

# **The Use of Imagery in Healing**

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Human beings express themselves symbolically. Their languages, music, mathematics, visual and performing arts are symbolic ways in which the collective and individual human spirit expresses experiences of its journey on Earth. From traffic signs to logos and computer icons, symbols are all around, and are part of everyday life. They evoke feelings and inner meanings, and are often used to express a concept which can be better expressed through an image than through words. Words are limited in scope in that they have relevance only to those who know their meaning and context. Symbols and images, on the other hand, can express complex concepts that may not be adequately expressed in words, and make them relevant across cultural barriers, far beyond their point of origin.<sup>i</sup> Carl Jung writes,

...a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider unconscious aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.<sup>ii</sup>

According to Jeanne Achterberg, imagination is a mental process that is “the communication mechanism between perception, emotion and bodily change.”<sup>iii</sup> It is “the world’s oldest and most effective healing resource, affecting the body intimately on both seemingly mundane and profound levels.”<sup>iv</sup>

Based on research by Polyak<sup>v</sup> as well as Talbot and Marshall,<sup>vi</sup> James Oschman hypothesizes that visual symbols work by amplification:

We know an image on the retina, of a symbol or any object in the visual field results in a pattern of electrical activity that travels through the optic nerve to the optic lobes of the brain. The mechanisms involved have been carefully researched and much is known. The pattern of light on the retina is translated into a pattern of impulses on the occipital cortex. The retina is projected point to point onto the cortex... We also know that amplification or magnification takes place. The visual cortex has a topographic map of the retina, but the cortical map has

10,000 times the area of the corresponding retinal area. There are about 100 cortical cells representing each retinal cone cell.<sup>vii</sup>

Based on the investigations of Stryer (1985) Oschman surmises,

There is a huge amplification that takes place because a few photons can trigger the entry of hundreds of thousands of calcium ions into the retinal cell, leading to a depolarization of the membrane and a nerve impulse.<sup>viii</sup>

When the retinal nerves contact the other nerves' electrical energy spreads over a broad area, and travels through the circuits. This activity can be mapped through a superconducting quantum imaging device (SQUID) or magnetic source imaging.<sup>ix</sup> Based on research that electrical circuits involved in injury repair and other activities have corresponding patterns in the space around the body, Oschman hypothesizes that,

...looking at a symbol, or even thinking about (visualizing) a symbol results in considerable neural activity involving measurable electrical and magnetic fields. According to him, writing or drawing the symbol can activate sensory and motor pathways and therefore bring in many more electrical and magnetic fields. The concept that viewing, visualizing or writing a symbol can trigger specific patterns of electrical and magnetic fields in and around the body is certainly reasonable, logical and testable. The idea that some of these fields might be beneficial to a nearby person also is reasonable and testable. A thousand or so years of experience with these symbols may also connect with modern science.<sup>x</sup>

Jung discovered what he called the “unconscious self” through his experience with mandalas that he encountered in dreams and recorded in drawings and paintings<sup>xi</sup>.

Describing his encounter of the self through creating a mandala, he writes,

My mandalas were cryptograms . . . in which I saw the self – that is, my whole being – actively at work. To be sure, at first I could only dimly understand them; but they seemed to me highly significant, and I guarded them like precious pearls. I had the distinct feeling that they were something central, and in time I acquired through them a living conception of the self. The self, I thought, was like the monad which I am, and which is my world. The mandala represents this monad, and corresponds to the microcosmic nature of the psyche. . . I knew that in finding the mandala as an expression of the self I had attained what was for me the ultimate.<sup>xii</sup>

For Jung, the spontaneous occurrence of mandalas in the dreams and art of psychologically disturbed individuals presented an opportunity for psychological research to investigate its function in the natural healing process. In Jungian psychology, the mandala is a catalyst for a psychological event called a “crisis of transition,” in which the ego fragments and is in danger of collapse. The mandala brings about a new connection between the ego with the self.<sup>xiii</sup>

Cornell describes the mandala as “a concrete symbol of its creator’s absorption into a sacred center.”

In its most elevated form, the sacred circle mirrors an illuminated state of consciousness through a symbolic pattern – making the invisible visible. It is meant to draw creator and viewer into an encounter with animating sources of numinous energy. The Navajo call this center “a spiritual place of emergence” for sacred imagery. By focusing on it, both mandala artist and meditator can open to the divine energies of deities and to the contents of his or her own spiritual and psychological self. When a practitioner willfully illuminates and embodies a sacred image from within the psyche while in a meditative state, spiritual transformation, physical healing, and the integration of personality fragments can result.<sup>xiv</sup>

For Cornell, the creation of a mandala is about self-realization and healing.”<sup>xv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Jung, C.G., *Man and His Symbols*, (NY: Dell Publishing, 1968), 3 – 4.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Jeanne Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing* (Boston: Shambala, 1985), 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> S. Polyak, “Projection of the retina upon the cerebral cortex, based upon experiments with monkeys,” *Research Publication of The Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Disease* 13, (1934): 535-557 in James Oschman, *Energy Medicine in Therapeutics and Human Performance*, (Philadelphia: Elsevier Science, 2003), 21.

<sup>vi</sup> S.A. Talbot & W.H. Marshall, “Physiological studies on neural mechanisms of visual location and discrimination,” *American Journal of Ophthalmology*, 24 (1941): 1255-1264 in Oschman, 18.

<sup>vii</sup> Oschman, 18.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>ix</sup> L. Stryer, “Molecular Design Of An Amplification Cascade In Vision,” *Biopolymer*, 24 no.1 (1985): 29-47 in Oschman, 19.

<sup>x</sup> Oschman, 21.

<sup>xi</sup> C.G. Jung, *Red Book*, (NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009).

<sup>xii</sup> C.G. Jung, *Mandala Symbolism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), v.

<sup>xiii</sup> Cornell, 3

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid. 2-3.

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<sup>xv</sup> Ibid. 33.