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Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness

Transcript of a 1-hour video documentary produced by Michael Brown
and aired on Richmond Channel 6 TV, May 25, 2001

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My name is Michael Brown and I am a Licensed Professional Counselor, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and clinical hypnotherapist in Richmond, Virginia. I am trained in a discipline called psychosynthesis. In this transpersonal approach to counseling, we assert that there is a source of guidance, an inner genius if you will, that can help us identify, address and transform the traumas, challenges, and issues that confront us in living. We call this the Higher Self. In psychosynthesis, we counselors use a wide array of methods and techniques to help our clients tune inward and connect to this guidance and inspiration. Two of the most powerful techniques that help clients achieve this goal are mental imagery and mandala art.

Mental imagery is a hypnotherapeutic technique. It helps the client relax, tune inward, and focus the mind in a precise way to view, through the power of imagination, a particular issue, problem or dynamic that is the subject of our exploration in counseling. With this focused and imaginative point of view, we are able to see in a broad way the issue that we are exploring. Mental imagery helps us collect energies and see how our emotions, thoughts and actions all come together in the metaphors of imagery. Then, in order to remember them, we create mandala art.

Mandala art is thousands of years old. It has been found in rock petroglyphs, in Tibetan Buddhism, in Native American spiritual practices--throughout the world. The essence of mandala art is that we draw a circle and within that circle we project or represent the visions and inspiration that comes to us from the inner world or from a spiritual dimension. We draw these images out so that we can document them, so that we can study them later and so that we can continue to learn from them.

I began my training in psychosynthesis in 1973. Since that time, I have been using mandala art to explore and understand my own life experience and I have been using it in my clinical practice with clients. I have drawn more than 2000 mandalas and I have helped my clients draw and interrupt and come to understand many thousands more.

What you see here is a 5-foot long, 40 inches tall fiberglass fish. The 1708 Gallery, in conjunction with the city of Richmond, is holding the outdoor, public art exhibition called "GO FISH!" 200 of these fish have been festooned with art by artists from across the Commonwealth and the nation celebrating the return of the rockfish to the James River, celebrating our rich tradition of Richmond-on-the-river, and inviting people to come enjoy the city from June until September 2001.



As Director of the Institute for Creative Living, when I heard about the "Go Fish!" project, I got very excited. I saw this project as a way for the clients with whom I work and me to exhibit to the greater Richmond community the beauty and the power of mandala art. I decided I would cover one side of the fish with images that have marked important moments, transitions and transformations in my life. I asked the members of a Thursday evening Women's Group I conduct if they would be willing to share with the public some of the mandalas that have documented the creative transformations from their counseling work with me. On this side of the fish are 14 of my own mandalas. On the other side of the fish

are 18 mandalas from these clients. Now we will take a close look at each one.

Each mandala tells a story all its own. Associated with each one is a poem or writing. In the exhibition on each side we begin from the experience of trauma, confusion and difficulty and move through a transformative process to integration and resolution. Each mandala is photographed on the curved surface of the fish and so does not always appear round. Together they describe a journey of awakening and Self-discovery through art.



This mandala depicts me emerging into life from the infinite pool of genetic possibilities. I'm emerging as a discreet and unique individual. I show a forked tongue because I didn't come alone. I came with a twin sister.

As a young adult I found that my ways were very different from my parents. They had a very ordered and well known way of doing life and doing their business and I was a very creative and unique individual who had to find my own path. This put me in conflict with my folks and sent me out on the journey of my own discovery.



Out on my own I found the world to be a big and confusing and scary place. I didn't know which way to go, which paths to follow. I began a journey of exploration not only of the world at large but also of the dynamics within me which I gained from my father and from my mother. My life then explored two tracks—a masculine track and a feminine track.

On the masculine side, I found my dream life and my unconscious was filled with images of conflict, struggles with dinosaurs or beasts. In the real world I was trying to come to terms with power, authority, structures, institutions, laws. On my own, great challenges confronted me to find my power and to find my path.



At the level of the feminine, as a young man on my own I had to come to terms with my own needs, my own drives and desires, the disappointments of leaving home and the struggles with Mom. There was fear in that, there was sadness in that, there was a lot of conflict for me to sort through, integrate and master.

This is a picture of me as Atlas. I learned to be strong to follow my own inner guidance, to do those things I was called to do. But deep inside there was still a vulnerability, a childlike element in me that I carried and which needed to be both protected and nurtured as I made my way in life.



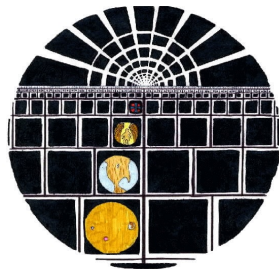
Listening within and following my passions and interests, I developed many skills and abilities: writing and music and techniques of psychotherapy and counseling. I found that these skills brought people to me both in my professional life and also in my individual life. With these skills I was able to meet and find a partner in life.





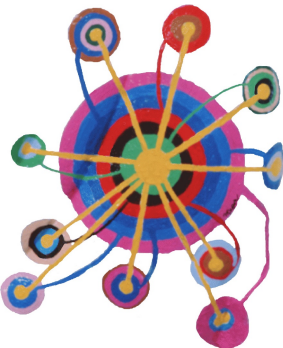
Sexuality and its creative and appropriate expression is the very source of richness, culture, spirituality. Finding a life mate and fulfilling this part of my nature lead to great work as a professional and to family.

In 1975, I began to do a transformational retreat program called the Wilderness Vision Quest. I had discovered at this time that transpersonal psychology and its focus on transformations of consciousness would, in fact, be the professional track I would follow in my life. I found great power in connecting to the spirits and energies of nature. In 27 years I've done 168 Wilderness Vision Quest programs with people throughout the United States and Canada.



In 1977, I was married. In 1979, the night before my son, Damien, was born I sat to focus on and express what the meaning of his emergence in my life and in our lives meant to me. I drew this mandala.

In 1981, Solange and I were gifted with the birth of our daughter, Gabrielle. The day that she was born I sat to draw this mandala image of her emergence into time and space and into our lives.



In psychosynthesis, we teach our clients to listen inward and find the source of their own guidance and inspiration, the wisdom of the inner self, the wisdom of the Higher Self, so that their lives, roles, duties, responsibilities and all activities may be infused with the energies of love and wisdom. In this way they may live in the world in a bright, integrated and synthetic way.

In a creative way, this mandala expresses the model of psychosynthesis. As we begin life, we find ourselves in the lower unconscious, filled with confusion and patterns and passions that we need to explore and integrate. In the middle mandala, there is a sense of growing integration and unique orientation. In the higher unconscious, we begin to be very focused and radiate in our activities the energies of love and will.

At the highest level of development, we radiate into life our highest spiritual capacities guided by the wisdom of the Higher Self.



The purpose and goal for all of us is to live well balanced and integrated lives, to be in harmony with ourselves and with one another. This is a classical mandala, geometric, ordered. It represents balance on the inner plane and loving and creative connections to others in the world, both individual and group transformations of consciousness.



When I heard about the “Go Fish!” project, I was excited to share with the public some of my own images reflecting important transitions and transformations in my life. I then went to a group of women in group counseling and invited them to consider displaying on the fish some of their own mandala work. The images you are about to see come from their counseling experience and journal work. I will share their images with you and guide you on the story they chose to tell, a woman’s journey of transformation through imagery and art. I sat together several evenings with dozens of journals and looked at hundreds of mandalas in order to piece this story together.



The story begins with a shattering life experience. Whether it happens for women abused as children or at any time in their lives, there is a shattering experience which wounds the ego and begins a journey of loss, recovery, discovery, exploration, and transformation.

With trauma often comes a splitting, an outer persona which greets and meets the world and an inner self which is fractured away from the whole and there can then result a divided self.



As women begin to look inside, they often find a feeling of floating, a feeling of depersonalization, that their real self is separate from the part of them that is mother, doctor, professional person. And it is necessary to connect with and begin to explore the self in order to re-own the center. Guided through the inspiration of the Higher Self and working with techniques of mental imagery, we begin to identify these subpersonalities and re-own them.

In this image we see a woman who feels isolated and alone, wanting to be a part of life that others seem to live so naturally and yet somehow feeling separate and apart from others.



Two things need to occur for us to identify, address and resolve the traumas that have existed or happened to us. One is to find that connection to the inner genius, the inner guidance. The other is to find a helping hand from another or from others. This sense of isolation and aloneness we cannot break alone. We need a helping hand.



With inner attunement and the help of another or others--family, partner, lover, counselor--energies begin to be organized, begin to be ordered and hope springs forth again within the psyche. Energies begin to rise up from the clutch of the negative scripts and self-talk that often come as a result of trauma and crisis.

feel wholeness once again.

This is an image of growing power, the power of self-expression, the power of creativity, perhaps the power of sexuality, as wounds from these dimensions begin to heal and one begins to



Very often as we come from the inner world back to the outer world, we notice that our relationships are confusing, that our roles are unclear, we are caught in dependencies and dynamics that we have to take responsibility for, address, and improve.

This image might represent different things for different people. Certainly each viewer of mandalas will find his or her own unique meaning. This image shows the opening again of the heart, an expansion of the willingness and ability to love, and a growing sense of connection to the vertical dimension and to that energy that we might call the Higher Self.



Many of us find peace and harmony and power from the natural world. These energies are important to us free from the demands and expectations and constraints of the human community. The world of nature can provide us teachings, lessons, guidance and inspiration to help us be strong in life.

This mermaid is also an image of emergence from the watery, inner world of emotions and the deep and lower unconscious, out into the light of day, out into the world, or into individuation.



Here we see a growing sense of power and force like a plant that is opening into the full light of the sun. The personality returns to strong functioning having taken the inner journey and redeemed the forces that have been scattered or lost within.

own true destiny.

True emergence happening here, fully formed, fully proud of self as person, as a sexual being, as author and agent of one's

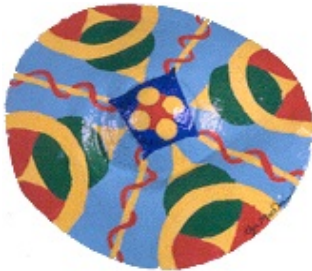


There are many important roles to fulfill, there are many visions to live for each and every woman in life. There are worlds to create and powers to manifest in the world.



Once history and past trauma has been explored and transformed, we raise our level of attention and work from personal to spiritual psychosynthesis. Now we are called to create new and more interesting projects and initiatives filled with love and inspiration for our children, our peers, in our life space looking for the manifestation of our highest visions and goals.

From the individual to the collective, from the collective to the universal, we are surrounded by the infinite and the eternal. If we are captured in our personal story, we cannot see, enjoy or participate in these higher states of consciousness. But, as we find the courage and the will to address and transform our individual selves, consciousness expands ever greater and ever more broadly.



Opening to the guidance of the Higher Self, to our inspiration and wisdom, the more we open within the more we can move outward in a focused way with love and will. Ever higher, ever more integrated, a synthesis of our personal, biological, psychological and spiritual realities. Higher and higher.

This exhibit is called “Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness.” It is on public exhibition as part of the “GO FISH!” project, in front of the Federal Reserve Building in the **Kanawha Plaza**, in downtown Richmond, Virginia, from the first of June until the end of October, 2001.

Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness.

Video Documentary A one-hour program, seen on Richmond Channel 6 TV in June 2001, documenting the transforming effect of mental imagery and mandala art in counseling. 32 beautiful acrylic drawings on Mandala Minnow created by Michael and his counseling clients are examined and explained in detail, three client/artists are interviewed in depth about the process of creating this work of art, and a peek is given of 27 of the 200 other fish in Richmond’s GO FISH! project. Cost: \$11.95 includes postage. Call (804) 222-0483 to order or for more information go to www.MichaelBrown.org.

Interview with three of the client/artists who contributed to the project

Michael Brown (MB)
 Jonnie Corbett (JC)
 Kaja MacDonnell (KM)
 Janet Winkelman (JW)



Michael Brown

MB) Thank you for coming to talk about the process of creating “Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness.” Kaja MacDonnell from Williamsburg, Janet Winkelman from New Kent, Jonnie Corbett from Richmond. We have come together to talk about why you chose to participate in this “Go Fish!” project, how you go about creating mandala art, and maybe about some of the specific mandalas you have made. Let’s discuss how we did the process of putting these mandalas on the fish, and then, what’s been the value for you in representing your mandalas on this large 5 foot by 40 inches tall fiberglass fish.

Kaja, you did five mandalas: “Complexities of Sexuality,” “Empowerment Creates Vision,” “Beginning Anew,” “Creating New Worlds,” and “Synthesis.” We spent about 300 hours putting all these mandalas on it. It was a long project. Janet, you created two on the fish: “I,” and “The Frog.” Jonnie, you did two as well: “Yellow Brick Road,” and “The Protector.” There are five other artists who are not here today that contributed to this but you folks were able to come to this interview. Let’s talk about why you got involved with the “Go Fish!” project, Janet.

JW) I was intrigued with the whole process of the “Go Fish!” project and the fund raising for different artists and organizations. This project struck a chord because it educates about the counseling process--the mandalas and the story telling and the journaling we work with--and about your Institute for Creative Living.

MB) It’s a fund raiser because all of the fish in the “Go Fish!” project will be auctioned for sale October 20 in Richmond and also online. The viewer can any time, between June and October 20, go to www.gofishrichmond.com and see the fish, all 200 of them, and find out where they’ll be auctioned--either on eBay or Amazon.com--the organization hasn’t decided which one. So it’s an educational process to let the public know about the power of mandala art in the counseling process and also to help raise funds for the Institute for Creative Living which has sponsored this project for us. Jonnie, how about for you?

JC) It was a creative process for me. It wasn’t quite as noble. It was more that I wanted to share with other artists and be part of the project. I just thought it was very interesting to work on. Again, mine was just more about sharing and creating it.

MB) Share with other artists? The artists of the Women’s Group?

JC) Well, the other artists, yes, within the Women’s Group and I wanted to be involved in that aspect of it but also sharing with the public, too, and letting them see what we had done in the Women’s Group.

MB) How about for you, Kaja? Why did you get involved in it?

KM) Partly because of what Janet referred to which was the project itself and an opportunity to possibly raise money. It also triggered the memory of the airport exhibit we did which was a collective of many women as well. We spent several days on that one and that was such a wonderful experience.

MB) Putting mandalas on the wall of the Richmond International Airport back in 1997 which was called, “Symbolic Art: Path to the Heart and Soul.”

KM) And the public really enjoyed it. I found the process wonderful. It was fun to collaborate again with other artists so the fish project represented an opportunity to do something similar again.

MB) Would any of you like to talk about how you come to create a mandala? How does that process happen for

you? It emerges out of counseling. We have a focus upon which we work and then you go home and do a homework assignment. What happens?

JW) Well for me, because I've talked to other people that have frustrations in different areas from mine...

MB) Different issues their working on?

JW) Well no, with the process of creating the mandala. I know a couple of people that work really hard to duplicate what's in their mind's eye on the piece of paper and they get kind of frustrated if they can't get that to be a photograph of what's in their brain. And for me, I have an idea in my head more or less. I never get these visions, clarity, or know exactly what's going to come out on the paper. I have an idea and a concept. Some have more detail to them than others but it's through the process of sitting down with that piece of paper and drawing it that I discover what's coming out.

MB) That's true. And everything that happens in the circle as we try to represent the inner image or the inner vision is interesting. It says something about our attention, it says something about our skill, it says something about the resistors or the blocks that we have and the difference between how we want to live our lives and how we manage to actually live them. All of that shows up in the mandala process. It's quite interesting and quite fascinating. Do you find that to be true? How is the creative process for you, Kaja?

KM) Well, it all depends. Some of the mandalas I put on this fish came completely spontaneously, out of the blue, sitting down and just deciding I'm going to swiggle for a little bit and the mandala completely evolved and along with it came a story. All of a sudden I was focusing on or representing something that was going on in my life or in my world. Other times I can't shut imagery off. It's a constant story line or snapshot and some of those get to paper. Sometimes, I will try and recreate exactly what my mind's eye is seeing which is impossible. And then I have to allow myself to let it go and it will evolve and change and represent itself however its suppose to be verses what my brain originally thought. So I love any of those ways.

MB) So sometimes it's a task to represent as closely as you can the image that you have focused on in your inner work and sometimes it's more spontaneous, more process of discovery than duplication?

KM) Correct.

MB) The circle is the frame into which you focus your attention, your art and your expression.

JW) It is interesting that you can come up with a story after you've drawn the mandala because my story comes first.

KM) Just like the process of putting mandalas we have already drawn on the fish, doing them again another story can evolve as a continuation.

JC) I saw so much more when we were doing the mandalas for the second time and each time I would go back because mine were so light to begin with.

MB) The originals?

JC) My originals, yes. And so when I went back to work on them again, I even think I mentioned that to you, I said, 'Gaw! I've gotten so much more out of it this time to see it transform onto the fish.' Again that was just taking it even a step further for me because a lot of time when I create mine--Janet and I were talking about this earlier--I'm a very conceptual person to begin with and very abstract so I'll have these things rolling around in my head and then I'll try to put them onto paper. And I know for me a lot of time mine will come from dreams, images that I have in dreams. It will come maybe from lines of poetry that I've written while working with you. I've had several good ones come out in the meditation process and the breathing exercises that we do when you, you know..

MB) the relaxation part...

JC) the relaxation process or when I visualize a person. I know that "Yellow Brick Road" came up that way and I was asking questions. And that's been a great tool for me in the work that we do.

MB) ...asking questions....

JC) of the image

MB) ...in your mind and in the reflective process or after you've done it as a mandala?

JC) In the reflective process

MB) Okay. The step that I call—the technique that's called “inner dialogue” when we have an issue that we're working on, we get a mental picture to creatively portray that, a mental image with eyes closed, we're looking at our issue creatively. Then we can talk to the imagery. It's imagination: You can't get it wrong, anything can happen. In our dialogue we ask questions of the imagery and the imagination answers. What happens then out of that for you?

JC) Oh, just it's amazing how it talks back, you know. I mean, any other time if I, I mean I've tried to explain this process to people and they're like, ‘Aw yeah, right!’ you know?

MB) Right!

JC) But I mean for me—

MB) Psychosis

JC) Yeah. ‘You need to see somebody!’ “I am” “How do you think I've learned this?!?” But for me it's beautiful and I've even used it in other areas of my life when I'm trying to

MB)...the inner dialogue step?

JC) the inner dialogue, uh hm.

MB) Your original mandalas were done in what medium in your journal? You said they were light. Pencil?

JC) I was using colored pencils and just the process of going from the colored pencils to the actual paints—the acrylics that we used—the dark

MB) On the fish?

JC) Yeah, it was amazing. I mean it gave it a whole other sense of depth and emotion. And another thing, too, that I find so fascinating about that mandalas is that it's so emotional.

JW) They're so personal.

JC) Yeah.

MB) They come from the deepest places.

JW) Well they're our “stories” so you are trying to express a part of yourself when you're doing them.

JC) But the stories that go with it! I journaled anyway and did a lot with poetry and things like that but then to suddenly make the mandala that correlates to it was a revelation to me.

MB) A whole other process of creative exploration and creative expression. So we sat in a group with eight women and dozens of journals and we tried to tell the story, the transformational story. We made a selection, out of hundreds of mandalas of about 20 or 30. Then we put the stories together with the mandalas in the sweep that's on the “Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness” fish. Then the eight women went from the drawings in journals to acrylic drawings on the fish.

JC) That in itself was just such a beautiful process, too, I thought. That was a very soulful journey that whole transformation of recreating the stories from eight different lives to 24 selected images

MB) to the 18 final ones on the fish.

JC) Right. But then 24 different facets of everyone's life—we had to examine every single one. And I thought that was very fascinating in itself. I mean, that whole process was so interconnecting.

JC) What's amazing is how similar the cycles are and how we come up with a whole kind of process for

MB) Sort of a hologram of transformation process as seen through

JC) Little pieces of eight different people

MB) What was it like, Kaja, for you to do the mandala art on the fish, alone, with me, with other clients?

KM) I'm kind of stuck here for the moment because that, too, had been my experience. How similar the stories were, regardless of however different our personalities might be, just in growing.

JC) And the bonds that are there. I know the first night that I came to the Women's Group I walked in and every woman was already here and situated. I felt like the stepchild coming in but I thought there's nothing, what could I possibly have in common with any of these women, you know, just superficially. And then as each week has gone by, and then especially this process of the fish—it's like whoa—you know we all have that core, that same inner core, so..

KM) Yep!

MB) Did you enjoy the process of working on the fish with the other women?

KM) I loved it. So now remember, that was my primary reason for doing it--the collaboration with other people. It happened to be women. It could have been women and men but the core of it was the Women's Group. I spent a lot of time up here alone, painting, which I loved. I was surprised. I loved coming up each time and seeing what you, maybe, had done or what you had done, to see the differences because if you remember we all had taken copies of our originals and they were taped to the Fish. We saw the originals and the differences on the fish itself. I found the process very difficult, to look at what I had done originally and to try and duplicate it, to honor what it originally was, sometimes wanting to change it, sometimes wanting to do a whole different one. Some of the areas were difficult to work with so it was sometimes quite challenging in having to be patient and deep breathe and

MB) It took a long time to put those images on that fish

KM) It took an incredibly long time

MB) I mean, each mandala probably took anywhere from 8 to 12 hours to reproduce.

JC) But the time just flew while you were doing it. You were just lost in it. That's what I found so fascinating and it would be, okay, it's time to go now. No! Because getting here is like, "I gotta go work," you know, but once you got here and once you looked at everything that everyone else had done, and as soon as that brush got wet and you made contact with the mandalas you were working on, you were in another world.

MB) A wormhole in time, it was to drop into eternity and

KM) That's right, it's just falling out of time, falling

MB) And to share that with another person

KM) It's was so wonderful

MB) What was that like for you?

KM) I hardly spoke to whoever was painting. You and I painted at times. Now I did occasionally say, "Stop rocking the fish!"

JC) Yeah, there was a lot of that. Probably what I said the most was, "Oops, sorry!"

MB) Right. I was on one side and all of you were on the other. I did 14 mandalas. You were like these flash bulbs of personalities on the other side of the fish. I was there 150 hours. There's Kaja and then she'd disappear. Or there's Janet, or Jo or Jonnie. It was quite interesting, sort of a trance-like state, with artists and clients coming to tell your stories.

JW) It was a real introspective chunk of time for me, just me and the fish. That's why the whole experience of redoing the mandalas from pencil to paint was interesting. Some of yours were years old, Michael. I hadn't been doing them that long. We had this kind of forced time where we were dealing with a mandala--you and the mandala and the fish.

MB) And it is curved and it wiggles.

JW) Sure, and the introspective time was great. I mean, we seldom stop and take time like that.

KM) No. It was a luxury for me, an absolute luxury.

JC) Because it forced you to make that time for yourself and to look inward and to actually take care of yourself.

MB) The final question: what has been the value now that it's done, when you look back and see the fish so beautiful, such a beautiful piece. What do you think about or how do you react or respond to it, seeing it finished? Are you ready to put mandalas on a building?

KM) Is that a joke?

JC) Gosh!

KM) I think the fish is beautiful, its absolutely beautiful. I love everybody's work, least of all my own, I'm certain of that.

MB) I understand that, too. I'm so close to my own it is like, 'oh, nobody will like this,' or 'this is trivial or juvenile.' I'm not a professional artist. Two hundred fish in this "Go Fish!" project! There are extraordinary artists doing extraordinary works and we're doing our little consciousness piece, you know? And we're telling the public to pay attention to this way to explore and heal important issues that is, in a way, naive and unprofessional but still quite beautiful.

KM) Well, I was told today at an art show that if you do art you're an artist.

MB) Right. Exactly!

KM) I thought, 'oh, that's a nice way to look at it.' We really told a story from the tail forward. We put all our journals on the floor. Everyone was looking through the mandalas and picking out what they thought was appropriate. We all decided, we all collaborated about where to put them on the fish to make the story flow all the way through. It worked. It really has. It flows and tells a story. And we all put our pieces together to reflect those aspects: lower, middle, higher.

JW) That whole collaboration and team effort was really good for me. That's what I took away from the project and we have something concrete to share from it.

KM) And actually, we all live in the world and work. How very wonderful it would be to have that type of collaboration in our daily lives, in our work place. It is really what we strive to have in our home, with our families.

MB) Even within ourselves.

KM) Even within ourselves.

MB) Collaboration within all the subpersonalities and passions and powers.

KM) Right. There was a brief time of single-mindedness and commitment when we all had the same goal.

MB) Shared in community.

KM) So the community experience helped us work out and complete a mandala even if we got in the middle of one and went, 'oooooh, this is too hard,' or 'I don't like it.'

JC) The whole team effort behind that.

KM) Right.

MB) The fish is called "Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness." The transformations of consciousness are both of ourselves as individuals, as we work with the imagination to resolve our inner issues, and transformations of group consciousness. The Women's Group has become much more intimate and much more connective through the sharing of this process.

KM) Absolutely.

MB) This fish will be on exhibition in front of the Federal Trade Building, in downtown Richmond, in Kanawha Plaza from June through October, 2001. Thank you all for being interviewed.

KM) You're welcome

MB) See you in the Kanawha Plaza.