

Walking in place: A decision to quit the journey

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

Here at the beginning of the New Year, I have resolved to quit the journey. What journey is that, you may ask. Judging by the language I both use and hear, it is the linear journey of life. Day by day, I wish people well on their journeys, as they wish me well on mine. Sometimes we offer to go with one another at least part of the way. When this is not possible we offer each other provisions for the journey—a book, a pocket cross, a mantra—without ever speaking of where, exactly, we think we are going. In some locutions, the destination is heaven. In others, it is arrival at the right job, the right relationship, the right sense of contentment and peace.

However differently travelers conceive the ends of our journeys, what we share is the certainty that we are not there yet. How could we be, when we are still so uncomfortable in our skins, so unfulfilled, so clearly less than we were created to be? On the journey, hope takes the shape of knowing that while all of this may be true, there is still more road ahead. As long as God is God, what counts is being on the way, putting one foot ahead of the other with eyes fixed on the far horizon.

If this were not such a powerful metaphor, I would have quit it long before now. I have traveled plenty of miles in my life, both by the odometer and by the gauge of my heart. Believing in the journey has helped me stay in some godforsaken places longer than I wanted to, and to forgive myself at least somewhat for behaving poorly in them as well. Believing in the journey has allowed me to grieve leaving safe and comfortable places without running back to them before I have gone a mile. It has given me the courage to want more for myself and for the world than I could see from where I was.

Only recently have I begun to notice how believing in the journey interferes with giving myself fully to the life I have right now. As long as I am on a journey, then where I am is no more than a way station. A good camper buries her trash, but she does not prune the trees around her campsite or spend too much time learning the

neighbors' names. Where she is matters less than where she is going. Who she is matters less than who she will be one day. When the linear journey is all there is, the difference between hope and denial can sometimes be hard to discern.

Last year I walked a labyrinth for the first time in my life. I had flirted with labyrinths for years, but my expectations were so high that I kept finding reasons not to walk one. I did not want to hurry. I did not want to share the labyrinth with anyone who might distract me. I did not want to be disappointed. I looked forward to walking a labyrinth so much that looking forward to it kept me from doing it.

Then one day I met a woman who had a labyrinth on her land. Set in a small grove of pines, it was made of found stones, with a large one as round as a pillow near the entrance. When the wind blew, invisible chimes tinkled in the branches overhead, while pine needles sifted down to pad the circular path below. Beyond the edge of the trees I could see a small pond sparkling in the sun, and two horses grazing behind a fence. I could walk the labyrinth whenever I wanted to, my host said, even if she were not there. I did not even have to call first.

With all my excuses gone, I returned one late summer afternoon, said a short prayer and entered the labyrinth. The first thing I noticed was that I resented following a set path. Where was the creativity in that? The second thing I noticed was how much I wanted to step over the stones when they did not take me directly to the center. Who had time for all those switchbacks? The third thing I noticed was that reaching the center was no big deal. The view from there was essentially the same as the view from the start. My only prize was the heightened awareness of my own tiresome predictability.

I thought about calling it a day and going to pat the horses, but since I predictably follow the rules even while grouching about them, I turned around to find my way out of the labyrinth again. Since I had already been to the center, I was not focused on getting there anymore. Instead, I breathed in as much of the pine smell as I could, sucking in the smell of sun and warm stones along with it. When I breathed out again, I noticed how soft the pine needles were beneath my feet. I saw the small mementos left by those who had preceded me on the path. I noticed how much more I notice when I am not preoccupied with the journey. When the path delivered me back to where I had begun, I lay down with my head on the stone pillow and dreamed Jacob's dream. *Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!*

If I fail at my New Year's resolution, as I have failed before, then perhaps I can still choose the spiral journey that leads me deeper into the life I have instead of the linear one that promises me a way out of it. Whether or not the center holds, I trust that the Lord of the center will.