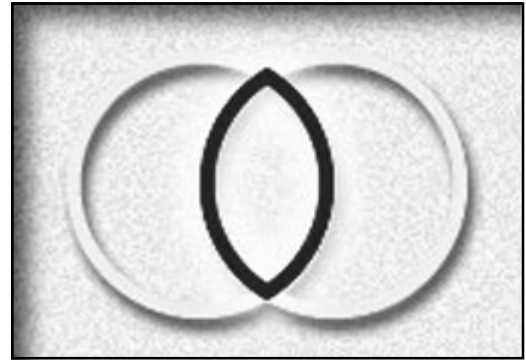


Mandorla Imagery in Psychotherapy

by Robert Shaffer



I have noted the appearance of elliptical "mandorla" forms in the dreams and artwork of psychotherapy clients who are in the middle of a personality conundrum. Feminine, containing images may be involved, such as a seashell. Violent and bloody circumstances may prevail which evoke the image of childbirth. Other more lofty images appear as zeppelins, not to mention the endemic saucer shaped images. Before describing examples of those, a review of the mandorla concept will be helpful.

HISTORY OF THE MANDORLA IMAGE

Robert Johnson considers the mandorla (Italian for *almond*) to be the essentially Western Mandala. It is composed of the arcs from two overlapping circles merging into an elliptical configuration shaped like an almond. The form itself is noted to have ancient and possibly prehistoric artistic representation. Jean Bolen has spoken of its ancient origin in the rounded forms of feminine deity. A historical design for this figure dates to the early days of the Christian church. It is said that during this time of persecution that in privately greeting another believer an individual would draw an arc or portion of a circle on a wall or in the dust. The second individual would then draw an opposing segment or arc, now forming the elliptical shape identified with Pisces, the astrological sign of the fish. The *vessica piscis* achieved representation as an elliptical form above the head of church Bishops as a fish-shaped mitre or headpiece. This abstraction of the fish is found in many ancient Christian images.

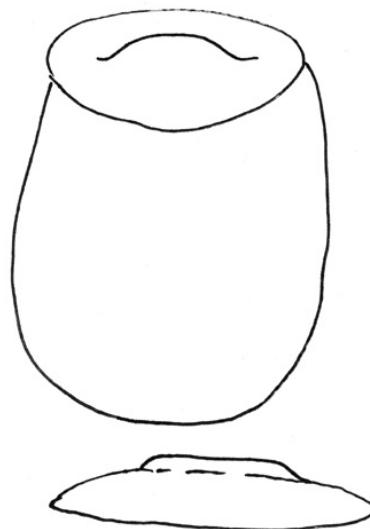
Mandorla is the Italian word for "almond." The almond is an ancient Mediterranean symbol for the envelopment of valuable contents in a hard, nearly impenetrable shell. In the Italian culture, the hard shell of the almond was broken open to reveal what appeared to be an image of the fetus. Classically synonymous with the Latin *vessica piscis*, the term *mandorla* found enduring usage as a term of medieval religious art. *Mandorla* was a descriptor for the almond shaped radiance surrounding the whole body of Christ or the Madonna. The mandorla surrounded Christ in works depicting the Nativity, the Transfiguration, the Ascension, and in the release of the captives in hell. Beginning as early as the fifth century, mandorla images have

graced the major Cathedrals throughout Europe and often may be found in the western glass portal of these structures.

Robert Johnson considers the union of two circles in an elliptical form to represent the clash of opposites within the personality. "Whenever you have a clash of opposites in your personality and neither will give way to the other, you can be sure that God is present." The unification of this third Presence is represented by the elliptical mandorla shape in the center of the conflict.

MANDORLA IMAGES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

A teacher I will call Steven was in a life crisis near the middle of his life. Steven was in a cauldron of life stressors and literally took his problems to bed with him, dreaming all night of conflicting professional, family and parental responsibilities. After throwing in the towel and entering psychotherapy Steven presented the dream image of a hand-thrown pot with emphasis on the lid of the pot. This pot lid was "a special lid of sorts, made a particular way by a student who kept showing it to me. It was a solution to something." The resulting sketch of the pot lid bears striking similarity to typical UFO saucer-like discs with a slightly raised "handle" in the midsection. This dream illustrates the *liminal* nature of passages in life and psychotherapy. The lid is decidedly at the intersection between what is contained and what is not contained, what is mine and not mine in consciousness and in the unconscious.



Steven's Pot

Robert Shaffer, Ph.D., developed a focus in Jungian psychotherapy from his interest in spiritual experience. He studied Jungian psychology at Guilford College and in his doctoral psychotherapy training at Georgia State University in the 1970's. Robert's articles have appeared in the *International Journal of Symbolology*.

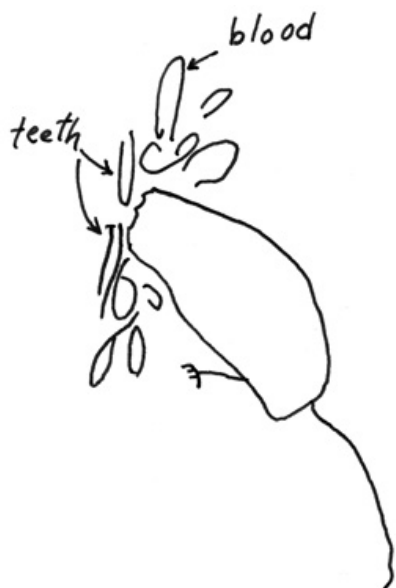
An archetypal parallel to Steven’s pot image is the *alchemical vas*, a circular container of personal transformation. Steven’s dream of the clay pot described his personal *vas* and emphasized the lid. The lid was a “solution to something.” *Solutio* or *solve* is an essential alchemical function wherein the rigid roles, demands and expectations dissolve into spiritual essentials.

As with others at midlife, Steven found himself in impossible conflicts of loyalty and commitment. The solution addresses what Steven must *contain*, what he must identify as self and what must be *excluded* from the self. The solution is shown not in contents inside or outside of the pot, but as the lid itself, the dynamic of containing and excluding in a single living image.

Steven’s pot lid is drawn with a raised center, similar to womb and fetal images produced by other individuals in deep regressive psychotherapy. This saucer-shaped image is a mandorla image of the Self, the transpersonal identity that is born from the dynamic interplay between consciousness and the contents of the unconscious. Steven’s mandorla image might be seen as bridging Medieval Alchemical container imagery with saucer-shaped UFO imagery that has been spontaneously produced by the unconscious beginning in the latter 20th century.

In a later dream Steven found himself “stuffing” a basketball into the hoop. He was surprised to find that his hand was up above the hoop, a feat he has only dreamed of in real life. His feeling was of being beyond the top of his game. In his drawing Steven’s hand appeared *above* the circular image of the basketball hoop, once more drawn as an ellipse. It seemed significant to Steven that an earth bound human has “a hand” in the airy world above the rim. This discovery has given Steven traffic above and below the liminal boundary of temporal human life. He now has both a “handle” and a hand to navigate the inner and outer, conscious and unconscious. This will hold Steven in good stead as he plays through his life challenges.

I frequently find among male psychotherapy clients in midlife an encounter between two seemingly irreconcilable ways of life. For example, one man, whom I will call Ed, became overwhelmed with the possibility of reunion with an ideal love from his youth. Tension grew between his longing for all that this

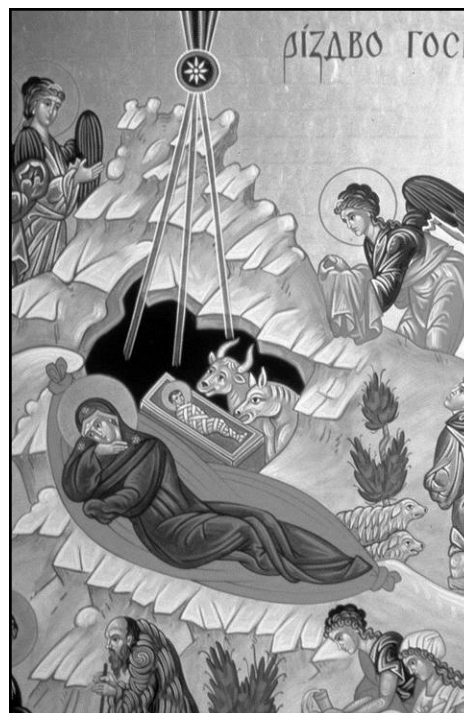


Ed’s Mouse

earlier relationship might bring to his life versus all for which he had sacrificed and built together with his wife whom he knew to be his lifelong partner.

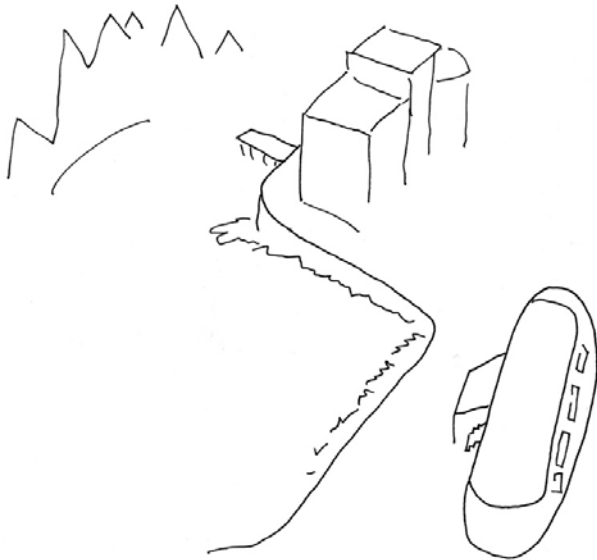
Asked to confront his inner experience, Ed reported a dream. In his dream Ed had a mouse in his hand and he aggressively bit off the head of the mouse. Drawing this image, he showed a bloody figure with an oval or crescent shape. Ed was in the breach of his life and couldn’t go forward and couldn’t go backward. This first encounter with the unconscious psyche after a long conscious struggle resulted in a rounded shape with an unmistakable parallel to childbirth itself. At this moment new life was about to emerge. As Ed later began to see his way through his marital crisis his dreams included more classical four-fold *mandala* (rather than mandorla) images such as a sphere contained inside of a square pyramid.

The protective durability of the Medieval Italian almond image expresses the theme of incubation or gestation within a protective container. I have observed images created by individuals involved in birth regression psychotherapy. Their artwork may include dark crescent or elliptical fig-



ures, sometimes with a fold or overlap in the center. Similar instances of crescent shaped imagery are found in Byzantine style religious icons depicting the Mother of God in childbirth. She is depicted against a Mandorla-like bed. The similarity in shape of these mandorla images to prenatal fetus is notable, a crescent shape with a fold on the concave face of the image.

Mandorla forms appear in patients who find themselves faced privately with irreconcilable paths of life. A man I’ll call John had struggled discreetly for years with homosexual behavior that was incompatible with his orthodox religious beliefs and his marriage of nearly 20 years. As he faced the dual nature of his life in therapy one dream placed an elliptical silver “Airstream Trailer” on the shore (drawing 3). The intersection of land and water often emerges in an encounter between consciousness and the unconscious.



John's Airstream Trailer

The intersection of two worlds or two opposites seemed to be a background for the presence of the elliptical form in John's dream. The silver color of John's Airstream Trailer is also classical as quicksilver (Mercurius), which to alchemists was a catalyst or mediator between opposites. I have witnessed other dreams containing silver Airstream trailers, probably chosen by the unconscious because of their uniquely rounded form and silver color.

SILVER FLYING SAUCERS AND VEHICLE ORNAMENTS

In 1958 Carl Jung wrote "Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth," in which he described the horizontal ellipse shape in contemporary manifestations of psychic totality. Even more endemic today than these silver sky images is the thousands of silver Piscean emblems on throngs of SUV's in suburban America. Early this year it was estimated that around 75,000 fish emblems of various types are added each year to American vehicles. This represents a nearly half million dollar annual industry. Around the late 1980's the Christian fish emblem was joined by a "mutation" with sprouted legs sporting the name of "Darwin," the founder of evolutionary theory.

Robert Johnson has implied that the appearance of a Mandorla reveals the intersection of opposing dominants in the psyche, or even worldviews. Here, the creationist goes bumper to bumper with the evolutionist. Many both serious and playful variations of the Piscean ellipse has emerged ("Jesus," "Truth" swallowing "Darwin," "Evolve," an "Alien" flying saucer, "lutefisk," "sushi," "n'chips," etc.). The clash of two opposing psychic fundamentals (the creationist vs. evolutionist theme) seems to be the driving force behind what has been dubbed the



"fish wars" on one Internet site.

Whether airy and silver or bloody and earthy, mandorla symbols emerge in heralding the transcendent, living third presence that forms the birth of a new way for personhood ■