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# THE QUEST FOR SELF: USING MANDALA ART IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE JOURNALING

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## THE QUEST FOR SELF: USING MANDALA ART IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE JOURNALING

Dr. Kathleen Quinn

*“The need to write comes from the need to make sense of one's life and discover one's usefulness.” – John Cheever*

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to share a mechanism in expressive art called mandala. This paper is based in Discovery Reflective Practice used with patients in psychotherapy, within a nursing education program, and faculty development program including the creation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC). This article contains mandala art work associated with awareness journaling covering more than thirty years work and the author's own reflective practice using journals and mandalas. It is hoped by the end of this article the reader will:

- a.) Understand the importance of journaling combining mandala usage as part of reflective practice.
- b.) Combine a mandala skill usage with intentional linking of critical and creative thought and meditation/mindful processes.
- c.) Create a demonstration of a beautiful artistic experiential exemplar of the whole paradigm of Mindfulness used in journaling for self-awareness, self-care,.
- d.) Understanding the link to increased mindful awareness, personal growth, patient safety and spirituality.
- e.) Teach and support consideration of a form of artistic creative scholarship to support personal growth and work/ practice skills.

In this process there will be visual interruptions using selected quotes. These quotations are designed to provoke thoughts related to the Discovery Process in the work of mandala making, voice expressions, reflective journaling and the underlying evidence-based concepts. The growth of the individual requires understanding the childhood images and experiences which shaped us individually, as part of a family and a community. In our understanding of this process we designate the process as one of Discovery and Create, this includes discovering interior self and creating outside of the individual. We transform and seek transformation as a component and consequence as a being in evolution. This evolutionary process is built into the human being with a conclusion in maturity and perhaps even deep spirituality. We all face lives where we juggle multiple components, making time for self and life-long growth is not only necessary it is crucial. In order to live fruitfully, work productively requires a continuous self-assessment.

*“Art is the triumph over chaos.” John Cheever*

### BACKGROUND LITERATURE ON MANDALA ART AND JOURNALING

The concept of mandala as art and spiritual connection is more than 3,000 years old. In the Sanskrit the word Mandala means circle, god, universe, and cosmos. It can also stand for the individual person. The images and metaphors for mandalas stand in spiritual art forms around the

globe...they are universal. (Kellogg, 1978) In Jungian psychology the mandala art form was used to help not just his patients, but C.G. Jung used them himself to uncover subconscious meanings bringing them into awareness. (Jung, 1972;1973) This includes an understanding of archetypes or symbols that we all carry in common. Those symbolic metaphors encompass the human experience collectively, and then can be used individually to understand self as the center of one's life and meaning in the universe. (Jung, 1968) This matters in term of our gender, culture and our ability to construct an understanding of our unique existence and meaning as a member of a collective. So, this technique is used today for individual growth, our educational processes, spiritual development. (Mulcahy, 2013).

Additionally, the process of mandala making and reflective journaling has expanded and become part of an educational system for medical, (Potash, Chen, Tsang, 2016) nursing, (Billington, 2013) and psychotherapy students (Cook, Mayorga, & Ball, 2016) in leading edge academic programs. (Ramsburg, & Youmans, 2014; Wisner, 2014). It is in part the creation of narrative which allows the dialogue. Perhaps it is even more accurate to say, the dialogue is only possible through narrative...and that narrative can be verbal, non-verbal, or visual as in the arts and music. (Passila, Oikarinen, Lahti, 2013). In our work, we call this visual verbalization. Once the art becomes externalized there is a distance between the self and "it." While still maintaining a connection to the interior it becomes easier to talk about because the gap between inside and out there is bridged in a less threatening manner. This technique is useful with patients, students, colleagues for self-communication and interpersonal understanding. However, there is a further value. When this art is part of a reflective journaling process it becomes a record to be referred to for gauging growth or reviewing a past perspective. This has value for practice, and writing for recording and anchoring experiences.

Moreover, these same techniques used for professional and interprofessional development in progressive programs are also encouraged for professional practice and self-directed growth for individuals and teams. (Titchen, McCormack, 2014). In this article, the author's embedded art and interpretations trace the developmental sequence often found in women using mandala and journaling as a contemporaneous documentation of their experiences. The art and recorded thoughts become part of a reflective journaling process to consider their work, the implications and impact of their growing self-awareness. (Dobson, 2008; Begley, 2007; Duerr, 2004).

One of the fundamental processes in any journaling using art forms is the recording of thoughts and experiences for retaining information as well as a documentation of the image or metaphor. This process is becoming more used in education, business, as well as healthcare education and practice. (Amble, 2012). What is significant is the intersection of art and health caring, the function of art and science. (Henderson, Rosen, & Mascaro, 2007). For decades we have talked about the art of medicine, the art of healing, and the art of nursing; recognizing there is the underlying science and the implementation of that science recognizing a near artistic application of scientific information. (Cook, Mayorga, & Ball, 2016). This is accepted in education as an experiential basis for artistic expression, (Dewey, 1934), and is also foundational in education and psychotherapy. It is suggested this intersection of science and art is not limited to healthcare or healing field but may be significant for other professions as well. (Waldron and Ebbeck 2015). Key in the process is the ability to begin care as self-care and compassion for self, then evolve into compassionate care for others. It is the intention of the author to demonstrate the use of artwork in the development of reflective practice journals and the impact on the person

and practice. The focus on this is a twofold process including personal and professional development. Within the process, the discovery of self supports a creative process which unleashes the internal energy which may be repressed or suppressed. (Youngson, 2016) This essay accepts that concept and moves the thinking forward.

As a practical matter, deep spirituality is often the outcome of really effective psychotherapy. Perhaps this article might lend thoughts about why; and is likely an intersection of essay and art in the quest for self-understanding and meaning. There is a basic question to consider: do we find meaning or make it?

“For the novelist David Mitchell, writing a novel is a kind of controlled personality disorder...to make it work you have to concentrate on the voices in your head and get them talking to each other”. We are all novelists, claimed the philosopher, Daniel Dennett, a swipe perhaps at Sigmund Freud’s idea of the unconscious as inherently “poetic” but mainly alluding to the idea of the brain as a parallel processor, running off multiple “drafts” that shape us into the narrative selves we become. But most people aren’t literally novelists. Summoning voices with such intensity, living in the head for years at a time, would for most of us disorder our personalities, to say the least. But novelists control absorption or creative dissociation. They harness the power of the inner voice to create imaginary characters whose thoughts and feelings entangle with those of real readers. The novelist plays with the distinction between reality and fantasy without inner voices becoming uncontrolled hallucination.” (Waugh, 2015)

We are all broken and wounded. All of us carry the voice of the critical parent, the critical other. In the absence of those criticism, we say them to ourselves. When we are very young children we do what is called external verbalization. This means we say aloud what will later become internalized thought. We take on the language and thoughts of others, whether these are positive or negative. We internalize others and they become the voices we hear in our minds. Just as children have to individuate from the parent/caregiver to become individual and fully functioning, so the adult must confront the voices in our minds. Recognizing those voices are there and giving them a mechanism to speak is crucial to healthy adult development. In students and patients, giving voice to the voices speaking inside one’s mind is often facilitated by drawing mandalas and then being able to use the art as a starting point for self-disclosure. Pennebaker (1997, 1999) suggests, the use of mandala and expressive arts allows people who are less able to communicate verbally a mechanism to begin talking about their interior states.

While we have flows of thoughts, values, beliefs, encouragements, criticisms unique to us, we also are part of a human community and share aspects in common with all others of our species. How we think requires a dialogue (Alderson-Day, et al. 2016) of internalized language and that is used to communicate into the mind of another. Where we learned to be the way we are, how we think, may be unique but we all still hold many aspects in common with others.

Knowing this makes understanding ourselves, sharing our unique perspectives easier. One of the approaches we have to clinical understanding includes the concept of disease and health. (Baikie, & Wilhelm 2005) There is a recognition of the “language and voices” associated with specific mental dysfunctions in cancer, (FDA Research report, 2015) schizophrenia, (Andreason, 2000) and anorexia (Pugh & Waller, 2017). Importantly, most authors indicate that it is less the presence of a voice (which in some can also indicate a spiritual experience) but the

persons experience of the voice's content and the perceived intention of the message, i.e. positive or negative, critical or supportive.

For example, if we have interior voices shouting at us we have to learn to listen to them, hear over them and supply what they need to heal and be whole. All voices are trying to be heard, are part of the experience of healing when they are given appropriate attention and their message is understood. Just as there is an experience of voices in mental illness, there is also an experience of internal voice and hearing that is part of the healthy experience of human beings. The experience of voice is not monolithic but has diverse experience and designations. This is more a continuum experience. Inner speech or the processes of thought we use in verbal thinking is part and parcel of creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. This positivity leans into the ability to self-regulate while spanning the gap to mental dysfunctions in hallucinations, and pathology. How we integrate the experience and the meaning of the experience supports either growth or its contrary. Fundamentally, the ability to listen to an inner voice supports our courage to become and be the fullness of our potential. This developing self-awareness is the basis for health, self-determination and spiritual fulfillment.

There is an Irish joke about coping with one's feelings: "I'm an Irish male, I have one coping mechanism...repression." While the humor is easy to see, it happens that we do suppress and repress into the unconscious mind, that which is too painful to bear, particularly in childhood. That unaware information is part of what we do not know about ourselves and it comes up in everything we do. Until we make time to do reflective journaling and use mandalas and dreams to access that information, we have blinders which keep us from living and performing at our best.

*"Go back to the beginning and see things for what they are." – Quinn*

There is a teaching process to building the mandala which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a brief outline of creating one is included here. Suffice it to say, the art presented here began with circles at one point and developed to the stage of journal notation included here.

*"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## TO CREATE A MANDALA

- 1.) Gather materials. An 8.5 x 11 Spiral art pad, oil or chalk pastels, colored pencils, anything you like to work with. This art pad becomes the journal.
- 2.) Sit in a quiet place focusing attention on your interior and do a quick body scan.
- 3.) Choose a color you are drawn to or repelled by.
- 4.) Draw a circle on a page about the size of the page leaving enough room to date, and do some writing around. (see included art)
- 5.) With some quiet reflection, draw something in the circle to represent what you are feeling. (With a little time, you can represent a dream, a struggle, anything you want to work on, or you can just allow your unaware mind to take over and draw.)
- 6.) Then with whatever colors feel right fill in the rest of the circle.

- 7.) Date the page, make a title for the mandala
- 8.) List the first five words coming to mind about the mandala
- 9.) Then write a non-rhyming poem including those five words.

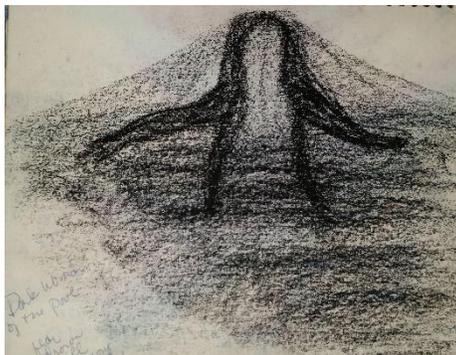
This is the basis of all mandala art therapy used with patients, groups, professional learning communities and, of course, our students and mentees. It is useful for getting clear, sharing with others where one is working and how it impacts the group or interpersonal growth and communication. It is also very useful for those who have difficulty with self-expression or self-disclosure because it gives a starting point to share verbally. We always remind the participants to share only what they feel comfortable sharing at that time. There is always time to bring in further reflections and connections.” (Quinn, 2014)

*“I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere, From muses unhired by you, dear mother. I woke one day to see you, mother, Floating above me in bluest air On a green balloon bright with a million Flowers and bluebirds that never were Never, never, found anywhere. But the little planet bobbed away Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here! And I faced my traveling companions. Day now, night now, at head, side, feet, They stand their vigil in gowns of stone, Faces blank as the day I was born, Their shadows long in the setting sun That never brightens or goes down. And this is the kingdom you bore me to, Mother, mother. But no frown of mine Will betray the company I keep.”*

– Sylvia Plath, *The Disquieting Muses. From the Collected Poems.*

## MANDALA ART EXAMPLES

This series of journaling art was based on mandalas preceding these images. However, this particular portion began with a dream the author had and the work persisted over several months. In the dream, the author was standing at the edge of a dark pool of water; a woman arose in the water and she was entirely black. The dream figure was taken to be the author’s mother with an intent to drag her into the pool and drown her.



**Image 1.** “Dark Lady of the Pool” and the words “fear, drown, kill, strong, and hit.”

There are several significant portions to this image which need to be considered. There is no face; water often stands for the subconscious mind; the water appears to drape the head of the

figure. Probably most importantly, women's relationships with the mother are profoundly complex, either paralyzing or generative. In processing the meaning of the relationship with the mother we come to an understanding of self. This is an individuation process for the child of the mother. The separation must happen for a healthy self and healthy relationship with the mother.

This process repeats again when the child becomes mother and must separate from her own daughter. The child who grows into the role of the wise woman will both allow and support the process. When this information is unresolved the woman will often have difficulties with projection of negative interactions with the mother onto relationships with other women. Conversely, understanding the fear, anger and complexity improves self-awareness and may also be of benefit to female-female relationships.

There is also a body of literature surrounding women in water, sirens, nymphs, these are multicultural images and metaphors. One significant one is the "Lady of the Lake" which is central to Arthurian legend, Excalibur, Merlin, and Morgan La Fae. Female energy is often associated with bodies of water and wells. For our purposes, it is sufficient to understand these metaphors usually contain the negative and positive energy of the female. Both energies are useful and necessary for growth. In psychology symbolism, water stands for the unconscious.

Shortly after the dream and the journaled art, the author drew the second. (Image 2) By color and design the image appears as a dark form attempting to capture the figure surrounded with light which has been knocked down, appears helpless and an action which could lead to being pulled into the pool of darkness. This image has two aspects, the power of the mother to destroy and in the face of a negative mother the helplessness of the daughter to separate.

*"Forgetting is an involuntary act...The more you want to leave something behind the more it follows you."*

— *The invisible guardian. William Jonas Barkley*



**Image 2.**

"I struggle with all my strength  
Against the dark woman  
Of the pool.  
If she pulls me in  
I drown.

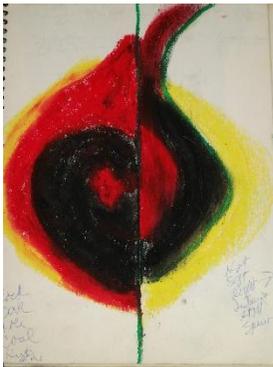
She wants to kill me and I'm afraid.  
So I hit her very hard and manage to escape.”

As you read these words they sound like a child. This is important. There is a simplicity in the beginning of a way out.

There is another perspective of this. As in all dream work, the woman is all the parts. We each carry the mother as a particular mother and the Universal Mother...the Goddess. We must deal with these images for the sake of the particular mother-daughter relationship and as the Universal Woman relationship. Our relationships to others depend on the discovery of this energy and meaning while using it to create the persons we choose to become and the effectiveness of our practice/performance in the world for all humankind. We must add here that the same thing must happen with resolution of the father. And this happens for men and women alike. Though not necessarily through the same means or metaphors.

While there is no explanation for the little green piece on the lower right side. It would be possible to have journaled and drawn about that in a process called amplification. *Amplification means taking any part of a mandala, changing the focus and expanded attention to a new portion.* That did not happen here, but can happen at any time in the future. In the process of amplification that shift in focus nearly always opens an expansion of awareness. Image 3. Illustrates how this would work.

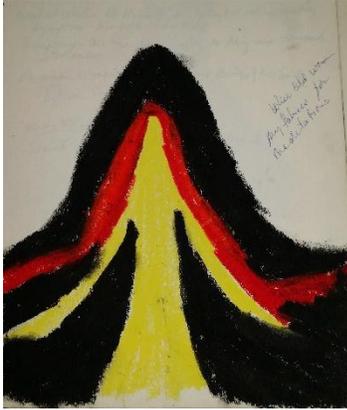
“Desire, like the atom, is explosive with creative force.” – Paul Vernon Buser



**Image 3.**

This is a mandala about releasing. It is helpful when one is stuck and needs to find a way out to a freer state. This is simple to do. Take a sheet in the art pad and fold in half, draw a mandala on the left side. Do the work exactly as always. And then turn the page over with an instruction to draw a mandala that embodies the way out or the change. The subconscious mind always knows an answer to this. Often the mandala will look different and have a kind of spewing to it. It is always amazing to see the energy released in this activity. Then do the same written work as usual with any mandala.

*“This is your body, your greatest gift, pregnant with wisdom you do not hear, grief you thought was forgotten, and joy you have never known.” -- Marion Woodman*



**Image 4.** wise old woman.

This image was created in a retreat where I was working on the “dark woman of the pool” and had done the releasing energy work. (<https://mwoodmanfoundation.org/>)

I suggest reading Marion Woodman (Schiff, 2008) and Michael White’s work in Narrative Maps. (Keeling, 2017). (I could see notes regarding this as bleed through on the page.)

During this retreat, which I was leading for professional women and men, we were working with fabrics of movement and writing with mandalas. After a discussion regarding Archetypes, the feminine and masculine both, I took fabrics and covered myself just like the figure noted here. As I sat in meditation this image came to me. And I documented it. It is important that the colors recapitulate the original drawings of the dark woman of the pool. The serious error which can be made is that there is an out there dark woman. Of course, there can be. But it is more important to discover the internal image, knowing that the integration is within. What is unfinished will be found outside/externally until we each realize the finishing work is an interior resolution.



**Image 5.** Well-spring released.

Changing the brain, changing, emotional responses. This is an important image which developed several weeks following Image 4. Expanding interior space and exterior space which contains us all. It is from the ground of being, the space between, the water of the spirit that new life flows. There is no way to move the river. The teaching at this point is to stand in the flow and allow it to move you. It can be seen there is black and red and yellow surrounding the blue water stream. These colors are an opening of the original images. As they transform, they change into something else which can be used to heal, move through the space between and engage with others. This is a transformational process using the very best of mandala art and reflective practice. Another thought: the engaging other is also a spiritual engaging Other. In these connections with each other and self we find....

*“When you make the two one, and  
When you make the inner as the outer  
And the outer as the inner and the above as the below...  
Then shall you enter [the Kingdom]....  
I am the Light that is above  
Them all, I am the All,  
The All came forth from Me and the All  
Attained to Me. Cleave a [piece of] wood, I  
Am there; lift up the stone and you will  
Find Me there.”*

*–The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas*

This is the beginning of spirituality.

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