

Reflections on mandala-making in nature

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Abstract

This photo essay reflects on my practice of making mandalas in nature from natural materials. It describes aspects of the process of creation, which involves all senses. The process naturally divides into three ritual phases: preparation, transformation and incorporation.

Keywords

Mandala, ritual, nature, kinesthetic.

*We forget that we are part of nature.
Nature is not something separate from
us. So when we say we have lost our
connection to nature, we have lost our
connection to ourselves.*

Andy Goldsworthy

For many years I worked as a gardener, creating and tending to herb and vegetable gardens and orchards. Now, as an arts therapist, I am still passionate about working with the healing powers of nature by creating mandalas outside.

Making a mandala is my personal meditation on a place and time in a given season. I create them in places that touch my soul: in my garden, on my favourite local beach, on holiday walks through hills, forests and fields.

Mandala-making naturally divides into three phases. In the preparation phase I wander along the beach or meadow with all my senses open. Sticks and shells call to me. My hands reach out, touch and gather leaves and stones.

Once the bounty is heaped around my chosen spot, I sort and place each bit of plant and mineral. I am guided by their shape and

being – long, thin shards of eucalyptus bark want to ray out, round apples want to huddle together, bones regroup in triangles. Drifting leaves, handfuls of shells, piles of rock connect to each other in new ways and find their place in the circle. This circle is the focus of the ritual phase.

The finished mandala is a distillation of its environment: lush and fragrant forest circles, dry and arid high country circles. After taking photos, I leave. Waves wash over the mandalas, winds scatter petals, and birds eat wild cherries. The physical elements return to nature, but a strong sense-memory remains: the smell of tree-ripened quinces, the hollow ring of bleached sheep bones touching each other, the weight of volcanic rock, the fragility of poppy petals, black flax seed slippery to the touch. The walk home is the incorporation phase; the mandala is dissolving but I still ponder on harvest and gratefulness, bones and death, self contained seeds and potential, building nests, centring and letting go.