

Reflection Paper #1

Creating Mandalas – For Insight, Healing, and Self-Expression

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The book I chose to reflect upon was Creating Mandalas For Insight, Healing, and Expression by Susanne Fincher. I decided on this book after our first expressive arts weekend after creating my own mandalas. I was amazed at what powerful and centering experience creating a mandala was for me. I think this is because I came into that weekend without any “true understanding” on my part of what mandalas were and without any interpretation after it was created, yet the creation itself left me in a much more centered, peaceful place. This experience left me anxious to learn more about the history of mandalas, as well as understanding the symbolism represented within them. I was excited to explore the reasons behind my experience. I felt that if the creation was so moving for me, then the understanding and insight into my unconscious thoughts and feeling would be just as powerful, if not more so.

Ms. Fincher’s book started with history’s fascination with the circle, and the association of the circle to the Self as seen throughout history, across many centuries, cultures and religions. It was an amazing realization to see how universally the circle or mandala has served as an instrument of self-reflection and discovery throughout time. A piece that I reflected upon for quite a while is the spontaneity in which we create circles. We start as young children scribbling in spiral motions, and then eventually move on to creating smiley faces, flowers and suns. Is this possibly part of a child’s psychological maturation as they begin to establish their identity? As an adult, in my most contemplative moments, I find myself doodling circular shapes. Is this a way of searching within my unconscious self? These ideas really intrigued me.

In the creation process of the mandala the materials and environment are extremely important pieces to the process. In the creation of my own mandalas, I found it very difficult to clear my mind and relax in a room full of people. I also found that my creativity flowed more freely with certain medium rather than others. Ms. Fincher stresses the importance of an environment conducive to relaxation and the use of materials that feel comfortable to each individual.

The creation process of a mandala moves from the visual to the verbal. What I like about this process is that it takes the individual through a multi-sensory path of processing, which challenges the person to touch, feel and verbally associate meaning and allows the person to process more completely. Giving the mandala a title, listing the colors and personal connotations of them and noting numbers, shapes and themes brings about a new awareness of the meanings of these objects in your life and leads to a better understanding of who you are at that moment.

Color is an integral part of the mandala because it “expresses your innermost thoughts, feelings, intuitions and physical sensations. Analyzing the meaning of colors in mandalas therefore should help you understand more about your unconscious thought. Fincher spends much time on color analysis in this book for this very reason. Even though I did find this section of the book quite interesting, especially the emphasize on predominant colors, colors placed in the center of a mandala, the use of shades of color and heavy or light usage of color, I found the color analysis very general and based predominantly in either Christian religion or alchemy. This leads me to two different issues. First, it seemed that when it came right down to it, any color could really stand for

anything, depending on the creator's association with it. If the analysis of a mandala must be based on the creator's interpretation of color, then can a therapist effectively analyze a client's work? I would think not. It would be up to the creator to do this analysis for him or herself. Fincher states, "When we create a mandala, we make a personal symbol that reveals who we are at that moment". Therefore, we must understand that person's interpretation of color in the moment, which may or may not change over time. This requires the creator to be extremely self reflective and honest with themselves. In a counseling situation, self-reflection and honesty can be very difficult thing to do. I wish the book had addressed in the issue of working with clients in interpretation of their mandalas and what the therapist's role would look like in this process. I assume it would be one of a facilitator, asking questions in regards to colors, symbols, placement etc... to stimulate thought. However, what I got from some of her citings within the book, especially Jung, was that the interpretation lied with the therapist.

My second issue related to color interpretation is the book's research founded in Christian religions and alchemy. I think this is an issue because for many, Christian religions are not a way of life and alchemy, the predecessor to modern chemistry, is not very applicable in today's world. I mention this because it seems it might be detrimental to base interpretation of a mandala, something that is very personal and individual, on color interpretation that is not applicable to that individual's worldview. The two issues above also relate to some of my skepticism in the chapter related to numbers and symbols as well.

With all that being said, I do not think that those chapters were a waste. I do firmly believe that a person creating a mandala should list the colors, patterns, symbols and

numbers prevalent in their mandala and synthesize their own associations in these areas. I see using these chapters with colors and/or symbols in your mandala that you are ambiguous about, or to gain other insights or perspectives that you might not currently be seeing, or to help when you feel “stuck” or to compare your association of a particular color or symbol to a historical context.

The rest of the Fincher’s book is dedicated the “Great Round” or the life cycle or cyclical pattern of the personal growth. What I liked about this chapter is the emphasis that personal growth is a continuous cycle that is lived many times over across one’s life span. Each part of the cycle has it’s own challenges and task as well as it’s own viewpoint or perspective. Each time we find ourselves returning to a stage we “resonate with all our previous experiences at this stage.” We get the opportunity to change our present given the light of our past. In my life that mantra is very important to me. I am a person who believes everything happens for a reason, good or bad. From our experiences the goal is to take away the things that we have learned, so that the next time we are down similar paths, we have that opportunity to rework or readjust ourselves in order to move forward. I am a firm believer that we constantly weave together our past and present. My struggle at times is not to fall in the comfortable rut of the usual and challenge myself to explore and grow. Fincher sums up the key to the Great Round by saying; “One’s own personal growth pattern will not follow neatly from one stage to the next in a clockwise order. You may skip stages and move backwards as well as forward in the process.” That is important to keep in mind when analyzing a mandala. Many would associate the move backwards as regression, so it is important to note that that may not be so.

Because this cyclical evolution is so significant for me, I have decided I would really enjoy creating a series of mandalas throughout the years because I believe it would be quite telling of my personal growth patterns as well as my ruts. I would be able to look at what stages I found myself in the most often over the years and where I felt the most comfortable and where I felt the most uncomfortable. I would also be able to see where I have spent no time at all. In some cases I feel retrospection is as important as introspection, personal growth and development is one of these areas.

Although some of my reflection was negative, overall I really enjoyed this book and gained some valuable insight from it. I believe creating mandalas is a very powerful exercise in self-reflection and personal understanding. This book was a very practical guide that offered historical contexts, guidance of mandala creation and presents historical symbolism of colors and symbols, which may be helpful in certain contexts. It has inspired me to continue to create mandalas and has made me think more along the lines of analyzing patterns in my life as a way to tap into my unconscious self.

References

Fincher, S. F. (1991). Creating mandalas for insight, healing, and self-expression.

Boston, MA: Shambala Publications Inc.