

**Mandala Art:
Inter-professional Mindfulness Education and
Journaling Techniques for
Self-Awareness and Self-Transformation.**

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Abstract:

This article is the result of a series of presentations during the Summer 2012 and 2013 Academy for Expanded Perspectives on Learning conferences, as well as the Summer/Fall 2014 faculty development workshops for San Antonio College. The content is based on principles of mindfulness and reflective practice, supporting disclosure in non-verbal patients and students and utilizes expressive art in the form of Mandalas. The psychological underpinning for this form of expressive art is Jungian and is frequently used to self-identify similarities to establish inclusion of group members; use amplification of aspects from the mandala to stimulate awareness, self-expression, and communication with others; and finally to create a mechanism to diffuse and manage stress in academic and work environments.

Keywords: *nursing, psychotherapist, education, mandala, neuroeducation, focused attention, mindfulness, projection, amplification, problem-solving, emotional intelligence*

Learning Objectives:

- 1.) Describe the process for creation of a mandala.
- 2.) Explain the psychological basis for mandala usage.
- 3.) Implement a mandala creation in a personal journal.
- 4.) Describe mandala usage in a variety of settings.



“Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule.”

Thomas Carlyle, “Sartor Resartus”

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share a mechanism in expressive art called “mandala.” The presentation in Summer Conferences 2012 and 2013 and Summer/Fall faculty development workshops demonstrated its use within the context of a nursing program and provided an experiential opportunity for conference participants to learn the construction of mandalas, extrapolating their uses into a variety of cross-disciplinary settings.

Background

The word mandala comes from the ancient Sanskrit meaning “circle,” but it means more than just “circle” in the geometric sense. It also connotes the universe, entirety, whole: a center point to surrounding space. Fundamentally, the mandala is the container for psychological meanings and images projected into it, and it is the basis of the religious mandalas used in Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, and Native American cultures.

Historically, the concept of the mandala can be traced to C.G. Jung’s designation of the Mandala as an archetypal form and “a representation of the unconscious self” and can help work towards wholeness in personality development and healing (Jung, 1968, 1972). The work of Jean Kellogg extended the interpretation and possible uses of the mandala into the diagnostics and assessment of children and adults (1974). Her classic text weaves together the archetypes, historical versions of mythology, and present culture as the basis for the use of mandala art forms in psychotherapy and assessment. More recently, Susanna Fincher’s mandala analysis and assessment work (1991) supports the view that integrating psychological subconscious information with emotional and cognitive information increases patient understanding and well-being.

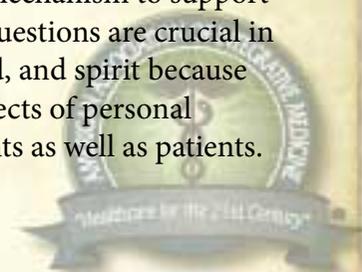
The use of expressive arts and writing for treating traumatic events is widespread and effective. Research in a variety of settings that use both has demonstrated positive results in mitigating the negative consequences of trauma through writing/journaling experiences and using techniques such as Pennebaker’s Written Disclosure Protocol (1997). In the arts “it is a process of discovering ourselves through any art form that comes from an emotional depth. Expressive art refers to using the emotional, intuitive aspects of ourselves in various media” (Rogers, 1993). As demonstrated in research conducted in a number of settings, individuals’ psychological and emotional health can benefit from journaling, writing, and expressive arts.

Henderson, in her work with students with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), considered:

There are also individuals who lack a strong enough command of written language to engage in a written disclosure task, such as children and those who are illiterate or under-educated. These populations are unlikely to benefit from written disclosure simply because they lack the capacity to write at such a sophisticated level. Disclosure of trauma by such individuals might be better accomplished symbolically through a creative artistic task rather than through written or verbal channels (2007).

These thoughts raise the questions with which we currently grapple. How do we bring expressive language and communication to those who are not prepared or at a level to do so?

How do we elicit inner images and meanings while supporting self-disclosures and personal growth? What is the best mechanism to support the development of different writing skills? These questions are crucial in practice as an educator and as a healer of body, mind, and spirit because both aspects are important. Integration of these aspects of personal development is necessary to the well-being of students as well as patients.



In 1996, Goleman put forward the theory of Emotional Intelligence encompassing the following characteristics and abilities:

Self-awareness: knowing emotions, recognizing feelings as they occur, and discriminating between them;

Mood management: managing feelings developed in context and reacting appropriately;

Self-motivation: handling feelings and directing the self toward a goal;

Empathy: recognizing feelings in others and tuning into their verbal and non-verbal cues; and

Managing relationships: involves interpersonal interactions, conflict resolutions, and negotiations.

The healthy, functioning individual possesses these qualities and they are also qualities we hope to instill in students. An understanding and employment of the characteristics is a consequence of reflective work with media that allows for exploration of these aspects of personality.

While recognizing the continued value of Delors' (1993) concepts of the four pillars of learning – learning to do, learning to be, learning to know, and learning to live with others – we consider the necessity of bringing all these perspectives to every mandala exercise. Part of the function of mandala exercises is to combine techniques (writing, journaling, and art) to maximize experience and retention of information, to evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques we use, and the possibility of helping students learn mechanisms to carry with them in the future, as these strengths are discovered and developed within them. Combining techniques seems to encompass the greatest number of learning styles and the inclusion of the greatest number of students, while supporting their successful outcome. Teaching the student to think in multiple styles and

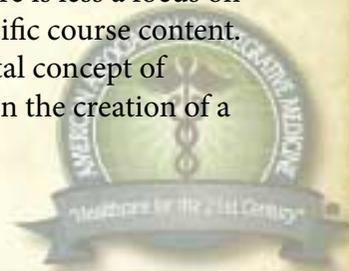
from various perspectives is equally important.

In 2004, from the UNESCO Expert's Meeting, "Education, Art and Information and Communications Technology," four forms of thinking were determined to be necessary for the holistic development of the personality. "Image thinking, discursive thinking, integrative thinking, and projective thinking... by the end of the 20th century it has become evident that in order to form a creative personality capable of self-development under post-industrial conditions, one needs to develop projective thinking" (Selivanov, 2004).

Projective thinking combines the three previous types of thinking and coalesces them into an ability to generate creative solutions to problems through expressive processes and materials. Through a mechanism of creative processes the totality of personality and cognitive function are brought to bear on problem-solving and artistic manifestation for the purposes of communicating interpersonally and cross-culturally. The driving energy of this process is to shape individuals who are better able to utilize whole brain functioning and be self-aware and communicative with others while using the most current technologies for communication.

If the intent of teaching is to shape, then the medium for that teaching in its most rudimentary form should be simple, in tune with individual psyches, allow for both verbal and non-verbal expression, and be communicable with others. Recently the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (2011) concluded that "the practice of teaching across classroom subjects in tandem with the arts, have been yielding some particularly promising results in school reform and closing the achievement gap" (p. vi).

Utilized in these school and academic settings, there is less a focus on the psyche and more on expressive art related to specific course content. Even so, it is important to understand the fundamental concept of projection and the psychological processes involved in the creation of a mandala.



The intent of this art form is to approach a blank page as a screen on which the individual may project unconscious information, either to discover a metaphor or external issue to be considered or an internal issue to be expressed, or as a means of facing feelings with which there is a struggle. It is apparent that using the art for creative communication brings something to the academic experience that is “more than” the academic content alone. It is also expected that journaling these experiences and preserving them over time allows the student an opportunity to re-visit and re-think the image and the experience. Evaluating self, the process of discovery, and the content of creation is not time-bound but a constantly evolving experience.

For the purposes of this paper we will review in a step-by-step manner the construction of the mandala for the classroom setting. Students are instructed to take a relaxed, meditative position, clear the mind, and focus attention. This is an exercise in mindfully focused attention upon a creative process that allows the unconscious to create a symbolic image it needs in order to bring the concept into conscious awareness.

The initial stance in approaching the mandala is one of mindful openness. It is helpful to keep in mind as part of the focusing process that “there is some evidence that a brief MM [Mindfulness Meditation] induction can be beneficial for untrained participants” (Arch and Craske, 2006). Some short opening focus in mindful meditation or focused attention could facilitate the relaxation process sufficiently to support the initial production of a mandala. What we are beginning with is a short guided meditation to relax the body and bring the mind to focused awareness. Then the directions for creating the mandala are given in a step by step fashion with each direction given at each point. We are walking through the creative process with the student one step at a time.

In this exercise the role of faculty is to hold the space for the student as witness or observer to a process that is unique to the student producing it. That role function is stated. This means the least amount of instruction the better because the space allows for individual creativity to be used without constraints.

Creating the Mandala

When approaching mandala-making there is, first of all, the blank page. This acts as a screen for the creator to approach, to create the metaphor for the internal state into tangible reality. The creation process is simple.

Prior to beginning, if possible, clear the mind and focus the attention on the blank page, then:

- 1.) With whatever preferred instruments (crayons, pastels, even watercolors) draw a circle that nearly fills the page;
- 2.) draw something in the circle that represents the feeling, thought, dream, struggle, or internal place with which one is currently dealing;
- 3.) fill in the circle in whatever way “feels right.”

The second portion of the exercise moves from the right brain construction of the image to a segment I call “anchoring.” This is a linear-sequential activity designed to create conscious connections and interpretations of the mandala.

- 4.) Title the mandala “as if it were a work of art” to bring symbolic meaning into the forefront linguistically.
- 5.) Direct the student to write down words to anchor this symbolic meaning. Often just listing the first five words that come to mind about the image is sufficient.
- 6.) Follow the instruction to write a non-rhyming poem using those five words.
- 7.) Remember to date the work.

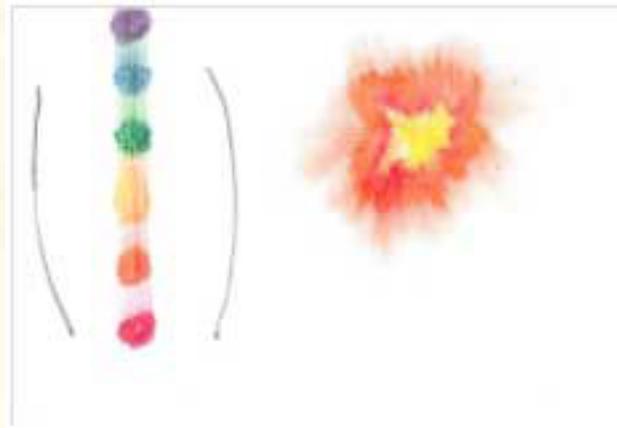


Usually students are asked to journal and use this technique to grapple with developing reflective thought processes or mindfulness.

In the course of developing the ability to reflect on images, self, language, and choices, the next exercise is useful. It is possible immediately after the process, or at any time in the future, to do an “amplification” based on some part of the mandala. This means taking some aspect of the original mandala and making another mandala to enlarge, expand, and re-view the metaphor. In this process we often see a way out of the “problem” or we can develop a view that transforms the original mandala, bringing new meaning or insight into the work.

The following are two examples of this process. The first comes from my own work on May 11, 2012 with an image from a dream where I awoke with anger in my chest. Using a documented dream with a single image (which in itself is a mandala); these mandalas were anchored with notations. [Note: there is no documentation of the dream itself, only the feeling that seemed more important for my work. It is important to remember this when working with students, this is highly individualized work determined by the needs currently present.]

Mandala 1



May 11, 2012

“ I awoke with a surge of energy in my chest... it felt like anger... really deep anger.”

“Hot, burning, painful, sitting, body.
I drew a column representing the chakra
And what I see is the bottom three moving upward
Sitting in my chest like molten lava surging.”

The second image is a complete mandala dated December 1, 2012, from my work, created in the manner discussed previously. There are clear differences between the two images. The first is small, compact, and intense in coloration. The second is more expansive, uses additional colors, and demonstrates a transformation of the emotion into another form. This often happens in the process of amplification. The way out, or the transformation, is present in the original mandala and expresses itself either through color usage, shape change, or another linked shift. In helping students evaluate their work, the process for critical thought and analysis begins. This process is both developing internal self-awareness and the ability to critically consider external creation. In a mindful manner it is possible for the student to reflect on the unfolding of a developmental sequence over time and review the development of thought processes associated with internal awareness.

It is possible, when using these individual exercises, have students self-select groups based on perceived connections and similarities with each other's mandalas rather than choosing to work in groups created by friends sitting with each other. This exercise, used in this manner, may extend the compassionate understanding of others and embracing connections that might not be readily observable by students. This exercise with the first mandala is often used in class groupings. Then it becomes possible to create additional individual mandalas reflecting changes within individuals while working with a "new" group or to even create a group mandala for awareness of the collective experience.

Mandala 2



Dec. 1, 2012

"Amplification from May 11, 2012."

"Star, burst, beautiful, energy, transformed

Up close a star bursts forth... from sleeping stillness... creative, beautiful

This awful pain and energy transformed... joyful... light."

Mandala 3



Dec. 9, 2012

“Goldfish schooling”

“Out of a dream like goldfish schooling, the energy rises.”

This third mandala comes from a dream had while working on this article. In the dream the energy began as a school of golden fish schooling around my feet, swirling upward until my entire body was surrounded with energy. The side effect of this process is a sense of healing and pain diminishing... and a kind of “en-lightenment” taking its place. This metaphor for transformation of interior and exterior energy happens on its own without focusing on the emotion but rather on the art and meaning of this article.

What becomes readily apparent from the first mandala image to the second and then in the third is the developmental process involved. There is no need to do an in-depth psychoanalysis of the image or the process of anchoring. Just noting the use of color and shifts in line and form, the overall affective response evoked is sufficient material with which to work. That moves the work forward and the subconscious or unaware mind is allowed to do its own work. That makes this very useful for classroom work. The focus is not therapy or psychological, but rather the task at hand.

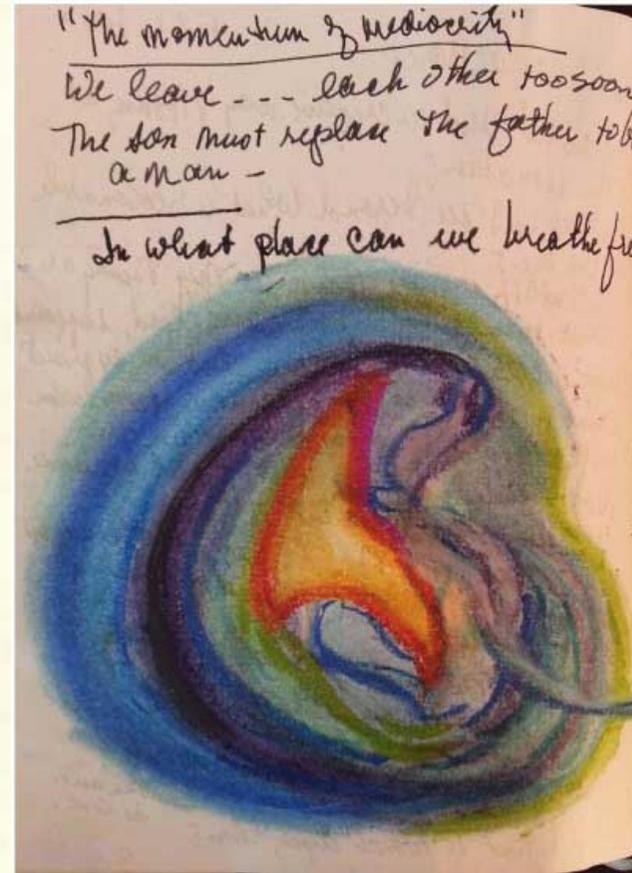
While faculty may observe and assist the student in interpreting, the final valuation of the mandala rests with the student. This is an individual metaphor and an individual path. Many times there is another amplification process at work that generates yet another image/mandala. Each mandala contains the seed of the next mandala. There is always the ability to take an image, portion, thought, color, and shape from the Mandala and enlarge or expand it. The process is endless.



Mandala 4

As these mandalas progressed so did the intensity and complexity of the mandala itself. By the time the fourth mandala was created there was an intentional use of the color yellow and the concretizing of the shape in that color.

What art does best is express the internal and often unconscious state. This medium is very personal; the teacher/therapist is witness to the process but not the evaluator of meaning. In the course of writing and anchoring thoughts about the work, individuals may want to express some aspects and remain silent about others. That is their prerogative. It is also helpful in the course of therapy and education to refer back and review the progression of the work because it unfolds meaning in a way that is different from each discrete mandala.



February 1

"The momentum of Mediocrity"

We leave ... each other too soon.

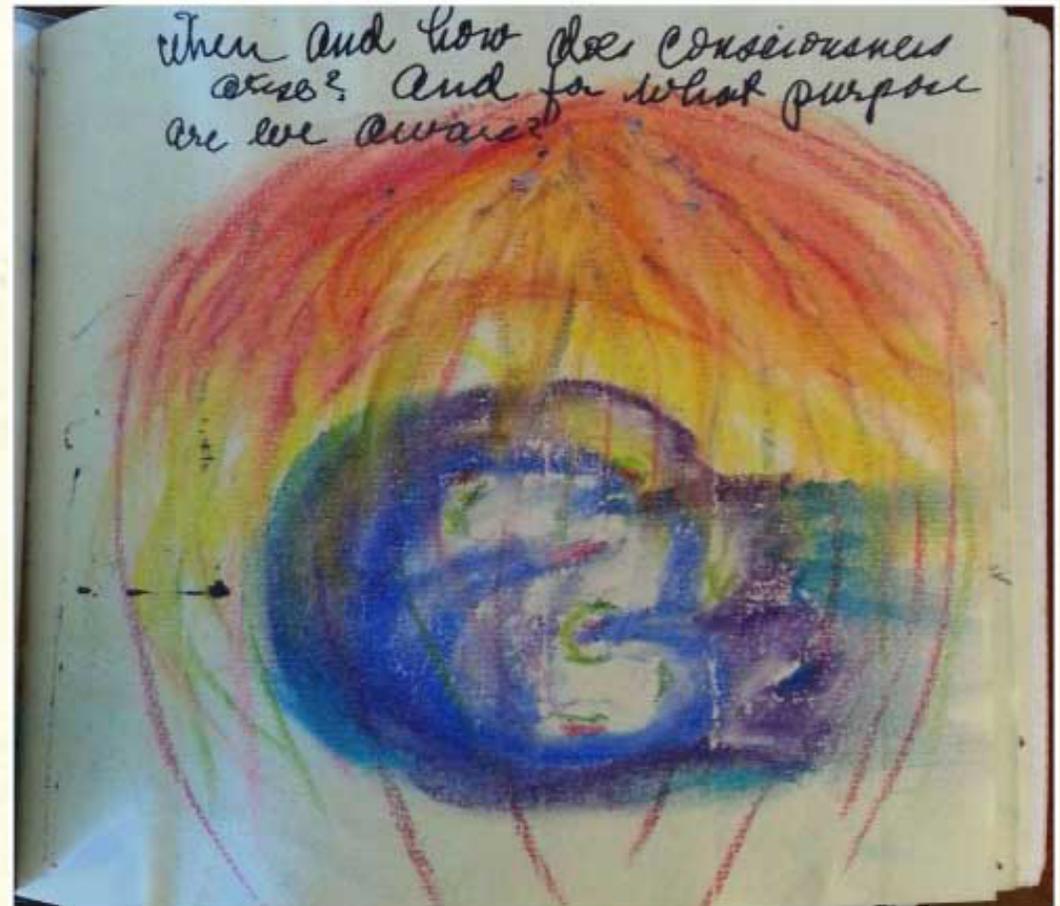
The son must replace the father to be a man

In what place can we breathe free

Within a few days the fifth mandala was created and use of the color, shape and placement of the representing energy is transformed. This transformation is obvious. The move from constrained to an overarching “showering” of light seems to enfold and energize a developing aspect contained within the center of the mandala.

In many years of using mandalas as part of my own journaling and using mandala art as a mechanism with both students and patients, it has become apparent that there are stories accompanying each re-vision. Each return to the mandala brings with it a revision in the narrative or the meaning of the mandala to its creator. There is a progression of thought in efforts to communicate in written and verbal language the meaning and discoveries of evolving meaning for the individual. In the space of safety we create for self and others there is the possibility of giving voice to the many voices of the mind. We help by amplifying each piece of a mandala for each associated voice or experience to arise bringing a new awareness and view to the process. It allows for the creation of a fictional other voice to speak for the self until that self can claim and incorporate the voices as one's own fragmented communications. This is the art of one's communication of self to self, and then self to other. The significance of this final aspect cannot be minimized. It is important for there to be audience and witnesses who “hear” and “see” without judging or evaluating, but accept the presenting of “self” in this form. This function of an accepting, validating audience becomes important as part of the interaction as a responder to disclosure. While this often takes a while for some to achieve, the mechanism of the mandala as an expressive form seems to safely accelerate the process.

Mandala 5



February 5

“When and How Does Consciousness Arise?”

“When and how does consciousness arise?
And for what purpose are we aware?”

It allows for the creation of a fictional other voice to speak for the self until that self can claim and incorporate the voices as one's own fragmented communications. This is the art of one's communication of self to self, and then self to other. The significance of this final aspect cannot be minimized. It is important for there to be audience and witnesses who "hear" and "see" without judging or evaluating, but accept the presenting of "self" in this form. This function of an accepting, validating audience becomes important as part of the interaction as a responder to disclosure. While this often takes a while for some to achieve, the mechanism of the mandala as an expressive form seems to safely accelerate the process.

In comparing the mandalas in this article it is also important to understand the process of "amplification." By taking one aspect of the first mandala (in this series it was the color yellow) and following it throughout the entire series, a developmental process becomes apparent. However, any aspect of the mandala could have been selected and the series would have developed with different understandings and meanings expressed. What began as a small exercise in design to express a single feeling that first appeared in a dream, and the inclusion of its amplification in each mandala, stretched itself into evolving complexity and expanding meaning. Because of the nature of projection, this meaning will expand and develop each time the mandalas are revisited. Like beautiful art, the beholder brings something new to each re-vision.

With the passage of time there are greater dimensions that may be brought to the mandala. Oftentimes the image presents itself as an elaboration or enlargement of a previous thought or process. The following mandala was produced nearly a year after the previous ones. It began as documentation of shoulder pain and without conscious planning the mandala became the starting point for an academic teaching process.

Mandala 6



July 21, 2014

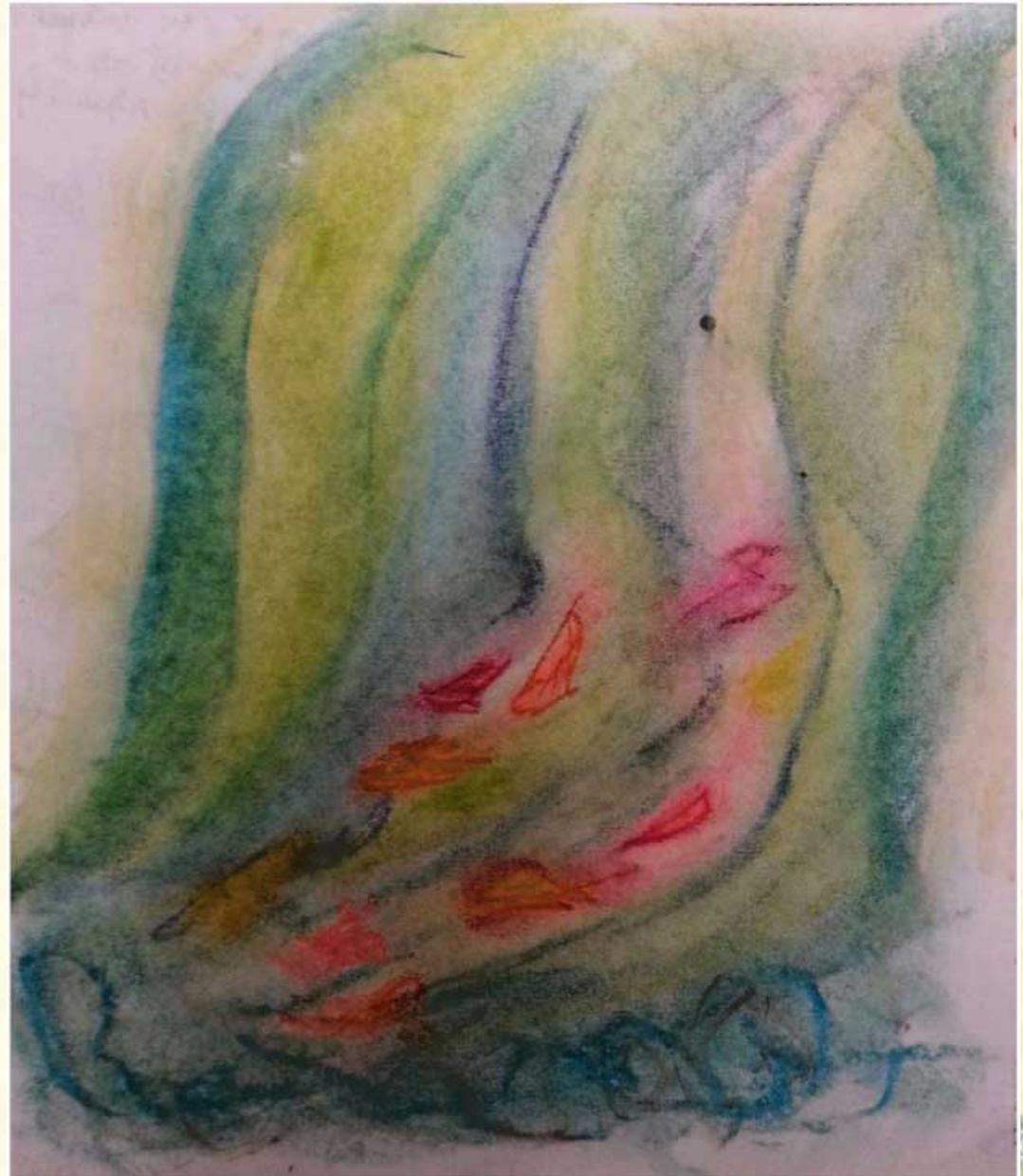
"Aleph"

Part of a professional development retreat, this work unfolds in relation to a current project. Reviewing this work, it appears harsher and more electrified in its use of color and line, particularly at the lower right, which represents the almost electric feel of the shoulder pain. The most important part of the mandala is the portion just above, which resembles little packets or contained pieces. Concurrent with the art work was research on music, infinite extensions of octaves in space, sympathetic vibrations in space, and questions regarding musical gestures and body movement. As part of my research I found a quote from Albert Einstein, “everything is vibration.” The next step in the therapeutic process is to allow the thoughts and images to “simmer.” While I read articles on electricity and music and movement, I ignored the mandala itself, allowing my mind to work in the background, unconsciously, and with my full awareness of the process.

During meditation and mandala review the next day, a colleague noted that it looked like a pod with seeds in it. As I looked at it I wondered what would happen if the seeds just dropped from the pod... and what were the seeds about? Later as I worked on team-building it occurred to me that I was carrying team-building burdens on my shoulders, and if I could allow them to drop, I might feel less pain, and perhaps the seeds could do what they needed.

I considered the following reflective questions: how do individuals become real teams? How can I support that creation? What common vision do we hold? What are we trying to create together? How do we embody this common vision and purpose? Are there natural leaders I could support to carry some of this? How can we best serve the whole? Who is the helper and who is the helped? What questions do we need to ask? How would I design team effort? Two days later some of the answers began in the next mandala.

Mandala 7



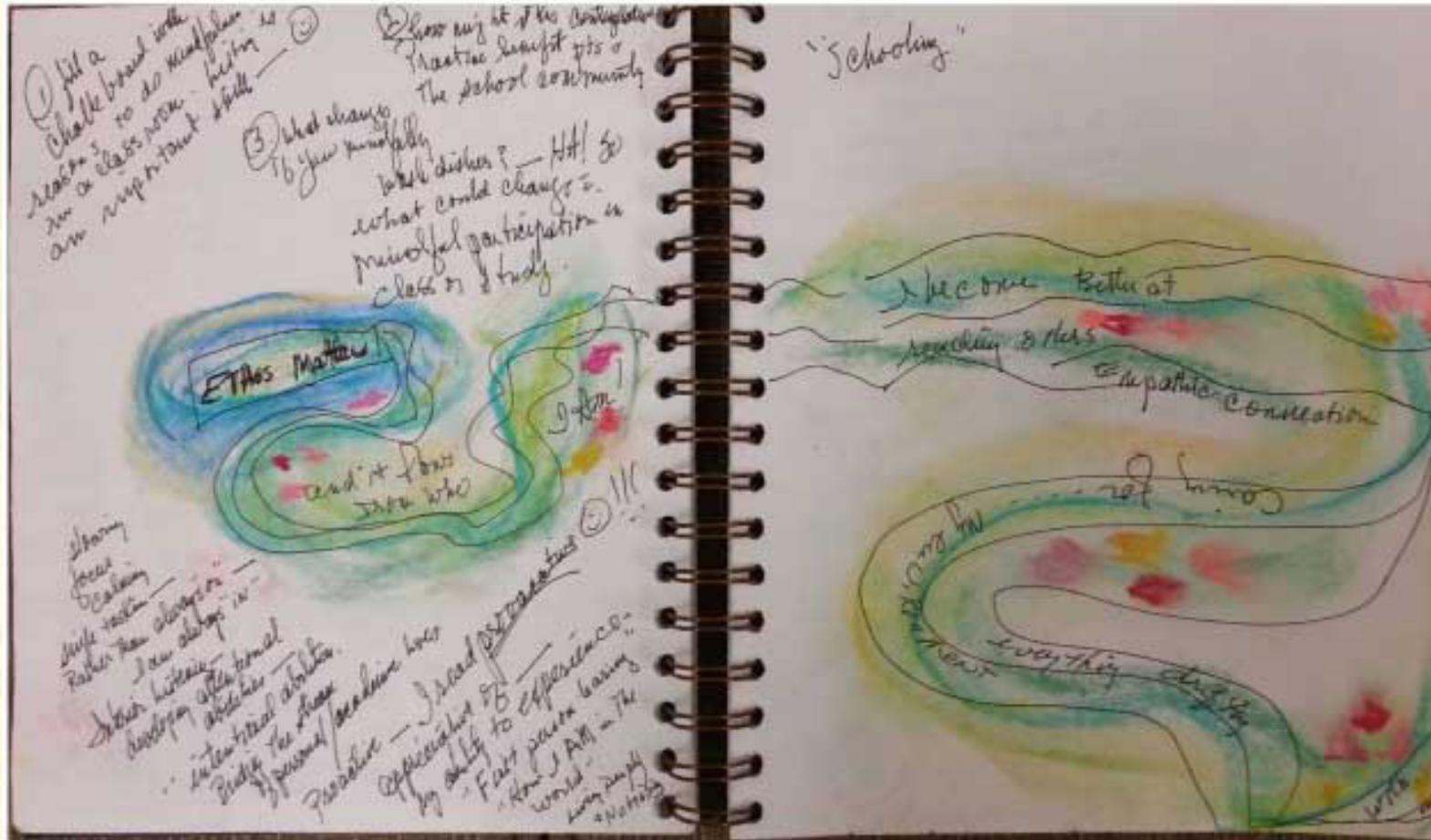
July 23, 2014
“Waterfall”

Three aspects become most apparent: as the colors soften the images open up, beginning to flow, and the little packets turn into "gold" fish swimming in the water. (This transformation of metaphorical symbols and images from one mandala to another is common in mandala art when used for self-awareness and project work.)

By the next day, after meditation and considering the research, the mandala centered on environment/ethos with techniques for teaching

and group formation into teams. Interestingly, the new conceptual model for my current work is a stream flowing from a spring. This metaphor is useful because it fits with the direction of the current work and it gives a humorous metaphor for all of us about our purpose in "schooling" ourselves, our patients, and our students. Another colleague mentioned that it seemed like some of my goldfish are swimming upstream. And it does often feel as if we move upstream, against the currents.

Mandala 8



July 24, 2014

"Schooling"



Conclusions

The history of mandala art is rich from both spiritual and psychological perspectives. The form itself is simply taught, easily learned, and is possible to include in already existing journaling and writing exercises. Other uses of this same mechanism may focus on individual projects, dreams, or community or group mandalas.

Current research demonstrates the effectiveness of using the medium as a technique for developing self-awareness and supporting critical thought and mindfulness processes, and it is believed that the possibility for using art across curricula is supportive of educational advancement in academically impoverished students and schools. Certainly these possibilities beg further research.



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Dr. Kathleen C. Quinn holds a doctorate in Marriage and Family Psychotherapy (St. Louis University), and Master's degrees in Women's Health Nursing, WHNP-BC, (Vanderbilt University), Theological Studies, Religious Education (Notre Dame Seminary), and Guidance and Counseling (University of New Orleans). In addition to a career-long background in media, a rich clinical career as a Women's Health Nurse Practitioner and

Psychotherapist, her focus on translational research in psychoneuroimmunology and mirror neurons contribute to Dr. Quinn's unique melding of theory and application to provide a new standard for self- and other-care. Dr. Quinn's clinical practice in Discovery Integrative Healthcare Centers and as Executive Director of the National Sexual Trauma Center utilizes her academic background in both Integrative Nursing and Psychotherapy. She is an international teacher/speaker and presents nationally and internationally in innovative educational methods in both fields.





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