

CULTURE

On the evening of March 15, in a large classroom on the second floor of Portland State University's Great Hall, a group of about 30 gay men gathered together to do something people from all over the world and from many different religions have been doing for hundreds of years.

Chairs were stacked to one side, a strand of Christmas lights wound its way around the perimeter, and a huge, circular piece of fabric was laid out in the center of the room, enveloping most of the floor space. A single, white path wove itself through the pattern of the floor covering, looping back and forth on itself through the dark color surrounding it—like a maze with no dead ends—eventually ending at the round patch of solid white at the center.

A brief introduction by the event's facilitators invited each member of the group to begin the path when ready and asked that all respect the mood of silence and contemplation. The overhead lights were dimmed, and the soothing, relaxing sounds of Sikh-derived New Age music wafted through the air.

One by one, the men began to traverse the path silently, each in his own time and at his own pace, stopping for varied periods upon reaching the center. Then each made his way back along the path to the place he began.

It's called a "Labyrinth Walk," a meditative/contemplative act that has been used as a spiritual practice throughout the centuries by people of multifarious beliefs. According to co-facilitator Dale Rhodes of the Interfaith Spiritual Center, it's perfect for gay men interested in connecting spiritually outside of their own religion or outside of religion altogether.

"I think that it's great for gay men to come together for spiritual practice," he says. "They can remain in their own traditions with their own practices but still come together. It's such an accessible practice."

The labyrinth itself can be interpreted and practiced in almost any way the walker desires. After the men completed the walk, they formed a "wisdom circle" wherein each participant was invited to share his thoughts on the experience. Although facilitators stressed there is no right or wrong interpretation of the labyrinth, most who spoke seemed to have

## A maze of emotions

Gay Men's Labyrinth Walk offers an exploration of spirituality

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

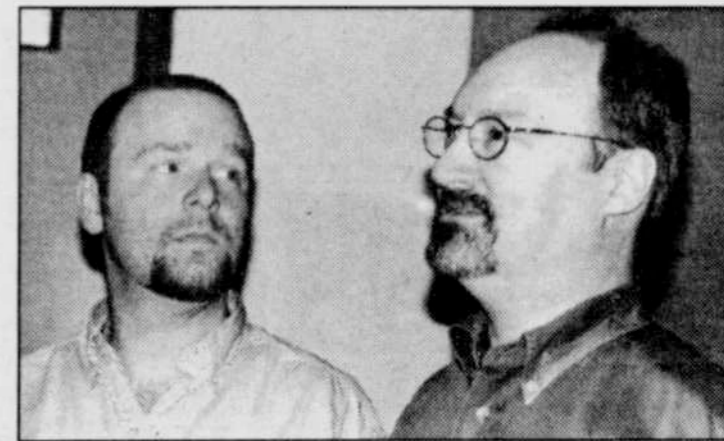
experienced it metaphorically, as an allegorical clarifier of the paths of their lives.

The labyrinth used at Portland's gay men's walks is based on a 13th century model from a French cathedral, but the labyrinth is more a state of mind than a physical entity.

There have existed labyrinths so vast and

a psychotherapist who identifies spiritually as Pagan-Wiccan—began to brainstorm ways for gay men specifically to explore their spirituality.

"Mostly, I've done things mixed—gay, straight, men, women—and I think I've learned from the women's community what can happen when women come together," Stutesman says. "Women have told me the power they've experienced from that, and gay men have been afraid to do that for some reason."



Dale Rhodes (left) and Dan Stutesman help lead participants on the Gay Men's Labyrinth Walk



After the walk, men share their experiences

complex that they only can be seen in their entirety from the air, but one also can simply be drawn in the sand. It needn't even be walked, necessarily—Portland artist Collin Fellows carved a miniature topographical wooden labyrinth for the gay men's group so that anyone who might be physically unable to walk the labyrinth could experience it by manually tracing the path.

The event is the fruition of a panel on lesbian and gay spirituality that took place several years ago as a supplement to the annual National Coming Out Day service at First Congregational Church. After that meeting, Rhodes—along with Jon Murray of Compassionate Heart Sangha; Dan Stutesman, director of American Friends Service Committee's Gay and Lesbian Program; and Dan Mills,

He suggests there's an internal pressure to be inclusive, as gay men tell themselves and each other, "We should include other people; we don't want to discriminate."

Stutesman adds: "I've been to gay and lesbian religious meetings that were mixed, and then the men and women have separated for different rituals...but in trying to remember how much I've ever been to that's men only...it's rare."

Murray, a practicing Buddhist, notes that the concept of the labyrinth fits well with the Buddhist tradition of walking meditation. "What has been important to me," he relates, "is the comforting quiet and sharing with men in an entirely different way than I have usually experienced. We men have our quiet, gentle and spiritual sides which seem to rarely be accessed, particularly in a group environment."

There is a palpable kindness between individuals on their separate but connected paths along the channels of the labyrinth."

As a Pagan, Mills appreciates the open spirituality the walk affords. "Labyrinth walkers aren't required to step into any particular doctrines, dogmas or religious belief systems," he explains. "Instead, one steps into who and where one is at this particular moment and comes to embrace this as the spiritual path. For gay men raised in the same competitive, male-dominant culture as straight men, this is not always easy."

Mills also emphasizes the breadth of the walk's effect both personally and culturally. "Most all of us have integrated negative cultural religious messages which undermine our very right to a spiritual self...this is what makes the

gay men's labyrinth walk so moving. To see gay men from all walks of life bravely stepping onto the labyrinth with whatever it is they carry is a reclaiming event of earth-shaking magnitude."

Rhodes and Stutesman hope to continue the labyrinth on a quarterly basis. "It's not a church service, it's not a political event, though it does serve a political purpose in bringing the community together," Rhodes claims. "I think it's a really great thing when we can...just be with our own brothers. I think it's empowering." □

For information about the GAY MEN'S LABYRINTH WALK, visit [www.hometown.aol.com/djrho5/page.html](http://www.hometown.aol.com/djrho5/page.html) or e-mail Dale Rhodes at [Holylistening@aol.com](mailto:Holylistening@aol.com).

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland free-lance writer.

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