IMAGES OF THREADS
AND LABYRINTHS

Research Paper
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There are times when an image catches hold of you and becomes a recurring way to relate what is happening to you to something larger than yourself. When I was a child, I read and re-read George MacDonald's extended fairy tale, The Princess and the Goblin. I find now that an image from that book, related to thread, has attached itself both to my love of working with thread and yarn in many forms and to my more recent enjoyment of walking the labyrinth. This paper explores the way that these two images interact with each other and with related images of threads and labyrinths.

MacDonald's story begins with an 8-year-old princess named Irene. Her mother died when Irene was a baby and Irene's father, the king, has established his daughter in a large manor house some miles from his palace, to be raised by her nursemaid and protected by his guards.

The house sits by the side of a mountain, which is inhabited by goblins, small deformed beings who live in the many caverns inside the mountain and who never venture out except at night. We learn that they are plotting to capture the princess and marry her to their prince to gain control of the kingdom.

The mountain is also worked by miners, removing ore with gems. The miners have learned that although the goblins are threatening, they can be driven away by singing or chanting poetry or even just quick rhymes. One of the most proficient at this is a young, teenaged miner named Curdie, who lives with his parents close to the mountainside.

Irene discovers that someone else lives in her house, an old woman who lives in three rooms at the top of the house and who describes herself as her great-grandmother, though in fact she is more like an ageless godmother specifically concerned with protecting Irene from harm. She is a wonderful mythic figure: she keeps a dovecote, lives off the dove's eggs, and has a huge light that resembles the moon that can be seen sometimes by people passing by. More importantly to the story, she spins in the moonlight. She describes the thread as being made of spiderwebs brought to her by her doves.

As the story progresses, Irene meets Curdie and begins to be the focus of attempts by the goblins to capture her. Curdie, too, follows the goblins into the depths of the mountain caverns, realizes their plans, and wants to protect Irene.

After a bad scare, Irene finds her way to her ‘great-grandmother’ and is given a gift: a ring that she is to wear until she is in danger.

...there stood the lady beside her with...a shimmering ball in her hand, about the size of a pigeon’s egg.

"There, Irene, there is my work for you!" she said, holding out the ball to the princess.

She took it in her hand, and looked at it all over. It sparkled a little, and shone here and shone

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there, but not much. It was of a sort of gray whiteness, something like spun glass.

"Is this all of your spinning, grandmother?" she asked.

"All since you came to the house. There is more there than you think."

"How pretty it is! What am I to do with it?"

"That I will now explain to you," answered the lady, turning from her, and going to her cabinet. She came back with a small ring in her hand. Then she took the ball from Irene's, and did something with the two—Irene could not tell what.

"Give me your hand," she said...and put the ring on the forefinger of[Irene's right hand].

"What a beautiful ring!" said Irene...[The grandmother puts the ball of thread in a cabinet.]

"That ball is yours."

"Oh! I'm not to take it with me! You are going to keep it for me!"

"You are to take it with you. I've fastened the end of it to the ring on your finger."

Irene looked at the ring.

"I can't see it there, grandmother," she said.

"Feel—a little way from the ring—toward the cabinet," said the lady.

"Oh, I do feel it!" exclaimed the princess. "But I can't see it."

She added, looking close to her outstretched hand.

"No. The thread is too fine for you to see it. You can only feel it...If ever you find yourself in any danger...you must take off your ring, and put it under the pillow of your bed. Then you must lay your forefinger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you."

"Oh, how delightful! It will lead me to you, grandmother, I know!"

"Yes. But, remember, it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, and you must not double the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too."

The thread is so fine that Irene can see it no more than several feet in front of her and Curdie can't see it at all. More importantly, the thread doesn't immediately lead her out of her apparent danger. At an important point in the book, it leads her to where Curdie has been imprisoned by the goblins and then instead of leading them both back to the surface, takes them deeper into the mountain so that they can emerge at a different point and have an opportunity to learn more about the goblins' plans.

In this book, although not in its sequel, Curdie is unable to see, or to recognize, Irene's protector.

"I see a big, bare garret-room—like the one in mother's cottage, only big enough to take the cottage itself in, and leave a good margin all round...I see a tub, and a heap of musty straw, and a withered apple and a ray of sunlight coming through a hole in the middle of the roof, and shining on your head, and making all the place look a curious dusty brown."

Fortunately, Irene is so insistent on following her thread that he accompanies her on trust.
"Now, Curdie! she cried, "won't you believe what I told you about my grandmother and her thread?... There!—don't you see it shining on before us? She added.

"I don't see anything," persisted Curdie.

"Then you must believe without seeing, said the princess, "for you can't deny it has brought me out of the mountain."

After Curdie, still doubting, has left the room, Irene's grandmother explains that Curdie is not yet ready to see her as she is, and then gives Irene back the ring that she left under her pillow.

"That reminds me—there is one thing that puzzles me," said the princess: "how are you to get the thread out of the mountain again? Surely you won't have to make another for me! That would be such a trouble!"

The lady set her down, and rose, and went to the fire. Putting in her hand, she drew it out again, and held up the shining ball between her finger and thumb.

"I've got it now; you see," she said, coming back to the princess, "all ready for you when you want it."

Going to her cabinet, she laid it in the same drawer as before.

"And here is your ring," she added, taking it from the little finger of her left hand, and putting it on the forefinger of Irene's right hand.

Eventually the goblins are defeated, with the help of the grandmother, her doves, and Curdie and the miners, and Irene is taken to safety with her father.

When I began thinking about this paper, I connected the thread in turn with my newly found love of walking the labyrinth. I hadn't realized, until I began some research, that two designs are commonly used in constructing labyrinths. One is the pattern that is used in Chartres cathedral:
The other is an older pattern and is the one used at Avila for their labyrinth:

Two other images have become connected with these two images. One comes from the fairy tale. As he begins to explore the mine, Curdie finds it easy to get lost in its many twisting passages, so he employs the old trick of leaving his miner's axe at the beginning of his exploration and tying a string to its handle. As he walks through the mine, he plays out the string; when he needs to return, he gathers up the string once more. He brings it home and finds that in the morning, his mother has wound it back into a ball for him to use again.

...he had brought a huge ball of fine string...The end of this string he fastened to his pickaxe, which figured no bad anchor, and then, with the ball in his hand, unrolling as he went, set out in the dark through the natural gangs of the goblins' territory...He had again and again to retreat in haste, a proceeding rendered the more difficult that he had to gather up his string as he returned upon its course...when he reached home toward morning, his string for lack of time to wind it up as he "dodged the cobs" would be in what seemed the most hopeless entanglement; but after a good sleep though a short one, he always found his mother had got it right again. There it was, wound in a most respectable ball, ready for use the moment he should want it!

"I can't think how you do it, mother," he would say.

"I follow the thread," she would answer—"just as you do in the mine."

As I considered this image, I associated it with the original story of the Cretan labyrinth, which had a beast, the Minotaur, at its center. Ariadne gives Theseus a ball of string to unwind as he makes his way through the maze of the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur and get out again by following the string.

So, four related images of finding one's way, following a path, being led by others or by one's own efforts. What follows are my various associations with these various images as they have danced together in the back of my mind over the last few weeks.
The image of Irene’s thread has stayed with me over the years and become a way of explaining both the strengths and weaknesses of my own search for a spiritual path. As I re-read *Princess and the Goblin* for this paper, I was struck that I had gradually changed the symbol to fit my own needs.

In the book, the thread is fine and smooth, but in my mind’s eye, it has always been a little thicker and roughly textured so that it had a strong tactile quality. I have always been able to imagine how it would feel against my finger. I also thought it was interesting that in my mind, the location of the thread shifted from one hand and one finger to the other hand and a different finger. To me, the index finger of one’s right hand (Irene’s version) is associated with thought and with activity. It’s not called the “pointer finger” for nothing. So, to have kept that finger on the thread seems to me to focus on rational thought and makes the task easier, because that finger is so involved in complicated, difficult activity that staying on the thread would be relatively easy. By contrast, the third finger of the left hand is probably the weakest and the one most symbolically connected with “heart.” Following a thread with that finger is difficult because it isn’t used for almost any skilled activity. And having the thread connected to heart, rather than head, stresses to me the strong aspect of trust, emotional trust, implicit in letting a thin, almost invisible thread guide your steps through danger.

One aspect of the thread image is that it can be seen only a few feet beyond the person following it. One can’t see where one is being led. One needs to trust that the thread is real and that its direction makes sense, even when one can’t see the larger picture of where one will end up or even how long the journey is going to be. Trust has never come easily to me in spiritual matters, so this sense of relinquishing control to some larger pattern or direction has not been something I could do often. Only in looking back can I begin to see patterns or paths that might have led me where I am now. Moving forward still requires trust in a process hidden from me.

The thinness and fragility of the thread has also been meaningful: this is no strong rope, galloping horse, or boat on the river. Although it never breaks as it unwinds up the mountain or through rocks and dirt, following it requires attention. Your focus can’t be on what’s going on around you, at least not to the point of losing contact with the thread. Following it isn’t easy and losing it is always a possibility.

As I look back at my life, I realize that both focus and losing focus are true for me. On the one hand, as
I look back, I realize that I have been actively trying to follow a spiritual path for as long as I can remember. I asked to go to Sunday school, I persisted in attending throughout childhood and my teen years, I let go of Meeting during college but continued to read spiritual authors, particularly C. S. Lewis, and I resumed contact with the Meeting as a young mother and have actively sought out small groups of fellow seekers more and more as time went on. So in one sense, I have kept my finger on the thread and followed it, even though I didn’t know where I was going, or even where I hoped I was going.

In another sense, my focus on that journey has been more and less intense, depending on what else was going on. I sense strongly that at times I have let go or at least stopped paying attention when a more active, present search might have had more significant results.

When I think about the labyrinth, I prefer walking the older design, because it has fewer sharp turns and loops constantly back and forth between the two sides. The Chartres design focuses more in one quadrant before shifting to the other side. It’s harder to walk because you are constantly shifting direction.

I think that both designs have common elements that hook up to the thread image. There is simply the twisting quality, reminiscent of the way that yarn looks when it has been unraveled, but not yet wound into a neat ball. More importantly, the labyrinth walk requires trust that you are headed in the right direction and will reach the place you want to reach. Like Irene’s thread, the labyrinth path leads you seemingly in the wrong direction. This is particularly true near the middle, where the path winds around the center, then swings way out toward the periphery before coiling back to the center at last. Particularly the first time you walk it, there is a startling realization that you seem to be close to your destination, only to be pulled away before finally arriving. Again, there is great trust that the path is designed properly, that it leads to the center, and that following it step by step is enough: you don’t have to jump the path to arrive at the center.

The labyrinth path doesn’t end at the center, but takes you back to where you began. Irene is always returned to her grandmother’s room, where magically the thread is already neatly rewound ready for the next journey. The labyrinth takes you to the center, to whatever it is that you are seeking from your walk, but then sends you back along the same paths until you re-enter the world with whatever
knowledge, or release, or comfort you needed and gained at the center.

My first association with the labyrinth was with the myth of the Minotaur. That labyrinth was actually a maze with choice points, rather than one continuous path. Ariadne gives Theseus the thread to unwind as he goes so that after he has reached the center and killed the Minotaur, he can find his way out again. At first, that image felt wrong: both the need to slay something and the fact that the thread was useful only to get out, not to get in. Going in was making a series of unguided choices.

However, the Minotaur part, if taken metaphorically, has something to say about what we may find at the center of whatever labyrinth we venture into. Unlike later labyrinths, this labyrinth reflected clearly that we don't always find what we want, or think we want, at the end of the path. Maybe what we encounter is the violence in ourselves, maybe it is a difficult struggle to address something that threatens our psychic existence. The Minotaur figure of half man, half bull can incorporate a lot of the fears that are an inevitable part of following a path with no clear direction.

[A friend] offered me another image around the labyrinth today, from her experience of walking it at Chartres: walking a path that so many have walked before. The thread is individual—a particular path for me. The labyrinth blends both: my particular path and what I bring to the center and leave with, and the underlying connection to all those who have walked it past and since. So, it is related perhaps to my seeing the thread also as a string of people who have influenced me in my life. I have been led in a different way.

That image of a string or a thread coming from my left hand has been so clear for so long. I can feel the rough texture of it. I'm almost positive that it's the feel of that tangle of linen/flax thread that I spent hours slowly untangling in 4th grade as I listened to Mr. Walstrom reading stories. Even then I enjoyed the puzzle of following the thread back and forth, teasing apart the knots. I quickly learned that you can't pull hard; you pull gently to see where the thread travels and then take the growing ball through that gap.

"I follow the thread," Curdie's mother says. Pulling apart, not yanking, not rushing, watching how the thread winds in and out is important. Not rushing is another way of talking about patience. Not pulling on the thread—not trying to hurry up the process of seeing where things are going next. So different from what I remember of home and certainly of my education: plan ahead, make lists, don't start
something unless you’re sure you can have a good outcome. Actually, focus on the outcome: the end of the thread, not the pleasure of untangling it and following its path. I want to shift to process, not output.

A passage in Sue Bender’s Plain and Simple talked about that distinction, and so has Jess. In fact, art often involves taking the piece to the place that you realize it’s time to move on, whether or not it’s perfect. The point is to enjoy being with the piece until it’s time to begin another and let that one go. I have a strong tendency to censor myself: someone else has done this before and better. That’s a focus on outcome. But it’s my thread and how it winds in and out is unique. So, both the process and the outcome can be valuable in that context.

There’s thread as the image of my life weaving in and out of other people’s lives. Maybe we’re all in a giant tangle—knots here, open places there. In that case, following my own path/thread also means noticing how it interacts with other threads, since I remember that the tangle in 4th grade actually had more than two ends in it. So my thread, unlike the thread in the fairy tale, intersects, wraps around, knots with the threads of others.

Which reminds me of the image I had of the labyrinth path—and the thread—as being people holding hands. The sense that my life has been guided by my encounters with other people—real people, authors via their books, and imaginary characters in stories and poems. The thread Irene follows is single, and palpable, and material. But the thread of my life has been the connections of person to person, event to event. It’s a much more subtle sense of being led and a much greater possibility of losing touch with the thread and having to find my way back.

Betty [a family friend and artist], for instance. I see her thread as a gold/red—for her auburn hair, for the red shoes she gave me, and for her bravery in going places and doing things I wouldn’t have dared. Her thread was lost for a long time—or perhaps muted in the pattern, but kept alive by the memory of the watercolors she drew for me, the coral beads she brought me from Italy, and the memory of her buying me “French Toast” lipstick at Revlon on 5th Avenue.

What do I mean by “lost”? Was her thread really lost? Part of me perhaps kept her thread alive by
continuing to learn one form of needlework after another—nourishing the artist in me without specifically naming that as “art.” I have more or less successfully (hmmm—think about the word) done sewing, tatting, knitting, crocheting, needlepoint, crewel embroidery, cross-stitch, and used a lace and a knitting noddy. No one taught me any of these really, except knitting in the beginning. I followed thread through so many different processes. [An artist friend] told me once, “You define art too narrowly. I think your medium is fabric [i.e., thread].”

I was surprised to rediscover the second thread image: Curdie unwinds string as he travels through the mines and gathers it up as he returns. That’s Ariadne’s thread and the original image of the labyrinth: you lay down a trail to help yourself find your way home. And in some ways, the labyrinth in Avila terms is both: it’s a trail that others have laid out, but symbolically you also bring with you what you want/need to bring to the center and then follow that same path out. So the trail is both linear and iterative: it’s created by others but its meaning is something you bring to it and you arrive where you left, but changed by what occurred in between.

[My friend] mentioned the magical quality of realizing that she was walking the same path that so many others had walked before her. That also has in it the intersection of walking something others have made but bringing to it your own individuality. Back to the notion of art as treading familiar paths but making them unique because their path now becomes your path. And like Ariadne’s labyrinth, each choice brings you to other people, events, possibilities, so that the thread isn’t simple and linear, but branching—created both by the choices one makes, but also (one hopes) by some guiding influence.

Interesting that I’m scooting all around an important aspect of the thread image: that a benign and omniscient female figure is holding the other end of the thread and waiting for me to follow it through adventures to safety. The Grandmother image is compelling for her calm, her healing qualities, her vision about what needs to be done and her quiet insistence that the thread be followed in a certain way. It would certainly be nice to have the sense that my life was being led so confidently and that it would all come out right in the end. Thread or labyrinth (at least in its later forms): your task is to follow it, not to make choices that can lead you in the wrong direction so that you are permanently lost. Trust is a big issue. Trust that guidance is there; trust that I know how to follow it. I think I have clung to the thread image partly in the hope that at some point I might have the experience of feeling truly led in a way that I can’t explain away.
Human, human-made, God-made, I-made. Some of each. And in all of the images, even Irene’s thread, the destination isn’t clear. Although at one minute you appear to be “getting somewhere,” the next minute you’re going off in what appears to be the wrong direction: into the mines, through the knots, around the outside of the pattern when you thought you were approaching the middle. And for the labyrinth, the center isn’t the destination: you enter, you pause as long as you choose, but eventually you walk out again seeing everything from the opposite perspective.

I told a friend last night about my struggles with staying with this particular way of writing a paper—sitting with the images rather than my familiar process of following a clear outline. I also mentioned that at the same time I was writing a paper for work that had a very clear content outline (which the client kept changing). She said that she thought it was a delicious cosmic joke that I was writing both types of papers simultaneously.

The process of exploring these symbols is itself a thread with no clear destination (except that it needs to be a “completed paper”). But my definition of “completed paper” has kept shifting as I yielded more and more to the realization not only that the these symbols don’t fit nicely into a box, but that I didn’t want them to. When I first started thinking about writing this paper about the image in Princess and the Goblin, I re-read a number of George MacDonald’s fairy tales. In one, The Golden Key, a young girl (Tangle) searching for her lost love, meets a series of old men, each of whom sends her down a stairway deeper into the earth. (And only at this moment do I realize the delightful irony that the first image that helped birth this paper is named “Tangle”!) The last old man shows her a hole and tells her to go down to the deepest level.

Then the Old Man of the Earth stooped over the floor of the cave, raised a huge stone from it, and left it leaning. It disclosed a great hole that went plumb-down.

“That is the way,” he said.

“But there are no stairs.”

“You must throw yourself in. There is no other way.”

In an Afterword to the edition, the poet W.H. Auden says the following.

In recent times, under the influence of modern psychology, critics have acquired a habit of “symbol hunting.”...But to hunt for symbols in a fairy tale is absolutely fatal. In The Golden Key, for example, any attempt to “interpret” the Grandmother or the air-fish or the Old Man of the Sea is futile: they mean what they are. The way, the only way, to read a fairy tale is the same as that prescribed for Tangle at one stage of her journey [that is, to “throw yourself in”].
Reading that paragraph, I realized that I wanted to allow the images that I have explored here to speak to each other. A structure for this paper that attempted to find one single ‘thread’ that bound all of them together was to impose an order on the process that I didn’t want. I don’t know where the thread of interacting with these images will take me in the future. But I have learned something by trusting the process of letting them interact in my head, listening in on the conversation, and allowing them in turn to interact with other events from my present and past.

I also wanted to write a different kind of paper to face my fears about turning in something that doesn’t easily, clearly meet the specs. Process, not product: what has this paper helped me realize, not what do other people think about the result?
Sources

