

The French Exit to Heaven

by Martha Shonkwiler

Not until I walked the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral a few years ago did I discover the French way to exit. American Veriditas had taught me to walk toward the center releasing as I wished, to pause in the center for insight, then to walk out the same path integrating my insight in service to my outside world. In Chartres on the summer solstice I watched local folks walk remarkably slowly to the center, then quickly exit directly from the center toward the altar. Later in our French Veriditas class we learned that the altar represented heaven, and this was a journey to God.

A few weeks ago our always healthy 88 year old mother came down with influenza, and after ten days she was very weak. She fell on a small plastic table breaking two table legs, but got up and said she was fine. Nevertheless my diplomatic brother-in-law was able to convince her to visit a doctor at the hospital that Saturday to be sure she was fine and to calm us. Pneumonia and dehydration were diagnosed as curable, but three days later a cat scan revealed advanced lung cancer (our mom hadn't smoke for fifty years). We were shocked, but learned that this is a fairly common elderly story. A few days later Mom asked to "walk" the outdoor hospital labyrinth, bundled up in warm blankets in her wheelchair. After this first labyrinth "walk" my sisters apologized for wearing her out, but she slept well afterwards. She had also said that when God extended His hand to take her, she was ready.

For the second requested labyrinth "walk" my daughters from out-of-state and I took Mom into the fresh air, which she cherished after the hospital room, and onto the labyrinth. I shared some of my recent Master Gardener labyrinth presentation with them about how the back & forth walking is like rocking a baby to sooth him/her, is like a meandering river which drops its impurities on the curves, and is brain balancing which connects the logical and intuitive sides for greater insight. As we approached the center the skies seems ready to share rain, and Mom's legs were becoming cool. Spirit spoke through me saying that we could follow the French way and go directly off the labyrinth to heaven. We held hands in almost last rite prayer then exited to shelter. Mom slept very well again after this, and I felt some sense of closure. I almost wondered if this labyrinth was built seven years ago for this very walk. Nature, archetype, heaven...we are all blessed.

Part 2

Our Mom moved to my sister's home across the pasture for her last days. When

the hospice nurse came out, she said she recognized me: "You are the labyrinth lady. Every September we have our hospice butterfly release from the center of the labyrinth in remembrance of those who have died." I said yes, remembering helping with this events for years, and now realize that in a few months I will attend in honor of our mother.

Closing

Our Mother died peacefully very early on Easter Sunday, as she had predicted. That afternoon I crossed the creek to walk our six year-old mowed labyrinth in honor of her. With the few raindrops and yet sunshine, I wondered about a rainbow. Sure enough when I got to the labyrinth's center to twirl, and the rain had moved down the canyon, a perfect rainbow graced the far mountains and I cried in wonder.

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Martha attended the 2006 NW Labyrinth Gathering in Tualatin, Oregon and was a leader in planning the 2007 NW Labyrinth Gathering in Medford.