

## **Culture of Peace: Taking steps toward peace at New Year's Sacred Walk**

**By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission**

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The Labyrinth Sacred Walk into the New Year has become an Ashland tradition. What aspects of Ashland encouraged this ancient symbol and worldwide practice to become a local custom? How has the presence of the Labyrinth Walk contributed to a culture of peace in Ashland?

Peace has been described as “beyond words” as it is a collection of life experiences about which we dream. Each of us has our own image of what peace looks, feels and sounds like.

The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) has recognized times when a group of people are gathered and the level of compassion is rich, empathy is strong, respect is palpable, inclusivity is apparent, accountability is noticeable. The ACPC calls them “culture of peace” moments.

One such gathering is Ashland’s “Sacred Walk to the New Year.” Despite there being many books about labyrinths, explains local labyrinth facilitator Elizabeth Austin, labyrinths are similarly “beyond words.” One needs to personally walk the labyrinth to know it.

Austin, an Ashland Culture of Peace Commissioner, was first introduced to Sacred Geometry some 35 years ago, initially acquainting her with the Chartres Labyrinth. Not long afterward, Austin joined Jean Houston’s Mystery School. To her great surprise, Austin discovered that Dr. Houston utilized the same labyrinth as her personal symbol.

Austin regards the labyrinth as sacred space, a notion supported by the sign at the Labyrinth Garden at Ashland’s Trinity Episcopal Church: “This place is sacred ground, where the unseen world’s veil is thin. So try to make but little sound and keep grace and love within.”

The labyrinth is an archetype, a divine imprint, found in all religious traditions in various forms around the world. By walking a replica of the 11-circuit Chartres Labyrinth, placed in the floor of France's Chartres Cathedral around 1220, we are discovering a long-forgotten mystical tradition that is insisting to be reborn.

Despite its maze-like appearance, the labyrinth has only one path which winds throughout and becomes a mirror for where we are in our lives; it touches our sorrows and releases our joys, inviting both an open mind and heart. The labyrinth is often referred to as a journey from the outer world to the inner sacred center where the Divine is found.

Austin and friends offered a labyrinth walk at the Presbyterian Church's Calvin Hall in 1993, using the Mystery School's fabric labyrinth shipped in from New York. She believes it was the first community labyrinth walk in the Rogue Valley.

In 1998, Austin, who by then owned her own portable labyrinth and had become a certified facilitator, joined the efforts of a local gardener named Lupine and facilitated a Winter Solstice walk. The following year the New Year's tradition evolved out of the global angst that computers might be unable to adapt to the millennial change in date. The Solstice organizers felt the need to be together in community, as 1999 yielded to 2000, if worst comes to worst.

Our computers didn't falter, yet a custom was born: Our community continues to gather each New Year's. Hundreds of people come to the annual Sacred Walk. Nowadays, men and women walk the labyrinth in equal numbers, and there are many younger adults and youth. Children seem to know exactly what to do. The Sacred Walk is inclusive, drawing participants from diverse sectors of our community.

The Sacred Walk provides time and space in the center of the labyrinth to ponder the six realms of creation — mineral, vegetable, animal, human, angelic and the unknown. The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission values and nurtures all of life, honoring the environment and promoting humanity's balanced place in the web of existence.

To Austin, the labyrinth represents our individual and collective walk through life. Each walker is encouraged to find their own pace and to pass or pause upon meeting those using the same path but in the opposite direction. The Sacred Walk becomes a practice in respecting the diverse ways our fellow community members approach life.

Even as each walker experiences the labyrinth uniquely, all walkers experience a safe and empowering setting. The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission honors all self-reflective paths, recognizing the importance of each person's inner work en route to the blossoming of a collective cultural shift.

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