

[Multicultural Maypole in Baltimore](#)

May 4, 2015 by [Liz Fisher](#)



I frequently attend a Maypole dance...I was surprised to learn a few years ago that this holiday was outlawed in past centuries because it was seen as a challenge to social stratification. [\[Read more...\]](#)

Beltane, Maypoles and Labyrinths

May 2, 2016 by [Liz Fisher](#) [2 Comments](#)

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The wheel of the year is a map of a journey. The holidays remind us of where we are; Beltane marks the beginning of the light time of the year which lasts until Samhain. Going out into the world is the energy that is engaging now. Dancing the maypole gives us this energy. While I have been to many maypole dances at Beltane celebrations, I also have learned recently that the labyrinth, usually walked in my experience, was danced in ancient times; and, that maypoles and labyrinths are sometimes intermingled. Labyrinths also are about the process of coming out after a going inward process.

For those who have not come across the Cretan seven-circuit Labyrinth, it comes from the ancient Goddess-centered Minoan civilization which once flourished on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea.

It is the oldest form of labyrinth and differs from a maze in that it has only one path which is circular. If you follow the path you will be lead into the middle and out again.



[Cretan Labyrinth](#)

No getting stuck or lost, unless you stop or leave the path.

Hermann Kern, the preeminent modern historian of labyrinths, suggests that this pattern was most likely drawn onto a courtyard of the palace of Knossos to represent the paths of death and rebirth, so important to the Cretans. Participants moved around it dancing, embellished with artful self-expression.

Here is the tie-in between maypoles and labyrinths. In modern Scandinavia, the maypole dances are sometimes performed in a labyrinth. The crane is associated widely in Europe with the return of spring and is honored in a long standing tradition, the Crane Dance. This dance was performed right up into Roman times, and today, a strikingly similar, labyrinth-like dance is still performed by the Basque people in Spain. There are other examples as well (from *Labyrinth: Ancient Paths of Wisdom and Peace* by Virginia Westbury).



Maypole Dance

Beltane is a community fête that is one of the highlights of the calendar for both pagans and people in the community, especially if they have children or grandchildren to entertain. It is about festivity and community cohesion. The maypole demonstrates the power of movement and music. The labyrinth also connects the dancer/walker to the earth's energy and often invokes an ability to feel the presence of the spirits of nature. When I have traveled the labyrinth in community, I have felt a distinctive dance-like quality and enjoyed interacting with others along the way. When I focus my awareness on the pattern being formed around the maypole, the spirit of nature definitely arises.

Dancing the maypole or the labyrinth are kinesthetic reminders. They correspond to this time of year when emerging is the called for action. They both stimulate ideas within us of effective ways for dealing with the circumstances and situations in our own lives. Sometimes these experiences change our mood or perspective in ways that benefit us.

So, what are the lessons each of these practices reinforce? See if these make sense to you:

celebrating a new found perspective;
re-igniting our creativity and our passion for living;
inviting fertile energies into our lives;
activating our unique gifts.



Expanded possibilities, both personal and communal, around labyrinths await. Perhaps in the future we will see more communal labyrinth gatherings that involve pagan elements as well. Remember, labyrinths are not confined to any time of the wheel of the year. For individuals, the practice of tracing the labyrinth with your finger on a drawing or carving also carries power. Try it sometime. Patterns are readily available on the internet.

Meanwhile, Barbara Ehrenreich, in her fascinating book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, reminds us of the social relevance of these get-togethers. Ehrenreich sees more than frivolity in these holidays. She tells us that historically the elite of European society were hostile to the community generated gaieties which usually occurred at the time of traditional pagan holidays, such as Beltane. She believes this is because hierarchy, by definition, establishes boundaries between people. Festivity breaks the boundaries down.



Over the past few years, I have attended a May Faire produced by a local public school which observes Waldorf methodology. Here are a few scenes from that faire which demonstrate the communal quality of revelries.

While hierarchy is about exclusion, festivity generates inclusiveness. The music invites everyone to the dance. During the day of this festival there are three maypole dances. One, pictured here, is for children. Teens, shown above, present a more choreographed version. Everyone is invited to join the third. Those who only watch are also drawn into the energy.

Masks and costumes were worn by many at this May Day Faire. Most pagan holidays encourage this. These dissolve the differences between stranger and neighbor, making the neighbor temporarily strange and the stranger no more foreign than anyone else.

Participants impersonate nobility, which is also a way of challenging privilege.

People step out of their assigned roles of gender, ethnicity, tribe, and rank and into another role, suggesting that the social order is arbitrary on many levels.



And of course there has to be a Faery Goddess Mother court! This tradition has



persisted through generations, suggesting what is really true and what is fantasy is still open to interpretation. Are faeries metaphor, fictional entertainment, childhood delusion or actual allies? Each of us is free, at the May Faire, to decide for her or himself.

In historical periods, then, dance rituals and merriments bond people together in a feeling of mutual appreciation and inclusiveness. Today these celebratory events are helping us to regain such feelings. They may affect political and social attitudes far more than we realize. Enjoy the Beltane season and feel like you are doing something socially responsible as well!

All photos by Bob Fisher.

[Kate Kissinger](#) • [a month ago](#)

Thanks for this great discussion, Liz. I want to share that one Winter Solstice, I participated with a large group that danced the outside labyrinth at Grace Cathedral. We held hands and did a simple circle dance step into, then out of, the labyrinth as night fell. The rhythm and rocking step induced a gentle trance in waves of community love. It is one of those spiritual experiences that has stayed with me two decades later and deeply informs the attitude I take into labyrinths today.

[Elizabeth Fisher](#) [Kate Kissinger](#) • [a month ago](#)

I was thinking of you and hoped you had seen this article. Thanks for your sharing. Being outside and dancing in a Labyrinth is quite an experience, especially in downtown S.F. I saw your post on Facebook about your Beltane Inspiration Point celebration. We use to love going there when we lived in Berkeley for the Sunrise gathering and then the Morris Dancing later.