Circles of Women:
Healing through Mandalas and Community

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I am ever grateful to the many women who participated in each of the three Women’s Circles for this project. I am thankful for their willingness to share their stories and their lives through their mandala creations. I am also grateful to my religious community, the Sisters of the Humility of Mary, who support me in so many ways. And I am most grateful for the wisdom shared by my faith-full supervisors, fellow staff members and friends in ministry.
Abstract

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This thesis project came about because of my own experience with and reverence for the art form of mandalas combined with my belief in the healing power of supportive communities for women. I was convinced that a communal opportunity of creating mandalas would deepen an individual’s self-awareness which can only enhance any group experience.

An invitation was presented to three groups of women who know some level of marginalization in our society. These women were all members of existing, larger groups which had already intentionally come together for support. All three groups were guided through five original mandala-making experiences adapted from basic art therapy techniques. These centering, prayerful experiences were embraced by all who participated. The result was that each group was changed. Within them, new alliances were created and existing relationships were strengthened.
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Chapter I.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In times of sorrow and in times of joy, women come together creating communities of support and celebration. Women are confronted with issues and concerns that are distinct to them. They need the support and nurturance of other women in order to negotiate their unique journeys. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, they do come together. Particularly when brought together under stressful situations, this natural tendency to gather has been referred to as the “tend and befriend” response unique to women (Taylor, 2000). I am suggesting that these gatherings may be enhanced through opportunities for creative expression.

First giving an introduction to the ancient art form of mandalas, I was able to present how group art therapy experiences can help to bring about both personal and communal change and fulfillment. Three groups or “circles” were invited to participate in this study project. These were women brought together as they share in common, socially isolating conditions. They are marginalized and oppressed. They are all striving for inclusion. Mandalas are symbols of wholeness and creation. Creating mandalas give opportunities for personal insight, healing, and self-expression (Fincher, 1991).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project and its grounded theory approach was to explore and to glean wisdom from women as they gathered for a variety of reasons. The three “circles” each participated in a 5-session art therapy experience of creating mandalas. The three groups were diverse in nature. One of the groups was of women who have been touched by homelessness. One was a group of women religious. I had invited a group of women from an existing Gay and Lesbian support group. These women were diverse in age, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. These women were all in need of healing, whether physically, emotionally or spiritually.

Research Questions

How did creating mandalas enhance a women’s supportive group experience? (a.) How did the art therapy intervention of creating mandalas within a group context aid an individual client toward healing and self-discovery? (b.) How did individuals and groups respond to the meditative component of the mandala-making experience? (c.) How did individuals and groups respond to the various media and techniques? (d.) How did the creation of a group mandala in the final session reflect the group’s overall cohesion?
Definition of Terms

Art as Therapy

The use of this terminology refers to the practice of utilizing the art making process as a means of therapeutic intervention in and of itself. The art and art making process are the focus in this approach. It is the practice of offering clients particular art experiences for the purpose of bringing about physical, emotional, and/or spiritual healing. This is distinct from the practice of art psychotherapy which emphasizes the therapy aspect of the art making process. The art produced is used as a means for diagnosing or assessing the mental status of an individual.

Mandala

An ancient art form most recognized from the Buddhist religious tradition. From this tradition, intricate patterned designs are created using colored sand within a circular outer shape. Mandalas can be less structured and can be created with a wide variety of media. With its circular, often spiraled imagery, mandalas have been cited as powerful tools for self-discovery and inner healing (Fincher, 1991).

Marginalized

Individuals whose lifestyle and situations locate them outside what would be considered society’s norm are marginalized and disenfranchised. They are on the margins economically, socially, and/or institutionally.
Tend and Befriend

Researchers investigating the differences in stress responses between men and women coined the term “tend and befriend.” According to these researchers, there are biological as well as sociological influences for women’s tendency to tend (nurture) and befriend (form alliances) when confronted with stressful situations (Taylor, 2000).

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation for this research project was that the participants had to be women. Although the social statuses were varied, all the women invited into this process did know some degree of marginalization.

Limitations included the potential for the groups’ participants to change. Unforeseen conflict and illness did affect the consistency of the group participants. In particular, because of the instability in lifestyle, the likelihood for loss of participation among the circle of women who have been touched by homelessness was great. I was prepared for this inevitability and offered this group a simple monetary incentive to any participant who attended all five sessions. What I was not prepared for was the change in participants, and unfortunately, the change in social status of the circle of lesbian women. This will be discussed later in the paper.
Chapter II.

*Procedures*

*Characteristics of Qualitative Research*

The settings for qualitative research are natural to the individual or group of participants. The researcher often travels to the site location (Creswell, 2003). This enables a certain level of familiarity and comfort to the participants involved.

Data collection for a qualitative research study involves open communication between the researcher and the participants. The researcher seeks to establish a certain rapport with the participants. This may result in the active involvement on the part of the participant in the data collection process. Once rapport is established, data is often interpreted by simply observing and noting the participants’ responses to the interventions and to one another (Creswell, 2003).

Qualitative research is evolving rather than able to be foreseen. Original research questions may be negated as others surface throughout the study’s development (Creswell, 2003).

Qualitative research involves expansive theories and wide-ranging analyses. It includes many examples and images of the various aspects of the study as it progresses (Creswell, 2003).
Qualitative researchers are self-reflective throughout the research study. They account for their own personal values, biases, and limitations which may affect the overall results of the study (Creswell, 2003).

Qualitative Research Strategy

Phenomenological research strategies were utilized for this research project. Recognizing the fundamental nature of women’s need to gather in community, I will attempt to describe all that I witnessed throughout the course of this research study. Based upon my own experiences of creating and reflecting on mandalas, I was confident that this five session art therapy experience would positively impact the lives of the women participating in these Women’s Circles.

Role of the Researcher

My role as researcher was that of an observer to the women’s groups. I was really very honored to have been welcomed into these Women’s Circles. Since before beginning this process, I have enjoyed inclusion with two of the three Circles I invited into this mandala-making experience. I am a member of the same religious community as the women I had called together for Circle One. These women have all been supportive of my education and journey as I study art therapy. This group gave me an opportunity to share with my own community the healing power of this creative arts ministry.

I am an intern and staff member at the outreach center serving the women who have been touched by homelessness (Circle Two). At the time of this study
I had known these women for about nine months. I have remained with this group since this mandala creating experience ended.

I had not actually met any of the women I had invited into Circle Three. Initially they were participants in a gay and lesbian support group, which gathers regularly at the parish where I currently minister. An invitation was presented through a friend and co-minister. I did not know any of the women who agreed to participate. Through a series of confusing circumstances, this group ended up including women who are not lesbian. This group actually was more inconsistent than the other two groups as participants changed throughout the five sessions.

With all three circles, I shared my own experiences of creating mandalas and the healing I have known through the art making process. Usually at the end of each session, I presented a mandala I had made using similar materials and I spoke about the many lessons I have learned from it. I always reiterated the uncanny truth that the mandala will continue to reveal wisdom to the women if they allow it.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection included information gained from two questionnaires. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire during the first and last sessions of this process (See Appendices A and B).

Data collection procedures entailed written, reflective notes on each of the 15 group sessions. This data also included information shared as the groups
processed the artwork created each session. Observable data such as
inappropriate as well as appropriate verbalizations and behaviors was noted. The
individual’s affect was noted as to whether there were changes throughout or
because of the art-making experience.

Visual data includes photographs of the artwork created during each of the
five sessions. These are organized and have been reviewed, noting any recurring
images or themes within and between the three groups of women.

Setting. There were three site locations for this research project. The sites
were purposefully selected, as they are familiar gathering spaces for each of the
three women’s groups. The site for Circle One was the conference room of the
ministry center owned and operated by the congregation of which the women are
members. This ministry center is located in a suburban area of a mid-sized
metropolitan Midwest City. The sessions for this project began in the mid-
evening. The room has large windows which provide natural light until the sun
sets. Candles and dimmed lighting were used to provide appropriate ambiance for
the meditations and art-making experiences. There was a large rectangular table
and comfortable chairs for the art-making experiences.

The site location for Circle Two was an outreach center located in the
inner city of this same Midwest City. This center is located in the basement of a
large, historical church. The only windows are glass block and cannot be relied
upon for adequate lighting. Overhead lighting and candlelight were used in this
setting as well. These sessions took place in a large room equipped with a large square table and chairs.

The site location for Circle Three was a multi-functional meeting room located in the basement of the rectory of a small parish located in a working class neighborhood of this same Midwest City. There were no windows in this particular room. Dimmed lighting and candles provided necessary work light and atmosphere.

I provided the environment intended to inspire and hearten the women throughout each of the group sessions. Photos of, and actual mandalas were placed in the center of the tables where the women worked. When appropriate, I incorporated some of my own mandala creations into the environment.

Participants. The participants for this research project were all women who have known some level of marginalization in our society. Circle One, were marginalized because the institution of which they are an integral part marginalizes women religious. Despite deep commitment and fidelity, they have been excluded from full participation in the church to which they have devoted their lives. These and all intentional gatherings were sources of encouragement and opportunities to strengthen bonds within their community.

Circle Two was comprised of women who have been touched by homelessness. They are marginalized in many ways. Simply stated, living in poverty denotes limited choices. Lifelong poverty has limited the emotional and
physical development of most of these women. They have been limited economically, educationally, and socially. Though they likely were not being treated, most who frequent this outreach center suffered from mental illness. The women who participated in the programs offered at the center were eager to reiterate the healing potential of these group experiences. They were grateful for the opportunity to be with other women who shared their struggles.

Circle Three was to be comprised of women who were participants in a gay and lesbian support group. While this group did include some lesbian women, it also included the parish minister who is not a lesbian, as well as two women who were invited into the process by someone unaware of the focus of the group. All of the women were interested in learning about the healing potential of creating mandalas. This group, unlike the others, was comprised of women who did not necessarily know each other before beginning the process. This group, in a rather unique way, was reflective of the way women come together with the intent of sharing their need for healing.

Methods of Gathering Data

Data collection began with information shared during each group introduction session. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, which entailed open-ended questions as to their hopes and expectations for this project (Appendix A). These were compared to an evaluation of the process presented at the conclusion of the final session (Appendix B).
These questionnaires utilized semi-structured questions, which provided information about the individual’s art and group experiences. The first documented the initial hopes and concerns for each of the participants new to the group art therapy experience. The latter evaluated the process and its effectiveness from each participant’s perspective.

Each session began with a group check-in in which individuals named their needs and what they were bringing to the group experience that particular gathering. There was a meditation experience before beginning the art making process each session.

Observations were noted as the art-making portion of the session progressed. Reactions to the art media and technique were noted. When appropriate, artwork was titled before beginning the processing portion of the session. The most relevant data was gathered during the processing portion of the session. Individuals were invited to share only as much as they were comfortable. Most especially, the women’s explanation of the images was documented. Artwork was photographed at the conclusion of each session.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data gathered for this research project was open-ended. Analysis was developed based upon information participants revealed through their artwork and sharing.
Visual and verbal data was collected and documented during each of the five sessions. Data collection was mostly observational in nature. How the women responded to the art materials and techniques was noted and documented. How they verbally and nonverbally reacted to one another during the process was important data for this research project. Information gathered during the verbal processing was noted and considered more fully. Artwork was photographed so that it could be further reflected upon and analyzed.

The mandala-making task for each of the five sessions had a specific goal. The first four sessions were progressive in nature. Each involved art tasks intended to encourage ever-deepening personal reflection and self-exploration. The fifth session was a culminating event in which the group created a mural. Creating a mandala together revealed the cohesiveness of the group as a whole.

Strategies for Validating Findings

Research findings were validated using a number of methods. Most readily, *member-checking* helped to establish the integrity of the qualitative findings of this project (Creswell, 2003). Each of the five sessions ended with open discussions of the group’s experience. A questionnaire and evaluation was presented at the end of the series of sessions. Because of the reflective quality of the questions in this final questionnaire, the women were asked to take it and mail the completed forms to me.
I will attempt to use rich, thick description when conveying my findings throughout this process (Creswell, 2003). Attention will be made in most appropriately describing the settings and the individuals invited into this project. With care and reverence, I hope to successfully illustrate the creativity of the individuals with whom I entered into this process.

I was able to review my research findings in peer debriefing sessions with my internship supervisor (Creswell, 2003). She was present for most of the sessions with the women who have been touched by homelessness. She was open to hearing of the experiences with the other women’s circles as well. Her input has been most beneficial to this process.

**Narrative Structure**

The narrative structure for this research project is that of a process model. I have designed a progressive process using mandala-making art interventions. I created all of the interventions for this project by adapting basic art therapy interventions into mandala-making experiences. Through engagement in this process, each individual was invited into deeper personal exploration. This project and presentation will include images and responses of individuals in the group.

Because of my own experience and reverence for the art form, I will often be interjecting personal reflection throughout the narrative of this research
project. Instead of referring to myself as the “researcher” and the women I will be observing as “subjects,” terminology will include “I” and “we,” most often.

Anticipated Ethical Issues

No ethical issues surfaced during the course of this project. I created a list of guidelines, which were presented and discussed at the beginning of each session. With these guidelines I stressed the importance of confidentiality among the participants. I also emphasized the fact that I am a student, and therefore these must not be viewed as therapy sessions, but as support groups. I affirmed the members’ roles as listeners and supporters to each others’ process. Each site had accessibility to skilled counselors and practitioners if needed. In the event that a participant would have required further counseling or clinical support, referrals would have been carefully made.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research study was that the particular population that was being observed is an ever-increasing portion of our society. Women are being marginalized in multifaceted and compounded ways. Most are outside society’s norms in more than one manner. Whether by economic, social and/or institutional marginalization, women are being excluded in large sectors of today’s society.

With the creation of a workbook, this project may offer an alternative option to the inevitable isolation of this large segment of our society. In order to
ensure their inclusion in society, women are in need of physical, emotional, and spiritual support. Creating opportunities for women to intentionally come together with the purpose of nurturing and supporting one another, will hopefully impact the lives of these women. And, inevitably the lives of all they encounter.

**Expected Outcomes**

I am hoping that the outcome for this research project will be a positive experience for each of the participants engaged in the process. I am hoping this experience will be a catalyst for new connections made, and perhaps old alliances strengthened. With this, I am most especially hopeful that the awareness of the healing potential of Women’s Circles will increase among the participants.

Another expected outcome for this project is the formulation of a workbook, which may be adapted for use with a wide variety of groups. With this, perhaps the number of Women’s Circle will grow. With this, perhaps more women may know more ways of inclusion in our society.
Chapter III

Review of Related Literature

Women’s social groups have been in existence for centuries. Informally or formally, women have gathered with other women with the sole purpose of meeting common needs. Quilting and sewing circles, women’s guilds and garden clubs, book studies and “Mommy and Me” groups have supported individuals, families and communities. These were opportunities for women to help each other while getting to know one another at a creative level. To the detriment of personal fulfillment and wellness, these social groups or women’s circles are becoming rare in our fast-paced, impersonal society (Taylor, 2002).

Given women’s natural tendency toward communal gathering, creating opportunities for women to come together for shared creative expression is a positive movement toward reconnecting with an important part of women’s psychosocial make-up.

I divided this review of literature into three categories of Healing, Mandalas, and Community. As the title of this research project indicates, I hope to convey that emotional and spiritual healing may occur with the opportunity to meditate and to create mandalas in a community or group environment. The following literature helps to support this theory and conviction.
Healing

In her classic book *The Artist in Each of Us*, (1983) Florence Cane shared her theories and methods for forming effective and therapeutic relationships with children and adults. Her theory and model of education included the emphasis on understanding the psychosocial and behavioral as well as the physical functions of the individual. This suggests that Florence Cane was not only a pioneer in the field of art therapy, but that she was also an early witness to the holistic approach to wellness. She emphasized that these mind, body and spirit functions can know integration from a very early age. She believed that creativity was integral to this individuation process. Her contention was that everyone is born with the power to create, and that that power should be released early and developed wisely. It was her belief that this was key to joy and wisdom, and possibly, to self-realization for every individual (Cane, 1983).

When working with children or adults, Cane often began by encouraging kinesthetic awareness within the individual. She includes examples of The Scribble Exercise, which she developed. These begin with freeing bodily movements and end with liberal visual expressions. She cites many examples of the powerful images and revealing insights these exercises brought forth from her clients. Individuals were often surprised by the release of feelings these physical exercises inspired.
A large portion of this book is devoted to case studies of children and adults. With these, Cane offers many examples of her theories and methods of practice. Her personal involvement and genuine care for those she worked with was most evident in the details of these studies. It was obvious that she herself was changed by these experiences.

Florence Cane was a true healing presence in the lives of many. She helped to release the power of creativity within all who came to her care. With this, each came to know himself or herself as artist. For artists, life holds many possibilities for growth and healing.

My experience working with the circles of women I had called together for this research project placed me in a position to be such a healing presence. One of my main goals was to help all involved to embrace the belief that they are indeed artists. This was more of a challenge for some than for others. I do believe that by the end of the experience, all involved were becoming aware of their artist within.

In his book entitled *The Courage to Create*, psychologist Rollo May clearly and eloquently defines creativity. Much of the book is dedicated to his thoughts and theories on the creative process and its impact on the individual upon the world. May defines courage in a rather ambiguous way. Courage is a basis, which gives authenticity to other virtues such as love or fidelity, he says (May, 1975). There are physical and social courage, which he explains help an
individual to deal with fears at the bodily and communal levels. The most important courage of all, May contends, is creative courage. Our very existence in society depends upon the courage to create. Artists are courageous. They choose to immerse themselves in chaos in order to bring about new form. A concerted effort needs to be made to dispense with the conception that creativity is associated with psychological disorders. The truth is, creative expression is a most healthy avenue for self-expression and psychosocial well-being.

A crucial distinction needs to be made between talent and creativity. Although many do not utilize it, every person beholds talent. Talent is actually a measurable component. Creativity, as May cites from the Webster dictionary, is “the process of making, of bringing into being” (p. 39). Though everyone possessed the capacity for it, creativity cannot be measured. It can only be seen in the very act of creation (May, 1975).

Rollo May further describes the creative process as an encounter. His theory is that creativity occurs as an act of encounter. Awareness of encounter is key for change. The more intense the awareness, the more authentic the response, he says. The encounter itself is the center between two polarities he names “Being” and “Non-being.” The state of Non-being or waiting is a difficult concept for our society to embrace. It is a crucial time for an artist to respect. These periods of openness are when the mystery of creation may be revealed (May, 1975).
The experience of encounter always brings with it some form of anxiety. Play is a real and necessary form of creativity. It is brought about by an immature response to anxiety. An act of what May refers to as mature creativity involves confronting anxiety. When a knee-jerk, often-justifiable response might be to run from the discomfort of anxiety, mature creation requires staying and living with this difficult emotion. It involves continuing the encounter. In this courageous act, there is change and new form created.

Therapy should encourage individuals to recognize their own possibilities to be changed by, and to create through, encounter. These are opportunities to help another to draw from the source of their creativity, May says (May, 1975).

There is an undeniable interconnectedness between any human being, their body, and the world. The creative individual participates in the struggle between harmony, disintegration, and integration—between being lost in the world or participating in creation of new kinds of form and being. Creativity, an intense encounter, is inseparable from the world (May, 1975).

This concept of creativity as encounter was helpful as I guided the circles of women through the creative process of this research project. There were a number of situations where individuals did struggle with anxiety and limitations during the mandala-making experiences. These encounters, though difficult at the time, were opportunities for creative change to come about. I know that I have been profoundly changed by each of these encounters, and am wiser for it.
In her book entitled *Art is a Way of Knowing*, Pat Allen asserts that image-making and artwork are ways of knowing the soul. She has learned from her own experience that, by creating artwork an individual has the opportunity to gain self-knowledge and insight. She shares that in her role as an art therapist, she has enabled others to know themselves through the art-making process as well.

I particularly appreciated her insights into various aspects of media and image-making. Citing the work of Elizabeth Layton, this author notes the significance of the psychological impact of contour drawings as studied by Robert Ault. She refers to the act of drawing as *energy made visible*. The drawing itself is a record then of the energy between the artist and the subject. She further expands this theory and names color as *a feeling made visible*. Sculpture is a way of giving depth and dimension to the experience of the artist (Allen, 1995).

Particularly relevant to this research project is Allen’s theory of the *inner critic* and its power to counteract the individual’s natural desire to create. This inner critic is that part of knowing which is dangerous because it fears the change that is inevitable with deepened self-awareness. The challenge for an art therapist is to help clients to see this way of knowing as a gift and to help them to learn how to share this gift with others.

Allen makes an important point about forming conclusive assumptions about an art image. She states that to do so is depriving the artwork and the process of its ability to guide and teach the artist. The art making process is a
journey, she says. An image has no sole meaning. In fact, the artist will come to see it and know it differently in relation to other images and artistic expression (Allen, 1995). I have found this to be particularly true from my own experience of creating mandalas. Throughout this thesis project I encouraged participants to continue working on and reflecting upon the artwork they had created each session. I assured them that their artwork would continue to reveal truths to them as they learned more about themselves throughout the process. Some participants have shared with me that they had found this to be true even months after our process had ended.

In the text *The Art of Emotional Healing*, Lucia Capacchione professes that one’s thoughts and emotions do affect one’s physical and bodily health. Undeniably, there are many physical diseases known to be exacerbated by stress. She claims these stress-related conditions are actually an individual’s emotions crying for help. It is her contention that all emotions actually move through us when they are accepted and expressed safely and appropriately. Meditation, expressive arts therapies and other psychospiritual treatment methods help an individual to actually embrace their emotional self. When emotions are freed, they can fuel creativity (Capacchione, 2001).

Capacchione’s book contains suggestions for helping individuals to learn and master the *language of feelings*. Keeping in mind that some learn in verbal ways while others are non-verbal learners, Cappachione offers suggestions for
appropriate media usage. I found her findings to be true as I noted and documented the various responses to different media among the participants of this research study.

Cappachione asserts the importance of emphasizing the art making process rather than the resulting product. Many participants who begin the process feeling threatened will actually end up enjoying their own art work. I found this to be very true with almost all of the participants of this research study. It was interesting seeing individuals surprised by their own creations. It was also inspiring to see the others in the circles encourage and voice positive feedback to another’s creation. I know this too was emotionally satisfying for many.

Capacchione devotes a section of her book to mandalas. She offered many wonderful examples, suggested meditations, and techniques. I used this text as a resource as I created the mandala interventions for this project.

In the preface of her book of the same name, Cathy Malchiodi defines The Soul’s Palette as the creative source within that heals, makes whole, and helps us deeply understand who we are in a way that no other way of knowing can. She explains that although we are born with this creative source, there is a need for rediscovery and nurturing as it is often neglected and made dormant (Malchiodi, 2002).

This book is an insightful resource as well as a practical workbook. It includes inspired reflections and personal insights on the subject of physical,
emotional, and spiritual healing. It contains practical information including techniques and exercises useful in creating a space where the Soul’s Palette may be awakened.

Early in the text, Malchiodi makes note of the difference between a cure and healing. She describes a cure as an elimination of all sign of a disease, where healing involves an inner process of becoming whole (Malchiodi, 2002). Where medical intervention is integral to curing, art and creativity are conduits toward healing. Both are necessary and complimentary interventions to assure wellness.

This book includes actual case studies of individuals Malchiodi was able to guide through some powerful transformative processes. She shares much of her own personal journey toward balance and well-being as well.

As the Soul’s Palette is awakened, symbols, images, and imagination emerge. With these, Malchiodi explains, is the creation of states of knowing. These are intuition, which is a means of discovery, intention, which is the use of our will, and synchronicity, which is the appearance of symbols that may take on a mystical importance. With attention to these natural states, the inward journey is able to move outward (Malchiodi, 2002).

Within the final chapters of this book, I was particularly struck by Malchiodi’s insights into the communal aspects of the creative process. She shared the significance of sharing the artist within. Especially important to the healing process is the ability to witness to one another as we share stories, images,
and creations. We can learn much about our own woundedness by empathically hearing of another’s suffering.

Malchiodi’s insights were particularly meaningful to me since before beginning this research project. I have known that when I am not attentive to any one aspect of my being, the imbalance is detrimental to my overall state of wellness. I have known physical, emotional, and spiritual healing by seeking connection to my creative source. Mandalas have been a particularly powerful exercise as I have incorporated them into my prayer. This practice of reflecting on my own spiritual journey has been life-changing. I shared some of my own personal experiences and mandala creations with the women I called together for this study. I believe that in doing so, I was able to help others to desire such a connection to their creative sources as well.

Mandalas

In the text, *Creating Mandalas* by Susanne Fincher mandalas are described as a tool for self-discovery and healing. The author credits her practice of creating mandalas as a saving force as she ventured on a path toward recovery from immense tragedy and suffering in her life (Fincher, 1991).

Much of this book is a step-by-step introduction and how-to guide for individuals desiring to incorporate a practice of meditation and mandala creation into their daily lives. Citing much of Carl Jung’s reflections, she calls mandalas the *center of the total personality*. Jung knew from experience that the symbols
and images which surfaced in the creation of mandalas had the power to reveal unconscious parts of the Self. When the unconscious is revealed to any individual, the personality is unified to the Self. This process can only lead to movement toward wholeness. With this, the natural process which Jung referred to as *individuation* may take place (Fincher, 1991).

Fincher described the process of creating and interpreting mandalas as *encounters with Self*. These encounters began in very early childhood and continue until about the age of five. Spontaneously, and having never been taught, children of every culture copiously create circular drawings as if by instinct. These childhood mandalas are an in-born process of identity formation, she says. They are instrumental in the early formation of the ego, the Self.

Fincher contends that the language of the unconscious needs to be cultivated in order that a relationship with Self may be formed. This requires a practice of centering during times of transition, which frankly is almost constant if we are attentive to our ever changing environment and our place within it. This practice helps to inwardly focus on ourselves to orient to any new reality (Fincher, 1991).

This book was written as an encouragement to individuals to engage in this meditative practice. She is confident that these spontaneous creations of color and form within a circle will lead to self-discovery and personal growth.
(Fincher, 1991). Much of this book is dedicated to in-depth descriptions and possible interpretations of color, symbols, and their placement within a mandala.

This book was helpful in my role as encourager to the women I had invited into this research project. All who responded were actively searching for means of self-discovery. I believe all who participated were encouraged to continue the process.

In the journal article entitled *The Use of the Mandala in Psychological Evaluation and Treatment*, the authors offer a great deal of information about what to look for when guiding groups or individuals through mandala creating experiences. These art therapists and physicians are in favor of the use of mandalas throughout the course of treatment for psychiatric patients. They affirm that mandalas can provide evidence to aid with treatment as well as serve an important purpose as they visually chart the succession of an individual’s recovery (Kellogg, 1977).

The authors encourage mandalas as a way of healing. They affirm that mandalas are an excellent way of introducing clients to art therapy as they do not require previous art experience in order to create. These circular drawings reflect the creator’s state of being as well as their potential for becoming, hopefully, healed. (Kellogg, 1977).

This article provides concrete, practical tips in acquiring the wisdom the mandala can reveal about its artist. Insights into color, shapes, line, and their
placement within the mandala were helpful as I applied them to the mandalas created during my research project.

This article included a single case study as well as several examples of different clients’ mandala work. Some of the samples portrayed healthy representations. Some mandalas revealed degrees of unhealth. These were all circumstantial, of course. It must be kept in mind that these and all client artwork must be taken in context with each individual and setting. They should never be used to label, or worse, to diagnose, a patient on their own merit. Mandalas may hold both positive and negative information about a client. As this article and most writing on this subject are quick to point out, mandalas are not static. They will change with time, and so too will their interpretation and meaning to the client. That is one reason why they are a most effective intervention when used in long-term treatment situations (Kellogg, 1977).

Although this thesis project was time restricted, I did attempt to use mandalas in such a way as to introduce participants to the ancient art form. At the same time, I was offering most a brief introduction to a therapeutic art experience as well. I believe that these objectives were met and the response was positive.

The article, “Combining Mandala and the Johari Window: An Exercise in Self-Awareness” (2007) by Beverly South MSN, RN was very helpful as I prepared for this research project. Written for the journal Teaching and Learning
in Nursing, its intended audience was most likely nurses and nursing students. It describes a study conducted by a nurse on a class of nursing students. This study’s main goal was to encourage the students to gain some self-awareness. I found its perspective was a unique one.

After short introductions to mandalas and to the exercise of the Johari Window, participants in this study were offered collage materials and time to complete a personal mandala. The art work was collected, with the announcement that they would be returned at the completion of the semester-long course. Processing involved optional personal sharing about the experience of creating the mandala. This sharing was done without the benefit of viewing the actual artwork. Most involved shared that this was a positive experience. What I found most striking was a report by more than one of the participants that they did not find an emphasis on self-awareness in other nursing program classes being offered. Given the stress level of those working in the nursing profession, this is an unfortunate and frankly unpleasant report.

It seemed to me that the experiment described in this article managed to make the right-brain, art making event a very left-brain, cognitive experience. Possibly resulting from my struggle with the counter intuitive execution of this experiment, I did learn a great deal from this article. I found it to be a conduit of sorts as I had decided to design the mandala exercises for this research study myself. With the information learned from this study, I created mandala exercises
based upon five basic art therapy interventions. Unlike the session described in the article, the sessions for my research project all began with time for quiet centering meditation and reflection. With this, the work toward self-awareness was ready to begin.

In the journal article, “Can Coloring Mandalas Reduce Anxiety?” the researchers studied the effectiveness of different types of art activities in the reduction of stress. Appropriately, the study participants were randomly selected undergraduate college students. In small groups, the participants were put through an anxiety induction. That is, a controlled exercise designed to raise the anxiety level of an individual (Curry, 2005). The anxiety level of each student was assessed and documented at the beginning of the session.

Again through a random-selection process, groups of participants were given one of three different coloring assignments to complete in a 20-minute period of time. One-third of the participants was given a blank sheet of paper and was instructed to do a free form drawing. One-third was given a piece of paper with a circle drawn on it. The final third was given a sheet of paper with an intricate geometric plaid design drawn on it. No matter which of the three assignments they had been given, all participants were given the same simple directive to “color for twenty minutes” (Curry, 2005).

The results of this study were that when anxiety levels were assessed following the coloring exercise, levels showed significant reduction on those who
had colored mandalas and the plaid design. These structured activities required a certain amount of attentiveness to complete the task. And the repetitive action of these drawings was noted to have placed the artists into a meditative-like state.

When measured after the completion of the free form drawing, Participants showed an increased level of anxiety. This was due in part to the unstructured assignment with little direction given. Participants struggled with coloring continuously for the entire 20 minutes. Not surprisingly, this caused some anxiousness (Curry, 2005).

I did not find the results of this study to be much of a surprise. The calming effect of creating mandalas was palpable during each of the mandala sessions of this research project. Though I did not utilize any tools for measurement, self-reports and observations of the individuals participating in each of the three women’s circles did reinforce the belief that mandalas reduce stress in individuals and so in groups.

Community

In the text, Women’s Way of Knowing, the authors cite a number of research studies which attempted to understand women’s unique patterns of obtaining knowledge and how it can be developed. The text offers analysis of research spanning almost three decades. What I found quite relevant for my thesis project was the study completed in 1950 by a researcher named Perry. He said that because they are naturally rooted in a sense of connectedness and
intimacy-building, for centuries, women have struggled with, and been seriously limited by, their exclusion from roles of authority and leadership.

This text further suggests that women’s way of knowing is through a process called *connected knowing*. Unlike men, women instinctively develop procedures for gaining access to other people’s knowledge. Understanding is only achieved by actively listening to what others know. The woman’s capacity for empathy is her only hope toward understanding (Belenky, 1986).

Another interesting theory mentioned in this text was one called the “Believing Game” proposed by Peter Elbow in 1973. It is his contention that compared to men; women have an easier time believing than doubting. This is due in large part to women’s need to understand what another knows.

Given the natural tendency toward gathering and connecting to obtain knowledge, this book reiterates the need and the potential for *Connected Knowing Groups*. It offers practical guidelines for a successful group process for women.

This book and especially these guidelines, were particularly helpful as I reflected on the group processing that took place during each of the mandala sessions throughout this thesis project. These groups were called together because of their shared lived experience. All present had some knowledge to share with others in the group. As the facilitator or guide through this process, I was sharing my knowledge and personal experience of mandalas with each group. The connected knowing of this group was beyond what I was offering.
participants shared of their stories and creations, I was a recipient of knowledge. I witnessed a connecting among the members of each of these groups. With this, the women and the circles were changed.

Though women’s groups or what this research project will refer to as “Circles of Women”, have existed for centuries, attempts to study the theoretical implications of women’s tendency to supportively gather have been relatively recent. In an article written on this subject in 2000 titled “Behavioral Responses to Stress in Females”, the researchers documented a study intended to broaden the existing theory on stress responses in humans. Besides the accepted response to stress, which was characterized as “fight-or-flight” by W.B. Canon in 1932, these researchers proposed that women in fact possess a third and fourth response to harmful or stressful situations (Taylor, 2000). Citing countless biological and physiological changes in the subjects, the researchers acknowledged that women were inclined to “fight or flight” when they, or their offspring, were in some danger or distress. They also discovered physiological hormonal changes that were unique to women in such situations. Their tests revealed that when women were in a stressful situation in which they were protecting and caring for their offspring, they were able to be sympathetic and calming. This reaction, coined “tending” by these researchers is attributed to a release of oxytocin and endogenous opioid into the woman’s bodily makeup. It is further noted that women may or may not initially feel the calming effects of these physiological
changes, but they are none the less present. They will in fact enable the woman to successfully respond to the stressful situation by protecting herself and her charges.

This study shows further evidence that women are apt to form alliances when in stressful situations. This tendency, coined “befriending” by these researchers is considered one of the most palpable gender differences in adult human behavior (Taylor, et al., 2000). In behavior observed throughout the average life cycle, females are far more likely to seek out social and emotional support from other women when under stress. The same physiological hormonal changes of increased oxytocin and endogenous opioid were measured in women as they gathered under stressful situations. The calming effect of the hormonal changes makes the tendency to “befriend” a most viable stress response for women.

In the Tending Instinct, Shelley Taylor further explores the “Tend and Befriend” response she had researched earlier with her colleagues. She suggests that the hesitation in studying women’s tendency to gather may have been in large part due to the lack of understanding of the woman’s brain and body cycles. There were thoughts and fears that the female reproductive cycle, and the emotional labiality that often characterized it, were difficult to monitor for a research study. Therefore any studies of the social brain were being performed by male doctors who interpreted brain development solely around men’s activities.
Fortunately, she noted the discrepancy of these past studies and the very important implications of a study on women’s tendency to come together, especially under stress. What they have termed “tend and befriend” is the stress response unique to women. This research has been conclusive that these are not only learned responses, but that there are biological changes occurring to back up this unique tendency among women (Taylor, 2002).

Jungian analyst and author Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D. shares of her experience with guiding women’s groups for the past several decades in her book entitled *The Millionth Circle: How to Change Ourselves and the World* (1999). This short, simple book was particularly relevant for this thesis project as it emphasizes the need for women to create and to participate in circles for personal healing. She asserts that with enough women circles formed, this personal healing will undoubtedly, eventually bring healing and change to our hurting world. Since women have a natural talent for circles, an ability men do not possess, it is imperative for women to form these opportunities for healing. She is confident that with enough energy devoted to this project, our society can know a shift from its present patriarchal mindset. She states her hypothesis as thus: *when a critical number of people change how they think and behave, the culture will also, and a new era begins* (Shinoda-Bolen, 1999).

With the distinct purpose of gathering women interested in engaging in a process of self-discovery, three circles were called together for this research
project. As Dr. Shinoda-Bolen suggests, the circle was *cast* by offering a purpose, time, and place for women to come together. Each session began with a time of centering, quiet reflection. Each session proceeded with time of creation, sharing, and processing. My hope is that this experience will inspire women to continue to *cast circles* whenever needed, contributing to the critical number needed to change the world.
Chapter IV

Calling the Circles

The purpose of this chapter is to give a more detailed description of this “Circles of Women” thesis project. This project came about as a result of my own experience with women’s groups as well as my own love for the process of creating mandalas. As a member of a religious community I have known much friendship and support from other women through community.

Women’s tendency to share wisdom through instinctively coming together is a gift that needs to be nurtured. It is true that women’s relationships are intrinsically circular-patterned in nature. From the most mundane, women generally prefer meeting places where seating is arranged in a circle, creating a safe “vessel” where stories can emerge. To the most personal, their conversations can be described as circular as women readily share of feelings and concerns, which leads to a creative process as others present share of their own experiences and ideas (Shinoda-Bolen, 2005).

As I mentioned in Chapter II of this paper, I had had direct connection with all three of the Circles of Women I had called together for this research project. I actually knew most of the participants of Circles One and Two before beginning this project. Although I had never met the participants of Circle Three, our connection was made possible through a mutual associate. These Circles and
their individual settings will be introduced and described in more detail in the following three chapters.

Though my initial hope was that these sessions would involve the same participants throughout, I did have to make some adjustments once the project was underway. Two of the three groups invited into this process would be described as “open.” These had a few consistent members, but also included women who were unable to be present for some of the five sessions. With a few exceptions, the sessions were weekly for each circle of women.

Invitations were sent through email to most of the women invited into this process (Appendix C). Each group’s initial response varied. There was some hesitancy among some who were invited. Some declined because of scheduling conflicts. Others were resistant based upon who was also invited into the process, while others voiced that they were unsure about the art-making component as well. Many of these issues were resolved before finalizing the group participants. A total of 27 women were involved in this project. I found this telling as to the desire women have for such opportunities to be in supportive group situations with other women.

In her book entitled Art is a Way of Knowing, Pat Allen asserts that image-making and artwork are ways of knowing the soul. She has learned from her own experience that by creating artwork an individual has the opportunity to gain self-knowledge and insight. She shares that in her role as an art therapist she has
enabled others to know themselves through the art-making process as well (Allen, 1995). An important feature of this thesis project is the sharing of my own mandala creations and processes with other women. With the carrying out of this project, a tool evolved that may be used for inviting other women into such group art therapy experiences.

Mandalas have been a meaningful part of my journey for many years. In group situations, I have had opportunities to create mandalas in structured workshop settings. I have often created mandalas spontaneously when directed to create images in class settings as well. I have created mandalas by myself, in times of prayer. Whether in a group or alone, mandalas have been helpful in putting words and images to deepest feelings, often before I am even aware of them. They often continue to bring to light new ways of knowing, long after their actual creation.

With my first mandala-making experience, without even realizing it, I had some insight into some of Jung’s understanding. Symbols and images surfaced in the creation of this mandala in a most profound way. This first mandala did reveal an unconscious part of my Self and began a process of personal and communal healing (Fincher, 1991). Though I began this piece on September 15, 2001, it would take weeks to complete (Figure 1). Begun with a conscious and all-consuming awareness of the negative energy around the tragic event just four days earlier, this image powerfully revealed many fearful feelings.
As time passed, I continued to reflect upon this mandala, turning it as I pondered. Soon, comforting figures and a heart image began to surface from within the mandala. These revealed much about my healing process and the return of feelings of safety after that most difficult time (Figures 2 and 3).

With the desire to share of my own belief in their healing potential, I guided the three Circles of Women through a five-session group process of creating individual and group mandalas. The sessions had been carefully
structured. Although they were designed to be experienced in progression, each session had a distinct beginning, middle, and end.

During the first session I introduced myself and explained my thesis project and process to the women present. Each participant was asked to read and to sign an Art Release and Consent Form if they were willing to have their images included in this project (Appendix D). They were then asked to complete a short Introduction Form questionnaire at this first session (Appendix A). Time was taken to explain the Group Guidelines which were reviewed and posted each session (Appendix E).

A brief history of the ancient art form of mandalas was given during the first session. The environment that was prepared for each session included many images and examples of mandalas. As the sessions progressed, I shared how my own life journey has been profoundly impacted by creating and discovering mandalas in artwork and nature.

After any necessary introductions, each session proceeded with a group “check-in.” Participants were asked to state in one or two words or sentences “what they brought to the group that particular day/evening.” Many shared their states of physical, emotional, and/or spiritual being… well or otherwise.

Following the check-in portion of each session, the women were guided in simple meditations. These prayerful meditations preceded the art experience for each session. These invited the women to explore their own spirituality and need
for healing. The use of guided imagery and quiet reflection was integral in inviting the women into a state of mindfulness necessary for these and all mandala experiences (Cornell, 2005). These meditations were 10 to 15 minutes in length. Each began with gentle instructions intended to help the participants to quiet their minds and bodies. Accompanied by soft music often used for yoga or massage therapy experiences, the participants were invited to become aware of their own breathing and its rhythmic movement within them. The meditations concluded after five or ten minutes of sitting in silent stillness.

There were a variety of media and techniques used throughout the sessions. These offered the individuals new forms of self-expression. Each session was processed as a group, offering the opportunity through sharing to deepen relationships within the groups.

Art therapy was a new experience to two of the three circles of women called together for this project. For many, there was a sense of anxiety at the very idea of an art-making expectation as well. In order to provide the participants with some background and understanding of the benefits of art therapy, I chose to design five unique mandala experiences drawn from basic art therapy techniques. I offered these five experiences to the three Circles of Women—resulting in 15 total sessions. The directives, meditations, and needs for each of the five sessions are given in the attached workbook created for this project.
The first two sessions in particular were intentionally designed as an introduction to art therapy. The mandala experiences offered for these early sessions had been modifications of some of the most basic and non-threatening art therapy interventions. Drawing on the wisdom of Florence Cane who believed that the power to create was inborn; these early sessions were efforts to help the participants to recall a time before there were judgments placed upon their artistic creations (Cane, 1986).

Simple materials and directives were deliberate for the first two sessions. Beginning with a Scribble Mandala, the participants were invited to discover the playfulness of the creative process. The collage materials used for the second sessions’ Inside/Outside Mandala helped to further foster confidence in the women who had little art-making experience. With each session, the reflections became more personal and offered those who were comfortable to share insights and stories. These interventions did help to lessen some of the fears of those with no previous art therapy experience.

Sessions Three and Four, Light in the Darkness Mandala, and the Gifts Plaque Mandala, were opportunities for deeper reflection and insight. The materials and directives were more limited and so, were more challenging for some. The meditations and reflections were both deeply personal in nature. The Light in the Darkness, more so than the Gifts Plaque Mandala, was difficult for many to share. I think this may have been partly due to the materials used. The
kinesthetic clay experience of the Gifts Plaque Mandala was more playful and reminiscent of childhood and lightened the mood among many in the groups. The black paper and serious reflection for the Light in the Darkness Mandala was possibly a bit premature for the third session. I think many in the groups were not yet feeling comfortable with such deep sharing at this point in the group experience. Through this learning, I decided to reverse the order of Sessions Three and Four for the workbook.

Session Five, A Part of a Whole Mandala offered some insight into the effectiveness of the group experience for each of the three Circles. An adaptation of an Amoeba Drawing art therapy exercise, individuals created quadrants of a mandala that, when put together, revealed much about the cohesiveness—or lack thereof, of each of the Circles of Women.

At the end of the fifth session, participants were asked to take home a Final Evaluation of the group process (Appendix B). I included a self-addressed stamped envelope for participants to have the opportunity to reflect upon the experience before offering their input. Most were returned and were helpful in the analysis of the project. It was evident that individuals appreciated the experience and knew some personal change and healing.

The following three chapters will include data collected from each of the Circles of Women art therapy sessions. Each of the groups and all of the sessions had potential to offer a multitude of poignant information. Data was not collected
to compare the groups in any way. For the purpose of this project and presentation, the focus was on how a mandala creating process can potentially impact any supportive group experience.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to be welcomed into these three women’s groups. I learned so much from each Circle. It was amazing to witness the art work created during these sessions. The insights shared were often humbling. With reverence, I share Circles of Women, their images, and insights.
Chapter Five

Circle One

The setting for the group experiences for Circle One was the conference room of a ministry center operated by the religious community of which these women were members. The room was brightly painted with some small, framed artwork on one wall. There was fluorescent overhead lighting. These sessions took place from 7:00 to 9:00 PM in the springtime of the year. There was one large window which provided natural light until the sun began to set toward the end of our sessions. Candles and dimmed lighting were used to provide appropriate ambiance for the meditations and art-making experiences.

There was a large rectangular table and comfortable chairs. A circular-shaped centerpiece consisting of candles and examples of mandalas from nature and culture adorned the table for each of the five sessions. This environment was changed for each session. It was modified in order to enhance the particular meditation and art-making experience.

There were five participants in Circle One. All were members of the same religious community. These women ranged in chronological age from 40 to 67 years old. Four of the participants were Caucasian in race. One was an Hispanic-American. Professionally, the background of these women included one educator, two former teachers who were in the spiritual healing field at the time of this project, one social work researcher, and one woman
who was in the Novitiate of her incorporation process with this religious community. All but one of the women had a Master’s level of education.

Besides the chronological age of the women in Circle One, a distinction needs to be made as to their age in religion. Within this group there was a range of women who have been in religious life from three years to 48 years. Besides the fact that newer members had a shorter history with the community, this distinction carries with it some interesting implications. There was some resistance by a few in the group who felt a certain responsibility to refrain from more intimate conversations with the newer members in their midst. This was very interesting to witness, both as a counselor-in-training and as a newer member of this same congregation. It was a resistance that I had not anticipated when inviting women into the circle for this project. One participant shared with me that when she was a new member in our community, they were not “allowed” to even speak to the “professed sisters.” She knew that this was archaic in thinking, and was surprised at the surfacing of this resistance within her. Some of these resistances were lessened as the process progressed.

Most in this circle have had some art-making and/or mandala-making experience. No one in this circle had had any formal art therapy experience. Not surprisingly, the meditative component of these sessions was nothing new
to these participants. They fully embraced the opportunity for mindful reflection and quieting of body and mind to begin each session.

Of the five participants in this circle, only two were able to be present for all five sessions. Each of the other three participants had to miss one session each. Fortunately, each had to miss a different session. Therefore there were at least four participants for every session.

I will share my reflections and observations of each group experience for Circle One. My focus will be on the two participants who were present for all five sessions and how they as individuals were impacted by the group experience. Sister Paula was a 42-year old Hispanic American woman. She was in the Novitiate of her incorporation process with this religious community. And Sister Margaret was a 40-year old Caucasian woman who has been perpetually professed in this community for 3 years. At the time of this research project, Sister Margaret was a Director of Research for one of the community’s corporate ministries.

Session One: The Scribble Mandala

Four of the five participants were present for this first session. All were eager to learn about the thesis proposal and their role in this project. Though some were less comfortable with group experiences than others, all were willing to engage in this new experience and saw it as a way to deepen relationships within the group.
Sister Paula expressed some anxiety at the art-making component of this experience. She was a bit uncomfortable as she entered the room this night. In her written introduction form she stated that she is “not an artist” and that she “tries to stay away from any art projects.” She is the newest member of this religious community. I did learn later that her participation was somewhat coerced by the Formation Director, her immediate supervisor in the community.

I believe this intervention was successful in its goal of offering an ease of process for those new to art therapy. It met its objective of releasing tensions and nervousness with this playful experience reminiscent of childhood. Despite her trepidation at the beginning of the session, Sister Paula expressed surprise at her mandala and how she actually enjoyed the experience of its creation.

All worked quietly as soft, meditative music played throughout the art-making portion of the session. The color choices were all mostly light in tone. Although the media varied, all worked with light pressure on their mandala creations. The tone and energy of the entire group could be described as very calm and reflective. The processing for this session was open and comfortable. Figures 4 through 7 are the mandalas created by the women present for this first session of Circle One:
Figure 4. Sr. Paula’s scribble mandala.

Figure 5. Sr. Margaret’s scribble mandala.
Session Two: Johari Window Mandala

All five participants were present for the second session of this process. I began with a short introduction to the Johari Window instrument for improving self-awareness which was created by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham. This written tool was not new to some in Circle One. After a simple meditation experience, time was taken to allow the women to reflect and to complete the handout on the Four Quadrants of the Self—characteristics of the Johari Window (Appendix F).

The tone and the energy of the circle were quite light for most of the session. There was a bit more conversation than in the first session. There was need for some communicating back and forth as the women shared the materials—trays of images of people, places, and things as well as words cut from magazines etc… These were passed between and among each other. For the most part, the women worked quietly.
Caught in traffic from her commute from work, Sr. Margaret was a few minutes late for this session. She arrived in time to enjoy some of the meditation. “It was a much needed time of quiet after a hectic day”, she said. The Johari Window exercise “was a challenging one”, she shared. Having had the opportunity to talk with her some weeks after this project ended, Sister Margaret shared that new insights have surfaced for her since the creation of this mandala in particular (Figure 8).

![Sr. Margaret’s collage mandala.](image)

*Figure 8. Sr. Margaret’s collage mandala.*

During the check-in Sister Paula reported being “in a fog” this evening. She found the task too overwhelming at this particular time. She shared that she was having difficulty with the images and that she preferred to work with words instead. I invited her to take some materials home with her. She returned to the next session with a completed mandala (Figure 9). Having the opportunity to
work and to create once she was in a better state of being obviously made a great
difference for her. I suspect she was more comfortable working alone.

Figure 9. Sr. Paula’s collage mandala.

The goal for this particular mandala exercise was to invite the women into
deeper reflection on their inner and outer selves. Whether initially or eventually,
this goal was met with Circle One.

I did discover that the Johari Window exercise was a bit ambitious. This
circle of women whose vocation it is to be ever on such a journey of self-
discovery found the time constraint to be an issue, and a challenge. As a result of
this input, I decided to adapt the art experience for the second session of the
remaining two circles to be simpler in directive.
Session Three: Light in the Darkness Mandala

All five participants were present for this evening’s circle. After a brief check-in, I invited the women into a reflection on the darkness and light in their lives. I read the Apache Blessing (Appendix G) before beginning the quiet meditation which further explored the concept of light and darkness. Using black paper and a variety of drawing media, the women were invited to create an image which depicted the light that they had become because of the darkness in their
own lives. Ideally, this exercise takes place in a darkened room. As it was difficult to darken the room at this particular site, this effect was lost on this particular group that evening.

All the participants worked quietly and intently. The tone and energy were quite peaceful. There was some light conversation. The women were supportive and encouraging to one another while creating their mandala images. Most of the women expressed having difficulty with the materials and with the drawing component in creating this mandala. Still, this exercise and medium did end up being cited as one of the favorites of most of the women in this circle. I found this very interesting. By staying with their resistances, they were able to grow… and were grateful.

Sister Paula entered this session in a significantly different state of mind than she had in the previous sessions. Her confidence was notably more evident this evening. She began by sharing the collage image which she had created since our last time together. She shared of how pleased she was with the experience and with the finished piece. In fact, I have learned that she has actually framed her collage mandala and has displayed it proudly.

Sister Paula titled her Light in Darkness mandala “Web of Hope” (Figure 13). She used only two colors for this piece of artwork. She shared that she intentionally chose green for the lines within this mandala as they represent growth that she has known from her darkest times. I was heartened by the
significant change in the overall presence of Sister Paula to the circle this night. Her sharing during processing was open and comfortable. She received the encouragement from others in the group with ease.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 13. Web of hope.*

Sister Margaret enjoyed the tactile experience of the chalk pastels in her creation of this mandala she had titled “Dahlia Burst of Life” (Figure 14). Her brightly colored dahlia flower was centered in this piece. It was surrounded by what she describes as “tears and chains.” These were two intense and conflicting images. This mandala brought forth some “enlightening insights,” she shared with me later. She was desirous of sharing some of what she learned in the group that evening, she said, but the resistance of some in the group kept her from doing so.
One participant created an image she named “Grace From the Deepest Wound” (Figure 15). She definitely struggled with the medium. She eventually simply allowed the image to surface, she said. She was greatly desirous of an opportunity to share more deeply of her creation and process. The silence in the room was an indication of the discomfort among others in the group for such deep sharing. This prompted a discussion about the nature of this group. We reiterated the guideline that although we are using art therapy techniques, this group is for support, not therapy. This sister shared at the deep level she was comfortable with. She respected the comfort level of others in the circle as well.

This exercise in particular revealed a distinct split in the circle. This experience invited the women to reflect deeply on what were likely some very personal issues. There were some in the group who were willing to share at this deep level. There were others who were uncomfortable with such deep sharing at
this point in the process. This was revealed during the processing of the artwork that night. Figures 16 and 17 are the titled mandalas created by the remaining two participants present for session three of Circle One.

![Mandala Image]

**Figure 15.** Grace from the deepest wound.

![Mandala Image]

**Figure 16.** Nightspace.  
**Figure 17.** You are precious.
Session Four: The Gifts Plaque Mandala

There were four women present for this fourth mandala session. After a brief check-in, I invited the women to reflect upon their own giftedness. Offering them a piece of music to reflect upon, I played the song “The Truth” by Vilma Fry. It’s simple, repetitive mantra “I will believe the truth about myself… no matter how beautiful it is”, was an appropriate lead-in for this experience of reverencing the gifts of oneself. The reflection continued with time given for the women to complete a hand-out in which they were invited to create a visual representation of the qualities they admired most about themselves (Appendix H).

This session’s quiet meditation began with presenting a small ball of clay to each woman. Using the ball as an object of centering, the women were invited to simply hold the clay for much of the meditation. With their eyes still closed, they were eventually guided into simple manipulation of the clay they held. Besides its very important centering quality, this exercise was an attempt to offer some comfort with the material which was new to most in this circle.

The art task for this session was to create a concrete depiction of the giftedness of each woman in this circle. They were each presented a circle-shaped clay form on which to create their gifts mandala. They were directed to create in clay, abstract or realistic images of the gifts they had identified on their worksheet. A variety of tools for shaping, smoothing, imprinting and building up the clay were offered. Because of the single-session time restriction of this
process, non-firing clay was used for this mandala experience. A variety of materials such as sea glass, stones, marbles, and mirror pieces for inlaying color and texture were offered as well. Some general assistance in working with the clay was offered.

Sister Paula shared that this was actually her favorite of the five mandala experiences (Figure 18). Relative to her apprehension at the beginning of this process, this participant’s subsequent ease in the group processing of each session has increased dramatically as a result of these group experiences.

![Sr. Paula’s gift plaque mandala.](image)

Sr. Margaret shared that this was one of her least favorite mandala experiences. She said she did not dislike the feel or texture of the clay, but that she struggled with manipulating it to create a depiction of her gifts. Reflecting on her drawn mandala experiences, I observed that Sr. Margaret was very open to the practice of allowing images to surface as she created. Although it is possible with
more experience, this is much more difficult to accomplish with this particular medium. Sr. Margaret methodically added color and texture to the clay circle form presented to her. Figure 19 is her Gifts Plaque Mandala.

*Figure 19. Sr. Margaret’s gifts plaque mandala.*

Figures 20 and 21 are photographs of the mandalas created for this fourth session by Circle One. The group worked quietly for most of the session. At first, some did express some frustration with this new medium. Though generally
pleased with the outcomes, most found this to be one of the most challenging of the five mandala-making experiences.

One learning I took from this experience is that I would likely reverse the order of Sessions Three and Four when offering this process in the future. This meditation on the individuals’ giftedness, though challenging in some ways, would have been a more useful prerequisite before engaging in the more emotionally intense Light in Darkness experience.

*Session Five: Part of a Whole Mandala*

There were four participants present for this fifth and final session of our mandala-making group experience. This session began with a reflection on the previous four sessions. I reiterated my hope that the women had had some positive outcomes of the experiences so far—that each had begun to discover the “artist within” themselves individually.

The final session was an opportunity to create a group mandala. In creating this art task, I had drawn from the art therapy technique called a Part of a Whole, or what I have come to know as an Amoeba Drawing. Each individual was presented a large sheet of white paper with a single arched line drawn on it. They were directed to incorporate the line on this paper to create an image depicting their feelings about this five session mandala-making experience. When these four images were placed together, this powerful mandala was created (Figure 22).
Figure 22. Part of a whole mandala.

The goal for this particular art task was to depict the cohesion of this group which had been together throughout this group process. Most participants expressed some difficulty in beginning their image. Most of the women used more than one media for their Part of the Whole Mandala. The processing of this completed mandala was most inspiring. It was interesting to see the movement of each of the women as they processed. They changed from comparing their individual piece to the others in the circle, to looking at the entire mandala as a whole. For some, there was a movement from disappointment and frustration, to excitement and wonder.

This exercise did successfully accomplish the task of imaging the cohesiveness of this circle of women. The palettes were varied in tone and hue,
yet they were complimentary to each other. I found it interesting that half of the circle chose to incorporate and color the outside of the mandala, and half did not. It was telling as the images were placed together of a certain “groundedness” of this circle of women. Like their stories and histories, the women created unique images. When these images were placed together in shared community, it was an object of beauty was to behold.

Summary

This Circles of Women project was a positive experience for the women of Circle One. Each has expressed great appreciation for this unique opportunity to learn with each other. They were personally enriched. The quiet, meditative experience was a welcome gift at the end of some very busy days, they said. Many have shared that their mandalas continue to reveal significant insights to them. Most importantly, all of the women were surprised to discover their artist within.
Chapter VI

Circle Two

The site location for Circle Two was an outreach center located in an inner city neighborhood of this same Midwest City. This center was located in the basement of a large, historical church. These and all group sessions for the women who frequented this center took place in a large room equipped with a large square table and chairs. This room had a sink and counter area where the women could prepare snacks and beverages when gathered in the center for a variety of group sessions and life skills training opportunities. There were two large rolling cabinets which contained yarn and other craft work supplies. The tops of these cabinets had books, periodicals, and other pamphlets of interest to the women at the center. The room was decorated with a variety of artwork created by the women over the years. There were a number of banners hanging from the high ceiling of the room.

The sessions for this group took place in the mid to late-afternoon hours. The only windows in the room were glass block and could not be relied upon for adequate lighting. Overhead fluorescent lights and candlelight were used in this setting as well.

The outreach center was not a treatment center. It was, however, a center which served women who were in fact in need of treatment. The targeted population for this center was women who had been touched by homelessness.
Some of the women served were living in a community women’s shelter a few miles from the center. Many were in some supportive housing situation, such as a government subsidized apartment or group home. And some were living with family or friends.

Most all of the clients suffered from some mental illness. Most had not been diagnosed however, and so, were not in treatment for their diseases. Some had shared of having been diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar and substance abuse disorders. It was blatantly obvious that many had profound developmental delays. All struggled with social and emotional limitations. Many suffered from some especially severe physical illness and disabilities as well.

There were a total of 13 participants in Circle Two. The ages ranged from mid 30’s to mid 50’s. Five of the women were Caucasian. Eight were African American. As I had anticipated and cited as a limitation for this particular circle of women, of the 13 participants, only two were present for all five sessions of this art therapy project. One woman was present for three of the five sessions. Two women participated in two, while eight women participated in only one of the sessions. I attempted to impress upon the women that their full participation was an important part of this process. I even offered a monetary incentive gift to all who were present for all five sessions. Because of the transient nature of this particular population, these and all group experiences at this center can be described as open, yet structured.
The participants in this circle of women had all known one another before this project began. Some knew closer relationships with some than with others. Many had been clients at the outreach center since its establishment 2 ½ years earlier. They all had art therapy experience. Weekly art therapy sessions had been a part of the center’s programming since its beginning. I had been serving at this outreach center as an art therapy intern for nine months at the time of this project. I was a familiar presence to the women there.

I will share my reflections and observations of each group experience. My focus for this report will be on the two women who were able to participate in all five sessions. Martha was a 49-year old Caucasian woman who suffered from obvious developmental and emotional limitations. She was morbidly obese, HIV Positive and diabetic. She was often unkempt in dress and hygiene. Elena was a 39-year old African American woman. She had reported suffering from depression. She had presented some evidence of psychosis. She suffered with developmental and emotional disorders as well. She was overweight and had a history of severe heart complications.

Session One: Scribble Mandala

There were four women present for this first session. Although they all had experience with art therapy and creating mandalas, I had taken time during this first session to explain the nature of my thesis project. I shared with those present my belief in the healing power of mandalas created in community.
The group responded well to the guided meditation. Initially, there was a brief hesitation by some. Not surprisingly, some were reluctant to close their eyes during the meditation. This simple act does require a certain level of trust. Although these participants had had an existing relationship, some had not reached such trust with each other or with staff.

Elena required a bit of prompting to focus her attention and begin the mandala. As evidenced by noting the similarities between Figures 23 and 24, Elena had some difficulty with original thought processes. She began this exercise by selecting markers for her medium of choice. She soon changed her medium to colored pencils. These pencils and color palette were almost identical to Martha’s who was sitting beside her. Particularly noteworthy, both mandalas have incorporated a large black form which appears quite out of place in these lighter abstract designs. Elena had made a common practice of copying her style and images from others in the group sessions.

*Figure 23.* Elena’s scribble mandala.
There was a bit of horseplay between Elena and another participant. I suspect this was an exhibition of the regression brought about from the playful scribble drawing exercise of this mandala experience. This energy was defused and redirected quickly. For the most part, the energy and tone of this first session was light and calm. The women worked slowly and quietly. The processing was most appropriate. All seemed pleased with the finished creations. The artwork created by the remaining two participants is Figures 25 and 26.
Session Two: Inside/Outside Mandala

As I had anticipated and planned for this particular circle of women, I modified the Johari Window collage exercise for this second session. Adapted from the art therapy Inside/Outside Mask or Box techniques familiar to these women, I invited the women to create an Inside/Outside Mandala.

There were five women present for this second session of the project. Martha and Elena were the only two that had been present for the first session. The session began with a short guided meditation. This was a bit disrupted by the presence of one participant’s one-year old grandson with her this day.

I was particularly aware of the concentration of Martha during the meditation. Generally a bit high-strung, she was able to quiet her mind and body better than most considering the distraction.

The session progressed with an invitation to the women to reflect upon how they saw and felt inside themselves at that particular time and place. Then, I invited them to reflect upon what they were willing to share with others—to explore how others actually saw them. I offered them a simple worksheet to aid in their reflection (Appendix I). They were then directed to find images among the collage material that best represented the qualities that they hold inside as well as the qualities that they are willing to share with others.

The tone and energy of this group experience was mostly quiet and calm. There was some chatter and interplay between the women as the pre-cut magazine
images and words were passed around the table. A few were momentarily
distracted by the child with them. He was a familiar visitor to this group, and so
the participants took turns holding and cajoling him as they worked.

With the developmental and emotional limitations so many of these
women possess, the images and words they selected were mostly quite concrete.
Few were able to grasp the concept of dividing the mandala into the two parts of
themselves. Although her processing revealed that she did not fully comprehend
many of the words and images she chose, Martha seemed to understand the
directive. She used a round piece of paper to represent the Inside Self. She found
images that depicted her Outside Self which she placed around the parameter of
the mandala (Figure 27). She was very pleased with her artwork and was able to
share her creation with the group.

Figure 27. Martha’s inside/ outside mandala.
Elena’s mandala again seems to mimic those around her (Figure 28). Interestingly, her piece did not include images of children. This was very unusual for Elena who had often shared her angst at having lost her three children. Taken by Child Protective Services some years earlier, all three sons had been placed in adoptive homes. Most all of her previous collage work had revealed much about her feelings of despair over losing her children. Although I do not believe she was necessarily grasping the directive for this exercise, I do think that the calm atmosphere and positive energy was a factor in her more uplifting choices.

![Elena's inside/outside mandala](image)

*Figure 28. Elena’s inside/outside mandala.*

Of the other participants in this session’s circle, I had to assist the woman who needed to watch her grandson. She had shared with us that she was not able to read since a stroke a number of years ago. She was extremely anxious on this and most days. Sitting beside her, I helped her in selecting and arranging images—mostly children and animals, for her mandala (Figure 29). She
experienced a reversal of her anxiety as she felt a sense of great accomplishment and encouragement with this simple art task.

Session Two was a positive experience for all participants. Figures 30 and 31 are photos of the artwork created by the remaining two participants. Of the five participants in this art therapy session, only Martha and Elena returned to participate in the mandala making process.
Session Three: Light in Darkness Mandala

This third session began with an invitation to reflect upon some of life’s darkest times. This circle of women was of course familiar with how very dark life can be. I gave a copy of The Apache Blessing (Appendix G) to each of the participants. Before guiding them in a short meditation, I read the prayer to them.

There were four participants present for this third session. Martha and Elena were joined by one volunteer staff person as well as a client who declined when asked to sign the release and consent form. Although I will not include her artwork here, I am grateful for the presence of these two individuals as they helped to enhance this group experience.

The tone and energy of this third session was very quiet and reflective. As is optimum for this particular technique, the overhead lights were turned off during this art experience. Small lamps and candlelight were the only source of light as the women drew and created. This added an element of surprise when the women were able to view and to process their completed pieces in more direct lighting. Although initially there was some disappointment with this process, all eventually responded very positively to the often-unexpected images that surfaced before them.

Martha continued to astonish me with her response to the mandala exercises. She generally worked very quickly on most of her craft and art projects
at the center. She worked very slowly and intently on this Light in Darkness Mandala (Figure 32).

Figure 32. My day.

Martha selected chalk pastels for this particular exercise. She seemed to really enjoy the tactile experience of blending and creating new colors as she worked. The fragmented shapes reminded her of the stained glass windows of her beloved church, she said. She wrote the names of her children and a prayer for them around the parameters of this mandala. She did not raise her children and had little contact with them. She was very pleased with the finished artwork and experience.

Elena presented a bored and evasive guise throughout this third session. This was not a particularly new stance for her. She possessed an emotional immaturity that could be compared to a young adolescent. When asked directly,
she expressed that she was disappointed and sad this day. Using disconnected concrete images, Elena created her Light in Darkness mandala (Figure 33).

![Mandala Image]

Figure 33. Diamond.

Houses and simple flowers were common images throughout Elena’s artwork. Having been homeless previously, at the time of this research project, Elena had been residing in her own apartment for about 10 months. She described the house in this piece as her uncle’s, one of the many homes she “stayed” in while growing up.

Expressions of sorrow over missing her children were even more common occurrences in Elena’s artwork and other group processes. She had written her son’s names and words of unhappiness around the outside of the mandala.

This Light in Darkness mandala and its invitation to deeper reflection was a positive experience for all participants of this third session. It was evident that
Martha and Elena embraced this experience, each with a sincerity that was unique to them.

*Session Four: Gifts Plaque*

There were six women present for this mandala session. Besides Martha and Elena, two new participants as well as two who had been present for one other session were with us this day. Although some of the women had had previous experience working with clay, I was grateful to have two volunteers present to help with the extra details of working with this medium.

This reflection on giftedness was difficult for some in this circle. The simple musical mantra, “I will believe the truth about myself...no matter how beautiful it is”, brought some laughter among this circle. It was apparent that many had little awareness of their own abilities and achievements. Sadly, it was evident that many of the women were unaware of their own goodness. Some of the women needed some assistance in completing the simple worksheet that accompanied this reflection (Appendix H). We took extra time to allow this important reflection to take place.

Most of the women in this circle responded well to the quiet meditation before beginning the art experience. The quiet, reserved energy seemed to remain throughout the session. I was actually surprised, as I had fully anticipated some regression with this medium and this particular circle of women. Interestingly, these women did not handle the clay extensively at all. There was no adding on
or building up the clay with shapes and forms. All of the women chose to imprint images and words. Color was added with glass and mirror pieces.

Martha shared that this was a very calming exercise for her. Her simple design and choice of the word “WISDOM” was really quite extraordinary for this woman who lived with extremely profound developmental disabilities (Figure 34). I had learned that her gift was a wisdom that comes from living with many emotional and physical hardships. Martha had certainly grown in confidence throughout this mandala-making process. And how beautiful that was to witness.

![Figure 34. Martha’s gifts plaque mandala.](image)

Elena was less successful in making the connection from the gifts she had identified on the worksheet to the clay mandala she created (Figure 35). Her worksheet noted that she was a student (she was in the process of completing her GED studies.) She also named her own home as an achievement and gift. As is a common practice, her mandala creation simply read “MY CHILDRENS.” Her
children were her gifts. They were gifts she had lost. Though the subject matter differed, Elena chose many of the same tools and implements in creating this mandala as did Martha who was sitting beside her.

![Figure 35. Elena’s gifts plaque mandala.](image)

There was terrific interaction and encouragement between the women and staff of this circle. Figures 36 through 38 are photographs of the mandalas created by the remaining participants willing to be represented in this research project.

![Figure 36. Gifts plaque mandala 3.](image)  ![Figure 37. Gifts plaque mandala 4.](image)
Session Five: Part of a Whole Mandala

There were seven women present for this final session of the five week mandala experience for Circle Two. Besides Martha and Elena, there were two women who had taken part in at least one other session. There were three women new to the project. Since I had no way of knowing how many to expect to be present for this or any of the sessions for Circle Two, I made some modifications for this group mandala exercise.

Most in this circle had had some experience with creating group murals and art projects. There was actually a Part of a Whole mural they had created together displayed in the room where we worked. Many were familiar with the process I was inviting them into. I came prepared with enough materials to create two whole mandalas—eight sheets of paper with an arched line drawn on each. We had seven women present, and so I invited one of the volunteers to participate in this exercise.

Figure 38. Gifts plaque mandala 5.
Since many of the women present had not been involved in most of the previous experiences, I also modified the directive for this Part of a Whole Mandala. Instead of asking the women to create a depiction of how this experience had been for them, I invited the women to create an image depicting how they were feeling at that particular time and place.

Unfortunately, the guided meditation was shortened for this fifth session. Some disruptive behavior by a few of the new participants made the meditative experience impossible for the rest in the circle.

Martha worked quietly and thoughtfully on her portion of the mandala. Her colored pencil choices and pressure were reflective of her calm mood on this day. Elena sat beside her. She worked methodically, carefully using similar media and color choices. Elena was less reserved and calmed by the experience. She was not capable of working with much definition and detail. Still, the similarities were evident when looking at the images placed together. Martha’s is the top right quadrant of Figure 39, and Elena’s is the bottom right.

One participant new to the project had reported being in treatment for acute schizophrenia. Her artwork is located on the bottom left quadrant of Figure 39. She entered this session quite stimulated. Her speech was disorganized and pressured. She worked with colored pencils, applying heavy pressure. Her random and disconnected images were reflective of some obvious psychosis.
Most conspicuously, she was agreeable and actually desirous of the upside-down placement of her image onto the finished mandala.

*Figure 39.* Part of the whole mandala I.

*Figure 40.* Part of a whole mandala II.
The second Part of the Whole mandala was comprised of artwork created by three new participants and one woman who had been present for three of the five session of this project (Figure 40).

The assembly process for both of these group mandalas was most positive and encouraging. The quadrants were not numbered in any way. There were many possibilities as to the arrangements and design of these two whole mandalas. Quite atypically, the women communicated appropriately and thoughtfully throughout this process. I was heartened by the leadership role that Martha took in this process. She offered appropriate input and listened to the desires of the other women in the circle. Both the Part of a Whole Mandalas were posted on a large bulletin board in the workroom and processed as a group. All were very pleased with the finished artwork. They were a welcome reminder of a pretty amazing experience for all present.

Summary

I am confident that this five-session mandala experience was a positive one for the many women it involved in Circle Two. In particular, I am most impressed with the impact this experience had upon Martha. I know that the incentive gifts were a driving force for her participation initially. She was obviously proud of her accomplishment in being one of only two women to commit to all five sessions. She took a certain ownership of the project she was committed to complete. I could tell that she looked forward to the sessions every
week. She had a particularly moving response to the meditations each week. She shared that she used some at home. I think her beautiful artwork was a viable witness to her transformation as a result of this experience.
Chapter Seven

Circle Three

The setting for the gatherings of this particular circle of women was a multi-functional meeting room in the basement of the rectory of a small parish located in a working class neighborhood of this same Midwest City. This room was very dark and unadorned. Unlike the basement facility used at the site location for Circle Two, this particular room had no windows. There were incandescent lighting fixtures which were on a dimmer. Two walls of this room were lined with dark unfinished wooden shelves. These were filled with canned food and paper products. This space served as a food pantry, a service ministry of the parish. There was a large locked refrigeration unit on one wall. There was a small kitchenette within and a small bathroom directly off the room. A large dark desk sat directly in the middle of the room. There were three large round tables with chairs on either side of this desk.

I managed to create a warm, inviting atmosphere within this room. For the purpose of our sessions, we created a work area by pulling together two tables. The environment with candles and a variety of mandala images on a large round lace tablecloth had been strategically placed over where the two tables met. This created a centering focal point for the women gathered each session. These sessions took place between the hours of 6:30 and 8:30 PM in the springtime of the year.
This circle began as an invitation to the women of a gay and lesbian support group. This invitation, sent through one of this group’s facilitators, was inadvertently distributed to others who were not actually aware of the targeted population for this study. For future reference, I have learned from this experience that when attempting to call together participants of shared experience, care needs to be taken to be more specific in the invitation and its circulation.

This circle of women was unique in that while some were acquainted with one another, none of the women knew each other particularly well. In fact, some had never met before. A few of the women had had some previous art therapy experience. All of the participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to be with other women for such a process of self-discovery and healing. Still, of the three Circles, this one was least consistent in its participation.

There were a total of seven women able to participate in Circle Three of this group art therapy process. Due to scheduling conflicts and illness, none of the participants were able to be present for all five sessions. Two women were able to attend four of the five sessions. Another two were able to participate in three. One woman took part in two of the five sessions. There were two more women who joined us for only one session of the program. The ages of the women ranged from early twenties to mid-fifties. All of the participants were Caucasian in race. All but one of the women had a Masters level of education.
The youngest was just beginning her academic career at a local community college at the time of this project.

I will include my observations and reflections on each of the five group art therapy sessions for Circle Three. For the purpose of this report, I will focus on and attempt to document the experience of the two women who were able to participate in four of the five sessions. Lisa was 54 years old at the time of this project. She was single, a divorced mother of four adult children. She was not a lesbian. She was actually the co-facilitator of the aforementioned support group. I had invited her into this project as a common denominator of sorts. I was grateful for her willingness to introduce me to the participants whom I had never met. As it turned out, Lisa had never met many or our participants either.

Maria was also in her mid-fifties at the time of this project. She was a former participant in the gay and lesbian support group. She was divorced with one adult child. She was in a committed relationship, living with her partner. Her partner did join us for one of the five sessions. Maria was a spirituality and healthcare professional working in a large hospital located in this city.

Neither Lisa nor Maria had ever had art therapy before beginning this process. Both entered into this group eager for this new experience.

Session One: Scribble Mandala

There were four women present for this first session of Circle Three of this research project. Besides Lisa and Maria, there was one former member of
the gay and lesbian support group. These three women were acquainted with one another. There was also a woman unknown to the rest gathered this night. She shared that she had been given an invitation by her mental health therapist.

There was a short delay before beginning this first session. All but Lisa arrived late. I was a bit concerned at this early evening starting time given people’s work schedules and other commitments. Maria actually arrived with her fast-food dinner she had hoped to be able to partake of as she worked. She managed to eat some of her meal as introduction forms were completed (Appendix C). Maria did arrive late for each of the four sessions she had attended. She brought food with her each time as well. She was typical of so many women, running from one commitment to another. This exemplifies the plight of so many women in our society. Taking time for, physical, emotional, and/or spiritual nourishment is often a challenge. The alternative for many is such “multi-tasking.” I was really pleased that Maria and all of the women of this research project took the time to be nourished by this opportunity for creative expression and community.

After the introductions were made, I presented an explanation of this thesis project and proposal. Time was taken to offer a brief overview of what mandalas were and how they may be an extraordinary tool for self-discovery.

The quiet meditation was well-received by this circle of women. All came from some very busy places and circumstances. The movement into the Scribble
Mandala art task was quite calm and comfortable. The women were all at ease with closing their eyes for the kinesthetic movement and drawing exercise to begin this mandala.

Lisa began slowly. She shared that she had a difficult time “jumping into” what was the first mandala experience for her. I invited her and all of the women to move around and to turn their large scribble drawings as they searched for an image with the circle-shaped template. Lisa titled her Scribble Mandala *Line Dance*; it is pictured in Figure 41.

![Figure 41. Line dance.](image)

Once she discovered her mandala within the scribble, Lisa worked with ease, mixing media as she created. She continued to take thoughtful reflective breaks as she worked. She shared that she had been suffering with a terrible headache throughout that day. Although she was not particularly satisfied with
the finished piece, she acknowledged that the experience was helpful in easing her physical pain this night.

Maria also expressed some difficulty in finding an image in her scribble drawing. She soon asked if she could re-do her scribble to try again. I encouraged her to continue her search and to allow the image to find her. Once she found her mandala, she worked slowly and deliberately. It was evident from this mandala-making experience and from those to follow that Maria had great artistic talent. It was also quite evident from her words and behaviors during these sessions that she was very much in need of absolute control in such situations. Her finished Scribble Mandala, titled Water Dance is Figure 42.

![Water Dance](image)

*Figure 42. Water dance.*

The artwork created by the remaining participants of this first session are pictured in Figures 43 and 44. Figure 43 was created by a woman who would join
us for three of the five group art therapy sessions. She had had some art therapy experience and was very excited about this process. Though her image was quite concrete and what I would describe as a bit disconcerting, this participant shared that this was quite a freeing experience for her. She titled this mandala *Awakening* because it depicted her openness to a current employment transition.

![Figure 43. Scribble mandala 3.](image1)

![Figure 44. Scribble mandala 4.](image2)

Our fourth participant this evening had a very powerful response to this art therapy experience. She worked quietly and seemingly serenely as she created her mandala which she was unable to title (Figure 44). As we processed, she shared that images which aroused some very intense memories surfaced for her as she created this mandala. She could not even look at her piece. She left it face down in front of her as she spoke. This was when she shared that she was referred to our sessions by her therapist. At the time of this mandala-making process, she was in treatment to heal the abuse she had experienced as a child and then at the hands of her ex-husband. I supported her choice to not look at the
artwork as she shared. I was taken aback when Maria asked to see her mandala. She gave some thoughtful reflections on the piece. Passing the piece around, others offered some positive input as well. I was not entirely sure this hurting woman was prepared to view her piece in a positive light. I handed it back to her, face down. I encouraged her to take it to her next appointment with her therapist. She agreed. Unfortunately this woman joined us for this and then the second session of this process. She stayed in contact with me for the remaining weeks. She said she really enjoyed the experience and wished to remain in the process, but it simply was not a good time.

There were many surprises at this first session for Circle Three of this research project. I learned a great deal about the women of this circle in a very short time. Though these women had little or no previous relationship, the desire to be supportive to one another was evident.

Session Two: Inside/Outside Mandala

There were three women present for this second session of this mandala-making experience. Lisa and Maria were joined by the fourth participant from Session One.

The atmosphere and tone for this session was quite light and positive. All the women expressed excitement with the process so far. Particularly the meditation and the opportunity for personal reflection were praised and appreciated among the women that night.
Based upon what I had learned from Circles One and Two, I offered the Inside/Outside Mandala experience to this circle of women instead of the Johari Window collage mandala. Time was taken to complete the handout (Appendix I) and reflect upon the Inside and Outside Self they each possessed.

The women worked well together, offering anecdotes and stories as they sorted through the collage material they worked with and shared. Lisa said that this was one of her favorites of the four mandalas she created during this project. “[It] offered an interesting combination of depth and whimsy in words or pictures juxtaposed.” It is notable that she left no background showing on her Inside/Outside Mandala (Figure 45). I could see that she had a difficult time narrowing down the many images she had selected. Around the outer edge of her mandala she depicted her Outside Self—outgoing, fun-loving, fashionable, socially conscious, mother, sister, friend, and professional woman. As she shared during the processing, Lisa pointed out the images of the four baby boys across the top of her mandala. She said they represented her four sons. She was obviously moved with sadness as she shared of the estrangement she now knows between herself and one of her sons. This was represented by the separation in the placement of one of the boys in her artwork. She quickly moved on to explain the center of her mandala—her Inside Self. Lisa’s career requires her to display a very public persona. But she is a shy and private person by nature. For her Inside Self, she selected images that depicted her desire and need for solitude. Although she
longed for and needed time to be alone, she did not want to be lonely. Lisa shared that she was at a point in her life when she was desirous of an exclusive romantic relationship.

Figure 45. Lisa’s inside/ outside mandala.

Figure 46. Maria’s inside/ outside mandala
Maria worked quietly and slowly on her Inside/Outside Mandala (Figure 46). She was very deliberate as she selected the images and words for her collage. She began by working in the center—her Inside Self. She pointed out that the lotus flower and the black panther were significant images. These depicted what seemed to be polarities in her emotional makeup. The lotus is delicate and yet hearty. The panther can be harsh as well as graceful. Also, in the center of her mandala was an image of a turtle which she shared she had collected for many years. I would feel confident in assuming that this image further represents her need for a tough exterior and possibly even protection. Maria’s Outside Self is depicted with bright, warm images of nature and animals, food, and people. It was most interesting to witness as she painstakingly arranged images and words before beginning to glue any into place. She asked for a ruler as she worked and attempted perfect symmetry on her piece. She omitted certain images and words based upon how they would fit into the mandala she created. Maria’s need for order was most apparent.

This second session was a positive experience for each of the participants. All expressed some surprise at the ability of such simple materials to reveal so much about them. The third participant who had such a strong response to the art making at our first session had a much more positive experience with this collage mandala. Finding none that worked for her, she enjoyed cutting apart words to create more appropriate words to describe her Inside and Outside self. I
encouraged her ingenuity and creativity. Still, she shared with me later that she felt lacking in her art making ability. She assured me she would return for the rest of our sessions. Unfortunately, I did not get a photograph of her mandala that evening. Even more unfortunate, she did not return for any of the remaining sessions.

*Session Three: Light in the Darkness Mandala*

There were three women present for this third session of our mandala-making experience. Maria was not able to be with us that night. Besides Lisa and one returning participant, we were joined by a new woman. This participant, our youngest, had learned of the Circle after we had in fact begun the process. Since I knew of the changing participation and focus of this particular Circle, I welcomed this young woman to join us.

After some short introductions, I offered a brief overview of the previous mandala experiences. The lights were dimmed quite low for this exercise. The meditation which included reading the Apache Blessing (Appendix G) was well-received by this circle of women. All three participants commented that the meditation offered them some profound insights.

Lisa’s Light in Darkness Mandala is pictured in Figure 47. She shared that she had a difficult time beginning this mandala. She eventually began by drawing the *diamond* referred to in the Apache Blessing. She sat with this diamond for a while. She “waited for the image to emerge,” she said.
Beginning with large heart-shaped petals, a beautiful flower emerged. She titled this image *Blooming in the Darkness*. Lisa later noticed that the heart was a prominent image in her mandalas created during this project. She recognized that this was in fact the resurgence of a past personal symbol.

![Image of a mandala with heart-shaped petals](image)

*Figure 47. Blooming in the darkness.*

All three participants worked quietly on these Light in Darkness mandalas. Figures 48 and 49 are the mandalas created by the remaining participants for this third session. Our newest participant titled her mandala *Inside Out* (Figure 48). I was very aware that she was self-conscious as she worked. She worked quickly yet thoughtfully, laying down large, bright images of her deepest sources of light—heart, sun, water, images of life and growth. There clock image, a depiction of her struggle with limited time and energy. I noticed that she took many breaks to look at others as they worked. She seemed quite aware that I was not drawing and was watching everyone working. I ended up creating a Light in
Darkness mandala myself in hopes of easing her nervousness during this, her first session. It seemed to help her relax. She shared openly as we processed the artwork. I could see that she would be a positive presence to this Circle of women.

*Figure 48. Light in darkness 2.*  
*Figure 49. Light in darkness 3.*

**Session Four: Gifts Plaque Mandala**

There were six women present for this fourth mandala-making experience for Circle Three, Lisa and Maria were both present this night. The two women who had participated in the two previous sessions were present. We were also joined by two of Maria’s friends. Our session began late, as Maria and her friends called to let us know they would be delayed.

I found myself a bit nervous about the late start for this particular exercise. The meditation and time to reflect and complete the handout (Appendix H) had to
be shortened somewhat. I wanted to be sure to offer ample time to allow the women to get comfortable with the clay, a new medium for most.

There was a very different energy this night. The new participants were welcomed by the group most warmly. I did not detect any discomfort or intimidation from the more regular participants. There was some playful conversation and encouragement between the participants.

Lisa worked quietly. She handled the tools very appropriately and confidently. She came up with some rather clever problem-solving techniques to best represent her many gifts. She named this exercise and medium as one of her favorites. She “enjoyed the challenge of 3-dimensions.” This mandala again contains an image of a heart—her rediscovered gift (Figure 50).

Figure 50. Lisa’s gifts plaque.
Maria worked very slowly and skillfully on her Gifts Plaque Mandala (Figure 51). Interestingly, she worked beginning on the outside of the clay circular form and then worked on the inside. She painstakingly created each leaf of what she referred to as a lotus flower. These were placed around the outer edge of her mandala. She said that she was most appreciative for this opportunity to focus on herself and on her giftedness. Simple, beautiful images of wisdom are within the mandala…her body, a bird, and a “Third Eye”. Maria did not have time to complete this mandala. She had more gifts to include, she said. I invited her to take more clay and materials to continue to work on her mandala.

There was a lot of positive interaction between the women of this circle. There was lighthearted banter and encouragement as they created their plaques.
depicting their gifts. There was great support and reverence as the women shared their creations.

*Figure 52. Gifts plaque 3.*  
*Figure 53. Gifts plaque 4.*  
*Figure 54. Gifts plaque 5.*  
*Figure 55. Gifts plaque 6.*

Figures 52 through 55 were the Gifts Plaques created by the remaining participants of this fourth session of Circle Three. It is notable that there was little carving into the clay circles given to each participant. In creating their mandalas, these women all built-up and added onto with the clay they used. I detected some obvious regression as some of the women worked. Many shared that this experience was reminiscent of favorite art making projects from childhood.
Despite my anxiousness, this turned out to be a really excellent session. All the women present expressed that this was a most positive experience. The women who were new to the group were hoping to be able to return for our fifth and final session. Lisa and one other participant were regretting the fact that they were not going to be able to be present for the last session.

**Session Five: Part of a Whole Mandala**

There were only two women present for the final session for Circle Three. Maria and our youngest participant were with us this night. I was concerned about this possibility. I knew that this group mandala experience would be a challenge for this particular group. I offered the women two options that night. I asked them if they would each like to create two parts of the mandala. Or, if they preferred instead for me to create along with them that final session. They both chose to have me create a Part of the Whole Mandala, and then to leave the fourth quadrant blank. In many ways, the piece created would actually be a more accurate depiction of this particular group’s experience.

After guiding the women in a quiet meditation, I invited the women to depict how the mandala-making group art therapy experience has been for each of them. Both women worked quietly.

Maria seemed somewhat anxious as she worked on her quadrant of the Part of the Whole Mandala. Hers is the lower right corner of the group mandala pictured in Figure 56. Although she was the last to finish her piece, she worked
more quickly than she had in our previous sessions. This was the first and only session she participated in without Lisa present. I wondered if she was feeling at a bit of a loss without Lisa. She shared that these group art therapy experiences were most helpful to her. Her image included a lotus flower at her “core,” she said. She attempted to depict horns, or pipes from an organ which were conduits for releasing many new insights. Winds depicted in wispy blue lines were helping to bring these insights to the surface, she explained. She was happy with the final group mural, but expressed some disappointment in her own image. She in fact had no desire to take it home with her and suggested I keep them all. “They were created together, and belong together,” she said. Based upon the level of sharing she was willing to enter into this night, I sensed that Maria was a bit out of her comfort zone. Although she expressed an appreciation for the process and experience, she was quick to suggest ending our session early that night.

I felt a bit awkward at the suggestion that I take the Part of the Whole Mandala with me after the final session of Circle Three. I asked if it was all right with our third participant. I suspect feeling a bit coerced, she agreed that I should keep the piece together. This youngest member’s quadrant is located on the upper right corner of the finished piece. She shared that the tree image was representative of the growth she had known through her participation in this group art therapy experience. It is noteworthy that this tree’s roots are many, but are totally exposed. Though this can, in and of itself, be an indication of a lack of
groundedness, I could see that this young woman was working toward achieving a sense of self and stability that comes from self-awareness. One large open flower was placed high upon the tree. She commented that she was comforted by the realization that she shared this image in common with many in this Circle throughout the course of this project. Looking forward to more growth to come, the mostly-bare tree had many unopened buds. The small blue drops of rain were nourishing the tree, she said. They do not appear to be falling from the sky, but from the tree itself. They seem to be watering the new, green grass beneath the tree.

![Figure 56. Part of the whole mandala.](image)

This final session was an interesting one. I think this final group mural does depict this Circle of Women well. Cohesion is evident in the similar...
imagery, color, and line quality of all quadrants, including my own. The blank quadrant of this Part of a Whole Mandala seemed to depict Lisa who was missing for this final session. Her participation was obviously missed by Maria that night, as well as by me.

Summary

Although it would have been ideal for more total participation in all five sessions of this project, I am not disappointed in the outcome for this particular Circle of Women. Despite the diversity of this circle of women, I learned much from all the women who gathered. It is evident that women do desire and so seek out opportunities for such group processes. All expressed that this was a beginning. Although there were many insights revealed through the mandalas created together, they agreed that more insights were yet to be discovered.
Chapter VIII

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Many conclusions may be drawn from this Circles of Women research project and results. Hoping to confirm previous research on the subject of women coming together to support one another under stress, my initial intent for this research project was to present this group art therapy opportunity to groups of women with some shared experience of marginalization and some previous relationship. I was able to accomplish this with two of the three Circles of Women. These groups represented specific groups with shared history and experience.

It is also true that by nature women share a common psychosocial reality and degree of marginalization, and so, are in need of support. Based upon the outcomes of all three groups’ experiences, I would conclude that there is evidence that such opportunities for women with little or no previous relationship would know some benefit as well.

The groups of women with some shared history did confirm that this experience enhanced these already existing relationships. All were grateful for this opportunity to focus on themselves for these precious few hours. Although the comfort levels did vary, all appreciated the opportunity to share their stories
and their creations with others in the group. Many expressed interest in revisiting this group experience again, possibly inviting others into the gatherings.

The group of women with little or no previous history was a broader representation of women’s groups. Though this group was diverse in age and experience, their art work revealed common imagery and expression of feelings. These women too expressed gratitude for the rare opportunity to spend time in self-reflection and nurturance. I found the level of sharing most inspiring among these given their short time together. It was unfortunate that no one participant was able to participate in all five sessions of this process. All the women of this Circle expressed some regret for this as well.

It was important to stress the guideline that these groups were for support, not therapy. A main objective was to create a community of each of these Circles of Women. This was a process intended to create a safe environment for women to come together to share stories and experiences. It was an opportunity for them to share differences as well as commonalities. Everyone’s experience and process was to be listened to and respected. I believe this objective was met respective to each Circle of Women.

This project was designed to be a process. The media were selected to move from most simplistic and least threatening to those that were more challenging as the sessions progressed. The interventions were designed to deepen in personal introspection and self-exploration from session to session.
This was an attempt to afford some comfort level with media and group process among each group’s participants. This was most successful with the groups and individuals who were able to participate in most or all of the five sessions. But, I also found that even individuals whose participation was minimal did benefit from whatever session they were able to attend.

Among the three Circles of Women, the preferred media varied from individual to individual. Many of the women reported that they really enjoyed the collage exercise. The degree of success this material fostered was most appreciated by the women. I observed the group interaction was positive and light in this second session of the process for each of the circles. The processing became deeper as they shared of their two parts of Self. With this, connections were deepening within the circles. I saw this as a turning point within each of the Circles.

The clay exercise was perhaps the most challenging medium for many. At the beginning of this session, many expressed distaste for the tactile experience. The level of success when working with this new medium was initially discouraging for some. The three Circles came up with different approaches to working with the clay. The circle of women religious and the women who have been touched by homelessness were somewhat conservative as they worked with the clay. These women primarily imprinted and inlayed images and materials into their clay mandalas. The women from Circle Three, however worked with
unrestraint and vigor. These women built up and into their clay pieces. Those that allowed themselves, became very playful when working with the clay. Despite the initial difficulties, many among all three Circles named this to be a favorite medium.

The mandala-making experience, with its meditative component, was most beneficial to each Circle of Women in this research project. The mandala experience, with its potential to reveal unknown aspects of Self, was a positive introduction to the healing capacity of art. The response of each of the women to the meditations was most profound. Almost all expressed a gratitude for the opportunity to focus on the here and now that these guided meditations offered. These were crucial aspects for the beginning of each of the mandala exercises. Within each Circle there were individuals who underwent some more profound transformation and deepened awareness than did others. These women were an inspiration for many.

Throughout these sessions, it was evident that individually, these women’s experiences were diverse. Given this opportunity to create mandalas together, the women were able to share their unique experiences with each other. For each individual, creating mandalas was an effective tool for self-discovery. Communally, creating mandalas was a powerful way of deepening relationships and support within the group.
Recommendations

Creating this opportunity for women to come together for a group experience of self-discovery reinforced the need for women’s circles in our time and culture. I would recommend that such opportunities be made available to more women whenever possible. The accompanying workbook may be used as a guideline for other art therapists desiring to engage women with shared experiences such as bereavement, physical or emotional abuse, divorce and/or addiction, to name a few. This workbook may be used with groups of women desiring an opportunity for personal enrichment and insight.
References


Malchiodi, C.A. (2002). *The soul’s palette: Drawing on art’s transformative*


Appendix A

Introduction From

Name: ___________________________________
Email address: ___________________________
Circle Location: ___________________________

1. Do you have any previous Art Therapy experience?

2. How are group experiences for you in general?

3. Do you have any expectations or specific wants from this group experience?

4. One thing you want to give/ bring to this group.

5. Reason for joining this group.
Appendix B

Final Evaluation Form

Name: ____________________________________________

Circle Location: ____________________________________

Please circle the sessions you were able to attend:

Week 1:  Scribble Mandala    Week 4:  Personal Plaque
Week 2:  Collage Mandala      Week 5:  Group Mandala
Week 3:  Light in Darkness     Mandala

1. Was this group art therapy workshop a positive experience for you? Please comment briefly.

2. What was most important for you in this process?
3. What were some of your most significant insights realized through these mandala-making experiences?

4. Did you have a preference for one or more of the medium or techniques? What did you like about it/ them?

5. Did you have a particular dislike for one or more of the medium or techniques? What did you dislike about it/ them?

6. How did the meditations and/ or environment contribute to your creative process?
Appendix C

Invitation

Circles of Women:
Healing through Mandalas and Community

An invitation to a group art therapy experience

Who: "Circles of Women"
Women who intentionally come together for support.

What: An introduction to the ancient art form of Mandalas. An invitation to embrace this creative form of self-expression that promises personal insight and healing.

Where: .................................

When: Thursdays, April 25, May 3, 10, 17 and 31
6:30 - 8:30 PM

Mary Slattery, HM
Masters in Art Therapy Counseling student
Email: slatterym@ AOL.com
Appendix D

Art Release and Consent Form

Art Release
Consent Form

Project Title: “Circles of Women: Healing Through Mandalas and Community”

Presenter: Mary Slattery, HM

Participant Name: ______________________________

Location Site: _________________________________

Dates of Participation: _________________________________

The undersigned agrees to participate in the above named research thesis project. With the understanding that they may be published and/or used in a public presentation of the project, in signing, the participant gives consent for the use of photographs of the completed artwork produced during the course of the group art therapy experience. Names and any identifying information will not be used in the written or oral presentations of this thesis project.

Participant
Signature: _________________________________ Date: ___

Presenter
Signature: _________________________________ Date: ___
Appendix E

Group Guidelines

**Group Guidelines**

1. Using art therapy techniques, this group is for support, not therapy.

2. **Confidentiality** is essential.
   Anything discussed in the group must stay in the group.

3. **Listen** to one another.
   Speak one at a time.
   No cross talk or talking over one another.

4. **Respect** each other’s process.
   Speak only from your own experience.
Appendix F

Johari Window Handout

Johari Window

"The Arena" (public self)
what you and others know about yourself.

"The Blind Spot" (real public self)
things you don't know about yourself but others do know.

"The Facade" (the hidden self)
the things that may be revealed to others only after trust is developed.

"The Unknown" (your unconscious)
This is the area you will have to work to "self-discover" or "learn" about yourself.
Appendix G

Light in Darkness Reflection

In the Apache language, there is no word for "guilt." There is no word for "shame."
Our lives are like diamonds. When we are born we are pure and uncut. Each thing that happens to us in our lives teaches us how to reflect the light in the world. Each experience gives us a new cut, a new facet in our diamond. How brilliantly do those diamonds sparkle whose facets are many, to whom life has given many cuts! So when you feel that the rain is no longer playful but harsh, and when the snow has lost its beauty, hold your diamond in your hand. Do not feel shame. Do not feel guilt. Think instead of the way you may now reflect the light in the world, and be thankful for the new cut you have received from your diamond.

By Bearwatcher, an Apache medicine man
Appendix H

Gifts Plaque Handout
Appendix I

Inside/Outside Mandala Handout

“Inside/Outside Mandala”

Outside Self

Inside Self
Appendix J

Workbook attached
Circles: Healing Through Mandalas and Community

A five-session therapeutic art experience for groups
Introduction

This workbook is the result of a research project entitled
Circles of Women: Healing Through Mandalas and Community.

For this research project, this five session process was offered to three
groups of women. The images enclosed, with permission from the
participants, are but a few of the beautiful pieces of artwork created
during these sessions.

The primary goal of this project was to offer an introduction to the
ancient art form of mandalas and how they may be an effective tool in
personal healing and self-discovery. The workspace environment was
carefully prepared with centerpieces which included a variety of mandala
images found in nature and art. The participants worked in dimmed
lighting with candles on the work tables. In keeping with the attention to
mindfulness of this art making experience, each session began with a 15-
20 minute quiet meditation. Soft, instrumental music was played
throughout the meditation and art making process each session.

In order to introduce the therapeutic advantages of this group process,
most of the mandala exercises are adaptations of basic art therapy
techniques and interventions. With each session, the art making
materials and directives became more challenging. With each session, the
meditations and exercises invited deeper introspection and personal
reflection.

This experience proved to be a very positive one for all of the women
invited into this process. Although the participants of this research
project were women, I am confident that these mandala exercises would
be equally beneficial to groups of men. This process would be appropriate
with mixed-gendered groups of adolescents and adults as well.

Mary Slattery, HM
Session One

Scribble Mandala
MATERIALS:

- 20 X 24 white drawing paper
- Markers
- 11 X 11 circle template
- Oil pastels
- 12 X 12 card stock in various colors
- Glue sticks
- Colored pencils
- Masking tape

ART EXPERIENCE DIRECTIVE:

1. Begin this session with the quiet meditation on the following page.

2. Guide participants in a kinesthetic exercise adapted from Florence Kane’s *Scribble Drawing* assessment:
   
   Have the participants move their bodies as if they are drawing in the air—moving their arms in large circular movements. Invite them to imagine that they are holding a crayon in one or both hands and are creating a scribble on imaginary paper. If they are comfortable, suggest that they close their eyes during this exercise.

   Invite the participants to select one colored marker or crayon. Ask them to recreate their circular movements on the large sheet of paper that has been taped to the worktable or wall in front of them. Again, if they are comfortable, invite them to close their eyes.

3. Present the participants with a circle template. Model how they might use the template as a viewfinder—finding any meaningful images or designs within their scribble. Encourage them to turn the paper, examining the scribble from all sides. Have them mark the circle they have discovered with a pencil. Have them cut out the circle.

4. Invite the participants to color in the mandala they have created. When finished, have participants select a piece of card stock they will use to mount their finished mandala using a glue stick.

5. Invite participants to title the mandala they have created.

6. Process as a group.
QUIET MEDITATION

1. SIT STILL AND QUIET THE BODY
   For a few moments, simply notice what is happening in your body without trying to change it. Be aware of how stiff or tense you are… where you are relaxed or at ease…where you are tense or dull… Then, without slouching, let your body be supported by the chair. Let it become quiet.

2. WITH GENTLENESS BEGIN TO BREATHE DEEPLY
   As you breathe, be conscious of your breath… bring your attention to your nose… as the air moves through your nostrils as you inhale… as you exhale…Simply notice your breath… without attempting to control it… Gently let your breath become fuller and deeper… let your breath be slow… even… and deep…

   Imagine the air that you are breathing as dark or gray… as it contains all of your nervous energy… negativity… uncertainty, perhaps… Imagine the air that you are breathing in as pure… luminous and full or peace… Without stress, draw out of yourself all dis-ease as you exhale… and as you breathe in, fill yourself with peace and the abiding presence of the Divine Mystery… breathe in everything that is of God and breathe out everything that is not of God. With each breath, imagine that the air is growing lighter and more luminous… until you feel that you are filled with only light and peace.

3. SIT IN SILENT STILLNESS FOR FIVE TO TEN MINUTES
   Take a breath and exhale…
   When you are ready, open your eyes.
Session Two

Inside/Outside Mandala
MATERIALS: 12 X 12 rounds of corrugated cardboard (cake bases)
Pre-cut collage images (people, places, things and words)
Glue sticks
Scissors

ART EXPERIENCE DIRECTIVES:

1. Begin this session with the quiet meditation on the following page.

2. The Inside/ Outside Mandala is an adaptation of the art therapy intervention often used in creating masks or boxes.

   Using the handout provided, invite the clients to reflect upon their two parts of Self—
   
   The **Outside Self** which is the part of themselves that they share easily with others.
   
   And the **Inside Self** which is the part of themselves that they rarely share with others.

3. Invite the clients to select images and/or words which best depict the two parts of themselves. These may be arranged however they see most fitting upon the cardboard backing provided.

   It is most helpful to have the images and words pre-cut for this exercise.

4. Process as a group
QUIET MEDITATION

1. SIT STILL AND QUIET THE BODY
   For a few moments, simply notice what is happening in your body without trying to change it. Be aware of how stiff or tense you are… where you are relaxed or at ease… where you are tense or dull… Then, without slouching, let your body be supported by the chair. Let it become quiet

   Find and look at a single spot in the room… among the environment… on the wall… on the ceiling… out the window…. Stare at this spot without moving any muscles… take several deep breaths… exhaling deeply each time…

2. WITH GENTLENESS BEGIN TO BREATHE DEEPLY
   Now close your eyes… As each muscle and nerve becomes limp, let all of your tensions and concerns… from your head to your toes… feel calm and serene…

   Relax deeper and deeper with each breath that you take… Be aware that you are in the embrace of Divine Providence… You are being loved fully… Loved completely…. Loved totally… You feel at home… You feel safe… You feel open…

3. SIT IN SILENT STILLNESS FOR FIVE TO TEN MINUTES
   Take a breath and exhale… when you are ready, open your eyes…
"Inside/Outside Mandala"
Session Three

Gifts Plaque Mandala
MATERIALS:  
No-fire clay rolled out into 9 X 9 circle shapes  
Several balls of no-fire clay  
Miscellaneous tools and implements  
Miscellaneous marbles, glass pieces, mirror pieces etc..  
Containers of water

ART EXPERIENCE DIRECTIVES:
1. Begin this session with the quiet meditation on following page.

2. Invite the participants to reflect upon their own giftedness. Offer them the handout prepared for charting their reflections (Page XX.)
   a. write your name inside the circle on the paper  
   b. taking time to reflect on the qualities you admire about yourself. How you view yourself… as caring… reliable… honest… sincere…beautiful…  
   c. at the end of each line coming out from this circle, write or draw an image depicting these attributes and gifts.

3. Place round clay shapes in front of each participant. Invite them to refer to their giftedness chart as they begin creating their Gifts Plaque Mandala. Encourage them to express their unique qualities by cutting and molding clay into images and shapes that depict their giftedness.
   Give some needed instruction for how to best work with clay. They may need some help with how to use and manipulate the clay—instruction in rolling into balls and coils, shaping and molding the clay, as well as how to attach clay pieces to one another. Offer tools for imprinting shapes, textures and letters, as well as materials for inlaying color and design such as stone and glass pieces.

4. Process as a group.

A media/crossover for this intervention may be to play a piece of music which helps to support the task.
QUIET MEDITATION

1. SIT STILL AND QUIET THE BODY
   For a few moments, simply notice what is happening in your body without trying to change it. Be aware of how stiff or tense you are... where you are relaxed or at ease... where you are tense or dull... Then, without slouching, let your body be supported by the chair. Let it become quiet.

2. WITH GENTLENESS BEGIN TO BREATHE DEEPLY
   Take the ball of clay into your hands... feel the cool, smooth form in your hands...

   Now, relax in your chair and become centered... breathe deeply so that with each breath, your abdomen goes up and down... as you breathe in, feel the warm, moist air flowing through your nostrils and filling your lungs... as you breathe out, slowly release the air into the atmosphere.... Breathe slowly like this until you feel relaxed...

   With your eyes still closed... you may feel the clay and your hands have become warmer... the clay is softer perhaps... envision the clay and its form now... smooth... round... envision the form it may become... try not to think about making it into any specific shape or object... begin to gently manipulate and reshape the clay... just allow yourself to enjoy handling the clay...

   Open your eyes only when you feel ready... what does the form look like now?... do the shapes or images speak to you somehow?...
Gifts Plaque Mandala
Session Four

Light in the Darkness Mandala
MATERIALS: 12 X 12 black paper—10” circle lightly drawn in center
Colored pencils
Oil pastels
Extra white colored pencils and pastels

ART EXPERIENCE DIRECTIVE

1. Begin this session with the quiet meditation on the following page.

2. Continue this session with a reflection on the shared experience of darkness in life...

   Sometimes the darkness is a result of something we have done... sometimes it is the result of something that has been done to us... often, it is the result of something beyond our own control... illness... the illness or death of a loved one... our darkest times...

   It is difficult to see it at the time, but even in our darkest hours, when we can look back, with some opportunity for healing, there are graces and light even in these darkest moments.

   And, it is possible to eventually, actually become grateful for those darkest times. Even to be grateful for the gift of the darkness...

3. Share the Apache blessing handout with clients (provided.)

4. Invite the participants to create a mandala depicting the “diamond” they have become...

5. Process as a group.
QUIET MEDITATION

1. SIT STILL AND QUIET THE BODY
   For a few moments, simply notice what is happening in your body without trying to change it. Be aware of how stiff or tense you are… where you are relaxed or at ease… where you are tense or dull… Then, without slouching, let your body be supported by the chair. Let it become quiet.

2. WITH GENTleness BEGIN TO BREATHE DEEPLY
   Take a few slow, deep abdominal breaths… allow your body to breathe according to its own rhythm… slowly… deeply… easily…

   As you focus on your breathing, imagine a warm golden light is moving from the top of your head to the soles of your feet… each time you inhale… and exhale… imagine this warm light moving through every cell of your body… your mind… your spirit…

3. SIT IN SILENT STILLNESS FOR FIVE TO TEN MINUTES
   Take a breath and exhale…
   When you are ready, open your eyes.
An Apache Blessing

In the Apache language, there is no word for “guilt.”
There is no word for “shame.”
Our lives are like diamonds.
When we are born we are pure and uncut.
Each thing that happens to us in our lives
teaches us how to reflect the light in the world,
each experience gives us a new cut, a new facet in
our diamond.
How brilliantly do those diamonds sparkle whose
facets are many,
to whom life has given many cuts!
So when you feel that the rain is no longer playful
but harsh,
and when the snow has lost its beauty,
hold your diamond in your hand.
Do not feel shame. Do not feel guilt.
Think instead of the way you may now reflect the
light in the world,
and be thankful for the new cut
you have received from your diamond.

By Bearwatcher, an Apache medicine man
Session Five

Part of a Whole Mandala
MATERIALS: 14 X 18 drawing paper with an arch drawn on each
Colored pencils
Markers
Oil pastels

ART EXPERIENCE DIRECTIVE:

1. Begin the session with the quiet meditation on the following page.

2. The Part of the Whole Mandala is an adaptation of the group art
therapy intervention in which individual images are assembled to
create a mural.

   Take time to offer an overview of the previous four mandala sessions.
   Invite the participants to reflect upon and to share their feelings about
   the process so far.

   Present the participants with a sheet of 14 X 18 paper with a large
   arch drawn on it. Invite them to use lines, shapes and color while
   incorporating the line on the page to create an image depicting this
   five session mandala-making experience. These images can be
   realistic in nature or can be an abstract image or design.

3. After each participant has completed their part, invite them to work
   among themselves to assemble the whole mandala. Keeping in mind
   that the outer edge does not have to create a rectangular shape, there
   are many configurations in creating the finished piece.

   There are a number of options in displaying the finished Part of a
   Whole Mandala. Pieces may be pinned to a wall or bulletin board, or
   they may be attached to a backing.

4. Process as a group.

The materials and directives imply a group of participants which can be
divided by four. Variations would be made as to the paper shape and size in
order to accommodate other group sizes.
QUIET MEDITATION

1. **SIT STILL AND QUIET THE BODY**
   For a few moments, simply notice what is happening in your body without trying to change it. Be aware of how stiff or tense you are… where you are relaxed or at ease…where you are tense or dull… Then, without slouching, let your body be supported by the chair. Let it become quiet.

2. **WITH GENTLENESS BEGIN TO BREATHE DEEPLY**
   Take a few slow, deep abdominal breaths… Focus your attention on breathing slowly and deeply… Breathe in deeply through your nose… Breathe out gently through your mouth…
   As you concentrate on your breathing, imagine a beautiful, flaming light rising up in front of you… As you inhale, watch it move down from your head… to your shoulders…to your chest… now, imagine the light entering your heart… the home of the Divine... Keep your heart open and receptive… be attentive of the blessings dwelling there… in your heart…feel the light’s warmth… feel the love…
   See the love and the light flowing from your heart through your arms, hands and fingertips… blessing your creations now and forever.

3. **SIT IN SILENT STILLNESS FOR FIVE TO TEN MINUTES**
   Take a breath and exhale…
   When you are ready, open your eyes.
Resources


