

## **Sustainability from the Inside Out: The Labyrinth as a Tool for Deepening Conversations in Higher Education**

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**Abstract:** This article describes a methodology of convening a community conversation, which took place during the 2018 Workshop on Regional Centres and the Sustainability of Canada's Rural and Northern Landscapes held at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. In what follows, we both theorize and narrate the use of the labyrinth—a circular, circuitous walking path—as a tool for accessing another way of knowing, and for sharing personal vision for collective reflection and engagement. First, the labyrinth is described as an intervention into business-as-usual in academic, workshop, or conference settings. In this section, we briefly theorize the use of the labyrinth as a form of cultural reinvention. Next, we describe the labyrinth as a dynamic, transformational process that taps into embodied, interior experience, drawing it out into collective view. This process, centred on walking the labyrinth and sitting in a listening circle, challenges participants to identify and express their chief motivating purposes, as well as the internal barriers they face in meeting their most valued aims. Central to this process is attending to the close relationship between experience and reflection, thinking and feeling, and speaking and listening—at both individual and collective levels. The article concludes with observations about how the labyrinth and the listening circle can be used in higher education, and other workplace contexts, as a tool for creating space for fostering sustainability from the inside out.

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## Introduction

A labyrinth is a circular, circuitous, and clearly marked path for walkers to follow as they journey to the center of the circle and then return—it is not a maze in which one can get lost. An ancient symbol thousands of years old, the labyrinth has become a form of walking meditation, or contemplative practice, that is increasingly being used in higher education communities worldwide as a tool for reflection, learning, and for deepening community conversations (Sellers & Moss, 2016). Since at least the Middle Ages, labyrinths have been thought to be a symbolic form of pilgrimage, one that facilitates transformation in the seeker (Artress, 1996).

In the last decade alone, over 150 universities have developed labyrinth facilities and programs (Sellers & Moss, 2016). This parallels a steadily increasing number of labyrinths found worldwide in hospitals, parks, schools, churches, and other public and private spaces. In these and other places, labyrinths are being embraced by diverse communities as an elegant and inclusive form of contemplative experience; they offer a time and place to pause, reflect, and renew oneself.

This *Northern Review* issue's special collection, "Place-Based Sustainability in the Provincial North" (<https://doi.org/10.22584/nr49.2019.100>) showcases academics working with northern communities to address their sustainability needs. Our contribution explores the rationale behind, and the impact of, using the labyrinth to help create a supportive community of learners during a 2018 Sustainable Communities Workshop at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Northwestern Ontario. In what follows, we describe the use of the labyrinth as a tool for convening contemplative community conversations about our common work in the broad, interdisciplinary field of community-based sustainability. We see labyrinth walking not simply as an inclusive way for a group to come together, but also as a powerful catalyst that can help us to access and share with one another our deepest desires and commitments.

In what follows, the labyrinth is first described as an intervention into business-as-usual in academic, workshop, or conference settings. In this section, we briefly theorize the use of the labyrinth as a vehicle for personal and cultural reinvention. Next, we describe the labyrinth as a dynamic, transformational process that taps into embodied, interior experience,

drawing it out into collective view. This process, centred on walking the labyrinth and sitting in a listening circle, challenges participants to identify and express their chief motivating purposes, as well as the internal barriers they face in meeting their most valued aims. Central to this process is attending to the close relationship between experience and reflection, thinking and feeling, and speaking and listening—at both individual and collective levels. The article concludes with observations about how the labyrinth and the listening circle can be used in higher education, and other workplace contexts, as a tool for creating space for fostering sustainability from the inside out.

### **Inviting Reinvention: Decolonization and Reinhabitation**

As a professor and doctoral student of education, our research, teaching, and community work revolve around concepts of place and sustainability. In the global context of the Anthropocene—that is, the geological epoch defined by massive human-caused changes to the Earth and its biosphere (Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007)—many people and communities are struggling with questions of survival and well-being, now and for the long run. Our primary curiosity as academics and community members can be expressed with remarkable simplicity: *How to be here now, in this place, with others, human and non-human?* Of course, the historical, cultural, epistemological, and political dimensions of human communities, along with the great variety of inner experience and continuous global change, makes the question far from simple. There is no one way to be in a place and to negotiate many different pathways to co-existence in local and global contexts is the essence of the challenge of sustainability (Heise, 2008).

Whatever complex political challenges are involved in this negotiation, as educators we believe the crisis of sustainability can aptly be described as *a crisis of attention*. Somehow—and the sustainability literature is full of many competing reasons for why this is the case—we don't seem to have the collective capacity to pay attention to the impacts we have on each other and our cultural and ecological environments. Some of us fail to pay attention to the impact we have on ourselves (e.g., Eaton, Hughes, & MacGregor, 2016). Collectively, this lack of attentiveness to the impact we have on each other, ourselves, and the world, has roots in the ontology and epistemology of dominant culture; that is, our failure to notice stems from conditioned ways of being and knowing associated with monotheism,

rationalism, individualism, anthropocentrism, colonialism, modernism, and capitalism (e.g., Bowers, 1998) This conditioning comes in the form of training embedded in everyday cultural experience and its myriad networks of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Such training is also embedded in university cultures; indeed, many have argued that schools and universities exist to reproduce and legitimate it (e.g., Greenwood, 2004; Corcoran & Wals, 2004). What we inherit from our training are ways of paying attention that inhibit our ability to recognize and address the problems we continue to create for ourselves.

Simply put, sustainability, whatever one thinks of the term, is an educational problem—not just in the institutional sense, but in the wider sense of individual, community, and cultural learning. Technical fixes and targeted political wins, as important as these are, will by themselves not bring about cultural change without a corresponding change in our practice of paying attention to our learning. We believe this means that those of us involved in sustainability education need to teach ourselves, and each other, to think and behave differently.

This re-education necessarily has an interior dimension, as it is within and through our interiority that our ways of being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology) are ingrained and expressed. Practising “sustainability from the inside out” is a methodology for reconnecting the inner experience of being and knowing with the outer collective reality (Eaton, Hughes, & MacGregor, 2016). And as faculty members across the disciplines become more aware of, and more responsive to, the many social and ecological crises facing people, place, and planet, many are seeking ways to use their privileged university positions as a platform for serving local, regional, and community needs (Barlett & Chase, 2013). This is particularly true in places, such as the Canadian North, where the interplay between culture and geography create specific regional identities, and where institutions of higher learning reflect and challenge those identities.

The transformation suggested by the sustainability movement, at this deeper epistemic and ontological level, can be described by two complementary educational projects: decolonization and reinhabitation (Greenwood, 2003). Briefly, decolonization means that we need to abandon, unlearn, let go of, and heal ways of being, knowing, and doing that no longer serve us in our relationships to ourselves and others, human and other-than-human. As suggested by the term, *de*-colonization is a call

for *undoing* the harm, intended and unintended, caused by colonization. But of course, this harm cannot be undone, especially to those peoples, cultures, and places that have suffered most or have been utterly destroyed. What can be undone, through the lifelong, and ultimately generational practice of learning to pay attention, are ways of thinking, being, and doing that continue to cause harm to others and to ourselves. Reinhabitation describes the kind of new learning that needs to emerge in tandem with the unlearning required by decolonization; that is, we need to remember, recover, revitalize, reinvent, and restore ways of being, knowing, and doing that better serve our relationships to ourselves and others, human and other-than-human—including the Earth and the biosphere.

Importantly, learning to decolonize and reinhabit our lives and our places is not something that one learns, just to move on. It is a lifelong practice that will be shaped by continual change, negotiation, and complex uncertainties. Becoming a more resilient and cooperative species is a generational project that is just getting under way (Greenwood, in press).

So why walk the labyrinth? Walking the labyrinth in academic, conference, and workshop settings is *an intentional intervention in institutional learning*. It purposely interrupts conventional notions of institutional time, space, and learning (decolonization) in order to make room for something new to emerge (reinhabitation). Additionally, the labyrinth is a tool that can be used to integrate inner and outer experience. The marginalization of interior experience is a practice enforced in the academy through the neoliberal discourses of productivity and the (colonial) objectification of human beings as human capital (Ball, 2012). Healing, recovering, and reinventing necessarily entail both inner and outer work. We need to decolonize and reinhabit ourselves as well as our places and institutions. Learning to pay attention to, and to express the relation between, inner experience and outer context is one of the labyrinth's chief lessons.

### **The Labyrinth and the Listening Circle: Experiential, Transformational Learning**

The symbolic form of the labyrinth is over 4000 years old and found in many places and cultures all over the world. Scholars believe that during the Middle Ages the labyrinth functioned as a symbolic form of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Its use in contemporary life is mainly

secular, but connected to spiritual and mindfulness practices that many modern people are seeking as respite from cultures of materialism and speed (Artress, 1996). In universities and modern institutions, where speed and materialism are increasingly both valued and resisted (Berg & Seeber, 2016), labyrinths can play a variety of roles. At our university, the labyrinth is envisioned as a major curricular initiative that seeks to:

- support experiential, holistic, and contemplative learning across disciplines;
- promote mindfulness and wellness;
- enhance the physical and aesthetic environment of the campus;
- facilitate university, school, and community collaboration;
- invite non-formal participation through public pedagogy;
- create an aesthetically unique space for ceremonies and celebrations;
- honour and model diverse ways of learning, knowing, and being; and
- foster creative engagement with people and place.

For the last year, we have been leading a Labyrinth Learning Community, convening regular group walks on a canvas Circle of Peace Labyrinth with faculty, staff, students, and community members (Fig. 1). We are also in the final stages of fundraising and planning for installing a permanent outdoor labyrinth at our campus. The outdoor labyrinth will be open to the community, and programs are being developed to engage multiple communities of practice in experiential and transformative learning.

#### *The Labyrinth and Workplace Sustainability*

On the cover of his book *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*, the Welsh poet David White (2002) offers a definition of work that explicitly links inner and outer experience. Work, he posits, is “an opportunity for discovering and shaping the place where the self meets the world.” If we are to discover and shape the place where the self meets the world, we need practices that invite the self, and its interior dimensions, into a collective process of shaping. This is the purpose of a group labyrinth walk, combined with a listening circle.



Figure 1. Circle of Peace Labyrinth, by Kay Lee Photography, December 14, 2017. Reprinted with Permission.

In helping to plan for the 2018 Sustainability Workshop, we suggested that we rethink conventional workshop protocols by beginning the day with walking the labyrinth. Workshop organizers agreed to forego the usual introductions and instead first invite participants to consider more deeply why they were there, and what they hoped to contribute. In other words, we decided to ask participants to consider the deeper nature of their work, and their own power to, in White's words, "shape the place where the self meets the world." Our rationale for this intentional interruption of business-as-usual at an academic gathering was to set the stage for a more contemplative appreciation of the northern context and what it actually means to diverse participants. Understanding places in the North means understanding that no place is ever one place: it is the shifting interplay of how people experience it and act upon it. Just like an individual person, part of a place is always changing, while other parts of it endure (Greenwood, in press). We wanted a process that illustrated the diversity and complexity of northern places from the beginning of our interactions together. While the workshop as a whole was regionally specific, it should be noted that the methodologies described below are transferable to any place where people are willing to walk and talk together. Their purpose, that is, is to

initiate a process that opens people up to their relationship to self, other, and place—wherever they are.

On the day of the workshop, directly after registration, workshop participants were led into a spacious gymnasium prepared with two distinct learning environments: a Circle of Peace Labyrinth (7.3 metres in diameter) and a circle of chairs set up for reflection following the group labyrinth walk. After welcoming the participants into this learning space, we offered a brief introduction that proposed a rationale for walking the labyrinth as part of a workshop devoted to sustainability. The content of this introduction was a synopsis of what we have described above.

We also located labyrinth walking as an example of contemplative practice in higher education contexts. The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) is an organization “committed to the transformation of higher education through the recovery and development of the contemplative dimensions of teaching, learning and knowing” (ACMHE, 2018). ACMHE includes labyrinth walking on the “movement” branch of its Tree of Contemplative Practices (Fig. 2). As a contemplative practice, the labyrinth is a form of walking meditation where one is invited to follow a clearly marked path from the outside of the circle in to a symbolic centre. It is not a maze where one can get lost; however, the path is circuitous, spiraling, representing the twists, switchbacks, and turns one discovers on any challenging journey. The walker experiences these movements in a fully embodied way. In our experience, the labyrinth returns us to our senses, to our total affective embodiment and everything it carries: memories, dreams, hopes, and concerns. It hardly needs to be said, but for emphasis it ought to be: getting out of our heads, or intellect, and opening to the wider world of embodied, lived experience is very uncommon in higher education, and is perhaps one of the reasons that universities are often critiqued for being “out of touch” with the real world and its diverse human and other-than-human communities.

Before entering the labyrinth, the workshop’s approximately thirty participants were each given a prompt for reflection, which they were asked to carry with them on their walk (Fig. 3). The prompt included the following two questions:

- What is the unique contribution I most want to make?
- What might I need to let go of, unlearn, or heal in order to make it?

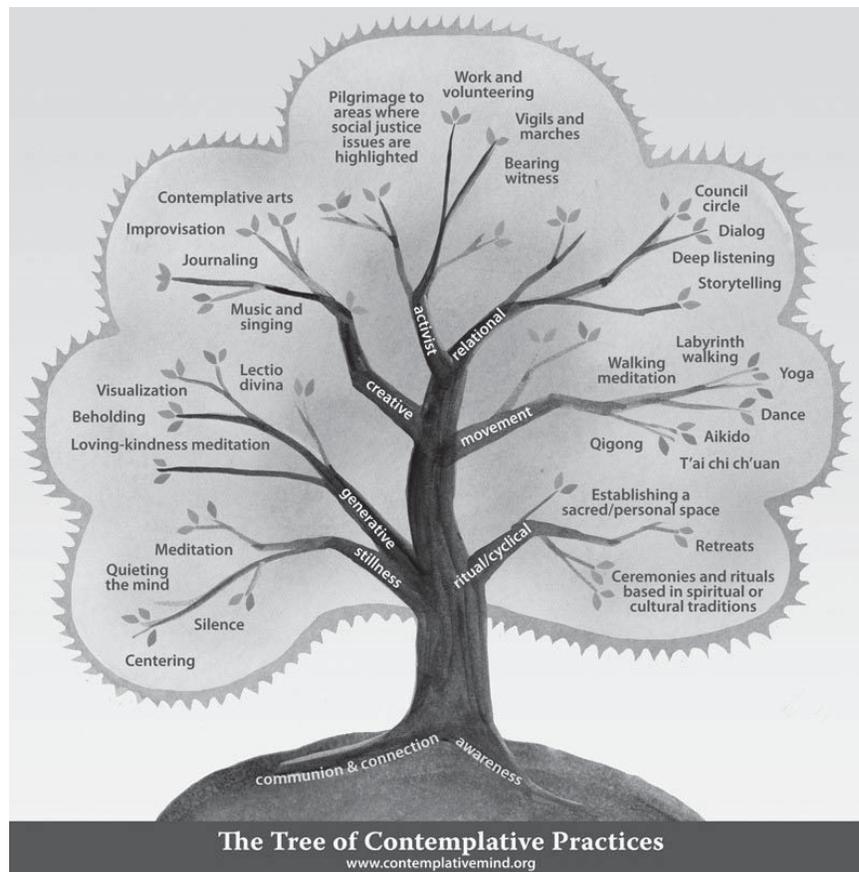


Figure 2. The Tree of Contemplative Practices, by Maia Duerr and Carrie Bergman, 2012, retrieved from <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree> Copyright 2012 by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.

As facilitators, we suggested that these questions were meant to connect each person's inner and outer experience and to connect also with the twin tasks of decolonization (unlearning) and reinhabitation (contributing). We also informed the group that the official workshop introductions would take place after the labyrinth walk in the adjacent listening circle, where each participant would introduce themselves and speak to the reflections stimulated by the walk and the prompts.

Finally, we gave final practical instructions for walking the labyrinth. These included: there are no rules to worry about, one cannot get lost, one should walk as one's own pace, and one should not worry about passing

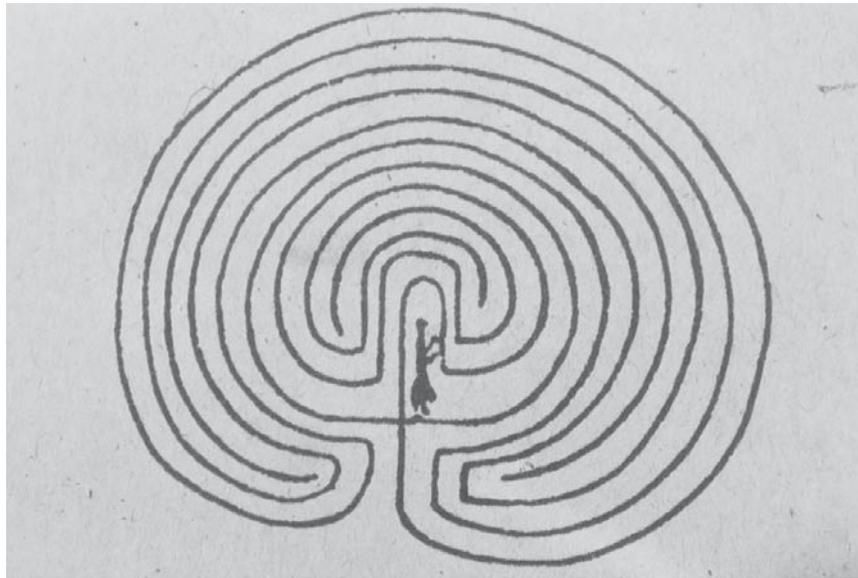


Figure 3. Labyrinth Reflection Prompt Card, by Gavin Shields, May 10, 2018. Reprinted with Permission.

others if needed. Walkers were also told what to do while waiting for others to finish, to observe silence, and to prepare for group reflections, perhaps through journaling in journals provided with workshop materials. Through our work with the labyrinth we have learned the importance of a skilled labyrinth guide to “hold the space” of this ritual walk. Typically this involves “gatekeeping” at the threshold of the labyrinth and helping to “hold” the space. As walkers approach, the facilitator answers any questions or concerns, invites the walker onto the labyrinth at the appropriate time, and in this way helps direct a large group process that otherwise might be confusing and disorderly. For a collective walk, it is important to hold the intention of some degree of group cohesion, even as everyone is having a personal experience. When everyone was finished walking, participants were invited to be seated in a listening circle (Fig. 4).

For group walks, the listening circle is a tool that complements and deepens participants’ experience on the labyrinth. This is true whether or not walkers walk with a structured inquiry or prompt. When participants do walk with a scripted prompt, having a space for processing the inquiry is an essential part of the experience. In such cases, walking the labyrinth



Figure 4. Labyrinth Listening Circle, by Gavin Shields, May 10 2018. Reprinted with permission.

gives participants time and space to wander with their question and to work it through their minds and bodies. We have learned that this is a totally different experience than simply posing a question to a group that remains seated. Time, space, and movement through the labyrinth changes how one processes a question and also changes how one approaches sharing.

We are constantly amazed at the levels of openness, intimacy, and vulnerability expressed in a listening circle after walking the labyrinth. Like the labyrinth, the listening circle is a particular learning technology best used consciously with guided facilitation (see Palmer, 2017). Several ground rules help to create a supportive container for deep reflection: an explicit verbal commitment to confidentiality, the option to pass if one prefers not to share, and restraint from offering feedback. It is also helpful to invite people to speak when they are ready—“popcorn” style—rather than to move around the circle one after the other. For many participants, this relieves the stress of having to be ready for one’s turn. The point is to give people space to speak, and to practice deep listening to others, without any intention, and indeed without any opportunity, for offering feedback. The facilitator models this restraint and enforces a “no response” ethic if necessary. For our purposes, this allows us to quiet ourselves and to create a space in which everyone can practice the skills necessary to listen to

ourselves and others, to “pay attention,” and to think and feel deeply before speaking.

As mentioned, participants in our listening circle were asked to introduce themselves and then to respond to two questions: What is the unique contribution I most want to make? What might I need to let go of, unlearn, or heal in order to make it? Without divulging any details of participant responses (as we purposely do not collect formal “data”), we can report that nearly every participant was very forthcoming in describing how their vision for contributing was related to their need to unlearn, let go, or heal. This is typical of group walks no matter the context. Most of the participants commented how their reflections on questions emerged or evolved as they walked through the labyrinth, and many offered metaphors connecting the movement of their minds to the movement of bodies over space or time. We experience that, together, a group labyrinth walk followed by a listening circle are powerful catalysts to community building. These experiential learning activities engender a high degree of trust and openness, as well as focus on a theme, in this case northern sustainability from many unique perspectives. As one conference organizer expressed, after the listening circle he felt that he knew the participants as if they had been working intimately together for days.

### **The Labyrinth in University Contexts: A Trojan Horse for Transformation**

As a tool for connecting inner experience with the outer world, the labyrinth project is convening diverse participants in the work of practising sustainability from the inside out. The labyrinth’s use in a conference and workshop setting has been described here, but this is only one aspect of the work that is taking shape at our university. Our Labyrinth Learning Community—composed of community members as well as faculty, staff, and students—has been holding regular theme walks. The facilitation of these walks rotates among learning community members, and each member presents a walk that connects directly to his or her work. For example, a psychotherapist and professor of social work who researches end-of-life care, led a walk on the theme of death; a local chiropractor and social entrepreneur led a walk on reclaiming the breath by imagining one’s breath during successive life stages. Collectively, we have also written about our experiences and created poster and conference presentations

for the university community at large. We also produced a film about our work that communicates the uses of the labyrinth to others, and helps to raise funds for our outdoor labyrinth installation. The presence of our learning community, comprised of faculty and community members, is one of the factors contributing to the support for this installation among senior administrators.

While working toward these various projects, learning community members have shared short pieces of writing with each other that describe what each of us was learning through our regular labyrinth walks and corresponding listening circles. After reading one another's reflections, we collectively noted the following prominent themes: 1) the kind of work we are doing together with the labyrinth is vital to our sense of well-being, both individually and collectively; 2) the labyrinth has the potential to revolutionize ways of knowing, being, and doing within the university by turning the typical mind-body divide on its head; and 3) the labyrinth offers a rare experience of wholeness within the university—public spaces are reclaimed and reinhabited and private experiences are brought out in the open in an atmosphere of mutual trust and support. Below, we offer brief comments on each of these themes.

#### *The Labyrinth and Well-Being*

Some members of our learning community have deep experience with contemplative practices and their use in higher education, including for the purpose of strengthening community connections. Others were simply interested in learning more, and then deepened their commitments as they experienced transformation within themselves as part of a community. No matter one's prior history, it is clear from our writing that we all view this work as essential to any notion of sustainability. Learning community members expressed gratitude for the space to come together to focus on wellness in an environment that often works against the feeling of being well (see Eaton, Hughes, & MacGregor, 2016). Collectively, we also expressed in our writing a longing for the practices of wellness to become more of an institutional norm in the workplace, and a desire to connect with others who hold similar aims. Our learning community includes physicians and therapists who lead the health and wellness programs, and these programs have requested that the labyrinth be made available to students, staff, and faculty. In short, our learning community, through regular practice,

consistently poses the question, if education and community are not for well-being, what are they for?

### *Other Ways of Knowing*

There is an old joke in higher education: “professors have bodies so that they can transport their heads to the next meeting.” In few places is the mind-body schism more encouraged than in the academy. The separation of mind and body is one of modern culture’s more troubling dualisms, and many people seek tools to heal this divide. As one such tool, the labyrinth elegantly reveals the mental and physical aspects of one’s experience of the present moment. As a form of walking meditation, this silent, contemplative practice foregrounds physicality and movement, emphasizing our embodiment in a bounded, yet fluid, space and time. In our experience, walking the labyrinth helps restore balance and breath to the body and provides a spaciousness of thought that heightens our awareness of our whole selves—the totality of body-mind. Learning community members frequently share that the labyrinth creates pause and awakens attention to aspects of ourselves that might otherwise wither in work settings (see also Sellers & Moss, 2016). This embodied attention, especially when expressed and explored in the listening circle, can be described as a marginalized way of knowing that all community members wished to validate and encourage in one another. Any notion of wellness that does not engage the body is obviously incomplete.

### *Reclaiming Wholeness*

Embodied ways of knowing are essential to the concept of wholeness in many branches of contemplative practice. We recognized in each other’s experience that the primary draw of our learning community on its members is to have a place to practice being more whole, more fully integrated, and to talk with others about the various meanings and expressions of wholeness as it relates both to our larger life journeys and our interactions with one another. The Tree of Contemplative Practices mentioned earlier in this article describes dozens of modalities for restoring a greater sense of wholeness to one’s life, the experience of a more harmonious integration of the different parts of ourselves—our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual states. Proponents of mindfulness in the popular literature often remark that we are all already whole, already

integrated and complete (Kabot-Zinn & Hahn, 2009). While this may be true, many of us experience the workplace as a place that reinforces a divided life, where we keep our true thoughts and real feelings to ourselves while we put on the game face, the mask, or the uniform (Palmer, 2017). Walking the labyrinth together has shown us that few people are happy with this arrangement, and that it actually works against people becoming their best selves or simply who they wish to be. In a sense, the labyrinth project has become a Trojan Horse for beginning a conversation about wholeness in a setting where it is not generally encouraged. At first participants may be attracted to the labyrinth as an intriguing form; but invariably they grow to value the learning and the community that take place there.

Reclaiming wholeness may be an impossible task in an institution like a university. After all, its history is one of fragmenting knowledge into discreet disciplines and narrow specializations. Further, wholeness is an elusive and contested idea. Not everyone resonates with the desire to live a more integrated and whole life; some even reject the language of wholeness as an essentializing discourse that negates the situatedness and fluidity of postmodern experience. This is why when we offer labyrinth walks to diverse communities we try to use language that fits local contexts. We would like to close, therefore, by returning to the questions that prompted our labyrinth walk at the 2018 Workshop on Sustainability and Community:

- What is the unique contribution I most want to make in my work?
- What might I need to let go of, unlearn, or heal in order to make it?

As labyrinth facilitators, we have used versions of these questions with many different groups, mainly in academe. Invariably, through the process of pausing, emptying, and receiving whatever participants receive on their labyrinth walks, they return to a listening circle prepared to describe some aspect of a journey toward greater wholeness, integrity, and commitment. What this means differs greatly from person to person. Witnessing each other's commitments, and what we each need to do in order to contribute what we can, broadens everyone's perspective of what wholeness and sustainability might mean.

We began this article by claiming that the complex sustainability challenges we face can be described, at least in part, as a crisis of attention.

The labyrinth is a flexible, inclusive learning tool that can be used to help individuals and groups become more aware of what they pay attention to, and how an awareness of one's attention can help to focus it on the work that one believes most needs to be done. Like any other contemplative practice, the labyrinth is not a panacea. It is a practice that, along with other practices, yields change over time. Unlike other contemplative practices, however, outdoor permanent labyrinths of the kind being constructed at universities today can become prominent features in the pedagogical landscape. As such they can serve as a continuous reminder for us to become more mindful, more aware, and more engaged in the collective work of transformation.

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