

Why Make Mandalas? Or, How a Small Window Deepens Understanding

Reflection & Activity Essay - Liam M. Hooper, MDiv; 2024



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In the preface to his book, *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*, biologist and environmentalist David George Haskell utilizes the concept of mandala as both a practice and a metaphor for better understanding the whole of a forest "through a small contemplative window of leaves, rocks, and water" (xii). To create this small contemplative window of observation and study, Haskell partitioned a roughly one-meter circle of woodland ecosystem in the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. In practice, and in theory, Haskell focuses on a particular meaning of the word "mandala," which in Sanskrit Haskell notes, means "community."

This small patch of ground, and all the living things it contains, nurtures, and sustains, became a kind of living mandala through which Haskell observationally explored the interconnected, interdependent, life-teeming cohabitations in nature. As Haskell points out, "the search for the universal within the infinitesimally small is a quiet theme playing through most cultures." That is, it is not a new method of inquiry. Tibetan mandala practices represent one example among many.

In a longstanding socio-cultural tradition of seeking greater understanding by attempting to apprehend the universal to explain the particular—which often minimizes, homogenizes, and erases the individual—a return to the specificity of the close is more than intellectually invigorating and refreshing, I think. It also mirrors the perspective which drives my work and which now is centered in justice and change making movements: that we apprehend an understanding of our shared and common human nature—our beingness—and the exploitative, exclusionary, and commodifying conditions we face by seeking to witness, listen to, appreciate, and regard particularity, individuality, and difference. In my own work, I emphasize that the stories, perspectives, and experiences of diverse individuals and minoritized communities matter precisely because the particular is both necessary and evidentiary to defining and understanding any meaningful common, shared nature.

Haskell not only understands, but values this nuance. And this looking closely to apprehend a larger perspective is Haskell's point. Therefore, his observations, inquiries, and assertions are about much more than the relational life of a forest. As John Jeremiah Sullivan notes in an endorsement of the work:

"The Forest Unseen is a "nature book," and a great one, but it's also and less obviously a book about human nature."

In part because Haskell's project resonates with my own disposition and interests, but primarily because this form of curious inquiry and contemplations strikes me as a potentially powerful and revelatory practice, I found myself rather consumed with even deeper curiosity about the



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prospect that bearing close witness within human communities can illuminate our understanding of our humanity and our conditions. Perhaps, it can even be transformative.

As I read (and reread) Haskell's intricate observations and ponderings about nature and us, as human beings both part of and embedded in nature, I thought more and more about the power and the potentialities of gathering people together in circles of courageous, earnestly relational conversation. I was reminded of questions posed to our Friday Fellowship group by North Carolina poet Jaki Shelton Green. Invoking and riffing on Joan Didion's assertion that we tell ourselves stories so that we can live, Green asked our gathered group: "how does what, and surely how, we witness shape our future? How do we listen each other into being?"

I began to wonder intentionally: can a small circle of human beings seeking to deepen capacities for relational connection reveal nuances of the whole of humanity?

Can a group of persons called together in a circle become a living mandala, a small window into a larger human ecosystem? Can a gathered circle of persons create an active and mindful practice that teaches and transforms us?

If so, what might be revealed to us? How might we witness, hear, sense, and discern each other into being in ways that illuminate our collective understanding of a larger all-of-us?

In my search for correlative, experiential activities that lead to, shape, form, and enhance formational and relational (perhaps, even spiritual) practices, I was inspired to begin making mandala drawings around not only the heart-labor of relational circles, but also my own desires for growth and deepening as a person living in a fragile, interdependent world. Along the way, it occurred to me that mandala work can be a kind of objective correlative and/or reflective practice for thinking about the work of relational fellowship, setting intentions for ways of being, listening, and speaking with others, as well as for remembering and honoring lessons and inspirations witnessed and heard through being with others.

And thus, the idea of exploring, reflecting deeply, and setting intentions using mandalas was born. To explore this practice more broadly, engage it deeply and learn from it, I created a basic mandala that preserves values and core beliefs I hold, visualizes hopes and visions that came to me intuitively in the process, and serves as reflective points of departure for continued practice.

Like Tibetan mandala practice, the activity becomes a way of deepening and holding intentions, embodying self-listening, and creating a kind of watchfulness toward my thinking, being, and relating with others. In much the same way that repeating multiplication tables makes math more second-nature, or recitation of common prayers can be meditative, using mandala as an active metaphor for thinking about how we want to comport ourselves in our relational connections and actions can be, perhaps, both formative and transformative.

Invitations to Mandala Practice

I am offering the following guiding prompts for mandala practice as invitations for use by any and all who wish to engage the practice. My basic guide-mandala is provided merely as an example of how I, personally, began my own process.



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Additionally, I have provided two templates for making a start for those among us who may find a blank piece of paper daunting. These suggestions are not designed to be definitive and directive, so much as points of process departure to encourage vision-casting and intuiting a personal practice.

Having said that, the underlying premises of these invitations are curricular elements designed for use in programming events/activities with Friday Fellows. Individuals and groups may adapt any or all of these practices for their own purposes, personally or in community contexts.

Invitation 1 - Values & Beliefs as Guides

Find a template or outline mandala parameters and shapes on a blank page:

~ engage a centering practice

This can be a period of meditation, a reading, a walk, or even a conversation

~ spend some moments thinking about:

What are the core values that I hope to embody and practice in my relationships with others?

What beliefs guide how I want to reveal and express myself relationally?

Who do I want to be with others? In a group? At home? At work?

What ways of being, thinking, and relating have I witnessed in community engagements that I value and want to honor?

What lessons have I learned through bearing witness that I want to explore, grow from, and/or preserve?

~ reflect on the responses that come up for you, with specific attention to how you might represent these visually (reminder: the point is not to be a great artist; the task is to be with the practice.)

Begin drawing, painting, collaging, and/or mixing mediums

Explore shapes and images and color. Immerse. Play.

If it is helpful, make initial drawings on scrap paper, exploring how things fit together, or how one shape or image informs or leads to another.

Complete the mandala

~ your finished mandala can be:

a prompt for reflection and/or meditation (or) torn up and thrown away

(Destroying the mandala—which of course is temporary and represents a step on a journey, a moment in time, a reflection, a blinking of an eye—can actually be a powerful exercise as well.)

It is the process—the practice—that matters most.

Invitation 2 - Group Practice & Discussion

Essentially, a group process involves the same activities, with the exception of engaging in the relational heart-labor of vision-casting, conversing, making individual mandalas, and returning to the group to share and reflect.



~ engage a centering practice

Again, use readings, music, meditative exercises, etc. for focusing minds/bodies

~ invite members to spend some moments thinking about focus questions, then spend some time talking with one another about:

relational themes, values, beliefs

personal/collective barriers to meaningful relational practices

learnings, insights, intuitions about deepening relational practices gleaned from previous and ongoing experiences with others

~ invite members into a mandala-making process

~ come back as a community of learners-seekers and talk about this experience: what came up, what was revealed, how can members use what they received to better understand themselves and others and how can these gleanings deepen their relational practices?

Invitation 3 - Community Mandala

Following a process similar to Invitation 2, invite members into a practice of making a community mandala, and perhaps, consider:

What was revealed in the process?

How does it feel to work together to create a mandala? A community?

What have members gleaned or received from the practice that enriches them?

What was learned that members can practice in their relationships?

What did members and/or the collective discover, working together, that might illuminate collectivized practices for justice and positive change-making in the shared community?

Invitation 4 - Create Your Own Process

Recognizing that mandala practices have multiple applications and profound implications for personal growth and spiritual vitalization, it feels important to note that these invitational prompts may not feel useful to or inspire some people to engage.

That is not only fine, it is as it should be.

I would, however, enjoy hearing about your process and I'm available for conversations.



References

Haskell, David George. *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*. Penguin Books, 2012.
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/309637/the-forest-unseen-by-david-george-haskell>.

