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# Secret labyrinth near Shell Beach draws travelers seeking solace



## SLIDE 1 OF 7

Retired California state park archaeologist Breck Parkman, left and Kaitlin Carlberg an anthropology student at U.C. Berkeley walk a labyrinth near Shell Beach on the Sonoma coast, Friday, August 30, 2019. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2019

MEG MCCONAHEY

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | September 6, 2019, 4:41PM

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It appeared mysteriously, without immediate notice, a hand-cut labyrinth pressed into the tall grasses between Shell Beach and Goat Rock.

The spiral path was lined with stones to guide the traveler to a center marked by a

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growing shrine of small objects.

Breck Parkman, then a senior staff archaeologist and anthropologist for the California Department of Parks and Recreation, went out to investigate, amid initial trepidation that it might be associated with something unsavory such as satanic worship.

The labyrinth that seemed to materialize out of nowhere sometime in the late 1990s was on state land and the initial impulse by parks officials was to scurry out and clean it up.

But as Parkman soon discovered with research, labyrinths are not sinister, but in fact an ancient archetype, often associated with spirituality, religion and meditation, and have been found in Egypt and Greece and throughout Europe. Perhaps the most famous labyrinth in the world was set into the floor of Chartres Cathedral in the early 13th century and used by monks for spiritual contemplation.

Parkman persuaded officials to hold off taking action against what amounted to an unauthorized trail.

“The longer we waited the more we ran into people using it who seemed to be very emotionally tied to it,” Parkman said.

Parks officials had to be persuaded, but eventually decided to quietly turn a blind eye to the labyrinth and let it remain. And over the last two decades it has become an established, but still largely word of mouth destination for people who want to traverse its universal circuit and perhaps, leave an offering.

When the grasses are tall in summer the narrow sinuous path worn down by the passage of many feet, lies concealed in a meadow, unseen by people hiking the nearby Kortum Trail. A piece of rough wood marks the threshold. Unless someone leads you there, it would be as hard to spot as a field mouse, hiding in plain sight. As the grasses die back, however, it is sometimes revealed. More than one visitor has noted and photographed a large black raven that is frequently perched on a nearby fence post, observing as they enter.

Initially, people would bring painted stones and leave them along the path. But with the passage of time, it has evolved into something more — a place of remembering and where people come to lay down their grief or connect with lost loved ones in the form of shells, small objects, letters, and other tokens.

Offerings set in tiny tableau line the path, ending in a center that is filled with a disparate collection of objects left by a multitude of pilgrims over many years, from a set of beads and a toy pony to a watercolor of a unicorn and a bracelet imprinted with the word “Angel.”

The labyrinth has come to fill a need for many people who may not always know where to go with their pain.

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## What's Happening

<b>MON</b> <b>9</b>	<b>HATER</b> Rickshaw Stop   San Francisco, CA
<b>MON</b> <b>9</b>	<b>Exhibition   Abracadabra: Magic in ...</b> Charles M. Schulz ...   Santa Rosa, CA
<b>MON</b> <b>9</b>	<b>Tri Tip Dinner Deal</b> Windsor High Schoo...   Windsor, CA
<b>MON</b> <b>9</b>	<b>Sonoma Food &amp; Wine Tour</b> Sonoma Plaza   Sonoma, CA
<b>MON</b> <b>9</b>	<b>Shakespeare on the Beach (at the ...</b> Hamlet, CA
	<b>MON</b> <b>TUE</b> <b>WED</b> <b>THU</b> <b>FRI</b> <b>SAT</b> <b>9</b> <b>10</b> <b>11</b> <b>12</b> <b>13</b> <b>14</b>
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“Not everyone feels comfortable in a church. People have to grieve. Some people like to sit in a church and light candles and think of the past and loved ones who are gone. Other people go out and take a hike and do the same thing. Those are both manifestations of the need to mourn and remember. As long as you’re remembered, you’re not truly dead. When no one remembers you, you’re truly gone,” said Parkman, who has returned many times to visit the labyrinth, take photos and study how it is used.

In Taoism there is a belief that in certain sacred places, “dragon veins” or invisible lines, connect the yang of heaven with the yin of the earth. Parkman wonders if the Shell Beach labyrinth is, for many, like one of those places, a sort of temple without walls flanked by the vast blue expanse of sea and sky.

“People are so hungry for a place where they can find solace or have a place to hold their grief and loss,” said Lea Goode-Harris, an artist, poet and designer of modern labyrinths, including one in the shape of Snoopy’s head at the Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa.

“There is so much tension in the world right now.”

In the not too distant past people were guided by long-held social and religious rituals that gave some common framework for how to deal with life’s passages. But many rituals, seen as old-fashioned, or lost with the fracturing of extended families, the abandonment of organized religion and loss of connection to ethnic roots, have left some people feeling a bit unmoored.

“We’ve lost that ability to have rituals. Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung talk about the importance of a society having some sort of markers to help us make transitions because life is about change. And our culture specifically has such a hard time with change,” Goode-Harris said. “That’s one of the things the labyrinths have to teach us. Instead of banging your head against a wall you’re invited to make a turn in the path. It teaches us about change.”

## Worldwide movement

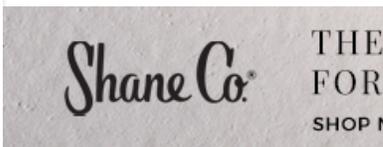
Labyrinths have experienced something of a renaissance since Grace Cathedral in San Francisco installed one in the mid-1990s and laid the groundwork for a worldwide movement under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress, then a Canon priest at the cathedral who was inspired after a visit to Chartres. She founded Veriditas, a nonprofit that promotes “personal and planetary renewal” through labyrinths. The cathedral for the French Gothic home of the Episcopal Diocese of California atop Nob Hill has both an indoor and an outdoor labyrinth. Veriditas co-sponsors a Worldwide Labyrinth Locator online; the Shell Beach Labyrinth is included.

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Christian tradition views walking the labyrinth as a contemplative experience of letting go. As you make your way along the coiling path you quiet the mind and open the heart, according to the Grace Cathedral website. At the center you meditate and pray and “receive what is there for you to receive.” As you traverse the path back you join a higher power or healing force in the world. Each time you walk the labyrinth you become more empowered to connect with your soul’s work.

Unlike a maze, which is designed as a puzzle to trick you with multiple entrances and dead ends, a labyrinth is a universal path with no branches that will always take you to the center and has only one entry/exit.

Evidence of ancient labyrinths can be found in different forms all over the world. They are based on patterns found in nature, and our bodies naturally resonate with them, Goode-Harris said. Studies have shown that the body relaxes when the mind relaxes, creating space to become aware of the connection of mind, body and spirit, individually and collectively, she maintains.



Over the last 25 years labyrinths have become an increasingly common tool used by many different groups, not all religious, to quiet the mind, engage in self-reflection and de-stress, and are now fixtures in many public locations.

In Sonoma County they can be found everywhere from Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital and Oak Hill Park in Petaluma to the Kaiser Medical Clinic and the Sebastopol Teen Annex.

But what is unusual about the labyrinth near Shell Beach, overlooking the very edge of the continent, is its organic origins, its secretiveness and the fact that it has also become a shrine, with people leaving offerings not just in the middle, but all along the path.

“Shell Beach is special if anything because of its location. It is inspiring. It lets you relax into your smallness of being a human in the larger picture,” said Marilyn Larson, a founder of The Labyrinth Society, an international group of labyrinth enthusiasts.

Larson, who now lives in Minneapolis, used to live in Sonoma County and has been walking the Shell Beach Labyrinth since 1997, which is about the time it is believed to have been constructed. Over time it has evolved, she observed, from “anonymous to universal.”

Good-Harris, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology, also has been an observer and user of the Shell Beach Labyrinth. She said she corresponded several years ago with a woman who claimed to have created it with a group of other people in the late 1990s. That woman, whose name Goode-Harris recalls only as Susan, had been staying in the coastal area at the time but now lives in Southern California. She claimed to also have created a labyrinth in Anadel State Park, although that one has reportedly fallen into disrepair.

Initially it was cut as a classical seven-circuit labyrinth with seven concentric circles.

“In the last 12 years people started adding another ring outside and looping it back and forth,” Goode-Harris said. “A couple of times when I’ve gone out with friends we’d clean it up and make it back to seven. But the next time we’d go out again it would have even more circles. That’s the nature of things. People want to leave their mark. That seems to be what’s really important, people leaving their mark, either to say ‘I am here, I matter,??’ or to remember someone.”

Parkman notes the labyrinth seems to draw a diverse group of people. Over his many visits he has run into everyone from a fisherman from the Central Valley to Starhawk, a well-known writer, activist and voice in modern earth-based spirituality, who has a home in the west county.

"It's a part of something that seems very normal to me," said Lorelee Denny, a Sebastopol resident who has been visiting the labyrinth for 15 years and has attended memorial services there.

"It's a communal place for people to come together and have that kind of a ritual together," she said. She recalls attending a memorial in 2012 for a friend who considered it one of her favorite places.

"People could bring things if they wanted and walk it in memory and contemplation. It was a place that had meaning to her and therefore they wanted to go there to honor her," Denny said.

She also visits alone when she is called, just like on some days she may be drawn to feel the wind in your face at Bodega Head.

"The labyrinth is a very personal experience and you take in what you need to contemplate," she said. "You're taking in whatever it is you want to shed or let go of or work within your life. This is my offering, my intention. And you're coming out with a different way of looking at an issue."

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#### Very special offerings

The offerings frequently speak to what seems like a loss. A single shoe with a fisher lure attached. An American flag with a tiny bottle of Brut, a computer game and a rock that says "RIP Dad." Another offering includes a heart-shaped tin box bearing the message "My Brother Dan. We Miss You."

Many people create offerings within abalone shells. One woman recently left a leather bound journal in which she recounted a love affair that had died. In leaving it she was seeking release and offering gratitude and forgiveness.

Brendan O'Neil, a senior environmental scientist and natural resources manager for state parks on the Sonoma-Mendocino Coast, takes a dim view of the collection of ephemera gathering in the seaside meadow, and expressed concern that the labyrinth has become an "attractive nuisance."

"It has a lot of litter or mementos some people think are important and other people think are junk," he said. "A lot of stuff out there violates state policy."

He said he's seen cigarettes and evidence of candles being burned out there, raising fire concerns. Some new weeds have taken root, he suspects introduced by cuttings left at the labyrinth.

He said parks staff is already spread thin and no policies or procedures were put into place to manage the site.

O'Neil said that while he wants to be respectful of what it means to some people, he believes there are better ways for people to memorialize loved ones.

"We're not a memorial center. If people want to do that we have a memorial bench program people can contribute to," he said.

Mike Lair, superintendent of the Russian River Sector of the California State Parks, said there have been some reports of people drinking, stacking bottles and bringing candles to the site. But no rangers have come to him reporting serious problems.

Parkman said he recognizes the conundrum unauthorized paths and trails and ad hoc shrines — and most recently, miniature fairy homes — pose to officials trying to manage public parks safely and for everyone. He said it used to bother him when parks staff would periodically remove things from the coast labyrinth. But after talking to staff at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., where people regularly leave offerings with prayers, he concluded it was a necessarily part of the process to keep it maintained and that when people leave things they don't expect them to be returned. Removal, he said, is part of their journey.

What draws people

Even in retirement, Parkman has been conducting a research study of the phenomenon. With the help of a UC Berkeley student, he is examining other sites where labyrinths and memorials have cropped up on public lands, including some in the East Bay Regional parks, one on Mt. Tamalpais and in The Palisades in Napa County.

As a contemporary anthropologist and archaeologist — one of his long-term

projects has been studying the hippie culture at Olompali State Park in Novato — Parkman is interested in understanding what draws people to do it. How do we define the sacred and how do sacred places come to be in the modern world? He hopes his findings may help parks officials establish protocols and guidelines for how to treat spontaneous shrines and labyrinths in the future and discern whether they're sacred or sinister.

"They need to be treated with some dignity and respect," he said. "But we also can't have everybody coming in and doing their own thing. There have to be some rules."

Parkman is the archaeologist who first posited the theory that the Sunset Rocks further up the coastline might have been used by prehistoric mammoths as scratching posts. He comes out to the rocks often in his studies and usually also pays a call to the labyrinth, bending down to examine the offerings and contemplate the possible stories behind them.

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"I have started to view the labyrinth as one of the most unique 10-minute walks we have in our area. Trails belong in parks and for now, that includes the trail inside the Shell Beach Labyrinth. It may eventually disappear, either from lack of use or perhaps because of too much use," he reflected recently on Facebook.

"For now, though, it exists as a place where one can come to reflect, mourn and remember."

"It has different meanings for different people," said Michele Luna of Cazadero, who periodically visits the labyrinth.

"But for me it's like making an offer to Mother Earth. I want to leave my mark, a little bit of my energy into this place that has everyone's energy.

"I always feel peaceful after something like that ... feeling a connection to my inner self and me being a part of this big amazing universe we're all a part of."

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