

# **My Year in Mandalas:**

## **Equipping for Ministry Project Jan 2020**

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Definition: Hindu and Buddhist symbol, usually circular, representing the universe.  
Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning circle.

### **Words meet images:**

The images that form this project have been an important part of my spiritual practice this year. They offer random aspects of my inner life and external circumstances over the past 12 months, rather than being a systematic overview of that time. Some have a strong narrative and capture events or awakenings of particular spiritual intensity. Others are not much more than doodles, but I want to include them as part of the story. To leave out any would be to be selective and each image has a right to speak for itself, with an equal standing, for that is how life is – the transcendent alongside the humdrum.

### **Your part in this:**

The text that accompanies each mandala is there to provide a little context and illuminate what you see. Alternatively, you might choose to arrive at the images ‘innocently’, without explanation, and see what they suggest to you. For the words to mirror the images they describe, they need to be simple and sparing for this is not an intellectual or academic exercise. I learned during the painting of the mandalas that thinking didn’t get me very far. When I was stuck and didn’t know where to go next, I needed to hold my faith and keep waiting – sometimes for several weeks - open to receiving whatever was to be revealed.

Some mandalas make themselves and are finished in one sitting. Others take more coaxing. I often start with enthusiasm and then get stuck. I find that if I let go and carry the ‘knottiness’ lightly, somewhere at the back of my mind, or in my heart even, a resolution emerges.

Usually I begin by being taken with a pattern or shape or colour and that leads me effortlessly to a spiritual focus or theme. Rarely do I start with a theme and have to find a way to represent it.

### **Where it all began:**

During the silent retreat, *Time Set Aside*, in January 2014, I was looking to spend my time in a way that was contemplative, encouraged mindfulness, and avoided the distraction of books and reading. I have always enjoyed the Woodbrooke Art Room and several fellow retreat participants spent their days there, painting and sewing.

The fellowship of the shared silence – each person completely absorbed but not alone – was beautiful and very appealing.

Collage – sticking coloured paper shapes onto paper - comes easily (Matisse is possibly my favourite artist) and I started playing with coloured paper as a way of simply 'being' in that room. I have no idea why I kept producing symmetrical patterns within a circle, and maybe I called them mandalas but I can't even be sure of that. By the end of the four-day retreat I was hooked, and on my return home, collaging mandalas became a regular part of my spiritual life. I would set aside a whole day every couple of weeks to re-enact the conditions of the retreat; no plans, in silence (sometimes with the radio or music), absorbed in the here-and-now experience. Each mandala had a theme or focus but did not represent anything of great spiritual depth, and the practice fell away naturally after a couple of years.

### **The move to Equipping for Ministry:**

When I embarked on EfM in January 2018, my thoughts about a possible project focussed on the subject of ageing and dying – the spirituality of getting older. I imagined that I might interview older people, and recreate the sort of social enquiry and qualitative research that has run through my working life and given me huge satisfaction. But the seed never took root... This did not weigh heavily and I was prepared to not produce a tangible piece of work.

### **Green shoots: a seed takes root**

The affinity I felt for the mandala remained with me, and towards the end of my first EfM year in November 2018 I was thrilled to find a short course on mandalas. Sadly the two quaker course tutors had to withdraw, and I would still love to know what they might have offered, even though the course was not rooted in quaker faith or practice and few of the participants were quakers. A dynamic London-based artist and healer stepped in, her enthusiasm making it easy to experiment without fear of judgement and we were encouraged to use acrylic paint, a medium I had no connection with on a small scale, in spite of being a professional painter and decorator for much of my working life.

My appetite for the sacred mandala was rekindled. I had found my project.

Sad footnote:

While compiling this text I revisited the website of Rosella Longinotti, the artist who had encouraged and inspired me to paint mandalas at Woodbrooke, only to find that she had died three days earlier, exactly twelve months after our course.

You will never know how much you gave me, Rosella.

RIP



1.

## Let your light shine into the dark corners of the Earth

- This is what I produced on the Woodbrooke short course on mandalas. We were offered a guided meditation, which didn't yield much for me, but did include the image of a peacock – hence the peacock feathers.
- The most significant aspect was that I was using acrylic paint in a piece of art work for the first time – in spite of being a professional painter and decorator for most of my working life!
- Having completed the painted part I was left with an empty centre and absolutely no idea how to fill the space. It was another participant who suggested using fabric. Not only did I know it was right as soon as she found the satin remnant, but I loved the way in which we were upholding and encouraging each other in our first tentative steps together.
- And so the title was born, alluding to that line from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:16: *Let your light shine so others can see it.* (NIRV Version) - definitely an afterthought that came from the golden light glowing through the yellow fabric.

Woodbrooke Nov 2018



2.

**The wound is the place where the light enters you.**

**13thC Persian poet and Sufi mystic, Rumi**

- I did this as soon as I returned home from that first short course and it is no more than a doodle. I simply wanted to experiment with shapes and templates.
- Once again I was left with a centre to fill and used the same idea of completing the centre with something that let the light through.
- I don't remember when or why the Rumi line occurred to me, but maybe it was the transparent, blood-like red centre and some of the rather bacteria-like shapes that evoked the image of a physical wound at first. This was quickly followed by the metaphorical or spiritual wound suggested by his beautiful observation.
- I know of few other poets who capture the nuances of being human with more wisdom and tenderness than Rumi.

Nov 2018



3.

## **Mexican Wave**

- Definitely no more than a doodle. I was intrigued to play with a set square and drawing compass and to fill the shapes with very bright colours. They reminded me of the wonderful vibrant colours of Mexican art – hence the title.

Dec 2018



4.

**“... walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.”**

**George Fox, 1656**

- I set out to convey the natural world of plants, concentrating on green.
- It was only when I added the human footprints that George Fox's advice sprang to mind.
- When I re-read Advice 42 I was struck by how exquisitely it expressed what I wanted to convey in the mandala. It is as if my unconscious reaches a place of spiritual depth long before any conscious thinking takes shape. My conscious mind is the last thing to catch up.

Advice 42. We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures, and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Work to ensure that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly, with reverence for life. Rejoice in the splendour of God's continuing creation.

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.

George Fox 1656

Jan – Feb 2019



5.

## Let your life speak...

Advice 27.

- A mandala that looked after itself from beginning to end. All I did was to follow.
- I was attracted to experimenting with tissue paper (the only mandala that doesn't use paint) and to working with a spiral shape – a sacred symbol of creation and growth used in many cultures and religious traditions.
- At the same time I was in the middle of a six-week online retreat, *Deepening the Life of the Spirit*, with an inspiring facilitator and very engaging fellow participants. From the beginning our sharing was profound and our sense of connection strong.
- I became interested in which of the 42 advices and queries spoke most deeply to other Friends, and for a few weeks I asked any Friend I encountered, either online or face-to-face to share their favourite advice. I discovered that it is a far more interesting conversation opener than the ubiquitous 'How are you?' and I was surprised how often people's faces lit up when asked that simple and direct question.
- The quotes represented here are those most often cited by Friends.

Feb 2019



6.

## Learning to read.... .... the bible

- This looks more meaningful than it is, although it did emerge at around the same time as the previous mandala, during a period of spiritual intensity.
- I love the six-sided hexagonal shape of a beehive's honeycomb and all that it evokes of harmony, community and shared industry.
- At this time I was ready to take my first tentative steps to finding a way into the Bible. It was no part of my pacifist, socialist childhood, other than some of its stories and many quotes being familiar by dint of being embedded in the culture of post war Britain., and I had always found its words inaccessible. Knowing that it means more than can be adequately put into words for many Christians, Equipping for Ministry seemed an ideal opportunity to try and make inroads.
- I asked several quaker Friends and a few personal friends to describe their relationship with the Bible and which book, chapter or verse spoke most powerfully to them. I also asked them where I should begin... It was beautiful to hear some of the passionate and eloquent responses.
- The honeycomb cells contain books from the Old and New Testaments – hence the title.

Feb 2019





7.

**Ninety-six days:  
Bethel Church in The Hague holds continuous church service  
to protect Armenian asylum seekers**

- One of my personal favourites, not because of the image but because it represents an under-reported story of David and Goliath proportions: a small but not insignificant feel-good story in the midst of a dark winter of even darker news.
- An Armenian family of five – two parents and three school-age children - granted permission to stay in the Netherlands in 2010 and living in The Hague, had their status revoked by the government in October 2018. This, in spite of it being illegal to deport migrant children who have resided in the Netherlands for five years or more.
- Meanwhile, an obscure medieval law forbids the Dutch authorities to interrupt a church service, and so in order to protect the Tamrazyan family from arrest, Bethel Church in the Hague held a continuous church service, day and night. Nearly 1000 ministers from around the world, more than 12,000 visitors from all faiths and none, shared the responsibility for round-the-clock worship, singing, dancing, praying and drawing inspiration from the Bible and many other texts.

- I became enthralled by this story and a mandala followed naturally, highlighting aspects of the family's journey: the colours of the Armenian flag at the centre, the treacherous journey to a place of asylum represented in the blue waves, although their journey was more likely overland, the people upholding them in love and light, before the multicoloured tiles of the chapel's walls, the small Bethel church, and the Celtic cross...
- At that point, the outcome of the story was not yet known, and I had no choice but to wait several weeks before I could complete the painting.
- Imagine my delight when not only were the Tamrazyan family granted asylum in Feb 2019, shortly followed by a permanent residence permit, but the vigil had lasted exactly 96 days. A much more satisfactory number to depict visually than 95 or 97!

Nov 2018 – Feb 2019.



8.

## All genders and none

- This has a uniquely different genesis in that it was deliberately contrived to clarify my current understanding of LGBTQI issues, where a plethora of labels felt a little overwhelming.
- I was about to attend a Woodbrooke short course on Gender Diversity, facilitated by two inspiring and generous tutors, where my heart and mind were opened to some of the realities of living outside the norm, and particularly to identifying as non-binary in a world that would choose more readily recognised options.
- To use the flags associated with the LGBTQI community may be a little clunky, but it served to remind me that our individual differences and our shared humanity are equally sacred – hence the quote from Jo Cox MP: ‘while we celebrate our diversity... we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us’.

Feb 2019



9.

**"O sunlight! The most precious gold to be found on earth".**

**21<sup>st</sup>C novelist and poet Roman Payne**

- No more than a doodle, to play with red, yellow and gold, and experiment with angles.
- The obvious suggestion of a sun lent itself to this quote, which speaks to my yang nature, and my lifelong passion for deserts and their fierce and unforgiving sunlight.

May 2019



10

## **In thrall to the darkness: 24 hour endurance ultramarathon and pilgrimage**

- An annual highlight is participating in the 24-hour non-stop endurance ultramarathon, Endure24, which takes place in June, just after the summer solstice, in beautiful rolling Yorkshire countryside. From noon on Saturday until noon on Sunday, runners in their hundreds compete fiercely to see how many miles they can cover within that time. (The best aspire to join the '100 mile club').
- For me, this is not a race but a pilgrimage, with a clear beginning and end, and an opportunity to switch off from daily preoccupations and witness how my body, mind and spirit respond to the ups and downs of the challenge.
- After five or ten miles when I am starting to feel physically tired, something wonderful happens. Moving between fields and woodland, between bright daylight and murky darkness, as the sun and moon play out their 24-hour cycle, makes for a very special connection to one's natural surroundings. I enter a state of being, a kind of 'flow' where my spirit transcends the fatigue of my body. Simply putting one foot in front of the other takes me to a place of transcendence.
- The Taoist yin/yang of the design mirrors the yin/yang of the experience: dark and light, joyful and grim, tough-going and flowing. The pink flowers allude to the walking meditation of Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh: walk mindfully on the earth, and as you lift your feet with each footprint imagine a pink lotus blossom flowering from your footprint.

July 2019



11.

## On Earth as it is in Heaven: an awakening

- It has been far more difficult to find words to illuminate this image than for the others, and that may be because it means more to me than any other mandala. It represents several pivotal events in a summer where things changed in my awareness of the climate crisis and my personal response to the emergency.
- The title refers to the 2019 Swarthmore Lecture, On Earth as it is in Heaven; the Kingdom of God and the Yearning of Creation. It was at the same Britain Yearly Meeting in May that I met an inspirational climate activist from the Czech Republic, and discovered for the first time what the Extinction Rebellion logo represented. By chance, the same activist came to speak in my home town of Leeds, and opened my eyes to what passionate engagement could look like.
- During a short break in Malaga in July with my daughter, on our first walk down to the harbour of that beautiful city, there in dazzling sunlight stood Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior, on a tour of 14 European cities, designed to raise awareness about climate change. Being shown round by a young Spanish activist and standing on that boat which had taken direct non-violent action all over the globe was a real 'pinch myself' moment.

- The personal shift is not so much about a new awareness of the facts, it is more about how the subject sits on my soul. Previously sustainability was a subject I knew I couldn't avoid but given the chance I would have. I had a resistance to really engaging with what it meant for the world, and maybe more importantly to how I might respond. Now I know I have no choice but to bear witness to the courage and resilience of those brave and eloquent activists. I can no longer stand back and wait for others.

July 2019



12.

## **Flying Geese**

- An exercise in blue, where I wanted to include a square inside the circle, typical of a Buddhist Tibetan mandala, and representing either the four directions – north, south, east, west or the four boundless thoughts - sympathy, compassion, loving kindness, equanimity.
- I don't know how I happened upon the traditional quilt pattern of flying geese – it came out of the blue! - but there is no sight in nature more wonderful.

Sept 2019





13.

## Love and grief: an autumn of protest

- Non-violent direct action to stop the London Arms Fair (DSEI) at the Excel Centre in docklands London at the beginning of September, is not depicted in the image but is a crucial part of the narrative. I attended the Faith Day with hundreds of other Quakers and people of many faiths, a powerful and moving experience, which did indeed delay the setting up of that despicable event.
- Extinction Rebellion: two weeks of direct action across London at the end of October, where I met XR Quakers face to face for the first time, stood in silent worship with them in Trafalgar Square, and marched with them in the funeral procession through central London on the middle Saturday. I came across the Earth Protector logo, depicted here, for the first time – a green inverted CND peace logo, looking more like a tree.
- My second XR trip to London coincided with the massive Stop Brexit march at the end of October. London was a sea of blue berets with the twelve EU stars, also depicted here, and almost every protestor wearing a 'Bollocks to Brexit' sticker.
- It was during the Extinction Rebellion funeral procession in the middle of Oxford Street that I was approached by a friendly unknown protestor and we spent a few minutes in shared wonder at the courageous, good-natured and creative activists all around us. As a parting observation she said, "There's so much love here'. And after a brief pause added, 'And grief'.

- Those words, love and grief, have stayed with me. They apply to so much that we hold precious, and most especially our beautiful planet.

November 2019



14.

## The Eightfold Wheel of the Year

- The penultimate short course I attended during the Equipping for Ministry programme was *Celebrating Samhain: Exploring the Wheel of the Year*, held at Samhain, on November 1<sup>st</sup>.
- The course focussed on the eight pagan festivals celebrated through the year, several of which are aligned with Christian festivals, such as Christmas and Easter (Yule and Ostara).
- I find moving through the cycle of birth, growth, harvesting and decline comforting; it reminds me that in any cycle there is neither a real beginning nor a final end.
- Maybe it is apt that having begun EfM anticipating that I might focus on ageing and approaching death as a project, I finished with a weekend that brought me to the realisation that I am currently in the 'Samhain' of my own life cycle, somewhere near the end.

December 2019



15.

## Drop in the Ocean

You are not a drop in the ocean.  
You are the entire ocean in a drop.  
Rumi

This is the first image I have made with particular people in mind. My daughter is an acupuncturist, with a special interest in fertility issues. She sometimes sends cards to patients. This is for them. And for us all.

February 2020



16

## How Great Thou Art: Anthem to the Web of Life

- It was during a recent Woodbrooke weekend on the climate crisis that the conversation turned to the web of life and to our place within it. As we come increasingly to question our dominion over other life forms, where does our sense of entitlement take us? Where does our need to manipulate and control end? As diverse beings, whether as humans, or as the heroic honey bee, the humble earthworm, the disease-carrying mosquito, and now the life-threatening pathogen known as coronavirus, we are all doing our best to survive on the planet that we share.
- As Covid-19 moves closer, the urge to explore and paint it within that context became irresistible.
- Traditionally the Taoist yin/yang design denotes two halves which together complete the whole, a dark and a light side, each dependent on the other. The image here moves from the visible to the invisible, highlighting the human inclination to create duality; light and dark, good and bad.
- Sophie Mainguy, a French A&E doctor, says of the coronavirus,

*"We are not at war, nor do we need to be. There is no enemy. There is only another organism in the process of migration and we need to stop so that our respective*

*paths do not clash... We are presented with an opportunity to realise that human beings are not the only force on this planet... It's not a war, it's an opportunity for learning – about humility, about interdependence and about solidarity”.*

- The title refers to my favourite hymn *How Great Thou Art* which celebrates the beauty of our sacred planet. I hope it is played at my funeral: preferably the Elvis version, with people singing along at the tops of their voices, their hearts filled with ‘awesome wonder’.

April 2020