

Puddle hopping: A labyrinth alternative

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [October 16, 2007](#) issue

Some friends of mine are avid labyrinth walkers and have recommended the practice to me. But though I've long admired the floor of Chartres Cathedral, and once had the pleasure of seeing my children race around it at top speed before they climbed the tower and searched the high vaults for bats, I've never been on a formal retreat involving labyrinths. Perhaps that's because I'm more familiar with informal collapses than with formal retreats. Fortunately an economic alternative has suggested itself: puddle hopping.

Every day I walk to my office by climbing and descending a hill that once used to have hot springs. The springs are no longer in evidence, but if it has rained recently, there are sure to be puddles. Before I get too close to campus, I can puddle hop without fear of attracting attention, up the hill and down the other side. From years of practice, I have gleaned a few observations.

The first observation is that puddles come in all different sizes and hues: some beautifully marbled by gasoline like the inside covers of old books, others delicately tinted by neighborhood dogs. Our ancestors may have used the eddies of their puddles for divination, but to me it is all a great swirling mystery.

As I hop, I have a sense at once of heaviness and lightness, flesh and spirit. I recall puddle hopping in my youth as a 60-pound girl, when the levitation was more pronounced—especially in a strong wind with an umbrella—but earthbound puddle hopping has its rewards, too, more suitable to a middle-aged mother.

Puddle stomping is a sport for little boys and girls in yellow boots and mackintoshes, but puddle hopping can be an intentional spiritual exercise. Certain familiar prayers lend themselves beautifully to the practice: Lord Jesus-*hop*-Christ-*hop*-Son of the Living God-*hop*-have mercy on me a sinner. Hail Mary-*hop*-full of grace-*splash*-the Lord is with thee. Splashed by the puddle, I recall my baptismal vocation.

Puddle hopping is also an illusion-buster. It reminds me that I am not grounded, I am not centered, I am not recollected—and this isn't likely to change. It makes me realize that I have no wings on my feet and I'm not likely to sprout any. But with every hop some degree of frazzlement, some burden of self-importance, falls off.

Did Karl Barth ever puddle hop? Did Spinoza or Kant? Jesus puddle hopped, this I know, for every puddle tells me so. Is it not certain that the child Jesus puddle hopped, in a thirstier land where puddles had a deeper significance? We know what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well; but no infancy Gospel tells us what he said to the Samaritan child at the puddle. Perhaps they puddle hopped.

Deeper still: In the beginning, life emerged from a puddle, and as I gaze into the puddle I see the face of my primordial ancestor. The *imago dei* looks back at me, all muddied by the Fall.

Some practical matters: Puddle hopping cannot be simulated; the puddle must be spontaneous, unplanned, not placed methodically on a puddle-hopping trail. A puddle that appears naturally outside the door of a trailer home will outperform a puddle installed by gardening contractors on the lawn of an exclusive spa. The rain falls equally on the just and the unjust.

A drawback of puddle hopping, it must be admitted, is that puddles are not portable. Puddles are awkward commodities, fleeting, unhygienic, unsuitable for our mobile society. You can't transfer your puddle to a rug to be rolled up when not in use. It's unwise to place the puddle in the sanctuary for the use of pilgrims or retreatants. And spiritual entrepreneurs will find it difficult to trademark their puddle designs.

There are other drawbacks, too. Puddle hopping is not improved by special athletic shoes, nor will it be enhanced in the future by rocket jet packs; one is too easily lifted up, and the fall is hard. But consider this: puddles are our share in the great ocean of being, held in trust for us by small depressions in the ground. What use to us those puddle radicals who would tear down the walls and despise the dogmatic definitions that hold our puddle together? When the water runs off, they too will run away.

As puddle hopping takes hold, however, its metaphorical power will not be lost on the intelligentsia. There will be a host of scholarly books and dissertations with titles like:

Puddle-hopping: A Subversive Praxis

The Puddle as a Permanently Contested Site of (Religious) Meaning

The Erotic Believer: Toward a Theology of Evaporation

Potholes in the Public Square

Que(e)rying Gravity

After Rainfall: Contrapuntal Readings of Wet and Dry in Postcolonial Fiction

Masculinities Without Boots On

Diving Deep and Splashing Up: Womanspirit at Play

And of course *The Secret of Overflowing Success* will quickly ascend the best-seller lists.

When the coming puddle-hopping boom takes place, I hope we will not be so swamped by the phenomenon as to forget its humble origins, nor so complacent as to fail to hop the next time a puddle shows its cheery face.