

## Circles of contemplation



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Mind Your Body

**By Lea Wee**

SINGAPORE - During his second year in Catholic Junior College in 2009, Mr Kevin Wong was stressed out while preparing for his A-level examinations.

Even though he spent seven to eight hours studying every day, his grades did not improve.

Then, as part of an overnight retreat in school, he joined a walk on a portable labyrinth laid out on the floor of the school's auditorium.

A labyrinth is a single circular path that winds its way - through a series of 90 and 180 degree turns - to the centre. The walker remains at the centre until he is ready to retrace his steps out of the labyrinth.

Unlike a maze, which typically has walls and is designed to disorient with its many wrong turns and dead ends, the labyrinth has only one entrance and leads in only one direction.

Mr Wong said while he did not gain any physical benefits from the hour-long walk, he certainly reaped psychological ones.

The 21-year-old, who is waiting to enter university, recalled: "I realised the labyrinth is a metaphor for life. You can rush through it or go at a pace that allows you to reflect on its design, the way it twists and turns and prevents you from discovering what is up ahead, just as life does. You learn to enjoy the experience of simply being present and immerse yourself in the stillness of the moment."

He found he had been too focused on wanting to get his A levels over and done with, and decided to concentrate on enjoying the process of studying instead.

He became less stressed and, eventually, was able to score straight As for his A levels.

People here have been walking labyrinths not just to relieve stress, but also to seek psychological or spiritual solace from grief and loss or other difficulties, ranging from marital problems to medical issues.

There are at least three people in Singapore - all Catholics - who facilitate such walks, usually in the compounds of churches.

Ms Edwina Yeow, an educator and counsellor, has been offering such walks at an outdoor labyrinth at the Lifesprings Canossian Spirituality Centre, near Upper Bukit Timah Road, since 2007.

A basketball court there was converted into the labyrinth that year.

Ms Yeow also has a portable labyrinth with an 8m diameter which she takes with her to conduct labyrinth walks at other churches and schools such as Catholic Junior College.

She was guided and encouraged to conduct such walks by a Jesuit spiritual director in India.

Ms Roselie Chia, a retiree, and Ms Diana Tan, an office manager, both spiritual directors at the Kingsmead Centre for Ignatian Spirituality and Counselling off Farrer Road, have also been facilitating labyrinth walks since 2008. They use a portable canvas labyrinth with a 9m diameter.

They had undergone a two-week course in Melbourne, Australia, in 2008 under Ms Lauren Artress, a leading figure in the worldwide labyrinth movement and a pastor from Grace Cathedral in San Francisco in the United States.

### **Ancient healing tool**

Labyrinths can be found in numerous pre-modern cultures, from India and China to Arizona. They enjoyed great popularity among Christians in medieval Europe, but many were destroyed by the 17th century, for reasons scholars are still debating about.

Ms Artress has been credited for the modern-day bloom of labyrinth walking, which started in the early 1990s in countries such as the US. In America, labyrinths are now found not only in churches, but also in secular places, such as hospitals and hospices, as a form of stress relief for staff, patients and visitors.

More recently, health spas and tourist resorts have added labyrinths to attract visitors interested in wellness programmes.

Labyrinths come in more than 100 designs. The ones found at Lifesprings Canossian Spirituality Centre and Kingsmead Centre for Ignatian Spirituality and Counselling are patterned after the 800-year-old Chartres Cathedral labyrinth in France. Each contains 11 circuits or circles.

Most participants are Catholics and Christians, though free-thinkers as well as people from other faiths have also taken part.

### **What happens during a walk**

Each session, which lasts about three hours and costs between \$20 and \$30 per person, typically begins with a brief introduction of the labyrinth, followed by the walk.

There are usually three stages - the three "R"s - to the walk, said Ms Chia and Ms Tan. The three "R"s are "release", "receive" and "return".

On the way in, the person releases a particular problem or burden which he may have. At the centre of the labyrinth, he may receive a "gift" or insight to his problem. Then, he returns with the "gift" as he follows the path out of the labyrinth.

There is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth, except that the walking has to be done in silence. Soft music may sometimes be played.

There can be just one participant or more, depending on the size of the labyrinth.

Children can take part, as well as the elderly and those who are wheelchair-bound. But to use the walk as a tool for psychological or spiritual health, the participants usually have to be around the age of 10 and older.

Participants enter the labyrinth one by one. There are no guidelines on how fast one should walk or how to walk.

Said Ms Yeow: "A walker can stop anywhere he feels moved to, and choose to stand, sit or kneel there. People have walked parts of the labyrinth in joy or in grief. Some have danced, others have walked very, very slowly."

As a facilitator, she stands outside the labyrinth and joins in only if there is a need for her to.

She said: "We are not counsellors. Our role is not to help the walkers fix their problems, but to help them see these problems in a different, more helpful way."

Hence, if someone were to appear distressed during the walk, she may walk together with the person, if that is what she feels the person needs.

After the walk, participants are encouraged to write about their experience in a journal and share their experience with others.

### **Does it work?**

Little research has been done within the mainstream or alternative medical communities on the effects of labyrinth walking.

However, it appears to be generally accepted as a form of mind-body therapy or spiritual practice that has few risks.

In an article published in Labyrinth Pathways journal in 2008, Mr John Rhodes, the chairman of the research committee of the Labyrinth Society (which consists of labyrinth lovers from all over the world) combed through the few studies that have been done on the commonly reported effects of labyrinth walking or what has been dubbed "the labyrinth effect".

He concluded that walking the labyrinth appeared to set off physical responses, including increased calm and decreased agitation, anxiety and stress. These allow a state of mind which is more centred and clear to emerge, and which may make a person more receptive to flashes of intuition or other insights regarding his problems. Buddhists who have taken part in the walk find no contradiction between the exercise and their religion.

One of them, Ms Puyee Wong, 42, a meditation teacher, has taken part in about eight labyrinth walks in Singapore.

She said: "As a mindfulness practitioner who takes guidance from the Buddha's teachings, I practise mindful walking - being deeply aware of the present moment as I walk.

"For me, labyrinth walking is mindful walking. I realise it grounds and centres me even more because the labyrinth has a distinct path. And because I already know the way, I am able to easily place full attention on the soles of my feet to be aware of the contact between my foot and the ground."

Another Buddhist, Mr Ann Wee Kuang, 38, an interior designer, has gone for three labyrinth walks in the US, France and Singapore.

"I was drawn to the labyrinth after I went for my first walk in the US. It was a magical experience. I was trying to decide if I should embark on a charitable project and the walk gave me some insights into it," he said.

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### **Take part in the labyrinth walk**

A labyrinth walk will be facilitated by Ms Edwina Yeow at the Lifesprings Canossian Spirituality Centre on Saturday from 8 to 11am at \$30 per person. Those interested can send an e-mail message to Ms Yeow at yeowedwina@yahoo.com.

Those interested in labyrinth walks can also send an e-mail message to the Kingsmead Centre for Ignatian Spirituality and Counselling with their names and contact numbers at cisc2664@gmail.com or call 6467-6072. They will be contacted when there is a walk.



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