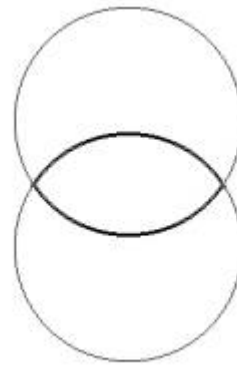


Our gratitude is expressed to Christine Remus-Everling of Hamburg, Germany, for her response to our invitation to publish her article in our newsletter. Christine is an ISST teaching member in Hamburg who has previously published this article in the German Sandplay journal.

Mandalas and Mandorlas

Mandala, a Sanskrit word emanating from the sacred language of the Brahmins, means "magic circle." Circles, as symbolic representations of inherent power, are found throughout the world, including the East/Far East in the form of the Yantra, in Western Europe as rosetta windows in medieval churches, and in the American Southwest in the form of Navajo sandpaintings. June Singer (1973) refers to Jerusalem as a "mandala city" (p. 300). There, entrances on each side lead into the centre. This suggests an imago of God as it exists in the imagination of humankind.

Figure 1



Traditionally, mandalas have served to promote concentration and contemplation. When people experience such states through meditation, they often find themselves encouraged to move away from a dominant focus on concreteness towards spirituality.

The elements of a mandala are always geometrical figures, such as a circle and a square. These forms are centered and balanced in a mandala. Cirlot (1971) refers to mandala forms as the squaring of a circle. In this form of a combined circle and square, heaven/order/wholeness/unification are suggested by the circle, and earth/chaos by the square. In its form of a combined circle and square, the mandala may symbolize synthesis of dual aspects, such as inner and outer, or differentiation and union.

Since Christian medieval times, the unification of heaven and earth has also been symbolized by the mandorla, an almond-shaped form that is defined when two circles overlap partially. In Figure 1, the upper circle represents heaven, the lower circle represents earth, and the mandorla zone represents the union of the two.



Figure 2

The mandorla, in upright form with its points vertically situated, was often used in iconography. An almond-shaped aureole or mandorla behind Christ is ascribed to the Gothic and late Gothic periods. A famous representation is "Christ in the Mandorla" found in the Tympanon of the royal entrance of Chartres Cathedral. Such monumental stone reliefs can also be found in Southern France and on an island in Lake Constance where the term "aureole" is used.

The mandorla is a very old symbol for Christ. As Robert Johnson (1991) points out, early Christians revealed their identity to each other when one person scratched a circle into the dust and the other person added his or her circle to complete the mandorla. In a time of severe religious persecution, this greeting was eloquent and powerful.

Both vertical and horizontal versions of the mandorla, each formed by two intersecting circles, can imply an intersection of matter and spirit. Like the mandala, the mandorla also embraces opposites, such as appearance and disappearance, and being and not being, the essence of life.

Johnson (1991) suggests that the two intersecting circles of a mandorla could represent culture and religion. He refers to the community we live in as giving us guidelines for life. In this respect, culture would constitute an artificial, but necessary, structure for society. Certain behaviors or attitudes that are not desired are prohibited by culture. Individually, we may try to repress those behaviours and attitudes in ourselves, or put them out of our consciousness. However, we are likely to encounter them in others as undesirable characteristics that evoke strong emotions in us. When we bring them out of the shadow of unconsciousness, we may confront them in ourselves and may accept responsibility for them. If we are inclined to integrate our shadow aspects, we unite opposites within ourselves and begin a process of healing and development, enabling movement from an unwhole dimension to a holy, "religious" realm that implies a putting "back together again", or a healing of "the wounds of separation" (p. 9). Thus, in accepting our shadow aspects, energy is liberated, opening up possibilities for religious experiences and a sense of wholeness.

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With the reconciliation of opposites suggested in the structure of the intersecting circles that create a mandorla, one could assume that, as the overlap of the circles increases (Fig. 3), so does the progress of healing.

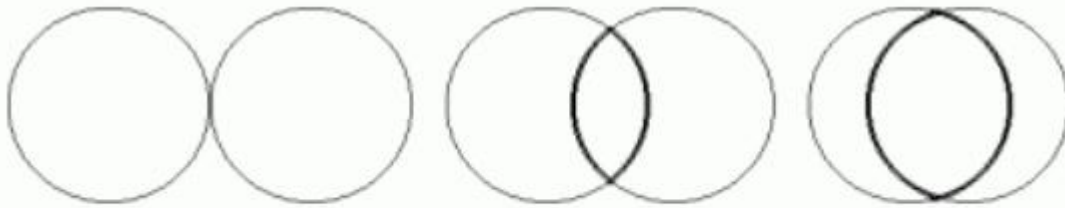


Figure 3: Tangent circles and increasing overlap

Johnson (1991) draws our attention to what he calls the "Miracle of Paradox" (p. 85). He writes: "Let us not say that the opposites are antithetical but that they make up a divine reality that is accessible to us in our human condition" (p. 88). In actuality, at times we are unable to see the hidden unity, the overlap of the opposites. In extreme cases, when one "pole" is given up or left to unconsciousness, fanaticism may result.

Figure 4 illustrates such a phenomenon.

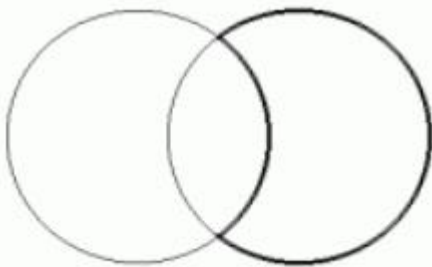


Figure 4: Fanatism, the Unwhole

Reconciling the enormous perceived gap between opposites, such as between heaven and earth, is usually beyond our ordinary tendencies or abilities. Irreconcilable opposites, based in unconsciousness or a refusal to acknowledge the existence of polarities within ourselves, generally enhance

personal and cultural neurotic structures, attitudes, and behaviours. With developing consciousness and acceptance of personal responsibility, one might hold an image of maximal overlap of the circles by the end of life.

The mandorla can have personal and cultural relevancy for us today: when we make a statement, it is prudent to invite a response. If we can consider the response as coming from our shadow or that unknown part of ourselves, we can gain an enlarged point of view, as symbolized by the mandorla. Powerful mandorla experiences give us only momentary glimpses of wholeness because our world is a world of dualities. The shadow returns quickly. When we consciously involve ourselves daily in attempts to own our shadow, we are less likely to impose it on others. We also may diminish the collective shadow and "prepare the way for the mandorla-- that high vision of beauty and wholeness" (Johnson, 1991, p. 117). As Johnson points out, in alchemy, stages of development pass from the "nigredo" to the "albedo" to the "rubedo" and, finally, to the "citrino". These alchemical stages can be considered in psychological terms as a period of darkness and depression, a period of brightness, a period of passion, and a period of appreciation of the great value or goldenness of life, respectively. After passing through these psychological stages, one might arrive at the stage of a full colour mandorla. Johnson concludes that the mandorla, is not a "place of neutrality or compromise; it is the place of the peacock's tail and rainbows" (p. 118).

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