



Birthing Circle
Serving Women Serving Birth

The Center of the Labyrinth

The first time I entered Grace Cathedral and stood ready to step into the twisting path of the labyrinth I was confused. I had gotten the phone call that changes your life forever. My grown son had died. People say your life can change in an instant but that is not true. The changes that never find completion take time to gain momentum. At first an impenetrable membrane of denial rejected the information. Obviously there had been a mistake. It couldn't have been Jake. The authorities had screwed up. It couldn't have been Jake lying dead of a drug overdose on a hotel room floor in Seattle. The facts were like a drum of bleach leaking steadily into the fabric of my existence. I wandered among cardboard cut-outs of trees, buildings and people as the color leached from my life. Underneath a raw pain throbbed a persistent message of the physicality of life. I was confused when I discovered I continued to breathe. One heartbeat, one breath, followed another. I was amazed to discover that created time passing. An invisible taproot had descended spontaneously out of the center of my chest and was linking me with the core of gravity deep inside the earth.

Cool winter sunlight illuminated the stained glass windows as I stepped into the labyrinth of in-laid stone at the rear of the cathedral. I discovered a labyrinth is not a maze as it leads without obstruction to the center of the mandala. Its serpentine twists and turns confound the mind forcing it to surrender to a liberating awareness of taking one step at a time. As I walked my disorientation melted away. I had found a container to hold my broken heart.

My mind gave way to trance as I placed one foot in front of the other.

I felt Jake beside me as though his body were in the room, saying "Don't worry Mom—it was an accident, I'm okay over here on the other side." As my bare feet followed the path over the smooth cool stones my body became a transmitter sending him prayers

The Center of the Labyrinth (continued)

for a safe passage. A river of feelings poured through me. Molten hot regrets cycled through my psyche one minute and tender memories the next. Jake and I had always shared humor and it held firm in our moment of need. As I took a turn in the labyrinth I unexpectedly felt a blast of his irreverent wit ripple through me. It clinched my certainty he was crossing over with confidence. The tear in the fabric of life had me standing smack at the crux of the paradox. I had a startling new sense of immortality and at the same time was excruciatingly aware of the utter finality of death.

I felt I was straddling two worlds as I looked up at the statues of angels adorning the walls. Having never taken the charming symbols seriously it was suddenly obvious they are a critical part of the plan. Love binds everything together. Angels as the messengers are like a catalyst—the active agent in the power to bind. Love is the glue between heaven and earth, between the divine and man. I was stunned to find the glib affirmation “love is immortal” is literally true. It crosses the final barrier, the two faces of the eternal called life and death.

The walls of my individual identity shattered, I walked directly into the zone of the collective grief of all mothers who have lost children. They walked with me telling me secrets about the courage they never knew they had but were forced to discover. Stepping directly into the gaping hole in my life a new existence was opening under my feet as I walked.

At night as I slept dreams with the luminosity and purpose of visions laced through the hours. Night after night I was awakened by the telephone ringing. Jake had often called late at night and when I jumped for the phone sensations of sickening pain bridged me back into waking consciousness. When I got to the phone no one was there. I knew he was sending me a message he was not gone but journeying to an unknown destination. During the day the pressing realities of crisis, with no sense of reverence, insisted on using the same phone line. Friends and relatives called. Details were attended to. The

The Center of the Labyrinth (continued)

coroner's office called and I marveled at the words emerging from my mouth. How did the word coroner and the word Jake end up in the same sentence?

A knock at the door brought a FedEx letter from the mortuary asking for authorization for cremation. An official government document elaborately stamped in pink and blue ink labeled Death Certificate impersonally held his full name: John Jacob Campbell.

The boxes for birth date and death date were completed. The box for offspring had a check mark by NO. As morning turned into afternoon I held it in my hands and looked at the phone. They were waiting for my call but there were no words.

As the relentless sunrise turned days into weeks I returned to the labyrinth daily. I felt like a crazed saint in the desert as my work with children and infants took on a burning sense of importance. I felt a pull as if a lodestone had been placed just beneath the surface of life. The portal of birth began to fascinate me. It is a juncture where the punch of potential spills over into actuality. No wonder folk wisdom teaches to tend beginnings carefully. They are thresholds charged with possibilities. I felt a sense of mission incubating slowly.

One evening as I sat with candles burning and a CD of Gregorian chants playing I was interrupted by a knock on the door. A lively couple looking for an apartment to rent for a grown daughter stood on the doorstep. As we chatted it emerged their daughter worked with childbirth and newborns. She was a doula. A new profession dedicated to nurturing birthing women, gently welcoming the latest arrivals to planet earth and bringing emotional sensitivity to the transformation into motherhood. When I closed the door I felt a wave of hot energy pass through me. As I turned a picture of an angel sent to me by a grieving father who had also lost a son named Jake fell off the wall. It lay directly in my path.

The next day I went to the labyrinth for more information. As I surrendered to trance my heart opened. As I walked I saw the birth of children as a wave of light eternally nourishing the earth like the perpetual breaking of the dawn. In every culture the birth

The Center of the Labyrinth (continued)

of a child is a moment of celebration which ripples out spontaneously renewing us all. The vulnerability of the new being calls us to tend life gently.

As my feet moved along the labyrinths path I felt the incessant drum beat of birth creating a bridge between heaven and earth. Each new arrival catalyzes the power that binds us. No wonder children have long been associated with angels. A thunder clap resounds in a newborn's first breath as it flashes a peak at the mystery of life. As I stepped into the center of the labyrinth I felt the dots connect. The only medicine which would have traction on the pain of my loss would be to turn my new found sensitivity toward some good for others.

The labyrinth has taught me one step and one day at a time there is a larger logic to life. The twists and turns often make it hard to see where our path is headed. I have learned life is precious. Jake's presence is always with me, constantly drawing me back to basics. Each time I welcome a child to earth life I stand for a moment where everything is simple and clear. I have learned that love always stands in the center.