



# Counseling and Human Resources Consulting, PC

MICHAEL H. BROWN, ED. S.  
*LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR*  
*LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST*  
*DIPLOMATE IN CLINICAL HYPNOTHERAPY*  
E-Mail: Internet: MBROWNLPC@aol.com  
Website: HTTP://www.MichaelBrown.org

4889 A FINLAY STREET  
RICHMOND, VA 23231  
(804) 222-0483  
FAX: (804) 222-8823

## **Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness**

A GO FISH! Project on exhibition in the Kanawha Plaza  
Richmond, VA June - September, 2001  
Transcript of a 1-hour video documentary  
aired on Richmond Channel 6 TV May 25, 2001

My name is Michael Brown and I am a Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and a Clinical Hypnotherapist in Richmond, Virginia. I'm trained in a discipline called psychosynthesis. In this transpersonal approach to counseling we assert that there is a source of guidance, an inner genius if you will, within each of us that can help us identify, address and transform the traumas, challenges, and issues that confront us in living. We call this source of inner guidance the Higher Self. In psychosynthesis, we counselors use a wide array of methods and techniques to help our clients tune inward and connect to this guidance and inspiration. Two of the most powerful techniques that help achieve this goal are mental imagery and mandala art.

Mental imagery is a hypnotherapeutic technique that helps the client relax, tune inward, and focus the mind in a precise way to view through the power of the imagination a particular issue, problem, dynamic that is the subject of our exploration in counseling. With this focused and imaginative point of view, we are able to see in a broad way the issue that we are exploring. Mental imagery helps us collect energies and see how our emotions, thoughts and actions all come together in the metaphors of imagery. We have these focused perspectives and then, in order to remember them, we create mandala art.

Mandala art is thousands of years old. It has been found in rock petroglyphs, in Tibetan Buddhism, in Native American spiritual practices--throughout the world. The essence of mandala art is that we draw a circle and within that circle we project or represent the visions and the inspiration that comes to us from the inner world, from the spiritual dimension. We draw these images out so that we can document them, so that we can study them later, and so that we can continue to learn from them.



I began my training in psychosynthesis in 1973. Since that time, I have been using mandala art to explore and understand my own life experience, and I have been using it in my clinical practice with clients. I have drawn 2000 mandalas and I have helped my clients draw and interrupt and come to understand many thousands more.

What you see here is a 5-foot long, 40 inches tall fiberglass fish. The 1708 Gallery in Richmond, Virginia, in conjunction with the City is holding the outdoor, public art exhibition called GO FISH!. 200 of these fish have been festooned with art from artists

across the Commonwealth and the United States celebrating the return of the rockfish to the James River, celebrating our rich tradition of Richmond on the river, and inviting people to come enjoy the city from June until September 2001.

As Director of the Institute for Creative Living in Richmond, when I heard about the “Go Fish” project, I got very excited. I saw this project as a way for the clients with whom I work and me to exhibit to the greater Richmond community the beauty and the power of mandala art. I decided that I would cover one side of the fish with images that have marked important moments in transitions and transformations in my life. I asked the members of a Women’s Group I conduct if they would be willing to share with the public some of the mandalas which have documented the creative transformations that occurred for them through their counseling work with me. On this side of the fish are 14 of my own mandalas. On the back side of the fish there are 18 mandalas from these clients. Now we will take a close look at each one.

Each mandala tells a story all its own and associated with each one of these is a poem or a writing. In the exhibition on Mandalay Minnow, on each side we begin from the experience of trauma, confusion and difficulty and move through a transformative process to integration and resolution. Each mandala, photographed on the curved surface of the fish and so not always appearing round, tells a story all its own. Together they describe a journey of awakening and Self-discovery through art.



This mandala depicts me emerging into life from the infinite pool of genetic possibilities. I’m emerging as a discreet and unique individual. I show a forked tongue because I didn’t come alone. I came also

with a twin sister.

paths to follow, I began a journey of exploration, not only of the world at large but also of the dynamics within me which I gained from my father and from my mother. My life then explored two tracks—a masculine track and a feminine track.



I found that my dream life and my unconscious was filled with images of conflict. Struggles with dinosaurs or beasts, in the real world I was trying to come to terms with power,

authority, structures, institutions, laws. On my own, great challenges confronted me to find my power and to find my path.



As a young adult I found that my ways were very different from my parents. They had a very ordered and well known way of doing life and doing their business and I was a very creative and unique individual who had to find my own path. This put me in conflict with my folks and sent me out on the journey of my own discovery.



Out on my own I found the world to be a big and confusing and scary place. I didn’t know which way to go, which



At the level of the feminine as a young man on my own I had to come to terms with my own needs, my own drives and desires, the disappointments of leaving home and the struggles with Mom

and there was fear in that, there was sadness in that, there was a lot of conflict for me to sort through, integrate and master.



This is a picture of me as Atlas. I learned to be strong to follow my own inner guidance, to do those things I was called to do. But deep inside there was still a vulnerability, a childlike element in me that I carried and which needed to be

both protected and nurtured as I made my way in life.

Listening within and following my passions and interests I developed many skills and abilities: writing and music and techniques of psychotherapy and counseling. I found that these skills brought people to me both in my professional life

and also in my individual life and with these skills I was able to meet and find a partner in life.



Sexuality and its creative and appropriate expression is the very source of richness, culture, even spirituality, family, finding a life mate, and fulfilling this part of my nature lead to great work as a professional and to family.



In 1975, I began to do a transformational retreat program called the Wilderness Vision Quest. I had discovered at this time that transpersonal psychology with its focus on transformations of consciousness would, in fact, be the professional track I would follow in my life. I found great power in connecting to the spirits and energies of nature, and in 27 years I've done 168 Wilderness Vision Quest programs with people throughout the United States and Canada.

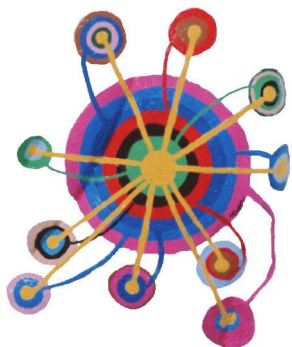


In 1977 I was married. In 1979, the night before my son, Damien, was born I sat to focus on and express what the meaning of his emergence in my life and in our lives meant to me and I drew this mandala.



mandala drawing.

In 1981, Solange and I were gifted with the birth of our daughter, Gabrielle. The day that she was born I sat to draw this image of her emergence into time and space and into our lives, this



In psychosynthesis we teach our clients to listen inward and find the source of their own guidance and inspiration, the wisdom of the inner self, the wisdom of the Higher Self, so that in our lives in our roles and duties and responsibilities and all of our activities, they may be infused with the energies of love and wisdom. They may help us live in the world in a bright, integrated and synthetic way.



In a creative way, this mandala expresses the model of psychosynthesis. We see in the lower unconscious, as we all begin in life with confusion and patterns and passions that we need to explore and integrate. In the middle mandala, there's a sense of growing integration and unique orientation. At the third level we then begin to be very focused and radiate in our activities the energies of love and will. And at the highest level we radiate into life our highest spiritual capacities guided by the wisdom of the Higher Self.



I think the purpose and goal for all of us at the highest level is to live well balanced and integrated lives, to be in harmony with ourselves and with one another. This mandala is a classical mandala, geometric, ordered. It may represent balance on the inner plane and loving and creative connections to others in the world, both individual and group transformations of consciousness.



When I heard about the Go Fish project, I was excited to share with the public some of my own images, important transition and transformations in my life. I went to a group of clients of mine in counseling and psychotherapy and invited them to consider displaying on the fish some of their own mandala work. The images you are about to see come from the counseling experiences and journal work these women have done with me. I will share their images with you and guide you on the story they chose to tell, a woman's journey of transformation through imagery and art.



The story begins with a shattering life experience, whether that happens for women as children or at any time in their lives, there's a shattering experience which wounds the ego and begins a journey of loss, recovery, discovery, exploration, and transformation.



a woman who feels isolated and alone wanting to be a part of life that others seem to live so naturally and yet somehow feeling separate and apart from others.



Two things for us need to occur for us to identify, address and resolve the traumas that have existed or happened to us. One is to find that connection to the inner genius, the inner guidance.

The other is a helping hand from another or from others. This sense of isolation and aloneness we cannot break alone. We need a helping hand.



With trauma often comes a splitting, an outer persona which greets and meets the world and an inner self which is fractured away from the whole and there can then result in a divided self.



As women begin to look inside, they often find a feeling of floating, a feeling of depersonalization, that their real self is separate from the part of them that is mother, doctor, professional person; and it's necessary to

connect with and begin to explore in order to re-own the center, the self. Guided through the inspiration of the Higher Self and working with techniques of mental imagery, we begin to identify these subpersonalities and re-own them.



With inner attunement and the help of another or others, family, partner, lover counselor, energies begin to be organized, begin to be ordered and hope springs forth again within the psyche.

Energies begin to rise up from the clutch of the negative scripts and self talk that often come as a result of trauma and crisis.



This story I share comes from women who sat together several evenings with dozen of journals and looked at hundreds of mandalas in order to piece this story together.

In this image we see



This is an image of growing power, the power of self expression, the power of creativity, perhaps the power of sexuality as wounds from these dimensions begin to be healed and one begins to feel wholeness once again.



Very often as we come from the inner world back to the outer world, we notice that our relationships are confusing, that our roles are unclear, we are caught in dependencies and in

dynamics that we have to take responsibility for, address, and improve.



This image of a mermaid also is an image of emergence from the watery, inner world of emotions and the deep and lower unconscious, out into the light of day, out into the world, individuation, perhaps.



This image might represent different things for different people. Certainly as a viewer of these mandalas, any one of these images will have its own unique meaning to you. This image perhaps is showing the opening again of the heart, an expansion of

the willingness and ability to love, and a growing sense of connection to the vertical dimension and to that energy that we might call the Higher Self.



Here we have a growing sense of power and force like a plant that is opening into the full light of the sun, the personality returns to strong functioning having taken the inner journey and redeemed the forces that have

been scattered and lost within.



True emergence happening here, fully formed, fully proud of self as person, as sexual being, as author and agent in life of one's destiny



All of us find peace and harmony and power from the natural world. These energies are important to us free from the demands and expectations

and constraints of the human community. The world of nature can provide us teachings, lessons, guidance, and inspiration with which to help us be strong in life.



There are many important roles to fulfill, there are many visions to live for each and every woman in life. There are worlds to create and powers to manifest in the world.

Once history and the past, past trauma has been explored and transformed, we raise our level of attention and work in psychosynthesis from personal to spiritual psychosynthesis. Now we are called to create new and more interesting projects and



initiatives filled with love and filled with inspiration with our children, with our peers, and our life space looking for the manifestation of our highest visions and goals.



From the individual to the collective, from the collective to the universal, we are surrounded by the infinite and the eternal. If we are captured in our personal story, we cannot either see,

enjoy or participate in these higher states of consciousness but as we find the courage and the will to address and transform our individual selves, consciousness expands ever greater and ever more broadly.



Opening to the guidance of the Higher Self to our inspiration and wisdom, the more we open within the more we can move outward in a focused way with love and will.



Ever higher, ever more integrated, a synthesis of our personal, biological, psychological and spiritual realities—higher and higher.

This mandala exhibition is called “Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness.” It has been developed by clients of mine in counseling and myself. It will be on public exhibition in Richmond as part of the GO FISH project, in front of the Federal Reserve Building in the **Kanawha Plaza**, from the first of June til the end of September. I hope you will come to enjoy this fish and the 200 other fish the Go Fish project will have exhibited along the canal walk and in downtown Richmond all summer long.



Transcribed from a video documentary seen on AT&T Broadband, Richmond TV Channel 6, May 26, 2001

***Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness.*** Video Documentary A one-hour program, seen on Richmond Channel 6 TV in June, documenting the transforming effect of mental imagery and mandala art in counseling. 32 beautiful acrylic drawings on Mandala Minnow created by Michael and his counseling clients are examined and explained in detail, three client/artists are interviewed in depth about the process of creating this work of art, and a peek is given of 27 of the 200 other fish in Richmond’s GO FISH! project. Cost: \$14.95 includes postage. Call (804) 222-0483 to order or for more information go to [www.MichaelBrown.org](http://www.MichaelBrown.org).

3 client/artist interviews with Michael H. Brown, Ed. S.  
At the end of the one-hour video documentary

### Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness

Michael Brown (MB)  
Jonnie Corbett (JC)  
Kaja MacDonnell (KM)  
Janet Winkelman (JW)

MB: So thanks for coming this afternoon to talk about the process of creating Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness. Kaja MacDonnell from Williamsburg, Janet Winkelman from New Kent, Jonnie Corbett from Richmond. We've come together to talk about why you chose to participate in this Go Fish project, how you go about creating mandala art and maybe about the specific mandalas that you have made? How did we do the process of putting these mandalas on the fish, and then what's been the value for you in the whole project of representing your mandalas on this large 5 foot by 40 inches tall fiberglass fish?

Kaja, you did five mandalas. "Complexities of Sexuality," "Empowerment Creates Vision," "Beginning Anew," "Creating New Worlds," and "Synthesis."

MB We spent about 300 hours putting all these mandalas on it. It was a long project. Janet, you created two to put on the Fish called "I" and "The Frog." Jonnie, you did two as well, "Yellow Brick Road" and "The Protector." There are five other artists who are not here today that contributed to this but you folks were able to come so this is our interview. Let's talk about why did you get involved with the Go Fish project, Janet?

JW I was intrigued with the whole process of the Go Fish project and the fund raising for different artists and organizations. This project struck a chord because it reaches both education about the counseling process--the mandalas and the story telling and the journaling that we work with--as well as your Institute for Creative Living.

MB It's a fund raiser because all of the Fish in the Go Fish project will be auctioned for sale October 20 in Richmond and also online. The viewer can any time, between June and October 20, go to [www.gofishrichmond.com](http://www.gofishrichmond.com) and see the Fish, all 200 of them, and find out where they'll be auctioned--either on eBay or Amazon.com. The organization hasn't decided which one. So it's an educational process to let the public know about the power

of mandala art in the counseling process and also to help raise funds for the Institute for Creative Living which has sponsored this project for us. Jonnie, how about for you?

JC It was a creative process for me. It wasn't quite as noble. It was more that I wanted to share with other artists and be part of the project. I just thought it was very interesting to work on that and again, mine was just more about sharing and creating it.

MB Share with other artists? The artists of the Women's Group?

JC Well, the other artists, yes, within the Women's Group and I wanted to be involved in that aspect of it but also sharing with the public, too, and letting them see what we had done as the Women's Group.

MB How about for you, Kaja? Why did you get involved in it?

KM Partly because of what Janet referred to which was the project itself and an opportunity to possibly raise money although it triggered the memory of the airport exhibition which we did which was a collective project of many women and we spent several days painting them on a construction wall. That was such a wonderful experience.

MB Putting mandalas on the wall of the airport back in 1997.

KM And the public really enjoyed it. I found the process wonderful. It was fun to collaborate again with other artists and do it so the Fish project represented an opportunity to do something similar again.

MB Would any of you like to talk about how you come to create a mandala? How does that process happen for you? It emerges out of counseling. We have a focus upon which we work and then you go home and do a homework assignment. What happens?



JW Well for me, because I've talked to other people that have frustrations in different areas from mine...

MB Different issues their working on?

JW Well no, the process of the mandala. I know a couple of people that work really hard to duplicate what's in their mind's eye on the piece of paper and they get kind of frustrated if they can't get that to be a photograph of what's in their brain. And for me, I have an idea in my head, more or less. I never get these visions, clarity, or know exactly what's going to come out on the paper. I have an idea and a concept. Some have more detail to them than others but it's through the process of sitting down with that piece of paper and drawing it that I discover what's coming out.

MB That's true. And everything that happens in the circle as we try to represent the inner image or the inner vision is interesting. It says something about our attention, it says something about our skill, it says something about the resistors or the blocks that we have, the difference between how we want to live our lives and how we manage to actually live our lives. All of that shows up in the mandala process. It's quite interesting and quite fascinating. Do you find that to be true? How is the creative process for you, Kaja?

KM Well, it all depends. Some of the mandalas I put on this Fish came completely spontaneously, out of the blue, sitting down and just deciding I'm going to swiggle for a little bit and the mandala completely evolved and along with it came a story. All of a sudden I was focusing or representing something that was going on in my life or in my world. Other times I can't shut imagery off. It's a constant story line or snapshots and some of those get to paper. Sometimes, I will try and recreate, as you were speaking, exactly what my mind's eye is seeing which is impossible. And then I have to allow myself to let it go and it will evolve and change and represent itself however its suppose to be versus what my brain originally thought. So I love any of those ways.

MB So sometimes it's a task to represent as closely as you can the image that you have focused on in your inner work and sometimes it's more spontaneous, more process of discovery than duplication?

KM Correct.

MB The circle is the frame into which you focus your attention, your art, and your expression.

JW It is interesting that you can come up with a story after you've drawn the mandala because my story comes first.

KM Just like the process of putting mandalas we have already drawn on the fish, doing them again, another story can evolve as a continuation.

JC I saw so much more when we were doing the mandalas for the second time and each time I would go back because mine were so light to begin with—

MB The originals?

JC My originals, yes. And so when I went back to work on them again—I even think I mentioned that to you—I said, gaw, I've gotten so much more out of it this time to see it transform onto the Fish. Again that was just taking it even a step further for me because a lot of times when I create mine—Janet and I were talking about this earlier—I'm a very conceptual person to begin with and very abstract so I'll have these things rolling around in my head and then I'll try to put them onto paper. And I know for me a lot of times mine will come from dreams, images that I have in dreams, it'll come maybe from lines of poetry that I've written or working with you, I've had several good ones come out in the meditation process and the breathing exercises that we do when you, you know—

MB the relaxation part—

JC the relaxation process or when I visualize a person, I know that "Yellow Brick Road" came up that way and I was asking questions. And that's been a great tool for me in the work that we do.

MB—asking questions of the....

JC —of the image

MB —in your mind and in the reflective process or after you've done it as a mandala?

JC In the reflective process—

MB Okay. The step that I call—the technique that’s called inner dialogue where we have an issue that we’re working on, we get a mental picture to creatively portray that so then we have a mental image with eyes closed, we’re looking at our issue creatively; and then we can talk to the imagery—it’s imagination—you can’t get it wrong, anything can happen. In our dialogue we ask questions of the imagery and the imagination answers and what happens then out of that for you?

JC Oh, just it’s amazing how it talks back, you know. I mean, any other time if I—I mean I’ve tried to explain this process to people and they’re like aw yeah, right, you know

MB Right

JC But I mean for me—

MB Psychosis

JC Yeah...”You need to see somebody!” “I am” “How do you think I’ve learned this?” But for me it’s beautiful and I’ve even used it in other areas of my life when I’m trying to—

MB—the inner dialogue step?

JC—the inner dialogue, uh hm.

MB Your original mandalas were done in what medium in your journal? You said they were light. Pencil?

JC I was using pencils and just the process of going from the colored pencils to the actual paints—the acrylics that we used—the dark

MB On the Fish?

JC Yeah, it was amazing. I mean it gave it a whole other sense of depth and emotion. And that another thing, too, that I find so fascinating about that mandalas is that it’s so emotional

JW They’re so personal....

JC Yeah.

MB They come from the deepest places

JW Well they’re our “stories” so you are trying to express

a part of yourself when you’re doing them.

JC But the stories that go with it because I know originally for me everything was done through—I journaled anyway and did a lot through it with poetry and things like that but then to suddenly make the mandalas that correlate to it was a revelation to me.

MB A whole other process of creative exploration and creative expression.

So we sat in a group with eight women and dozens of journals and we tried to tell the story, the transformational story, and we made a selection out of hundreds of mandalas—we made a selection of about 20 or 30—and then we put the stories together with the mandalas in the sweep that’s on the Mandalay Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness Fish. And then we represented those—we—you all—eight women went from the drawing in the journal to acrylic drawing on the Fish.

JC That in itself was just such a beautiful process too I thought. That was a very soulful journey—that whole transformation of recreating the stories from eight different lives and then well what 24 different—

MB 18 final ones on the Fish—

JC Right but then 24 different facets of everyone’s lives—we had to examine every single one. And I thought that was very fascinating in itself. I mean and that whole process was so interconnecting.

JC What’s, yeah, what’s amazing is how similar the cycles are and how we come up with a whole kind of process for—

MB Sort of a hologram of transformation process as seen through—

JC With little pieces of eight different people

MB What was it like, Kaja, for you to do the mandala art on the Fish, alone, with me, with other clients?

KM I’m kind of stuck here for the moment because that, too, had been my experience how the similarity

of the stories recognizing that our lives, however different our personalities might be, I think we found many similarities amongst each other, just in growing.

JC And just the bonds that are there because I know the first night that I even came to a group I walked in and every woman was already here and situated and there was this—you know I felt like the stepchild coming in but I thought there's nothing—what could I possibly have in common with any of these women, you know, just superficially. And then as each week has gone by, and then especially this process of the Fish—it's like whoa—you know we all have that core, that same inner core, so..

KM Yep.....I'm sorry.....

MB Did you enjoy the process of working on the Fish with the other women?

KM I loved it. So now remember that was my primary reason for doing it was the collaboration with other people. It happened to be women. It could have been women and men but the core of it was the Women's Group. I spent a lot of time up here alone working, which I loved. I was surprised. I loved coming up each time and seeing what you maybe had done or what you had done to see the differences because if you remember we all had taken copies of our original and they were taped to the Fish and so we saw the original and the differences on the Fish itself. I found that process—one of the things—it was very—there were times it was very difficult to look at what I had done originally and to try and duplicate it—to honor what it originally was, sometimes wanting to change it, sometimes wanting to do a whole different one and working—some of the areas were difficult to work with—So it was—I found it sometimes quite challenging in having to be patient and deep breathe and—

MB It took a long time to put those on that Fish—

KM It took an incredibly long time—

MB I mean, each mandala probably took anywhere from 10 to 14 hours to reproduce...

JC But the time just flew while you were doing it. You were just lost in it. That's what I found so fascinating and it would be, okay, it's time to go now—no! Because getting here is like..."I gotta go work" you know but once you got here and once that you looked at everything that everyone

else had done and as soon as that brush got wet and you made contact with the mandalas that you were working on, you were in another world.

MB A wormhole in time—it was drop into eternity and—

KM That's right, it's just falling out of time, falling—

MB And to share that with another person—

KM It was so wonderful

MB What was that like for you?

KM I hardly spoke to whoever was painting. You and I painted at times. Now I did occasionally say stop rocking the Fish.

JC Yeah, there was a lot of that—probably what I said the most—Op, sorry.

MB Right. I'm on one side and all of you are on the other. You know, I did 14 mandalas. So you know it was like these flash bulbs of personalities on the other side of the Fish. I'm there, 150 hours, you know. And then there's Kaja, and then disappear, you know or there's Janet, you know, and Jo or Jonnie. It was quite interesting-- sort of trance-like state with these people, you folks, artists, and clients to come tell your stories.

JW It was a real introspective time for me that chunk of time that was taken just for me and the Fish and that's where that whole other realm or kind of redoing not just from pencil to paint but time has gone by—I know time has gone by—I know some of your mandalas were years old—I haven't been doing them for that long but—and so you had this kind of forced the time you were going to be dealing with that mandala and it was you and that mandala and that Fish—

MB And it's curves and its wiggles—

JW Sure, and the introspective time was great. I mean, we don't stop and just take time like that.

JC Yeah, excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt...

KM No, It was just luxury for me—absolute luxury...

JC Because it forces you to make that time for yourself and to look inward and to actually take care of yourself.

MB Sort of a final question, what's been the value now that's it's done when you look back and see the Fish so beautiful—such a beautiful piece—what do you think about or how do you react or respond to it, seeing it finished?

KM Is it time for a joke?

MB Sure—are you ready to do a building?

JC Gosh

KM I think it's beautiful. I think it's absolutely beautiful. I love everybody's work—least of all my own, I'm certain of that—

MB I understand that, too. I'm so close to my own it's like oh nobody will like this or this is trivial or juvenile—I'm not a professional artist. Two hundred fish in this Go Fish project. There are extraordinary artists doing extraordinary works and we're doing our little consciousness piece, you know. Totally pay attention to here's a way to explore and heal the issues that, you know, that in a naive way in a sense unprofessional but still quite beautiful.

KM Well I was at an art show today and was told that if you do art, you're an artist.

MB Right. Exactly—

KM So—

MB That's true

KM I thought oh, that's a nice way to look at it. The story we did from the tail forward really did depict from the moment it was on the floor and everyone was looking through and picking out what they thought was appropriate, what we all decided, all that collaboration, then putting it on the Fish and where would it go to make the flow all the way through, it worked. It really has—it flows and it does tell a story. And we all did with our pieces of those aspects—lower, middle, higher—we were able to do it. So, hopefully.....

JW Yeah that whole collaboration and team effort was

really good for me. That's what I took away from the whole project and we have something concrete to share that with.

KM And actually, we all live in the world and work and very much how wonderful it would be to have that type of collaboration in our daily lives, in our work place, it's really what we strive to have in our home, with our families—

MB Particularly even within ourselves

KM—Within ourselves, yeah...

MB Collaboration within all the subpersonalities and passions and powers that—

KM Uh hm...Right. There was a little time of single-mindedness and commitment when we all had the same goal.

MB Shared in community.

KM So that community helped us to work out and complete a mandala even if we got in the middle of it and went ooooh, this is too hard or I don't like it—

JC The whole team effort behind all of that....

KM Yeah

MB The Fish is called Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness. The transformations of consciousness are both of ourselves as individuals as we work with the imagination to resolve our inner issues and transformations of group consciousness—the Women's Group has become much more intimate and much more connective through the sharing of this process.

KM Absolutely

MB This Fish will be on exhibition in front of the Federal Trade Building in downtown Richmond in the Kanawha Plaza from June through September, 2001. I'm going to end this video with some images of the other fish, a few of the other fish that will be on exhibition along the Canal Walk and downtown Richmond during this time. I hope that you, the

viewer, will come see this fish, see the other fish. If you like one you can bid on it, support the Children's Hospital, the other organizations and sponsoring institutions who have drawn artists together to do this. Thank you all for being interviewed and–

KM You're welcome

MB see you in the Kanawha Plaza.

# Counseling Today

An American Counseling Association Publication, October, 2001

## Fishing for clues

By Jennifer Simmons, Managing Editor

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

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

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

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

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

"The wonderful simplicity in the Mandala art is that it becomes a focus point," he said. "A symbol itself of wholeness, one projects into (the Mandala) images from the dream life, spiritual experiences or even fascinations of the world of nature. Mandala art works as a process and a place to represent goals, visions and images of significance. Brown said that using



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

mental imagery as the connection in therapy helps clients create imaginative metaphors for the issues and problems that confront them. The client becomes creatively involved in looking at those patterns and dynamics in their life, and Mandala art is a way to capture that imagery so clients can remember it, reflect on it later, and so they can "own" and begin to transform those patterns.

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



Client mandala

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

Brown's solution was to use Mandala art to get the teenager to understand and take ownership of his actions. Brown asked the

boy to pick an animal that would represent the angry and reactive pattern and draw it in his Mandala. "He came up with an image of a tiger hunting for food," Brown said. "And it was tearing apart a small zebra. I asked him why he was attacking the zebra, and he said the zebra did something he didn't like. I then asked him how did the zebra feel about the tiger? When he thought about this (the client) was upset to see the imagery he'd created. He had never been able to see the situation. I asked him, 'Who does the zebra represent?' and he told me it represented his mother, his sister and his girlfriend. He had a lot of violence inside."

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

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

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

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

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Recently, Brown was given the opportunity to take Mandala art out of the therapy session and expose the greater community of Richmond, VA., to its influences. This summer, the city launched the largest outdoor art expo in the history of Virginia, called the "Go Fish Project." Two hundred, 5-foot long ceramic fish were placed around the city, and artists were invited to submit proposals for how they would decorate their fish.

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

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

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

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

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



*Jo Diperna*

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

fit it to the fin, which I just found more satisfying.”

Kaja MacDonnell has been hooked on Mandala art since her first encounter with Brown in 1990. “I was doing an Earth Day event at the College of William and Mary,” MacDonnell said. “Michael Brown was facilitating it. I drew a Mandala that had great meaning and wrote a five-line poem. I connected with myself in a way that I’d needed for a long time. It was like making love to myself - it was very weird. And I knew right then, this was process that I needed in my life and I will do more of it - and of course, I have.”

In fact, MacDonnell added five Mandalas to the Minnow and felt it was important for her to revisit her past Mandalas for this project. “One of the things I’ve learned about Mandala art is



*Kaja MacDonnell*

that no matter what you reap from that first Mandala the first time you do it, each Mandala has so much depth of meaning that there is always an opportunity for it to tell you yet a deeper story for some insight within yourself or others,” MacDonnell said. “Knowing this, the opportunity to spend this kind of time

with artwork, some of which was almost 10 years old, was an opportunity to travel back to those times and see what those Mandalas could teach me now.”

MacDonnell also said that the power of being with other women who were also sharing in the experience made the Minnow worth investing her time creatively. “To do this together is such a rare opportunity,” she said. Both women believe strongly in the impact Mandalas can have on the therapeutic process as well as in day-to-day life. Just as with Brown, Diperna and MacDonnell have drawn Mandalas outside of the counseling environment. MacDonnell uses Mandala art with her children, while Diperna has used it to aid her in a career choice.

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

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

“The neat thing about doing Mandalas is you’re drawing and



not even realizing you’re putting things into the picture,” Diperna said. “My breakthrough image was when I first used color. All my pictures before had been black and white.”

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

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

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

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

### **MANDALA MINNOW AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

A one-hour video about the clinical use of mental imagery and mandala art, the meaning of each mandala, interviews with three artists, and a view of 37 of the other fish in Richmond’s GO FISH! project: \$14.95 + postage. 7 page transcript of the program with color images of all 32 mandalas: \$3.00.