

## **Dare To Do Something Different: Using a Spiritual Practice to Solve the Problem of a Ring-Wise Dog**

By Joyce Miller  
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*The first article of this series, [Picture the Behavior](#) (May 2005), discussed how visualization can help you train your dog. The second, [Learn to Enjoy Showing: Changing Places to Change Behavior](#) (February 2006), looked at how changing places can help bring training and performance back where you want them when they have gotten off track. This article looks more closely at how spiritual practices can strengthen the bond between you and your performance dog and help solve problems that you may encounter in the ring when you are competing.*



The ring-wise dog: we've all either had one or known one. He's the dog that seems to think that he can go in the ring and do it all without you. This is the dog that goes out, picks up the dumbbell, and then. . . Or the agility dog that sets its intent on an obstacle regardless of your cue. . . Or the conformation dog that thinks that it can go in the ring, go around, do the down and back, and go to the end of the line without you; you feel as though you are in a race.

The ring-wise dog is a well trained, experienced competitor who can do everything correctly and do it in the allotted time. Chances are, she is the dog with whom you feel an incredible bond. Then, one day, in competition, something goes terribly wrong. If she's in the obedience ring, she may pick up the dumbbell and jump the gate to the audience instead of the jump to return to you. Or maybe he is the agility dog who decides to do the tunnel when he has been directed to the A-frame, or he stops to scan the audience from the middle of the high dog walk. Or she is the conformation dog that races her handler around the ring and back to the judge, pulling sideways from you the entire time. Regardless of what your ring-wise dog decides to do, you lose.

All you can do is watch your dog's performance fall apart. And once this has happened, it is really difficult not to worry about it happening again. But the more you worry, the more it happens, and the worse it gets.

There are many effective ways to bring a ring-wise dog back on track. I want to tell you about a technique that I discovered by accident. This technique helps the handler release the worrying and fretting that causes the behavior to continue.

### **Pause, Breathe, Let Go, and Walk**

It is widely accepted that what we feel and what we think affects our dogs. When we hold on to negative patterns, anger, or other concerns, we find that our ability to work with our

dogs suffers. So when we are fearful that our dog will repeat a behavior, chances are the dog will repeat the behavior.

Jamie Sans, in *Animal Medicine*, says that spiders weave webs that entangle those who get caught in them. Some have compared these webs to humans who cannot still the chatter of their daily work and lives and see the reality of the moment. It is true: all of us sometimes have difficulty quieting our minds long enough to work with our dogs. Doing exercises that help us learn to pay attention and to control our thoughts can help us work more closely and more effectively with our dogs.

Many people are finding that when they use spiritual practices for their own personal development, their work with their dogs improves. One woman wrote that she was going through some very difficult times, and her dogs developed health problems that she treated but they wouldn't go away. Then, independent of what she was doing for her dogs, she started doing spiritual exercises to calm herself. As she became more proficient at these exercises, she noticed that her dogs' illnesses were disappearing. She wrote, "I got it! I finally put it together."

Our dogs are in the present. Their world is now. They have no understanding of our concerns about the past or our fears of the future. When our minds are focused on these things, our dogs get confused signals from us: they do not understand what we want them to do, and so the ring-wise dog wings it.

As I said in the first article in this series, meditation can help us live more fully, more effectively, and more peacefully in the present. And the meditation practice that I accidentally stumbled on that has helped me and many of my students with ring-wise dogs is the labyrinth, an ancient walking meditation.

Walking the labyrinth can be traced back more than 4,000 years in cultures as diverse as Peru, Arizona, Crete, Egypt, Iceland, India, and Sumatra. The labyrinth is a series of circles with a single path that reverses from time to time. It is a continuous path that does not trick you: once you are on it, if you follow it, you will find your way to the center. It is not like a maze in which you can get lost and come to dead ends. When you walk the labyrinth, you walk one pathway deep into the circle and then back out to the beginning.

One of the most famous historic labyrinths was built into the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France, and it symbolized the pilgrim's journey to the holy land. Today, labyrinths have gained popularity as a metaphor for a personal spiritual journey, and they are found carved on rock, laid out with stones on a beach, or embedded in colored tiles on the floor of a church.

Since I have been involved in exploring a number of spiritual practices, the more I read about the labyrinth, the more I wanted to walk one. I looked for labyrinths near me, and I found about six, most at churches, one at a major hospital. But the problem for me was that I would have to get into my car and drive at least 30 minutes to get to one. And most were not open every day. Some required appointments. This would not do: if it were to be

a meditation, I did not want to make arrangements in advance or drive a great distance to do it. But since my own home did not stand on a large enough lot to make it possible for me to have my own labyrinth, I had to come up with a reasonable alternative.

First, I purchased a finger labyrinth and worked with it. But it was not the same as a walking meditation. Then, it occurred to me that the cul-de-sac in front of my house would make a wonderful labyrinth.

We live on a short street and very few people use the cul-de-sac. I went out and walked it, and I realized I could visualize the lines of a simple labyrinth superimposed on our cul-de-sac. I walked that imaginary labyrinth and found it very relaxing, very soothing, and very helpful for staying in the moment. But. . . as I walked reverse circles in the cul-de-sac of my neighborhood, I attracted unwanted attention: neighbors wanted to help me find whatever I was looking for in the cul-de-sac!

To walk my labyrinth without being interrupted, I decided to take a dog with me. Everyone knows that I do a lot of training with my dogs so it was no surprise to see me walking in the circle with a dog, stopping from time to time, reversing directions, the dog sitting or standing when I stopped, the dog working with me on a loose lead. Since I did not want to be distracted by the dog, I decided not to give any commands to the dog other than “Be with me.”

### **Step by step, around the circle and back, seven times.**

The first time I did this, the dog was excited, not sure what we were really doing, and easily distracted by the noises and movements of leaves and the wind in our cul-de-sac. But as I proceeded into the center of the cul-de-sac labyrinth, my mind quieted and focused on just the moment I was in, and the dog quieted with me.

In the labyrinth that I visualized in our cul-de-sac, there are seven circles. Each circle reverses, takes me back to the point where I started that circle, and puts me on the next circle, which is smaller and deeper into the labyrinth. As you walk the labyrinth, you should let yourself totally relax, move very softly, deliberately, and quietly, saying nothing to your dog. If your dog pulls you one way or another, just say very quietly, maybe even only in your mind, “Be with me” or as one of my students prefers, “With me.”

I started thinking about what I really want to accomplish with the dog I was walking. I visualized something we were currently working on, but I visualized it as the outcome I desired. For example, if you are working on refining your dog’s recall and finish, see that in your mind’s eye. See her doing a perfect recall and finish in many different places: where you train, different competitive venues, at home, in your yard, etc. See your dog doing exactly what you want your dog to do, and see yourself not only praising your dog for doing it so well but also rejoicing at how perfectly your dog is performing.



**Entering the labyrinth with a dog, handler and dog are out of step.**

After walking my visualized labyrinth many times over the course of several weeks, my husband took pictures of me working with one of our dogs. What I had been feeling with that dog in the labyrinth, the tremendous sense of moving together and of being in the moment together, was borne out by the pictures. When we started into the labyrinth, the dog was distracted and out of step with me. As we proceeded deeper and deeper into the center, the dog came into alignment with me. It was an exciting development for me, and seeing it in the pictures validated the sense of connection that I was experiencing.

Not soon after this, one of my students told me about a problem she was having working with her dog. The dog was Sassy, a dog that I wrote about in the first article. After Myra started using prayer and picturing Sassy doing exactly what she wanted, the two of them had done very well in the conformation ring. Then, for no apparent reason, it all fell apart. Sassy had become ring wise.

When Myra was doing the go around or the down and back, Sassy raced Myra to the end or pulled away from Myra. As Myra told me about the problem, I looked at her face, and I could see the stress and tension that were really interfering with their performance as a team. I mentioned that she looked stressed, and the things that were bothering her flooded out. I said that we had to find a way for her to leave those daily concerns behind when she was working with Sassy. Because of her previous success using the techniques of meditation and visualization, I was sure that she could work through this new behavior from Sassy.

I asked her if she lived near a cul-de-sac, and when she said yes, I drew a labyrinth with my finger on the grooming table in our classroom. I explained how to simply go deeper and deeper by reversing directions and circling back and forth in ever smaller circles. I described the need for her to be very quiet and calm on the way into the center of the circle, and then to return to the beginning with a sense of joy.

A few days later, Myra called to say that Sassy was once again moving on a loose lead. At their next show two weeks later, one judge was so impressed with how well handler and dog move together in the ring that she asked the team to come back after the showing ended so she could see them moving again.

Myra and Sassy had walked the labyrinth and emerged on one path. I asked her if she thought the entire class could benefit from learning how to do this. She emphatically said “Yes!” I asked her if she would lead the class through the labyrinth and she said that she

wasn't perfect. I told her that no one is perfect and that I really would appreciate her leading the class. She did, and the entire class found the exercise well worth while.

Today, several students come to class early to do the labyrinth before the class formally starts. Other times, I start the class with a labyrinth exercise to quiet the dogs and handlers. Issues with gaiting seem to melt away. Dogs and owners link spirit to spirit, mind to mind, body to body.

Somehow, moving through the labyrinth helps us release external cares affecting our lives so we can spend these few moments totally connected to our dogs. Awareness comes: We can almost feel how humans and dogs have worked together for thousands of years. We are physical and spiritual beings having a human experience.

Dogs have always known how to do what we want them to do. They have always known how to follow, how to sit, and how to retrieve. They are so hard wired to retrieve that when we call them to us, they go deep within us and retrieve what they find in our thoughts and feelings. Then they give us what they have retrieved in their behavior.

If we are not clear about what we want, if we are bogged down in other problems and concerns, our

dogs cannot understand the behavior that we want them to do. If we think only about the behavior that we do not want, we signal them that these behaviors are wanted. Otherwise, why would we be thinking about them? Why would we talk about them? But if we are in the moment, with no concerns about other things in our lives or previous results in the ring, if we are totally focused in the moment on exactly what we want them to do, they will do it.

Walking the labyrinth with your dog is just one example of a spiritual practice that can move you into the moment with your dog. There are many others that can help you as much as walking this ancient path has helped me and my students work with ring wise dogs and forge a stronger bond with our dogs.



**Deep within the labyrinth, the dog and handler are in sync.**

**Illustration at top of article:** Airedale in a labyrinth artwork by Susan Olsen (<http://www.thepaper-isapainting.com/> )

**Biography:**

Joyce Miller is a retired teacher and marketing writer. She is a member of the American Dog Writers Association, the International Association of Canine Professionals, and the

Airedale Terrier Club of America. She teaches a six-weeks handling techniques class, and she also does in-home training for people with new puppies or older dogs that need re-training. She lives in Dallas Texas, where she and her husband breed and show Airedale Terriers.