

The Cosmic Labyrinth

Stephan Martin

Arrival

“There are three parts to the pilgrimage journey,” Lauren began. “The outer journey, the inner journey, and the secret. Not everything is revealed during the pilgrimage itself.”

What was the secret? I glanced around the room at my companions. Nearly fifty of us sat in a wide semicircle in one of the meeting rooms of the Hôtellerie St. Yves, a renovated priory that has stood in the shadow of Chartres Cathedral for nearly a thousand years. We had come from six countries and a wide range of backgrounds—scientists, business leaders, artists, educators, and healers, all drawn together for a weeklong pilgrimage to explore a single sweeping question: What is humanity’s role in an unfolding universe?

It was a big question, but we were big thinkers. Our hosts, Lauren Artress and Brian Swimme, were big thinkers too.

Lauren, an Episcopal priest, psychotherapist, and Honorary Canon of Grace Cathedral, has almost single-handedly revived the modern tradition of labyrinth walking thirty years ago. Brian, a mathematical cosmologist, has spent decades helping people reorient human consciousness toward alignment with the evolving universe. I had studied with him many times over the years.

At first glance, they might have seemed an unlikely pair—science and religion conversing in a medieval priory—but their rapport was effortless. They shared a deep respect and a sense of shared purpose. The ancient stone surrounding us added weight to their words. I wondered whether the “secret” Lauren alluded to lived somewhere in the overlap between their two approaches.

Brian began speaking about cosmogenesis, the realization that the universe is not a huge container expanding outward like a balloon but a creative, self-organizing process arising from within itself at every point. This was Big Bang theory as I had taught it for years in my college classrooms, but he unpacked its implications in novel and fresh ways that seized the room’s attention.

“We are inside a creative process called cosmogenesis,” he said. “Looking outward, we see the universe that gave birth to us. Because we are intertwined with this creative process, we need a cosmological interpretation of human experience. Anything less is too small for us or the challenges we face.”

The room shifted as people leaned forward or softened into his words. Belonging. Destiny. Participation. He was telling us that we belonged to this vast universe, that each of us had a place in the whole. Our day-to-day hopes, dreams, and lives mattered within the unfolding destiny of everything.

“Experience is the primary way the universe presents itself to human consciousness,” he continued, inviting us to recall moments when our lives turned abruptly, when something opened or closed in us, revealing a new way forward. Lauren suggested calling these “hinge moments,” borrowing a term first used by religious writer Phyllis Tickle. We all smiled and nodded in recognition of the phrase.

Brian offered an example from his own life. As a young academic studying gravitational theory, he had a disturbing dream that revealed his current path was no longer his future. Not long afterward, he left a promising position and brought his family eastward to study with Thomas Berry. That decision changed his life.

“Who constructed this experience?” he asked us. In the context of a 13.8-billion-year universe, his dream and the changes it prompted were part of a larger pattern, carried along by the same creative forces shaping stars and galaxies. Brian suggested that the source of this dream and the guidance it indicated had come from the same place everything else in the universe had originated—a ground of potentiality and imaginative possibility that lay beneath everything, out of which everything arises.

Lauren joined the conversation. “My psychotherapy practice has always been about creating a safe place for people’s pain and process,” she said. “That includes their dreams and what they choose to do with them.” Over the years, her approach had shifted. “It’s not so much about interpreting dreams now, but tending them, the way you’d tend an inner garden.”

Together, Brian and Lauren were tending our group by weaving an expanded sense of psyche and universe, affirming that our inner lives arise from a dimension that transcends individuality. Jung had proposed the collective unconscious as the source of cross-cultural symbols and archetypes. Brian took this further, describing a cosmological unconscious—the field of potential from which particles, dreams, and forms arise each moment. Physics knows it as the quantum vacuum. He called it the cosmological imagination.

Lauren shared her own hinge moment with the labyrinth. On her first visit to Chartres, walking the labyrinth had opened a flood of insight and healing within her and others. It wasn’t simply a walk to a center but an archetypal symbol charged with creative power and direct insight into the heart of people’s lives. One morning while shaking pepper onto her scrambled eggs, she realized her life’s work was to “pepper the planet with labyrinths.” The

realization changed her life. She went on to establish two permanent labyrinths—one indoors and another outdoors—at Grace Cathedral and founded Veriditas, now responsible for more than six thousand labyrinths around the world and counting. Now, nearly eighty years old, she continues working tirelessly with her characteristic wisdom and humor in leading groups and labyrinth experiences worldwide.

Our morning session ended, and hunger drew us outward, fanning from the priory to explore food options in the heart of this ancient city. Orla and I wandered through narrow cobblestone streets lined with half-timbered houses, some slanting a bit with the age of centuries. A small stream hugged the south side of the town, winding past ancient mills and trees that seemed to have stepped out of a Monet painting. We bought fresh bread and cheese from a boulangerie and sat by an old mill raceway.

The late morning air was fresh and cool and the autumn sun shone brightly. The burbling sound of trickling water over the stone trough behind us was the backdrop for our conversation.

“The labyrinth is the blueprint of cosmogenesis,” Orla said as we ate. She had completed her dissertation on re-envisioning education inside an evolving universe and had referred to the labyrinth as a living example of education in a cosmic context.

Her words stopped me. “What do you mean?” Hearing the connection between an ancient archetypal symbol and the ongoing evolution of the universe expressed so simply and directly captured me.

“The universe is our primary teacher,” she continued, “and each moment holds the potential of being brought forth and educated in a new way by the Whole.” She was using *education* in its original Latin sense, *educere*—“to bring forth.” In this way, the universe itself becomes our primary educator, drawing new insight, experience, and wisdom forth through us.

“Then perhaps,” I said excitedly, “if the universe is our original teacher, the labyrinth is one of the cosmic patterns through which we are educated, through which something new is brought forth in us.”

“Yes,” she replied, “that’s exactly it. The labyrinth is the outer form of the inner dynamic of cosmogenesis—the pulsing heart of evolution, or the hidden heart of the cosmos, as Brian would say.”

She went on: “The labyrinth’s blueprint underlies our cosmic pilgrimage. It brings us back to our shared origin, while allowing each of us, as a unique expression of the whole universe, to bring the universe forth in a new way. As the cosmos seeks to teach us its deeper

wisdom, it draws us home—to itself, to the center of things—where we are entrusted with insights we can then carry outward again into our daily lives. This is the pattern of cosmic education and evolution. In this sense, we are all pilgrims within cosmogenesis.”

Walking back toward the cathedral, ceramic tiles appeared beneath our feet. Blue backgrounds with bright yellow scallop shells marking the Camino de Santiago. Pilgrims passed us, packs bouncing, decorated shells swinging from their necks.

As our own footfalls settled into the worn path of those who had walked this way before, I felt a sudden glimpse of what she meant—an intuition of the vastness of the journey we were part of, and the magnitude of what this pilgrimage might be inviting into our lives.

Reading the Cathedral

The next day our group toured the cathedral with Victoria, an art historian steeped in the medieval world. “Every aspect of this cathedral is symbolic, intentional, and multi-layered,” she said. “Its builders embedded meaning into everything—from the grand geometry to the smallest carved detail.”

I had read about the cathedral’s sacred geometry: towers proportioned according to significant ratios, façades laid out in harmonic patterns, and dimensions that echoed ancient mathematical principles. No blueprints remain, and even the architects’ names are lost. Scholars believe the builders relied on geometry itself as a visual language, transmitting their designs stone by stone.

The labyrinth, set into the floor of the nave, was one such geometric pattern. Its spiraling limestone path aligns directly with the great west rose window which towers high above it within the western facade. The two features mirror each other so precisely that they must have been conceived together as complementary elements—a vertical and horizontal axis of a single cosmogram.

We stood before the Western, or Royal, Portal, where three arched tympanums framed the main entrances. Each arch rose gracefully, elaborated with statues and carved ornamentation that fit together into a harmonious whole. Larger-than-life figures of Old Testament prophets lined the jambs of each doorway. Their faces were expressive, some with faint smiles, as though they carried a secret spanning past, present, and future. Above them, the famous rose window glowed more brilliantly with the slowly descending afternoon sun.

To the right, a series of carved figures represented Aristotle, Pythagoras, Euclid, and other ancient sages. Though “pagan” by medieval standards, they formed the intellectual foundation of the liberal arts curriculum long taught at Chartres. This had once been the

center of a great medieval school whose purpose, as Victoria reminded us, was to help students find their place in the universe—a lineage that eventually shaped the modern university.

We moved closer to the central doorway. The statues towered above us, elongated and porous to the divine, their forms bridging heaven and earth. Three concentric archivolts arched overhead, filled with carved figures representing the seven liberal arts, the zodiac, and the Elders of the Apocalypse. At the center of the lintel, Christ sat enthroned within a luminous mandorla, radiating calm authority.

Victoria explained that the cathedral functioned as a vast symbolic text, intended to teach an illiterate populace through images and structure. Symbol is humanity's oldest language. From cave paintings to modern iconography, symbolic communication carries meaning across time and culture. Through the power of words and images, one person's interior experience can leap across vast amounts of time and space to awaken something new in another. As Brian often reminded us, this symbolic power is cosmological in origin—a cosmic capacity newly awakened in humanity, with enormous potential for good or harm.

Examples of this power wandered through my mind. A stock trader's keystroke could raze a rainforest or fund its restoration. Golden arches summon fast food across continents. A single photograph of Earth rising over the Moon altered human consciousness. Our species has been handed promethean symbolic power before we've developed the maturity and wisdom to handle it wisely. No wonder the world seems like it's on fire—we've been handed a full box of matches!

Even without deciphering every detail of the façade, I could feel its symbolic presence speaking to me in waves that bypassed thought. A figure representing the liberal art of astronomy showed a robed woman gazing upward, near her a wide-eyed monster gazed out from under an ornamented figure, a reminder that not all revelations from the universe are pleasant or wanted.

The portal was teaching me in its own language. I sensed that if I had the time to study each of the thousands of symbols carved into this cathedral, I might learn something profound about the builders, the universe, and myself.

I was nudged from this reverie by the enthusiastic shuffling movement of our group as we followed Victoria through the massive wooden doors into the vaulting interior. We stepped eastward, toward the rising sun. Crossing the threshold felt like entering a different realm, as countless pilgrims had done for a thousand years.

The cool limestone floor grounded us immediately. Pale stone columns rose toward a ceiling so high it seemed to dissolve into the darkness of outer space. Light filtered through

brilliantly illuminated and colorful stained-glass windows, filling the vast interior with hues of cobalt, ruby, and gold. The famed Chartres blue glowed most prominently in depictions of Mary, her serene face shining with quiet grace.

The builders understood light, space, gravity, and harmony in ways that continue to astonish us.

We stood in silence, overwhelmed by beauty and magnificence—precisely what the medieval builders intended. Beyond conveying religious teachings, the cathedral was designed to evoke an experience of the divine cosmos.

As an astronomer I am accustomed to looking across vast amounts of space. Here in the cathedral, we entered the experience of vast space directly and palpably, inviting our hearts and consciousness to expand to cathedral proportions.

Experience is the primary way the universe presents itself to human consciousness.

Brian's words from the previous day echoed through me as I felt myself entering the worldview of the medieval universe. Everything here expressed proportion and order. Heaven vaulted far above; angels and saints gazed down; human figures sat and knelt near the stone floor. Light itself illuminated and unified every level into a coherent Whole.

Our group continued through the cathedral, following Victoria as she highlighted symbolic details. In one double-panel window, the zodiac signs were paired with agricultural tasks of each month. Pisces, my birth sign, stood beside a figure warming his hands by a fire—a gentle reminder to allow my sometimes restless nature time for warmth and rest.

We eventually returned to the western nave where rows of wooden chairs filled the space. My feet were tired, and conversation bubbled quietly among us. Other tour groups were moving around us; their voices dimmed in the vast space that surrounded us. Yet something nagged at me. With all we had seen, we still hadn't encountered the labyrinth.

Where was the famous labyrinth that pilgrims traveled across oceans to walk? The city outside displayed its image everywhere—on manhole covers, postcards, T-shirts—yet the cathedral itself concealed it.

As if reading my thoughts, someone asked aloud, "Where is the labyrinth?"

Victoria smiled knowingly. She gestured around us. "It is beneath your feet," she said. "We have been sitting on it the whole time."

I looked down and gasped. Through gaps between the chairs, I saw the curved outlines of light and dark stones, stretching across the nave. The labyrinth was immense. How had I missed it?

Then I remembered how, upon entering, I had looked up, drawn by the soaring vault and luminous stained glass. My gaze had gone vertical, not horizontal. The grandeur above had eclipsed the everyday meaning below.

Standing, I traced part of the path with my eyes, following its sinuous curves beneath the chairs all around us. The labyrinth lay hidden yet fully present, patient and timeless. It felt like a secret waiting for its appointed moment, just as Lauren had suggested. The pattern seemed to whisper, “I am here. I have always been here.”

Earlier that day, Lauren had reminded us that everything that happens on pilgrimage is part of the journey. The realization dawned that my astronomical habit of looking upward, towards the big picture, might sometimes lead me to overlook patterns of meaning woven directly below my feet and all around me. Meaning continued to unfurl in me as the cathedral seemed to be teaching me both through symbolism and direct experience.

A small ache of longing tugged at me. I wanted to walk it now, not wait for the scheduled public opening on Friday. But our group had arranged a private evening walk in a few days, which felt like a sealed invitation waiting to be opened.

Outside, as we rejoined the sounds of the modern city, I held the awareness that beneath all the noise and bustle, an ancient path waited in quiet darkness, ready to reveal itself.

Later that day, we told Lauren about our surprise at discovering the labyrinth hidden under the chairs. She laughed, saying she had made the same discovery more than thirty years ago. Back then, once she realized the sacred pattern had been concealed for centuries, she felt an irresistible call. She began moving the chairs herself, revealing the labyrinth one section at a time. When she stepped onto its curves, she felt the labyrinth reawakening not only in Chartres but across the world.

“The labyrinth wanted to come forward,” she said. “I simply helped.”

The Living Pattern

In the days that followed, our conversations with Brian and Lauren turned toward the labyrinth as a portal into symbolic consciousness—now the most widespread and powerful mode of human meaning-making on the planet.

“Traditional religions have found symbols that capture the Whole of things from their perspective,” Brian began. “The labyrinth is a symbol that captures the whole universe in the same way.”

I thought of the great symbols of the world—the cross, the crescent, the six-pointed star—forms that carry stories and have shaped civilizations. More than images, these symbols

have inspired movements, structured societies, and stirred human hearts for millennia. Billions of lives on the planet were being shaped each day as people interacted with those symbols in meaningful ways.

“The labyrinth,” Brian continued, “is a different kind of symbol. It isn’t static—it lives through dynamism. It needs to be walked. It comes alive only through our movement and our willingness to engage its wisdom.”

He was right. On its own, it is simply a pattern of lines on the ground. Still. Inert. Silent.

“When we interact with it,” Brian said, “it calls us on a journey to the center of things. It reveals the magnificence of the universe that has taken human form—and then sends us back out into the world renewed.”

His words echoed what Lauren had shared earlier: the three phases of the labyrinth walk, echoing the three traditional phases of pilgrimage.

Releasing on the way in.

Receiving at the center.

Returning outward, offering our renewal to the world.

Three aspects of one journey: outer and inner pilgrimage interwoven. We walk a physical path, yes—but simultaneously we walk a path toward the heart of things, where insights and invitations can appear in the most unexpected ways.

Lauren reminded us that the labyrinth is a sacred pattern that originated before the modern mind-body split—before the rise of Cartesian dualism. It speaks from a place of original wholeness to a wholeness within us that predates our divided ways of thinking.

Additionally, one of the key cosmological insights we were exploring that week was that the universe has no single center. It is omni-centric, unfolding its rampant creativity everywhere at once and continuously breathing itself into newness from every point within itself. Every place, every moment, every being is a locus of emergence. Each of us, then, is a center of this vast and ongoing creativity—a unique and novel expression through which the universe enters the world.

To walk the labyrinth, I realized, is to step directly into this creative process of cosmogenesis. Each footfall participates in the magnificence and generosity of a universe unfolding itself through us. The path gathers the abundance of cosmic creativity into the center of a human life, concentrating it into newfound wisdom waiting to burst forth.

Experience is how the universe knows itself through us. The labyrinth invites us into the center of that knowing.

Thursday evening arrived, and with it, the moment we had all been anticipating. The sun had set. The cathedral was closed to the public. Our group had been granted the rare privilege of having the entire space to ourselves, cathedral, labyrinth, and all.

No footsteps, no voices of tourists. No murmured prayers or distant liturgy. Just fifty pilgrims in the vast, ancient sanctuary, enveloped by towering stone walls and shadowed stained glass, the cathedral's great voice of silence resounding around and within us.

How had my path—how had any of our paths—led us to this moment?

We gathered first in a small, ancient chapel beside the cathedral. Candlelight flickered along its stone walls, illuminating centuries of silence. We sat on simple stone benches arranged around a low altar, the air thick with anticipation.

Lauren invited us to take a piece of paper and write down something we were ready to release. The first phase of the labyrinth journey had begun.

I wrote a few simple words. As my pencil moved across the thin paper—expressing symbolic consciousness through its small, deliberate motions—I felt something loosening inside me, a hidden door quietly swinging open. With each mark, I sensed a subtle unburdening. A hinge moment was happening.

When ready, we approached the altar one by one and dropped our slips of paper into a small bowl of water. To our gathered surprise, the paper dissolved instantly, the words vanishing into the water as though they had never been written. Our fears and old stories softened and slipped into something larger, returning to the stream of being from which they came.

After everyone had released what they were willing, Lauren offered final guidance.

“No two labyrinth journeys are alike,” she said. “Release expectations. The labyrinth gives us what we truly need, not always what we want. Trust that your journey is enough.”

A quiet stillness settled around us as she spoke. Then, in silence, she led us across the cobblestones toward the darkened cathedral.

Inside, the ancient space glowed with warm candlelight. Tiny lights lined the path from the entrance to the labyrinth. Around its circumference, hundreds of small candles flickered, illuminating the ancient stones. From somewhere deep in the cathedral, a cello played a long, low note that vibrated through my being.

We had entered sacred space.

The labyrinth stretched out in front of us, its mysterious and ancient design fully revealed in all its glory. I felt a sudden gasp within me seeing it in its entirety for the first time. It was truly beautiful, an elegant pattern brought into this moment from the deep mists of time.

Labyrinth facilitators stood around the perimeter, arms gently open in welcome. At the entrance to the path, Lauren greeted each walker individually, spacing us so each person could move in their own rhythm.

From where I stood, I watched my companions enter one by one. They appeared to wander at random as they wove through the twisting path, yet I knew each was following a pattern as least as old as the building itself. Had I been high above, perhaps I would have seen the entire design and the beauty of each person's path within it.

In that moment, I glimpsed an insight into life itself—and into cosmogenesis.

The universe, too, unfolds differently and uniquely for each of us. We see only fragments of our own journey within the greater pattern that holds us all. Yet the pattern is there nonetheless, moving through every life, cresting and spreading like ripples across the vast pond of existence.

Soon the line shortened, and it was my turn. Lauren greeted me with a warm smile and an inviting gesture. My heart beat faster as I took a deep breath and stepped across the threshold. I had entered the living symbol of the labyrinth, becoming part of its dynamic pattern of unfoldment in that moment.

Immediately, the world shifted.

The floor was inlaid with hand-shaped white stones smoothed by time. There were no footprints, no trace of previous walkers. Each stone rose to meet my foot freshly as though the labyrinth was being walked for the first time. My breath slowed. Thoughts, questions, and emotions rose and fell with each step as I moved into a rhythm beyond thought.

The walking path of the labyrinth stretches more than 900 feet, winding through eleven circuits before finally arriving at the center. Within its turns, there is time for everything: reflection, release, insight, surrender.

As I continued, the labyrinth began to speak through sensation rather than words. The fears and stories I had written on the dissolving paper were only surface offerings. Deeper layers of identity began to loosen within me.

Astronomer. Scientist. Father. Husband. Son. Human being.

Each identity slipped away like grains of sand falling from an open hand. I felt myself becoming less and more at once—less defined, less bounded; more open, more free. The boundaries between walker and path softened.

The labyrinth received everything.

Step by step, I felt myself dissolving into something larger, shedding accumulated layers of self that had once protected but now constrained me. I was no longer simply walking the labyrinth. I had become a living pattern within its sacred design.

Meandering this way and that along the labyrinth's intricate circuits, insights and life lessons continued to flow with each step. Eventually, I found myself entering the center, shaped like a six-petaled rose. Several pilgrims were already there, standing or sitting in quiet receptivity. I moved into one of the circular petals. Seen together, the petals looked like a series of omegas, symbols of completion and endings.

Brian's earlier words echoed within me:

Experience is the primary way the universe presents itself to human consciousness.

Lauren's voice followed: *The labyrinth is a doorway into the cosmological imagination.*

And then something shifted.

A simple understanding—clear, quiet, and utterly unsurprising—rose up, like a whispered secret from the depths:

I am cosmogenesis in human form and always have been. So is everyone and everything.

It was a simple truth, very ordinary really, yet it shimmered through me like a silent thunderclap. I looked around at my companions and saw each of them in a new light, as unique expressions of the same unfolding universe, each one walking their own particular pathway as part of the journey of the Whole.

The statues and sculpted adornments around us revealed themselves as living shapes in the fabric of the universe, each one a portal into its deeper mysteries. In an omniscient universe, every place is a direct path to the center. Everything is cosmogenesis—arising in each unique form as it pours freshly into the world from an overflowing ocean of imagination, potential, and generative mystery.

I realized that I was a form of cosmogenesis that knew itself directly—an experience of the universe awakening to itself in a new expression of its unfolding.

I was not only in the labyrinth; the labyrinth was in me. It was in everything, just as everything was in the labyrinth. The labyrinth is a living symbol that embodies the Whole.

The last peal of insight echoed through me and faded into silence. I felt full and complete at the center of it all. Then I began my return, stepping outward from the center with a newfound confidence, each step rooted in mystery and in the cosmological imagination.

The floor of the labyrinth seemed to come alive beneath my feet, flowing with images and symbols from human consciousness across time. I realized that the cosmological imagination is not bounded by time or space—and neither, in that moment, was my experience of it.

Before long, I found myself back at the entrance. Facilitators and earlier walkers stood in a gentle circle around the labyrinth, silently witnessing those still on the path.

Together we circled the labyrinth in silence, weaving a human border around its sacred form. I felt connected to everyone in the room, the building around us, and the universe that had given rise to all of it.

Our collective circle wordlessly affirmed the insights each of us had received during our respective journeys to the center. The labyrinth had spoken to each of us in its deep, resonant voice—and in our own—our inner knowing amplified as our own unique expression of cosmogenesis.

Lauren's voice broke the silence gently, yet with quiet authority and deep inner wisdom.

"The labyrinth has been here for eight hundred years," she said. "You are here now. In this place. Remember this moment."

Her words sealed our experience, and we left the space in silence, drifting outward from the cathedral into the waiting night.

The next day we were gathered for a final time as a group in our meeting room at the Hôtellerie. My fellow pilgrims looked both familiar and somehow more luminous. We were in the same place geographically, yet we had traversed vast stretches of inner terrain during our time together. We had shared a pilgrimage in every sense of the word.

Brian offered closing reflections. The labyrinth, he reminded us, calls us toward the center of things—to the deep truth that each of us is a unique expression of the universe's creativity, its magnificence, its unfolding story. The labyrinth had reflected that truth and our own magnificence back to us as we walked.

Lauren followed with a brief history. At the end of the medieval era, there were more than twenty labyrinths in French cathedrals. Only a few remain today. For pilgrims unable to journey to Jerusalem or Santiago, the labyrinth offered a way to undertake the pilgrimage inward—a journey to the Holy City within.

“We’ve each done that this week,” she said. “And the journey doesn’t end when we leave Chartres. Pay attention. Stay awake. The secrets of the pilgrimage continue to unfold long after the trip is over.”

As I listened, I realized that the cathedral and its labyrinth were not separate from the universe that formed them. Both had emerged from the same creative dynamism that gave rise to stars, galaxies, and life itself. Through walking the labyrinth, this symbolic consciousness had entered each of us.

Its winding circuits had inscribed themselves into me, revealing that pilgrimage is not a one-time event but a way of seeing and living within a creative universe that is itself on pilgrimage—ever unfolding, ever becoming. The labyrinth is a living image of life’s own patterning, guiding each step of our journey and drawing us toward our own unique becoming.

We are each pathways through which the cosmos continues its long journey toward awareness, love, and wholeness. Like the labyrinth, though our path may twist and turn in unexpected ways, it always leads us home—to the center from which all things arise.

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