

## Creating and walking the labyrinth

PHOTO AND STORY BY STAR WEISS

On one of those glorious West Coast mornings which makes you wonder why you don't always get up that early, I met Joanne Thomson on the beach below Tower Point at Witty's Lagoon.

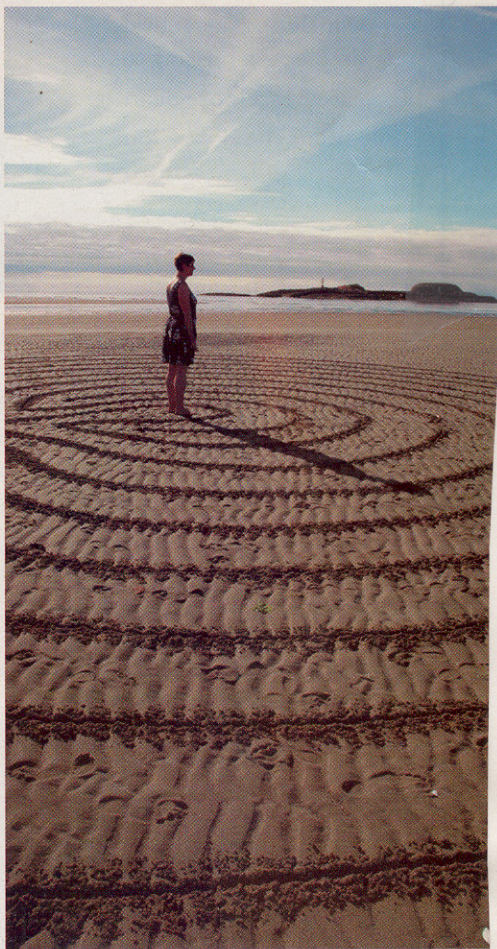
The expanse of sand there at low tide is astonishing, revealing a whole "new" shoreline, which we walked out onto until we reached a carefully chosen, central spot. The snowcapped Olympic Mountains soared in the distance, framing the scene so majestically that it felt to me like we were standing in an amphitheatre in the middle of the universe. In fact, the ancients in various cultures often believed that their sacred place *was* the centre of the world, (known as the *omphalos*, or navel, in Greek), from which all else emanated.

Joanne is a Victoria artist whose usual medium is watercolour, but today she would be working with sand. She had invited me here to show me her sacred place, a labyrinth that she was about to create on the beach. Labyrinths are ancient motifs, used for thousands of years (the most famous one is on the floor of Chartres Cathedral).

A labyrinth consists of a twisting, usually circular path, which leads to the centre and back out again, by a unicursal (single) though circuitous route. A maze, by contrast, is a complicated, somewhat ominous puzzle, with many paths and choices that confound the walker and cause you to get lost in dead ends. Even though these terms are often confused, true labyrinth buffs know the difference.

For Joanne, there is both freedom and poetry in creating labyrinths on the sand. She likes the world writ large, and here, she has a vast canvas. At the same time, she feels an intimate connection with the elements of nature, as she sketches huge ephemeral designs on the earth, knowing the whole creation will disappear in the next tide. Even the physical act of drawing the design is pleasurable for her: I could see her joyfulness as she walked barefoot on the beach, pulling a big stick behind her like a plough, feeling it cut a deep, satisfying groove in the wet sand.

On the edge of the sea, with the wind on her skin and the waves rolling in, Joanne notices a white seagull and a black crow hovering nearby. Light and dark. Historically, the labyrinth



Joanne Thomson's labyrinth

was designed to mimic the path of the soul and that appeals to Joanne, who wants to recognize both the light and the dark—joy, happiness, pain, and anger—in her life.

"We spend a lot of time trying to ignore the negative in life, and it's still there," she says. "If we can accept the negative, it loses some of its power."

When her father died in 2005, Joanne turned to the labyrinth as a safe and private place to face her grief. "I went into the centre and I wept and allowed myself to grieve...for the things he never got to do, for the things we never talked about. I needed to grieve the man I didn't know...On the way out, I looked at how I could use my father's life for lessons of my own... He was a painter. He talked about colour...and infinity. So, I've looked at that too, and incorporated it in my work."

Joanne also turns to the labyrinth at times of transition. A former palliative care nurse who later worked full-time in nursing administration at UVic, she says that it was her meditative, transformative experiences in the labyrinth that made it clear to her that she needed to leave her administrative job and become a full-time artist and educator.

Walking the labyrinth, Joanne says, is a "journey to the unconscious. You enter the non-speaking world, quiet and timeless. It's a place we move in and out of, secure in the knowledge that the way in is also the way out."

Traditionally, you bring a question to the labyrinth, then walk to the centre, following the twists and turns as you come upon them. And along the path, there is always the possibility of surprise.

Joanne also goes to the deep forest for inspiration, but she says that her sand labyrinth creations are a "more deliberate connection. I come here specifically to draw the labyrinth and connect in a spiritual way. I most often find when I'm walking the labyrinth I can come with the world on my shoulders and by the time I reach the centre, I am overwhelmed with my good luck, to live in a place like this and just be who I am."

"The labyrinth is the whole metaphor for existence. That's what a sacred place is, isn't it?"

*If you go: Joanne occasionally offers labyrinth workshops on the beach, where you can learn to draw various patterns of labyrinths yourself. Contact [joannedthomson@shaw.ca](mailto:joannedthomson@shaw.ca) or 881-1539 for details. From August 25-September 22, 2006, Joanne's solo show "Between Breaths: Forest Metaphors," will be on exhibit at the Morris Gallery, 428 Burnside (at Alpha) Call 388-6652 for details.*



Star Weiss is a Victoria writer and researcher who would like to hear about your sacred place. You can reach her at [star-weiss@shaw.ca](mailto:star-weiss@shaw.ca)