

‘More me than we’ – A story of identity

By Liz Caddy and N.

Liz Caddy works as a nurse therapist at Perth Clinic, an independent psychiatric hospital in Western Australia. Liz facilitates a busy, vibrant therapeutic group where participants have the opportunity to experience a diverse range of creative activity through individual and small group projects. It is in this group that N. first discovered that painting mandalas leads to a feeling of being ‘more me than we’.

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Abstract

Through a co-written dialogue and through the presentation of visual images, this article explores the unique identity outcome that occurred when a person with a fragmented sense of self (and a diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder) started painting mandalas. The result of the painting of mandalas was the development of a new identity story that was ‘more me than we’. This story felt better for N. It offered a sense of ‘making a mark in the world’ and of temporarily ‘putting on hold’ the experience of loneliness.

Keywords: narrative therapy, dissociative identity disorder, mandalas, identity stories, mental health, art therapy

Ideas about the concept and experience of 'self' and 'identity' have evolved over time. Currently, poststructuralists and social constructionists view the idea of 'self' as something that is continually changing, being created and recreated in relationship with others (Burr, 2002; Thomas, 2002). Narrative therapy supports the theory that humans have a 'multiplicity of different selves' (Burr, 2003) or a 'multi-voiced sense of identity' (White, 2007). However, for N. – a woman who has experienced a fragmented and compartmentalised sense of self since childhood (as a result of severe trauma and sexual abuse) – living with a 'multiple' sense of self is a day-to-day problem.

N. was diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder in 1993. As described in the DSM IV, Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is a condition in which a person displays distinct identities or personality states that 'take control of the person's behaviour' and have their own particular way of responding to the environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2001). N. experiences 'five injured, frightened girls' sharing her sense of 'self'. Cognitively, N. understands that these 'children' are dissociated parts of her own consciousness, but she says, "Try telling the girls that! — as a multiple who is co-conscious, I hear the girls frequently — it is exactly as if there are five children behind me day and night".

N. experienced some progress through traditional therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, Jungian therapy, gestalt therapy, and mindfulness meditation. All were useful in helping N. stabilise and be able to function in professional and everyday life however, none of the therapies were very successful in addressing the difficult process of integration. It wasn't until N. discovered art as a form of self-expression during her first hospitalisation in Perth Clinic, that, as she says, her 'healing journey began in earnest'.

In my role as nurse therapist and group facilitator at Perth Clinic, I have had the privilege of working with N. and witnessing some of this journey over the past four years. Much of my early work with N. involved supporting the externalisation of her experience of living with DID through artwork.



'Broken Mirror'(depicting the fragmentation of N.'s inner world)

However, when N. recently started painting mandalas, a 'unique outcome' (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007) occurred - N. stated that she felt 'more me than we' for moments of time.



The term 'mandala' is based on the ancient Sanskrit word that means 'circle', and these concentrically designed paintings have appeared in different cultures and religions throughout history. Mandalas are used in art therapy because they are thought to 'promote psychological healing and integration' (Henderson, Mascaro, Rosen, & Skillern, 2007). In a study of artwork by clients diagnosed with DID, Cohen & Cox (2000) describe how a mandala can become a 'container, offering a gentle, nonthreatening boundary, affording safety and stability'. The painting of mandalas allows N. to experience feeling 'more me than we' – a unique outcome in itself and also a new and emerging identity story.

Art and narrative therapies share several theoretical concepts (Carlson, 1997). I particularly value the way both approaches acknowledge that clients are the experts of their own lives and aim to balance issues of power in therapeutic relationships. These concepts have resonated throughout our work together, so, when N. and I decided that we wanted to share this 'unique outcome' and 'story of identity' with a wider audience, we chose to do so through a 'co-written' and 'co-researched' paper. As all our therapeutic interactions occur in the context of a busy creative activity group, finding a practical way to do this was a challenge. We came upon the idea of passing a USB drive backwards and forwards between us. The process and ongoing dialogue took several months to complete. I would write questions for N. and she would choose which questions she wanted to respond to (or not). N. also chose which photographs of her artwork she wished to include. Therefore it is through a co-written dialogue that N. and I would like to share, explore and celebrate this 'unique outcome' generated by mandala painting.

L: Last time we worked together, you had just discovered something quite remarkable about painting mandalas. Somehow, in the process of painting mandalas, you said that you felt 'more me than we'. Can you help me to understand more about what this experience is like for you?

N: It was probably about half-way through my first mandala that I began to realise I was 'feeling better'. It is a difficult thing to try and pin down. I think the first thing I realised was that after I had been painting for a while, I felt calmer and more capable; I just felt happier. The feeling seems to last for a while afterwards as well. I did some research on mandalas when I noticed this change and read something that seemed to

strike a chord with me. It said mandalas can have a great psychological impact upon us as they represent us 'making our mark' upon the world. This can be said about art in general, too, but mandalas are complete, and individual, and say something, and this is what makes leaving our mark so meaningful. I really like that explanation.

L: Can we explore this a little more, this possibility of 'making a mark on the world'? I am really interested to know what sort of 'mark' you would like to make.

N: The mark I want to make is 'I was here. It happened'. That's all. My childhood left me with the indelible feeling that I am nothing — I don't exist. If I made myself known when I was a child or if I drew attention to myself then I was either blatantly ignored, which hurt, or I angered them, which meant I was hurt even more. As an adult I am still convinced that, if I died tomorrow, there would barely be a ripple in the moment and I would very soon be forgotten. Things would continue on exactly as they had been.

Even though my mandalas don't depict the abuse pictorially, each contains all of the pain and confusion that I am dealing with when I paint. Some mandalas contain my prayers for rescue, some simply my confusion, some my powers of coping. But each, in the very fibres and brush strokes, contains what happened to me. *Others* may not know my pictorial history, but *I* know that my story is 'out there', even if I am the only one who can read it. Even after I am gone, my mandala might be lying on a rubbish dump somewhere, or hidden under a layer of someone else's paint, but I will know that, somewhere, my story has a physical presence.

L: So, in a way, each mandala holds the story/stories that you want to tell?

N: Each mandala holds the stories I **need** to tell — I don't necessarily want to tell them. That's why my mandalas seem to have a life of their own. But, yes, each mandala is very much a story. It might seem a little confusing — how a pattern within a circle can tell a story, but it can. Thinking about it, I guess that telling my stories of hurt and abuse in patterns is a safe way for me to get my story out. I know what the patterns represent but I am not confronted with pictorial images of the abuse I suffered.

L: I remember that when we first started working together telling your story through art was also very important - this work used very different art forms.



Seven's drawing of 'the father'

N: When we paint things other than mandalas, the painting represents the experiences of only one girl; Seven and Five (the girls don't like to be called by proper names but by their ages) draw in crayon, and depict their immediate memories and fears, sometimes events or feelings, that the other girls, and me, can't remember or relate to.

Ten paints in the same way — her memories, fears and immediate

concerns that she feels she needs to 'get outside', express concretely, visually, using more than just words.

Each painting belongs to only one of the girls – it is only one girl that has physically painted it (although sometimes Ten will help the younger girls) and it is meaningful only to the girl that has physically drawn it. Even when ‘I’ draw, it doesn’t mean anything emotionally to the girls; most of the time they are not particularly interested in it.

L: This seems quite a different experience to when you paint mandalas.

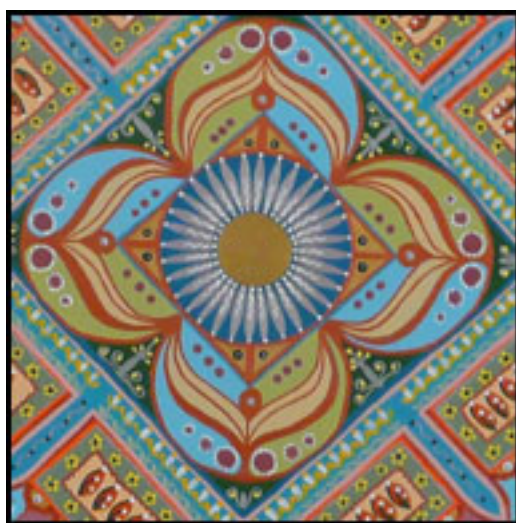
N: When it comes to mandalas, something different seems to happen. Physically, the painting of the mandala is my domain – it sounds mean but I can’t trust the intricate detail to one of the girls, even though I know Ten is itching to ‘help’.



The design is usually mine, too, as I include symbolism and symmetry that the girls wouldn’t be able to do.

Colour has to be my decision as Ten would be inclined to paint only pink mandalas, Twelve would insist on dark colours (if she was interested in the first place) and the younger girls’ colour choice would probably be random. But it is different emotionally when we paint mandalas.

Although it is me doing the physical painting, the mandala actually represents all of us, or I guess I should say all of me, albeit symbolically. It is not just my memories, or Ten’s or Seven’s. It is not simply a visual representation of an event that belongs to only one of us, or a feeling that belongs to only one of us. It is a visual representation of N. – the whole of her – in one work. Because of this, even though Ten hasn’t actually done the painting, and even though it wasn’t her idea, she feels as emotionally proud of it as I do because she can see it is a painting of her as well as me and the other girls. The inter-relating circles and squares and colours depict the complexity of me as a multiple — how one aspect of a thing can be made up of distinctly separate, but equal, parts; how the centre of the mandala (for example) can be seen as either a separate and distinct entity, or as a combination of parts, and actually how the whole mandala can be seen as either an entity in itself, or as a series of interconnecting parts. It just takes a mind twist to see it in these different ways.



The centre of a mandala

L: Each mandala you have painted has a different title. Each mandala is so unique in its form and colour. Each mandala is hours in the making. How different is the ‘experience’ of each mandala for you? Is each mandala saying something different?

N: Each mandala is a product of the moment, and what I am feeling at the moment of painting is conveyed in the work. It is always the process of painting the mandala that is important, not the finished product, so naturally each will be completely different. Actually, in terms of title, I don’t find these very important. It is too difficult to put a single title on an experience that may have lasted weeks. I feel like each mandala is

almost a composite photograph of what I have experienced during the time it took to paint it, so trying to find a single word or phrase to describe this is almost impossible.

Talking about colour, this is a really weird part of the mandala process. When I am initially drawing the patterns of the mandala, I see the finished colours, or at least the colour scheme. This doesn't vary over the time it takes to paint it – some small things might change, but basically the colour scheme I see as I am drawing is the colour scheme I will finish with.



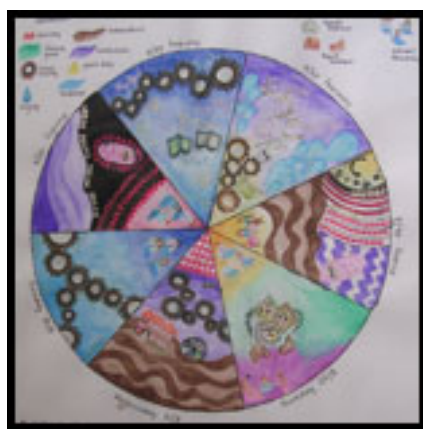
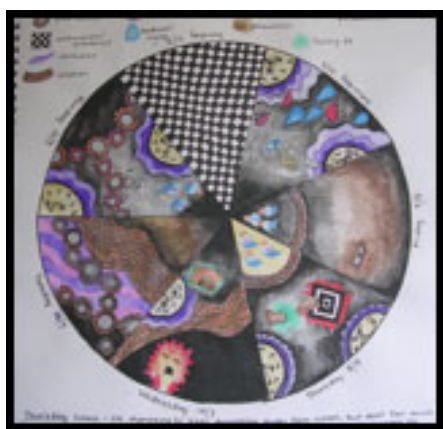
Most recent mandala colour scheme

These colours don't fall into any recognisable pattern. For example, I don't do dull-coloured mandalas when I am depressed, or brightly coloured ones when I am feeling okay. The one I am doing at the moment has a very bright orange, green and purple scheme, and yet it is the one tinged with the most melancholy for me.

L: How did you come to discover this experience with mandala painting? Did you have any idea (before you began painting) that the experience could be so different?

N: Everything was a complete surprise to me! I knew about mandalas, just from my reading and experience, but I hadn't ever considered doing them myself. I

didn't even find them particularly fascinating. Ages ago you had suggested I try mandalas, and to tell you the truth the idea didn't particularly appeal to me, so I adapted the idea into a cross between a diary and a sort of mandala, although it was more simply a circle with the days of the week in it, rather than a detailed mandala. I didn't feel that this art work was any more significant than any other I had tried in the past, but it did help me with my fractured sense of time for a while.



L: Yes, I remember those early mandalas well, and how we could 'catch up' almost 'at a glance' with your experiences of a week. But for now, can we go back to how you discovered the experience of painting mandalas in the way you have been recently?

N: I was in a bad spot a while ago, and was trawling the web for something or other. I wasn't looking for inspiration for my art – in fact, I think I was just looking for something for work. For some reason, the Google image search I was doing came up with a mandala, and I just knew straight away that I had to paint one. I couldn't wait to start and I think I got a canvas that day or maybe the next to begin. I'm sorry that I can't give anything more concrete for my answer, but that's just the way things were. I saw the image, and then I knew that I had to paint my own. I suppose a religious person would say this was God's work; maybe a spiritualist would say I was Buddhist in another life; my psychologists have said many things but are basically just glad that I have found something to help. I don't know what drew me to mandalas, but sometimes in life things happen that you just can't explain.

L: So would you say that the painting of mandalas has been in some ways a spiritual experience for you?

N: There's definitely a spiritual aspect to my painting of mandalas. I'm not sure how to define that spirituality, but things like just knowing the colour scheme to use, and just knowing that I had to paint mandalas, and just feeling how different painting mandalas is to painting other things – I don't think there is any other explanation apart from spirituality of some shape and form.

L: Can we talk a little more about the actual experience of painting mandalas – I am interested to know, for example, what happens in your body when you are painting a mandala. What happens to your thoughts?

N: There isn't anything unusual happening physically when I paint, although I am usually feeling more relaxed than usual. I am fully aware of what I am doing, just like a 'normal' person painting. My thoughts? What happens inside my head is a different matter. I find my thoughts are actually busier than normal, not quieter as you might have expected, but busy in a relaxed way, if you understand what I mean. I am not worrying or planning or analysing – I am talking internally to myself or the girls. I consciously try to avoid negative thoughts, if they arise, because I believe that these might be conveyed to the mandala in the colours I choose or something. But I find that I really don't want to think negatively when I am painting a mandala because I am simply enjoying the experience. I like the physical action of applying colour and working with brushes, and have always enjoyed art, so when I get a chance to do it I don't want to ruin the experience. As I have said, it is almost like time stands still when I am painting and I am very much simply 'in the moment'.

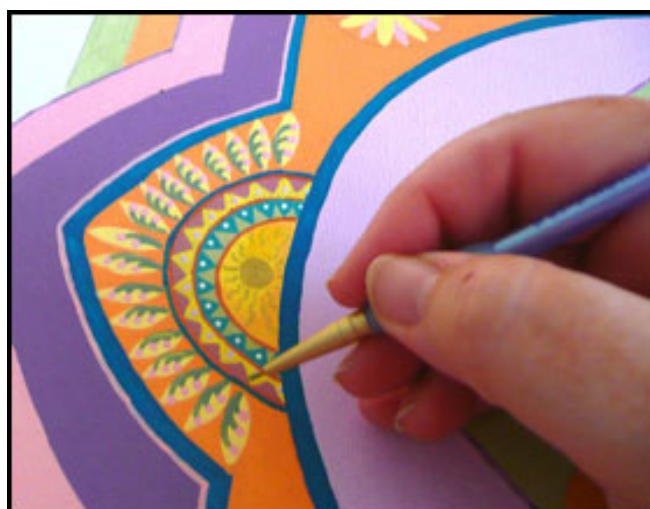
L: Yes, even as we try and explore this unique experience that arrives when you paint mandalas, I have concerns that articulating the experience might in some way 'change' the experience. What are your thoughts about this? Can I check how these questions are going for you so far? Is this dialogue helpful/not helpful? Should we continue?

N: My answering these questions has no connection to my painting at all. Maybe it's got something to do with my dissociation, but these are entirely separate activities. Possibly if I was in the middle of painting and tried answering some of these it might be different, but my paints are packed away and have been for a while and my current mandala is sitting in the spare room waiting for me to get some time to do some more. I fully suspect that when I do some more mandala painting I will be so lost in the moment that these questions will hardly exist for me. So fire away!

L: Thanks – I will! Just a moment ago you said that when you paint mandalas you are 'very much simply in the moment'. I know that the practice of mindfulness is something that you have explored previously and found helpful. Is the experience of painting mandalas in any way similar to your experience of mindfulness?

N: I think that painting mandalas takes me into the 'mindfulness' state automatically. I learned that mindfulness is a state of both intense concentration and relaxation at the same time, and this is very similar to what happens to my body and mind when I paint mandalas. I find that I am concentrating on one tiny aspect of what is in front of me – a small pattern or design on the mandala, or one millimetre of border at a time – and so whatever is troubling me, or happening around me, tends to blend into the background. It's almost like time stands still, and whatever is bothering me, or on my mind, melts away while I am actually painting.

When I'm not chatting internally to Ten, I sometimes find myself chanting to myself, rhythmically. I think it has something to do with the rhythmic way I paint my mandalas – one tiny stroke, move on to another tiny stroke, etc. I called the first really big mandala I painted 'The Prayer' because, as I got into the rhythm of the painting, my thoughts became repetitive, almost prayerful:



Let every stroke

Be a prayer to God

To end

My loneliness

Let every stroke

Be a prayer to God

To end

My loneliness

L: My understanding is that loneliness has been a frequent visitor in your life. When loneliness arrives, how does it get you to think about yourself and your relationships?

N: I often think that all of my 'problems' would be taken care of if there was someone who was willing to share my life. Loneliness is horrible. I don't experience it as the quiet, melancholy mood that most people think of. I think of loneliness as a stalking beast, a violent, ravaging, tortuous beast. Loneliness doesn't 'visit' me, as it is a constant companion, but when it is in a bad mood, I feel completely under its control. Painting mandalas is a very individual experience and I am somewhat unaware of who is around me, so my loneliness is 'put on hold' for a while when I paint. All I am focussed on is my painting and so troubles and anxiety are suspended while I am working. So I guess painting mandalas gives me a holiday from the beast, even if it is just for a little while.

L: Can I say something here? I have noticed that when you paint mandalas in a group, they generate much interest and many people comment on your work. Last time you were in a group I noticed that there seemed to be always somebody sitting quietly by your side watching you paint. Have you noticed this, too? What do you make of this? Does this quieten the beast of loneliness in any way?

N: Yes, I have noticed it. I noticed it quite early on when I began to paint mandalas. I really like it and I am quite flattered. It's certainly a different experience to when I painted more graphic images. I had to turn my canvas away and try not to let other patients see it in case it upset them, or they asked me questions I wasn't prepared to answer. But I quite like it when people sit and watch me; it doesn't make me self-conscious or anything. I especially like it when other patients want to try a mandala of

their own, or when they seem to settle down and feel more relaxed because they have watched me paint. That feels really good.

What do I make of it? I guess I'm prejudiced, but I think that it is something in the mandala itself. The image calms and settles, and you don't have to know anything about the power of mandalas for them to have this effect. I think designing and painting mandalas should be a whole therapy in itself. Might put a few psychiatrists out of business, though!

L: It might! If painting mandalas has allowed you to feel 'more me than we' for moments of time – do you think that other people experiencing DID might find similar benefits from mandala work too?

N: I hope so. I really do. I think that anyone with mental health issues will probably find mandalas helpful. There are no 'rules' when painting mandalas – they can be as simplistic, colourful, meaningful, complicated, basic or symbolic as the painter likes. There are no worries about making a mandala look like anything in particular, as long as the basic design is contained in a circle and the painter is enjoying doing it.

But I do think that mandalas have particular significance for people with DID. My theory, and it's only a theory, is that there is something about the wholeness of a circle that resonates with the lack of wholeness within someone with DID. It's comforting to see the 'whole picture' spread out before you and be in control of that wholeness. There are clear mental delineations of what is outside the circle, and what is inside. The inside might contain lots of different patterns and colours, but their relevance to the whole is immediately apparent. I know that I like mandalas because they represent the insides of my head as someone who has DID – pieces all fitting together as a whole – a beautiful whole. It's very comforting. It offers hope.

L: One last question – Can you describe what this new experience of feeling 'more me than we' is like?

It's really hard to explain if you haven't experienced what DID is like. I use metaphors a lot to explain what it feels like because it's the only way I can think of that might help people understand what it's like, experiencing yourself as distinct parts. I sing in a choir, and a metaphor for this idea (i.e. what it feels like to be 'more me than we') comes to mind. It's like you have been rehearsing your own part in the choir for ages and ages, and you have heard the other parts but haven't actually sung with them. Then you all come together and sing – each part doing its own individual score, but sounding, and feeling, like a coherent piece of music, each of the parts blending to create something other than the sum of its parts. I think I'm rambling, but it's the only way I can think to explain the experience.

Before I started painting mandalas, I heard snatches of this music, but they were fleeting and not quite blending harmoniously with each other. When I look at a mandala I am painting, it just seems to sing 'me' and not 'we'. I can hear all of the parts individually, but mostly it just seems to be a single piece of music. The individual parts are not as important as the whole that is being created.



L: Thank you so much for sharing this unique experience with myself and the readers of this e-journal. It has been a privilege to be a part of this unfolding story.

N.'s mandala art continues to evolve. When we met in a group most recently, N. was experimenting with small mandalas that can be painted in a few hours and also three dimensional mandalas made of clay. The experience of feeling 'more me than we' continues for N. each time she creates a mandala.

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