



IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

Mandalas as a tool for transformation to enable human flourishing: the influence of Carl Jung

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My work as a practice developer has been influenced by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, in particular his work with mandalas. Jung is a revered role model from whom I draw inspiration as I develop my own professional artistry as a transformational facilitator. This professional artistry spans all areas of healthcare practice and can incorporate direct patient care as well as staff facilitation processes (Titchen, 2009). My experience of working with mandalas has shown me their potential as a tool for transformation to enable human flourishing, for patients and staff.

'A mandala is a picture that tells a story, it is a sacred space, often a circle which reveals some inner truth about yourself and the world' (Watts, 2000, p 6).

I would like to share some ideas of working with mandalas as a tool for self-exploration and expression, to enable human flourishing. McCormack and Titchen (2006) identified human flourishing as an integral component and product of transformative practice development. I personally relate to human flourishing as achieving a sense of wholeness, living comfortably in the here and now, where one is connected to an inner knowing that strives for optimal growth and wellbeing of self and others. In this paper I reflect on exemplar quotes by Jung and how I have worked with them on a personal and professional basis to enable my own growth and flourishing, and in supporting others on the same path.

Introducing mandalas

A century ago the Western world was largely unfamiliar with mandalas, beyond the academic community of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. However, this was not the sphere in which Jung, who is best known for his pioneering exploration of the collective unconscious, first encountered the mandala. He discovered it 'in his efforts to relieve suffering – both his own and that of patients in psychotherapy' (Cornell, 2006, p 140).

'I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. With the help of these drawings I could observe my psychic transformations from day to day' (C.G. Jung, cited in Cornell, 2006, p 142).

Over an extended period, attempting to find answers and to explore his own inner world, Jung began working with mandalas on a daily basis and found that this practice had a positive and calming influence on him. From his own personal experience he subsequently developed mandalas as an aid to psychological understanding.

'He guided his clients to make colourful mandalas as a way to express and understand deeper subconscious processes' (Watts, 2000, p 22).

My introduction to mandalas

I was introduced to the work of Jung about four years ago. I was working at home raising my two young children and beginning to consider returning to my previous position as a nurse educator. One day I saw a flyer advertising 'Mandala workshop - A tool for enlightenment and self-discovery'. My attention and imagination were captured immediately; I felt I had suddenly stumbled on a 'secret map' that could lead me on a journey to find my own internal treasures. I became excited by the quest.

The following weekend I attended my first mandala workshop and became re-acquainted with crayons and paintbrushes 20 years after I had last used them! Initially I felt confronted by the soft pastel crayons and the vibrant coloured paints. Memories of my primary school teacher stormed my brain with cries of 'not good enough'. I was reeling emotionally and mentally as I sat with my fellow explorers. What was I going to create and, more worryingly, what would come out of me? Would my work be laughed at or would I be shamed somehow?

The gentle, supportive and skilled workshop facilitator explained in her introduction that, when working with mandalas, we should always remember that:

'There is nothing to prove and there is nobody to please; the mandala comes from within you, from your own creative self, therefore it is worthy work.'

She went on to explain that even if you draw a 'big black blob', if it has meaning for you then that is the most important thing. I was reassured and began to draw, despite what my head (inner critic) was telling me. I had received my creative licence! This permission was all I needed. Off I went, mind, body and spirit fused together and I completed my first mandala (Figure 1). Reader, please take comfort. As you can see, one does not need to be a professional artist to work with mandalas in a critical creative way!

Figure 1: 'Me, Here, Now Mandala'



Following this experience I felt drawn to do more. Something was shifting inside me. From that moment on, I had to keep drawing. It was as if I was beginning to 'draw myself out', discovering my own inner mysteries and knowings. I now realise that my creative self was 'awakening'. Not long afterwards, I was appointed to a position as nurse educator – practice development.

Working with mandalas

Within a very short period of my appointment I realised that critical creativity, enquiry and companionship were going to be necessary to support and enable me to work in a transformational way with self and with others. To enhance my effectiveness, confidence and my own sense of authenticity in my role as a transformational facilitator, I began a daily practice. For four months I arose at dawn, often feeling daunted as I faced the bleakness of a blank piece of paper! Making myself comfortable, I would begin drawing the circle and allow myself to doodle within it; in a short time I would invariably create a type of mirror, reflecting what was going on for me within. It drew out my fears, my old beliefs and assumptions and day by day I began replacing these with new ones that were more productive. I noticed that my confidence began to grow and the practice development terms of authenticity, person-centredness and human flourishing were beginning to have real meaning for me. Mandala making was providing me with the opportunity to go inwards on a regular basis in order to seek validation and direction.

'Enlightenment is not imagining figures of light but making the darkness conscious' (Jung, 1945, p 265).

When I first saw the person-centred nursing framework of McCormack and McCance (2010) depicted within a mandala, it was so reassuring; it helped me visually capture and understand more deeply what person-centredness really means. I still remember the feeling. It was as if I had arrived at my own 'front door' in relation to my values and beliefs about how practice development fits within nursing. I have continued to work with this mandala in reflective practice sessions with health professionals and have offered them the opportunity to create their own mandala as a tool for enabling their own sense of professional artistry and human flourishing. As a facilitator, I feel highly privileged to witness this sacred art being performed in a group setting; to see how individuals create their own inner awakenings and develop actions to take them and their patients on a journey towards human flourishing.

Recently I have begun to work with and reflect on other practice development mandalas: those of critical creativity (McCormack and Titchen, 2006; Titchen and McCormack, 2010), critical companionship (Titchen, 2004) and professional artistry (Titchen, 2009). All have human flourishing as their outcome. In June this year, I had the pleasure of working with these mandalas in a critical creative and experiential way, with Angie Titchen in the beautiful UK city of Oxford and its surrounds. As critical creative companions on a sunny summer's evening, we crafted a mandala together using the natural resources found in a stunning meadow nestling in the Cotswolds. The ritual and symbolism inherent in this process will remain forever etched on my consciousness and continues to serve me in my current practice with a richness that reminds me what it is to flourish (see Figure 2).

I continue to approach critical creativity through the use of mandalas to access inner knowing, to allow for wholeness of self, while nourishing my sense of professional artistry. I have learned that critical creativity can be approached through different paths and journeys according to one's own passion and experiences. I have taken the path of the mandala as it has proved a very useful tool to work with as I continue to journey towards human flourishing.

Figure 2: Walking the mandala



Truth

*Summertime I came
To know the one I came from
And sit together now.*

(Mulcahy, M. The Cotswolds, June 2013)

The Haiku was written on reflection of the meaning of critical companionship prior to completing the mandala depicted in Figure 2.

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