—the opening of the Eye of the Heart to the experience of certain places, objects, people, events as locations of the shining-through of divine Light.

The dervish travels, so to speak, both in the material world and in the World of Imagination simultaneously. But for the eye of the heart, these worlds interpenetrate at certain points. One might say that they mutually reveal or unveil each other. Ultimately, they are one—and only our state of tranced inattention, our mundane consciousness, prevents us from experiencing this deep identity at every moment. The purpose of intentional travel, with its adventures and its uprooting of habits, is to shake loose the dervish from all the trance-effects of ordinariness. Travel, in other words, is meant to induce a certain state of consciousness or spiritual state—that of Expansion.

For the wanderer, each person one meets might act as an angel, each shrine one visits may unlock some initiatic dream, each experience of Nature may vibrate

with the presence of some spirit of place. Indeed, even the mundane and ordinary may suddenly be seen as numinous (as in the great travel haiku of the Japanese Zen poet Basho)—a face in the crowd at a railway station, crows on telephone wires, sunlight in a puddle...

Obviously one doesn't need to travel to experience this state. But travel can be used—that is, an art of travel can be acquired—to maximize the chances for attaining such a state. It is a moving meditation, like the Taoist martial arts. The dervish is moving out (it's always moving day), heading forth, taking off, on "perpetual holiday" as one poet expressed it, with an open Heart, an attentive eye (and other senses), and a yearning for Meaning, a thirst for knowledge. One must remain alert, since anything might suddenly unveil itself as a sign. Travel in itself can intoxicate the heart with the beauty of theophanic presence. It's a question of practice—the polishing of the jewel—removal of moss from the rolling stone.

Then there is the flip side of the problem of tourism: the problem of the disappearance of aimless wandering. Possibly the two are directly related, so that the more tourism becomes possible, the more dervishism becomes impossible. In fact, we might well ask if this little essay on the delightful life of the dervish possesses the least bit of relevance for the contemporary world. Can this knowledge help us to overcome tourism, even within our own consciousness and life? Or is it merely an exercise in nostalgia for lost possibilities—a futile indulgence in romanticism?

Well, yes and no. Sure, I confess I'm hopelessly romantic about the form of the dervish life, to the extent that for a while I turned my back on the mundane world and followed it myself. Because of course, it hasn't really disappeared. Decadent yes—but not gone forever. What little I know about travel I learned in those few years—I owe a debt to "medieval accretions" I can never repay—and I'll never regret my escapism for a single moment. BUT—I don't consider the form of dervishism to be the answer to the problem of tourism. The form has lost most of its efficacy. There's no point in trying to preserve it (as if it were a pickle, or a lab specimen). There's nothing quite so pathetic as mere survival.

But beneath the charming outer forms of dervishism lies the conceptual matrix, so to speak, which we've called intentional travel. On this point we should suffer no embarrassment about nostalgia. We have asked ourselves whether or not we desire a means to discover the art of travel, whether we want and will to overcome