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Fishing for clues

By Jennifer Simmons, Managing Editor

It may seem fishy to some that a Virginia counselor used Mandala art to get to the root of clients' problems—but it's so popular, that now the art is on public display

The strongest shape is a circle. It has no corners to become over stressed and break. It distributes weight across its entire surface with an even balance. It is flexible, yet can easily return to its original form. Therefore, it is no wonder that when Michael Brown asks his clients to draw within a circle and create a piece of Mandala art, he receives such a strong, therapeutic reaction.

"The main feature of Mandala art is that it is a circle into which one paints or sketches a design," Brown, a Licensed Professional Counselor and member of the American Counseling Association, said. "Such circular art is found throughout the world and throughout time. It finds its most powerful expression in Tibetan Buddhism, but also in Native American sand paintings, the medicine wheel and in Eskimo and Inuit art."

Brown, who began his training as a lysergic acid diethylamide - or LSD - therapist, has used Mandala art in his counseling practice for 28 years to help in the development of the therapeutic relationship. According to Brown, incorporating the Mandala art into his practice "involves a creative and symbolic process in conjunction with mental imagery."

It is that connection that Brown calls "the link."

"The wonderful simplicity in the Mandala art is that it becomes a focus point," he said. "A symbol itself of wholeness, one projects into (the Mandala) images from the dream life, spiritual experiences or even fascinations of the world of nature. Mandala art works as a process and a place to represent goals, visions and images of significance. Brown said that using mental imagery as the connection in therapy helps clients create imaginative metaphors for the issues and problems that confront them. The client becomes creatively involved in looking at those patterns and dynamics in their life, and Mandala art is a way to capture



Michael Brown shows off the minnow that he and several of his clients painted for an outdoor art exhibition in Richmond, VA.

that imagery so clients can remember it, reflect on it later, and so they can "own" and begin to transform those patterns.

But what Mandala art is not is a tool for counselors to look at and say, "Ah ha! You drew a monkey swinging from the trees! Clearly you have a problem with commitment and you are not grounded in reality ... and you didn't get along well with your dad."

In actuality, the benefit of Mandala art for the therapist is its ability to open lines of communication and more quickly identify the issues at hand than with traditional talk therapy. This benefit is no more obvious than in the case of a teen-age client Brown recently worked with. The teenager had been in trouble for anger and assault in his school. No one had been able to work with the boy, citing that he was impulsive and reactive.

Brown's solution was to use Mandala art to get the teenager to understand and take ownership of his actions. Brown asked the boy to pick an animal that would represent the angry and reactive pattern and draw it in his Mandala. "He came up with an image of a tiger hunting for food," Brown said. "And it was tearing apart a small zebra. I asked



Client mandala

him why he was attacking the zebra, and he said the zebra did something he didn't like. I then asked him how did the zebra feel about the tiger? When he thought about this (the client) was upset to see the imagery he'd created. He had never been able to see the situation. I asked him, 'Who does the zebra represent?' and he told me it represented his mother, his sister and his girlfriend. He had a lot of violence inside."

Mental imagery helps clients create imaginative metaphors for the issues and problems that confront them. Mandala art is a way to capture that imagery so clients can remember it, reflect on it later, and so they can "own" and begin to transform those patterns.

Being able to actually see the situation in front of them is what Brown believes to be a very important part of the process. "At the deepest level and the most precise use of mental imagery is the depiction of a specific pattern of thinking or behaving that is troublesome to the client or alternately that symbolizes an ideal model of some kind - what they want to change or what they want to grow into," Brown said. "Mental imagery can be very precise in identifying specific patterns with unique imagery to the client that brings ownership, involvement, excitement and motivation because they have created the image of that specific issue."

For the teenager, capturing and representing himself in a Mandala was the beginning of his breakthrough in therapy. "These clients get a lot of advice, a lot of opinions and a lot of people tell them what to do," Brown said. "(Drawing the Mandala) helps them take ownership of the problem from the inside out. They are powerfully focused with no resistance because it's their image. So then, after drawing the Mandala, I asked him to empathize with the zebra. Something he'd never been able to do before was to connect empathically with the objects of this anger and he cried about it. I asked him to be the zebra, to feel afraid, vulnerable, wary and hopeless as the jaws of the tiger came down on it.

"The teenager moved from acting out behavior, to inward looking, to identification of the pattern through imagery, to the symbolic representation of the pattern, to empathy with the victim, and then I asked him what part of him was like the zebra. In a series of two sessions I was able to get to his experience of emotional and mental abuse by his stepfather. And this was what was driving all of his behavior."

Before the boy's work with Mandala art, no one had been able to reach him and he was already a junior in high school. He has since formed a willingness to allow his mother and stepfather into the counseling process to work on the problem.

Recently, Brown was given the opportunity to take Mandala art out of the therapy session and expose the greater community of Richmond, VA., to its influences. This summer, the city launched the largest outdoor art expo in the history of Virginia, called the "Go Fish Project." Two hundred, 5-foot long ceramic

fish were placed around the city, and artists were invited to submit proposals for how they would decorate their fish.

"I saw the opportunity to festoon one of these fish with Mandala art to represent to the people of Virginia the power and the beauty of mental imagery and Mandala art," Brown said. The Institute for Creative Living, of which Brown is the founder and director, sponsored what has become known as "The Mandala

minnow."

Brown himself has made more than 2,000 Mandalas in his lifetime, so he chose to decorate one side of the fish with his "story" told through Mandalas and for the other side, he invited six women from a group he leads to choose their own Mandalas to place on the fish.

"The most exciting part was when (the women) decided to do the Mandalas, they brought together 25 journals and looked at probably 200 Mandalas to decide how they would tell the story of transformation," he said. More than 350 hours of work later, and the Mandala minnow was complete with 32 Mandalas emblazoned on its sides.

Jo Diperna has been doing Mandala art with Brown for several years and contributed a Mandala entitled "Boobles," a mermaid breaking through the water's surface, to the minnow.

"I didn't stick to the formal Mandala circle format," Diperna said. "When this project came around, a lot of people were going back to their journals to find images, but I decided that I wanted an image just for the fish. I meditated and what I got was the mermaid breaking through the water."

Because Diperna's space on the Minnow was the tail fin, she thought that drawing the Mandala in the circle seemed "artificial and arbitrary to slap this thing on the fin when the fin had such a design and texture to it. So I worked the mermaid's shape to try to fit it to the fin, which I just found more satisfying."



Jo Diperna

Kaja MacDonnell has been hooked on Mandala art since her first encounter with Brown in 1990. "I was doing an Earth Day event at the College of William and Mary," MacDonnell said. "Michael

Brown was facilitating it. I drew a Mandala that had great meaning and wrote a five-line poem. I connected with myself in a way that I'd needed for a long time. It was like making love to myself - it was very weird. And I knew right then, this was process that I needed in my life and I will do more of it - and of course, I have."

In fact, MacDonnell added five Mandalas to the Minnow and felt it was important for her to revisit her past Mandalas for this project. "One of the things I've learned about Mandala art is that no matter what you reap from that first Mandala the first time you do it, each Mandala has so much depth of meaning that there is always an opportunity for it to tell you yet a deeper story for some insight within yourself or others," MacDonnell said. "Knowing this, the opportunity to spend this kind of time with artwork, some of which was almost 10 years old, was an opportunity to travel back to those times and see what those Mandalas could teach me now."

MacDonnell also said that the power of being with other women who were also sharing in the experience made the Minnow worth



Kaja MacDonnell

investing her time creatively. "To do this together is such a rare opportunity," she said. Both women believe strongly in the impact Mandalas can have on the therapeutic process as well as in day-to-day life. Just as with Brown, Diperna and MacDonnell have drawn Mandalas outside of the counseling environment. MacDonnell uses Mandala art with her children, while Diperna has used it to aid her in a career choice.

"I drew a Mandala of the job I was in at the time," Diperna said. "The image had alligators and snakes in it, and I thought, 'Well, duh! What took you so long to figure out you needed to leave?' I also use it for relaxation. Mandala art is not just about rooting out negative stuff. It can be used for positive things as well."

Diperna said she responded well to Mandala art because her experience with traditional counseling had not been productive, calling the group work she'd done "rigid."

"The neat thing about doing Mandalas is you're drawing and not even realizing you're putting things into the picture," Diperna said. "My breakthrough image was when I first used color. All my pictures before had been black and white."

Diperna said she usually has a very specific idea of what she is drawing and what everything stands for, but that Brown doesn't tell the client what they're doing. Instead, he asks the client what the images they've drawn mean to them.



"You explain it and he'll offer some interpretation after yours," she said. "For example, at the very end (of drawing a Mandala), I was just tacking on something extra - birds in the air as an afterthought - when (Brown) asked, 'What is this over here? What's the importance of the number 6?' I asked him, 'What do you mean?' and he said, 'There are six birds.'"

MANDALA MINNOW AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

A one-hour video about the clinical use of mental imagery and mandala art, the meaning of each mandala, interviews with three artists, and a view of 37 of the other fish in Richmond's GO FISH! project: \$10.00. 7 page transcript of the program with color images of all 32 mandalas: \$4.00.

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"Something traumatic had happened when I was six years old that I had completely forgotten about," Diperna said. "Who knows how long it would have taken us to get there if we had done chitty-chat counseling?"

Diperna believes that Brown's use of Mandala art gives him "insights into you that you weren't ready to share. It just seems that when the image is there, there are certain things that are right in front of you that you at least have to acknowledge. You can have the elephant sitting in the room and not deal with it, but at least you've seen it."