

Our Journey: in Masonry and in Life

An address given at Bytown Lodge on January 20, 2011
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Originally I had planned to talk tonight about the labyrinth, which is a pattern found in many medieval churches and cathedrals in Europe and also many places in Canada. I know of two in the church I attend (St. John's Church) and I believe there is another in Christ Church Cathedral.

My thought at 3:00 this morning when I woke up feeling unhappy that my talk was a bit long winded, I thought I shouldn't restrict it to a description of the labyrinth. I'll try to place its symbolism within the larger context of the journeys we all take.

So I spent most of today changing not only the topic, but the content of this talk. I suppose I was partly inspired because last night in Bonnechere Lodge, I witnessed a young man beginning his Masonic journey, and on reflection, felt that this was a good topic to talk about and which would make you think. That is the object of all my talks. I won't create too many conclusions tonight: you make your own conclusions from what I say.

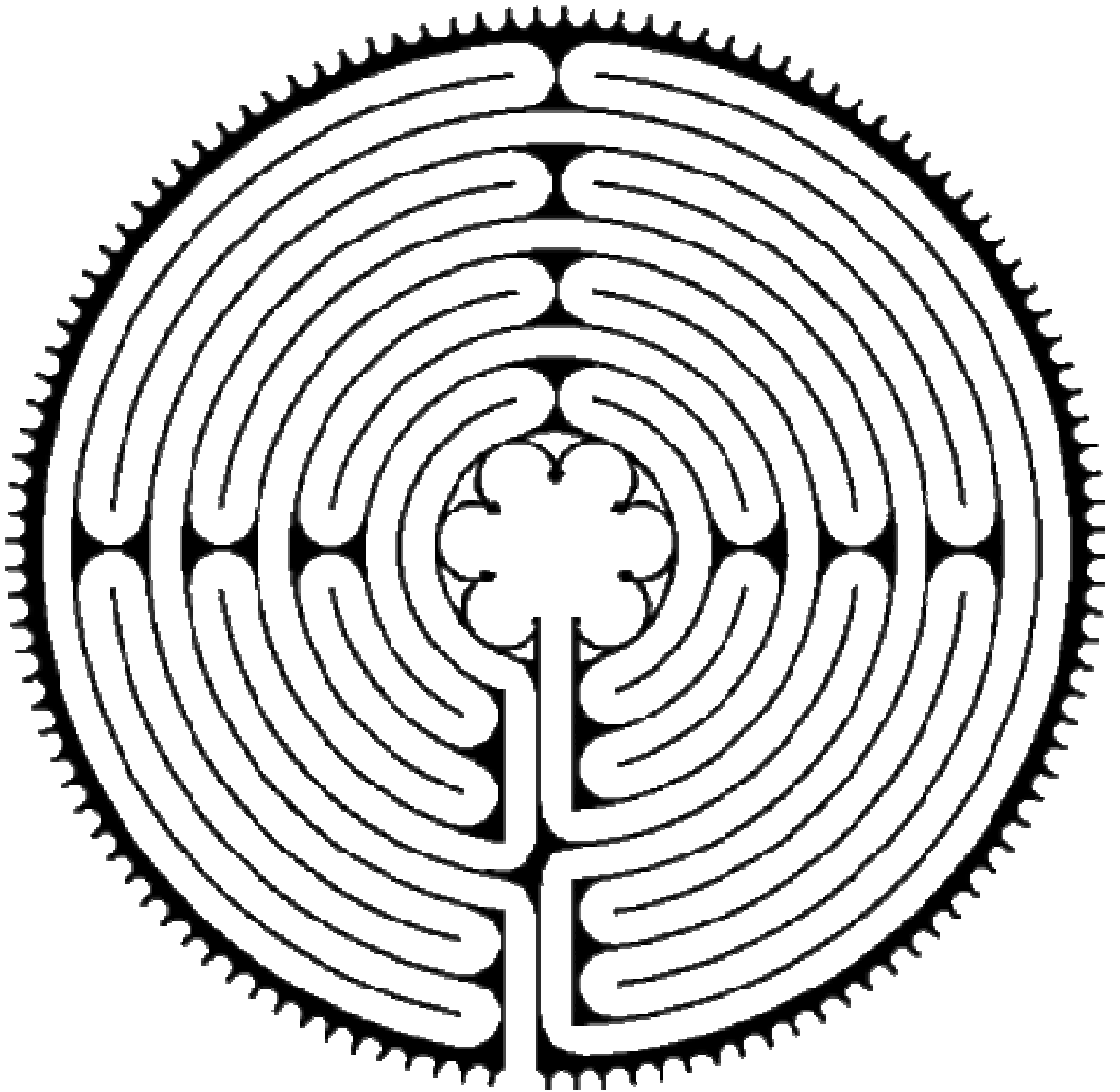
Firstly what is a journey? It is a passage from one place or time to another place or time, or it can be a process of development.

On Tuesday this week, I took a journey to Toronto to attend the memorial service for an old friend. For this journey I knew where I was going: it said so on my ticket. I was going to fly to Toronto and then fly home again. Last night I journeyed to Eganville and spent an enjoyable evening in Bonnechere Lodge. This was both a passage in place and time *and* a process of development!

The children of Israel took a much more complex journey. In the book of Exodus, and the four books of Moses which follow it, we learn of their release from Egyptian captivity and how they spent 40 years on a journey to the promised land. During which they wandered in the desert. The Bible is a book which is filled with metaphor and 40 years simply means a long time,

Probably 40 years meant that during their sojourn in the desert, people died, others were born. Moses himself is described as 120 years old when they finally arrived.

A labyrinth is a convoluted pathway which eventually leads to its centre: there are two or three variations on the labyrinths.



All have an entry point and, unlike a maze, there is only one path and it will lead eventually to the centre. All you have to do is follow the path. Another name for the Cathedral labyrinths was “the road to Jerusalem” and the centre was often called either Jerusalem or heaven. In those days, a pilgrimage to Palestine was one of the most devotional things one could do. However, it required time, money and fortitude. Walking the labyrinth at a cathedral could substitute for the long and arduous journey.

Professor Gailand MacQueen writes: “From ancient times, the labyrinth has been used in rituals at the most important moments in life. Although we don't always know exactly how, its structure, as well as its placement at gravesides, seacoasts, and healing sites, suggest that it was used in rituals associated with birth, coming of age, marriage, sickness and death, as well as initiation into secret societies or elders' groups. Like all rites of passage and initiation ceremonies, walking the labyrinth is structured as a pilgrimage with three parts. First comes the journey inward, toward the sacred space where change happens. Next, time is spent at the center, where the new life begins. Finally, there is the journey outward, the return of the transformed person to the world, often with a new identity.

Our operative brethren felt them important enough to add to their architectural splendours and to put their marks on them.

Like our rituals in Freemasonry, walking the labyrinth is a symbolic journey. It is a metaphor for life.

In a labyrinth there is only one path. The only decision you make is whether or not to start. The path has many twists and turns but it steadily and surely takes you to the centre. However it takes you many places before you get there. Most labyrinths make you walk in a general clockwise direction, just as we do in our perambulations. The winding path of the labyrinth is much like the journey of Freemasonry.

A Professor MacQueen describes the experience so well: “As you walk the labyrinth, there will be times when you find yourself tantalizingly close to the goal, but then, suddenly, you find yourself moving away from the center. Likewise, far into the path, you may find yourself on the outer circle. It could be puzzling or even discouraging if you did not know that the entire path is necessary, that the entire path leads to the center -- even those parts that seem to lead away from it, even those parts that seem far from it. You can trust the path to take you to the center eventually, no matter where you happen to be at the moment.

Thus, the labyrinth is a powerful symbol of the unity of our life path and of the center that awaits, wherever we are on the path. Alternatively, we might say that the labyrinth is a symbol of God, who is both the center we seek and the path that gets us there.

Like being in the tiled recesses of a Masonic lodge, walking the labyrinth is a peaceful reflective pursuit. During your journey you think on your life, where you have been, where you want to go. By the end of the walk, you know yourself better, something Masons are admonished to do.

It represents an good journey through life: it enables us to have a virtuous clean and wonderful life.

Thus, our brother who was initiated tonight begins his journey. Many of us have been on this journey for many years, 46 years in my case and we still seek a centre, the peace of that place where all will be revealed and we will be in the presence of God.