One of the oldest universal symbols found the world over, the labyrinth has been discovered on cave walls, on pottery, in weavings, and in centuries-old European churches.

The labyrinth is a sacred symbol of Life. It represents the roller coaster drama in our lives, our neurotic decision-making process, and the body itself. Our brain, intestines, and circulatory system, and even the first journey we make from our father to our mother, and from the center of our mother's body into the world are labyrinthine.

The labyrinth is also a sacred symbol of Labor.

A woman's psychic and physical journey from maidenhood-to-motherhood during labor, and again postpartum, is surely a labyrinth.

Years ago, I coined the word “LabOrinth” when I began using this ancient symbol to illustrate a woman’s inner experience of labor and postpartum. Instead of teaching parents how birth attendants see labor, e.g., the linear “stages of labor,” I taught them how to make a labyrinth in pastels or clay, a LabOrinth, that they could hang on their wall during labor. (Instructions for this process are given below.)

How Labor is Like a LabOrinth
Mothers experience labor as a labyrinth, a LabOrinth. “Ready” or not, with the first contraction, or when the water breaks, you are catapulted across an invisible, but felt, threshold. Once in the LabOrinth, you will find yourself taking one step at a time until you reach the Center. The Center represents the birth of your child, the birth of you as a mother, the birth of your family.

You could be blindfolded and still reach the Center by feeling your way through the path. You don't need to study the path before you enter it. You don't need a birth plan or a cell phone to call for help! There is no time-line.

Unlike in a maze, you cannot get lost in a labyrinth. You can get lost in a maze, which has more than one entrance or exit; there are choices to make and dead-ends. You have to plan, remember, and think to avoid getting lost (not unlike the medical model of birth).

Two Contemporary Labor “Map” Symbols
To better appreciate the LabOrinth, take a look at two contemporary labor map symbols.
First, there is the ever-popular cervical dilation chart representing progress in labor. This chart is seen in books, and also in childbirth classrooms and labor rooms, as a clinically white, shiny hard plastic chart with raised rigid circles to show 2 cm to 10 cm dilation.

In truth, your cervix is neither blanched white nor a perfectly round rigid circle; your cervix is the blood-rich colors of life—shades of pink, red, and purple. In labor (unless induced before the cervix and baby are ready), your cervix is juicy and soft like overripe fruit that can't resist slipping and sliding over the baby's head.

Another way to visualize a positive, felt-image of labor is to imagine and paint your dilating cervix. Use a big wet brush, dipped in watery paint, making widening circles on a big sheet of wet paper, dripping rivulets of color.

(Do you feel this image, versus think it rationally? Does opening in labor seem a little more do-able with this softer, wetter image of opening in labor?)

The second symbol to think about, before we make our LabOrinths, is my version of another popular medical model's symbol for labor progress. It is a labor graph or partograph, sometimes called Friedman's Graph named for its designer, Dr. Emmanuel Friedman. This graph illustrates the average hourly rates of dilation during first and subsequent labors. Although some birth professionals deliberate the value of this tool, it is a part of our collective western psyche, so we have to take a look at it as a symbol.

The bottom, horizontal line is a time line; each notch represents an hour or two or three in labor. The curved line represents cervical dilation. I added successively larger circles to represent the cervix, beginning at 1-2 cm dilation and opening gradually, until at the end of the line, the cervix is completely dilated: the baby falls out and the mother is discharged, and that's that!

Friedman's Graph is, more or less, how most medical people objectively see labor from the outside. However, parents, especially mothers in labor, do not experience labor as a linear hill, nor do they experience "stages of labor," and, unless they are examined and told about their dilation progress or lack thereof, they are rarely concerned about it either!
How to Make Your Own LabOrinth

Art Supplies You’ll Need to make a simple pastel LabOrinth:
- ✏️ A big sheet of paper, 18” x 24”
- ✏️ Soft chalk pastels, because they are pretty, soft (like the cervix), and forgiving if a mistake is made (you can rub out or blend a line, unlike the permanence of a marker).

I suggest you choose two colors of pastels: one to draw the template and the other to draw the corridor lines. Having two colors helps to see the next step, or to see where a mistake was made so it can be easily corrected.

It is easiest when first making a labyrinth to copy the template pattern first (see the first pink illustration to the right). Because a labyrinth grows upward when you draw it, the template has to be centered on the page, about a third of the way up from the bottom of the page, which can be oriented either vertically or horizontally.

Next, slowly draw the connecting lines that make the corridors, step-by-step (see the second illustration to the right – the blue lines show how to connect the ends). The first loop is from the vertical center line (in the +) to the first vertical line in the “picture frame corner” on the right.

You must be mindful to make a labyrinth; connecting the lines and dots so the corridors form the continuous, unicursal path takes concentration. So, your room may become quiet, as you glance from your labyrinth to the one here, and back again. While you draw, I invite you to think about the rich history of labyrinths.

For example, did you know that Hindu midwives in India offer laboring women a Yantra? A yantra is a labyrinth that hangs on the wall in a labor room, so during contractions (or between contractions) the mother can follow the path from beginning to center…and out again…with her eyes. How might this help you in labor?

When your eyes go back and forth, left-to-right, right-to-left, following hairpin turns, your brain waves change from fast-thinking beta waves to slower, meditative, intuitive theta or alpha waves. When you are in labor, you do not need to think. You need to feel and intuit your way through labor.

Following a labyrinth’s path, whether we are walking one, or finger-tracing a hand-held labyrinth, or using our eyes, is deeply relaxing and lowers the blood pressure and heart rate. A labyrinth brings our body and mind into balance.
Threshold and Footprints
After you have drawn your LabOrinth, continue by drawing a threshold stone in front of the labyrinth’s opening. The one at New Grange (right) is an awesome million-ton (plus or minus) rock beautifully inscribed with spirals and symbols. I like to think the Neolithic peoples placed the massive rock in front of the door to help them pause in the threshold between their ordinary world and the sacred space they were about to enter.

Finally, draw two little footprints in front of the threshold stone. “These footprints represent you standing on the ground of everything you know before you Labor. You can learn a lot from books, but you can't learn from books or classes what you will learn in the LabOrinth. Labor takes you from what you know and who you are now to what you will become and know as a mother... or a father.”

A LabOrinth can also be made out of clay or other materials. Try drawing them in sidewalk chalk in a parking lot, tracing them in sand or dirt, or using stones or sticks to make the paths. Then you can walk a full-size labyrinth in mindfulness and introspection.

Ancient LabOrinth Rules
1. No unnecessary talking in a labyrinth. Hold your question, intention or prayer in mind. No laptops or phones, especially cell phones.

2. You can rest in the corridors. Catch your breath. Smell the earth. Even cry, tears falling into the thirsty earth. In the labyrinths of old Europe, there were benches in the hairpin turns for people to stop and contemplate.

3. There are no clocks or shortcuts in a labyrinth. Once you enter a labyrinth, never cross lines to get to the Center or to get out quickly; if you do, you will get lost.

Once I was in a seven-day winter Zen training; it was grueling. With only five hours to go, I decided to "jump over a few lines" and get out of the pan before I was cooked. I packed up and tried to leave quickly before my Zen teacher saw me. I was sneaking up the hill heading toward the parking lot with my backpack, thinking I’d gotten away unnoticed. Down the hill he comes, Seiju in his black robes, walking like a brick in sandals. I told him my rationale for “crossing the lines” and leaving early. He listened. I doubt he heard a word I said. When I finished, he said,

"You can leave, but wherever you go, you still have to breathe."
With this, he nodded and kept on walking. I just stood there. I didn't know where the lines were. I didn't know whether to go up the hill or down the hill, because I stepped out of the labyrinth.

*Before you freak out and step out of your LabOrinth, stop! Remember, "Wherever you go you still have to breathe."

In labor, this means that even if your labor is not what you expected or wanted, even if it's taking too long, or there are interventions that might make you feel like you've lost control, or a cesarean becomes the “next best thing”...the one thing that can't be "taken" from you is your determination to be loving and mindful.

Even in normal labor, you may feel you are trudging through the trenches of your LabOrinth and living your determination in breath awareness. In doing what needs to be done next, and nothing extra, again and again, you are birthing as a Love Warrior.

*Breath by breath, you will reach the Center; your baby (and you as a Parent) must be born.

This article and all images are copyright 2004 by Pam England, and may not be reproduced without written permission.