

Lauren Artress: An example of the large group spiritual work Veriditas does at Grace Cathedral is a pilgrimage we call *A Moment In Time*. How do we open ourselves to a transformational moment in time? And, of course the invisible part of this is my hope everybody is going to have a transformational moment sometime during the weekend.

We work very much on an interfaith model, so we use interfaith or universal spiritual language. So, referring to the Light works well, especially when we hand them a candle at the entry way of the cathedral and the labyrinth is surrounded in candlelight.

We limit our programs to around fifty—since the labyrinth indoors will hold that many. It is crowded, but not everybody is on the labyrinth at once. There may be 35, maybe 40 people at one time. We have exquisite music from a group called *Musica Divina*. They begin to create music from the very beginning, when we first open the labyrinth. They take the rhythm from the participants. And, again, this is a way of bringing in the invisible element. Rhythm, music, pattern, candlelight. All of those help open what Margot Adler calls the “old mind.” Groups have the potential of opening the “old mind,” much more powerfully than attempting to do it alone. It is difficult to do spiritual work alone. And, of course, once the “old mind” is open you can experience that spark of illumination, through metaphor, synchronicity and through events that happen on your journey. There’s a paradox there. You can’t seek illumination directly, but you can experience it directly through your seeking. That’s where magic can happen in groups.

Alan Briskin: Why can’t you seek spirit directly?

Lauren Artress: Because it’s still under the control of the ego. Do I look here? Do I look there? Maybe this person has the answer! But the “answer,” the illumination, the moment, the spark of divinity, spark of awareness, always comes in from the side. For instance, one man walking the labyrinth had on a tee shirt with some message like, “You are beautiful.” It was a bit quirky. But there he is. And some woman sees this and takes in the message for the first time. She doesn’t get hung up on how quirky it is, or how seductive it may be under other circumstances; it just goes into her awareness: she is beautiful! You see, the labyrinth is a symbolic field. Sometimes I’ll do rituals where people bring a meaningful object and place it in the labyrinth. They won’t tell anybody what it is or why they choose it until later. But somebody will be walking the labyrinth and see this wonderful little charm or bracelet or the I Ching symbol. Whatever it is, it can speak to the intuitive, pattern-seeking part of ourselves. Creating symbolic fields can be a powerful part of group work.

So, in the event *A Moment In Time* we actually provide a special moment in time. Now, please understand me. When you’re creating around the labyrinth, the intention is not to be manipulative. The intention is to offer a climate of trust, a place of beauty and an experience for people to truly be walking the path together. It’s a profound experience. They receive it on the “imagic” non-verbal level. We’re all on the Path together.

Let me tell you a bit about where the idea came from for our *Moment in Time* experience. Tom Keelan, my associate, and I were over in London,



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Rose Petals Falling:

The Group as Symbolic Field

(Excerpt from an edited conversation of Lauren Artress with Alan Briskin)

“But the ‘answer,’ the illumination, the moment, the spark of divinity, spark of awareness, always comes in from the side.”

returning home from our yearly work in Chartres Cathedral. We went to an off-off-Broadway theater piece called *De la Guardia*. When you arrive, there are no seats or stage. Instead, you walk into a big barn-like room. Overhead, there is a big piece of butcher-block paper that, for the beginning of the evening, is the stage.

Alan Briskin: The butcher-block paper over your heads?

Lauren Artress: Yes, over our heads! And there is lighting angled so you can see shadows through the paper. There are about six people swinging overhead on harnesses, like trapeze artists. About forty-five minutes later, the butcher-block paper breaks because balloons with water in them are thrown down and everybody winds up sort of wet. "Actors" are scaling the walls while doing a dance pattern to music. It is a spectacle of chaos, with no understandable purpose that I can derive. What's really interesting is that because you don't know what to expect your attention is really wide open.

That is exactly the reverse of what can happen in the labyrinth. You are placed in a context of meaning: prayer, discovering an insight, given a metaphor as sustenance for the journey. Your attention is wide open because you're so focused. So, after reflecting on the chaotic theater experience, we decided to drop hundreds of rose petals gently down on the labyrinth, from the Cathedral catwalk, ninety-two feet up in the air. Volunteers went up there and very quietly released handfuls and handfuls of rose petals that drifted down like snow, all over the labyrinth.

Alan Briskin: On the people?

Lauren Artress: Yes, as the people were walking; deep in meditation, surrounded by the soft light of 500 candles lit everywhere in the Cathedral and the beautiful, slowly pulsating music. And I didn't know what to expect. This was the first time I'd ever tried anything like this. I didn't want an overstated experience. It was a very, very tender moment. The group consciousness at that point was so beautifully attuned to the moment. The whole sense of being, as the Buddhist might say, in the presence of the eternal now.

The moment was exquisite. As the rose petals dropped most people stopped and looked up, like kids seeing snow flakes falling the first time in their lives. They began catching the rose petals and picking them up from the labyrinth and holding them in their hands.

We did not tell the musicians we were going to drop the rose petals. They always create their music by following the pace of the people in the labyrinth. When the people stopped, the musicians stopped too and looked up at the rose petals. Then after a few moments of confusion, they started musically expressing what they were seeing, so the music captured a twirling rhythm to it. And they really, truly, captured this whole moment in time musically as well.

Then, after the last rose petal floated down from above, the walkers spontaneously joined in what I call a 'cosmic chuckle.' It was a gentle, accepting giggle! And then the people began to walk again and the music began to stabilize as people walked. It was fascinating.

So one woman stood there, just with a rose petal in her hand, crying, crying, crying. And there's no right way or wrong way to walk a labyrinth. Anything can happen in a labyrinth. I mean, people cry and cry and some people just wail and some people laugh. I mean, there's no...this is a free container and this is a major principle for training facilitators. Stay out of it. You're only going to walk into your ego state in the labyrinth. And the ego

Quotes and Principles: How They Came to Be

"I would read a transcript, immersing myself in the spoken words; pause a day or two, letting its meaning wash through me; then move on to read the next one. Over the months certain themes began to crystallize; familiar sounds in different voices, which seemed to echo over and over again through the 37 transcripts studied. These I eventually wrote down in clusters of direct quotes, along with the gems they contained—the 'Principles.'"

—Chris Strutt

state is not happening in the labyrinth. People are in a suspended, luminous, open, transitional space.

The woman crying with the rose petal—and it wasn't an agonizing cry, there was some grief to it, but it was joyous, too—and the last time she'd had a rose petal in her hand was a year earlier at her husband's funeral. It "book-ended" the whole experience of grief. Here she was, holding a rose petal, remembering back then; looking at it and feeling so deeply moved and ripped with grief. And here, now, she's standing in Grace Cathedral with exquisite music, surrounded by candlelight, holding yet again, a rose petal.

You see, there is a magic that happens. We planned the rose petals, but that's all we did. We offer the labyrinth and the music, and we do that on a regular basis. But there is something that happens when a group of people come together. We do shape the weekend with the intention of healing and wholeness—finding courage, releasing grief and walking into the future with an open heart and an open mind. We talk a lot about finding your soul assignment; following your call to do the work you have come here to do. I believe there truly is a Spirit that's trying to get our attention, that wants to help us come to our fullest potential. This Spirit, whatever you call it, wants us to live fully and, in Hildegard's words, flower. And that's always evident in this transformational work that we do.

The labyrinth is a metaphor for our spiritual journey in this life. Sometimes the path is really tough, sometimes it is flowing. If you come across anything that is difficult let yourself be amused by it. Because when we're amused, we're not in our ego. We're in a reflective state instead of criticizing or attacking ourselves.

Commentary on The Story of Rose Petals Falling:

Group magic often begins with an interior experience. How does the journey of my own life intersect with others? How can the real beauty of the world be made visible, so that my capacity to see enlarges to include the spirit world? The labyrinth is a tool for social meditation, a physical embodiment of the paradox that we are each on our own path and yet we walk this path in a common field with others.

Ninety-two feet high at the crown of a cathedral, a reverend and a canon of an Episcopal church drop hundreds of rose petals down onto a twelfth century geometric design believed to quiet the mind and evoke transformation. Walking on this sacred space in candlelight are a dozen or so people, deep in meditation. The whole setting is designed to be metaphorical, to create a gathering where it is safe to think symbolically. And when the rose petals fall, like Tin Man, Lion, and Scare Crow awakened by snow in the Wizard of Oz, all action subsides. And then, from out of the stillness, the cosmic chuckle. Lauren describes the state as luminous, an open transitional space. What is activated is an interior radiance, what religious traditions call *kairos* time.

These are the moments the future is unknown to us, requiring the search from within ourselves before stepping forward. In story after story, some version of this phenomenon was described, how the inner work of the individual and the work of the group came to be in some form of synchronization. How time and pace slowed down and group members felt, in a deep, kinesthetic way, that some important transition or healing was imminent.

In this particular story, a crying woman holds a rose petal and unbeknown to anyone else in the group, a personal healing takes place. "You see, there is a

Principle

Element of the Experience

Synchronicity

People experience a heightened sensitivity, a kind of enhanced sensory perception of their surroundings, whether in nature or within a space. Events appear to have synchronicity—a certain rhythm and timing that is meaningful to the participants in the group. People speak of having a special kind of attention, of noticing things, words, sounds, and other cues that they would not normally notice, and of receiving clear meaning from these signals. Every happening has intelligence and is seen to add value to the learning and wisdom unfolding in the group.



"There's a deep presence of heart and mind where you can tap into profound group wisdom. There's deep respect and authentic sharing and a kind of group flow state occurs, as synchronicity seems to happen more frequently."

—Deborah Vogele Welch

"The whole natural world seemed somehow to be part of what it was we were doing together."

—Glennifer Gillespie

Metaphor Cluster

Sound

silence hit the room • wake up call • dominoes toppling • music lifting off the keyboard • rattling in our cages • group hearing itself think • sonic backdrop • tuning to intention • tuning self to the group • crank up trust level • calling the circle • ideas clicking • sounding fluffy • battery of 300 compact disks • doom-doo-boo-bob-bob-da-boom • paint buckets vibrating • calling to creativity • buzzing of another order of self • listening to drive of humanity • barking up the same tree • cosmic giggles • squinting your ears to hear the whole • implosion that amplifies • voice collage • God talk • beating out a pulse in unison • humming birds • hearing Earth and trees • coming around on the groove • stuck wings squawking • rocking the world • holographic listening • aggressive listening • silence attaching to the meta-level of pace • triggering magic • self-amplifying feedback loops • vibrating chords • music as magic carpet • music changing brain chemistry • rocking chairs • synaptic inputs playing music with dendrites • applauding spaciousness •

magic that happens," Lauren recalled, "there really truly is a spirit that's trying to get our attention." The dropping of the rose petals, the candlelight, the music, all that is part of the structure and the setting, but what cannot be planned is the particular meaning of the parts in relation to each other and how they come together in the particular experience of the individual and the group. Individuals may come alone but they participate in a collective act.

Also in this pattern story we see the juxtaposition of structure and spontaneity—we witness through the story the paradox of creating psychological safety with a provocation to face the unknown. And we glimpse the power of the invitation to grasp life experience symbolically, so that every action takes place in a mythic field. The particular genius of the labyrinth, its physical and psychological structure, is how it promotes freedom. What we see again is the power of intention, in this case to create an experience of wholeness, to release grief and find courage.

Finally, we see the ability to jump categories. As the old woman of Juanita Brown's story "saw" a way to translate a power struggle into a vigil, so too did Lauren intuit a way to take a Broadway show whose intent was entertainment and "see" how it might apply to spiritual growth. Some may wonder, after the fact, why she was so uncertain about the reactions to the dramatic power of falling rose petals. Yet in the moment, a canon of a prestigious church creeping along a cat walk to throw down rose petals on unsuspecting labyrinth walkers, is an act of courage and faith. This too is part of what we discovered, acts of courage and faith that form an invisible intent surrounding and seeding transformation in groups. ■

"You can listen with a sharp focus and understand what it is you're relating to on a very specific basis. But there's also a soft focus, where you're actually able to hear the melody that's created by all the parts coming together. That melody changes as each part changes, because the melody is the sum total of everything that's present at the time. A lot of times we don't listen for that, and a lot of times we don't know it's there, and a lot of times we get stunned by the fact that we hear it, and then everything stops."

—Ysaye Barnwell