



Meditative Art Forms



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I choose the topic of Meditative Art Forms for several reasons. First and foremost, I'm an artist and have made my career in arts education. I have always loved the visual arts. Even as a young child, with limited resources, I found myself drawing, coloring, imaging and creating. To this day, if I find myself struggling, I remind myself to find a creative outlet for my energy.

I have just retired from a thirty year career as a elementary and secondary art teacher. It was a career I loved and found the combination of working with children and the arts very much to my nature. Children's creativity is fascinating to me and I was always amazed at what happened within the space of the art room. Creating a space for creativity is something that I'm very aware of. I'm not talking directly of the physical space, although that is important, it's the openness of the creative space allowing for freedom of one's spirit and true nature, thought and experimentation. It is in this same direction of creating a space for meditation within an art form that this report takes it's place. I wanted to explore how the arts and in particular the visual arts can bring calmness and peace.

As an artist, others often comment that it must be nice to enjoy the calm that comes over you when you create. In all honestly when I'm creating my mind is anything but calm. It's completely engaged with color, form, shape, texture.....It's completely engaged with self-critique. Rarely have I been involved in creating and found true peace within as I create. Although I have experienced the sense of blocking out everything but my work, it's typically the rare occurrence than the norm. This is not to

say I don't love the experience of creating artwork - I'm totally alive in the moment - totally engaged. But calm and meditative are not words that describe the experience. My report is intending to look at meditative art forms in three case studies. First, with children as they created mandala designs from India. Second, a personal exploration with an art form I found called Zentangles. Finally the bulk of the report with experimentation of creating a snow labyrinth and inviting guests to walk the labyrinth and respond to the experience. Each step of this journey has been very engaging and interesting to me personally. I welcomed the challenge and introspection it has brought me.

Mandala Designs

As an art educator I have experienced the art classroom through just about every medium possible. I can attest to the busyness of the art room. Children are excited to create and express. Children welcome any opportunity to explore new materials and techniques. My biggest joy was just stepping back and watching the creativity and comments flow. But it's anything but meditative!!! Often if I found the chatter to be about what's being created, the joy about what's happening with this new art medium, or the excitement of a child just wanting to share their creation as one of the gifts of educating a child in the arts field. Music and art teachers often joked that they turned their radios off on the drive home for a little peace and quiet. That being said I did

discover times when the art room was indeed very peaceful and calm which was a direct reflection of the intention of the artwork that was being created. This was the case with the Mandala's from India. I have done mandalas lessons with elementary students for several years and the results during the drawing stage always quieted the space within the room. The mandalas photographed for this report came from my long term subbing assignment this winter in Long Grove, IL. They are created by third grade students. The project was in progress when I started the subbing and I observed the completion during my stay.

Mandalas can be found in many cultures - Buddhism, Hindu, Celtic and Native American to name a few. Mandala is the Sanskrit word meaning circle. For this lesson mandalas from India were discussed. Their bright colors and intricate designs are of interest to the children.

Personally I have always found the circle motif very calming and the mandala starts as a circle and the design revolves around this center. The mandala created by the children starts with a circle with dividing lines separated into quadrants. There is balance within the geometric composition of the visual elements.

Sand mandalas are created by Buddhist monks based on the meditation of impermanence, a central teaching of Buddhism. The intricate design is made of sand, meditated on for an allotted time, and then the sand is brushed together and placed in a body of running water - distributing the positive energy and blessings to the world.

Several years ago I witness the process of creating a sand mandala at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. In the past when I mentioned this to my students they had an interest in the development of such an established work that is then washed

away. This concept of impermanence is one that I will revisit with the snow labyrinth. The process and not the product is it's importance. A somewhat difficult concept for children to comprehend but I find it very fascinating as an artist and a yogi. It's truly living in the moment and developing that sense of non-attachment that is at it's core belief.

Children are very quiet in the drawing and designing of their mandalas. Are they meditative? Not sure you would say that per se, but there is a peaceful and calm spirit in the space of the room when they have started the repetitive nature of filling the quadrants with their designs. The centered based mandala, whether they see it as meditative or not, makes them focus on a center point which in my interpretation calms the spirit. It takes quiet concentration to make the radial balance design. It quiets the mind in this concentration. Thoughtful, mindful drawing by children often quiets them.

The children's mandala designs are on page eighteen of this report.

Zentangles

My personal art has always been varied. As an educator, I have experimented with almost all mediums. Some come natural to me, some I struggle with.....but I love the exploration and always appreciated a career that let me “play” with things I loved. I still love a box of new crayons as well as spending time in the art store exploring. I have made it a vacation habit to visit art museums around the world. I love looking at art on all levels. The masters, the untrained artists, artist collaborations, fine art crafters, old/young - I just like to witness people creating. As an artist, when I’m not an educator, I have enjoyed watercolor, drawing, weaving, wood working and printmaking. My art is private to me and my creative spirit is one I cherish.

Zentangles came through my research on meditative art forms. The Zentangle method was developed by Rick Roberts and Maria Thomas. Rick spent years living as a monk practicing meditation and other spiritual exercises and Maria worked as a botanical art illustrator. Together they developed the method of drawing entitled Zentangles that they believe will allow anyone to feel peace and relaxation while creating their art. They now have workshops teaching others these methods so they can share their passion. Their students become certified Zentangle teachers and continue to share the benefits of tangling.

There is a big emphasis on the fact that the method doesn’t require any artistic talent and it has the appearance of doodling. At first I thought, oh this is doodling and I had

long ago recognized that doodling for me can be meditative. I had sat through numerous staff meetings and created ongoing doodles that I finally came to realize that others were sitting by me to see what would be created. I knew I was listening and aware of what was going on but with pencil/ pen in hand the marks on the paper made me connect to the speaker more.

I would say that I felt that creating Zentangles does take artistic decision making all be it not formal drawing skills. There is an emphasis on simplicity and no required outcome. You were asked to limit the number of decisions you make as you tangle thus keeping yourself calm, focused and relaxed. There is an acceptance of abstraction in the tangles which helps with the anxiety that is created by realism.

I started my exploration with some ideas in the Tangle directory. All tangles are made on small white square paper. They are initially created with pencil and black thin markers. Color and shading can be added later but I felt for my research the drawing became the meditative aspect for me. After a few tangles that were suggested for beginners I explored on my own. Doodling comes natural to me so ideas come easily. They emphasized that the difference between doodling and the Zentangle method was that doodling is mindless and the marks are made randomly. Zentangles pen strokes are very deliberate and intentional. I'm not sure I believe doodling is mindless but I do see the repetitive nature as very calming and meditative. It has the same calming effect as the repetitive drawing done on the mandalas with the children. The repetitive nature eases the mind as to what's next - the making of the marks on the paper has already been decided and so your mind rests. I absolutely believe that drawing the Zentangles relaxed me. I lit a candle, put on some quiet music and spent several hours creating my

tangles. I know that I'm calm when I'm drawing for the most part - especially if it comes with the intention of not creating with a realism intent. There was this sense when I was creating the Zentangles that the concept of impermanence came back into focus for me. I wasn't creating permanent works of art - it was art for the present moment I was creating in. I would gain whatever it gave me at this time and move on.

I enjoyed my exploration with Zentangles. Recently, I heard that Living Well Cancer Center in Geneva is offering a class in the Zentangle Method. A wonderful addition to creating a time, space and the opportunity for participants to discover a meditative art form.

Resources:

Joy of Zentangles - Drawing Your Way to Increased Creativity, Focus and Well-Being
Suzanne McNeil, Sandy Steen Bartholomew, Marie Browning

Yoga for your Brain - A Zentangle Workout
Sandy Steen Bartholomew

Zentangle untangled - Inspiration and Prompts for Meditative Drawing
Kass Hall

My Zentangle exploration samples are on page nineteen of this report.

The Snow Labyrinth

The snow labyrinth came as an idea which was two-fold. First, I love snow and I love to walk. I love to walk in all kinds of weather but there is something about walking during and after a snowfall that I have always found quieting. The covering of the earth with a white blanket is lovely to me. I have very fond memories of hours spent in the snow with my siblings when we were children. Secondly, for my meditative art report I was looking for an idea that would involve others and how they would respond to some form of meditation through art. I was looking for a means to encourage others to think about what meditation might mean to them and how it might enhance their lives and if they ever considered ways to quiet their minds.

Labyrinths

The origins of labyrinths are Greek and later they can be seen in Roman art before spreading to other European countries. Simple labyrinth designs could be found on pottery, basketry, wall images and floor designs. The classical walking labyrinth starts out as a four seed pattern that develops into a seven circuit labyrinth. Even within the classical labyrinth framework there are great variations. The classical labyrinth is developed as a single path that is walked until you reach the center which is considered

half the distance. The labyrinth is not a maze as mazes include a choice by the individual as to what path or direction can be taken. Labyrinths are a single non-varying path towards the center and not meant to be difficult for the participant to navigate. Mazes offer choices and labyrinths take this option out of the equation so the walker can focus on centering their thoughts.

Walking a labyrinth can be viewed as a cultural pilgrimage. The opening representing birth, the center God, and the walk towards that center enlightenment. In some research it was mentioned that labyrinths were created as a substitute for those who could not travel to holy sites and lands.

The labyrinth is an metaphor for life's journey. It is considered a right brain task which involves, intuition , creativity and imagery. It relates to wholeness through it's circle image providing a meaningful journey to our center.

Today we can find labyrinths at churches, hospitals, health care facilities, retreat centers, schools, parks, memorials and healing centers. They are created with a wide range of materials. Labyrinths are used as a meditation, relaxation and spiritual tool where the focused walking can reduce anxiety as well as enhance greater powers of concentration and a sense of control in one's life. All the benefits of a meditative practice - mindful concentration, a sense of control in one's life, the reduction of anxiety, a receptive mind set were all mentioned as benefits of mindful labyrinth walking.

Through my research I found many testimonies about life lessons learned while walking a labyrinth but my favorite was by a walker who found himself cutting short his walk because of two points - his overriding fear he was going to be "late" for the next retreat

speaker and his avoidance of someone who was annoying to him on the labyrinth. After reflection he found that he missed the true meaning of the experience behind the message of the slow mindful walking of the labyrinth....to become a better and happier you. His quote ...”The labyrinth has lessons to teach - let the labyrinth teach you.”

Creating the Snow Labyrinth

I have walked several labyrinths and found the circular design interesting as well as reflective. Earlier I mentioned that I love circular motifs and labyrinths are fascinating circular motifs. I contemplated creating a labyrinth in my backyard with stones or ground markers but decided that the impermanence of the snow was more interesting to me. As I mentioned earlier there is something about the creation of a work of art that is not meant to last but to be observed and experienced in the moment that fits with my experience of yoga in my life. Where are you today with your practice.... not yesterday and not tomorrow. How is your practice influencing your life and your decisions today? How can you use your breath to steady your mind as well as your body in the present?

Planning the labyrinth

After researching the designing of labyrinths, I found them to be quite complex in their structure. Formal classical labyrinths have an exactness to them - the perfection of the circle - the width of the path, the length of the walk all have significant meaning to the strength of the labyrinth. I developed an appreciation of this exactness and planning but knew that the snow labyrinth needed a different layout for it to be successful. I found a simple labyrinth design on-line that I modified to fit my space.

The layout for the snow labyrinth fit my small backyard well. The yard is fenced in on three sides, includes two large maple trees and a raised bed garden. To prepare for the labyrinth, I strung white lights around the fence line to help light the path for the evening walkers. I planted markers around my yard that would indicate where I needed to shovel out the path. The snow labyrinth would be a path that found it's way to the center where I placed a chair and a candle. I also sent out an informative email and made a few phone calls to friends and family that I was doing this project for my yoga research and that I would in the future be sending an invitation to walk the labyrinth. I made up a questionnaire I hoped would provide me with responses about how the walkers felt about the experience.

Then I waiting for it to snow. I needed enough snow to make the path, but not so much snow that it made it difficult for the walkers to travel to my home. I needed it cold enough to maintain the snow but not so cold that it made my guests feel like walking outside was anything but meditative.

The snow came on Friday evening, February 1st. I have to say it was so exciting for me to wake up Saturday morning, see the snow depth and get to work on creating the labyrinth. I brushed the labyrinth first with a broom and then with a shovel. It occurred to me that as I created the labyrinth that if I made a mistake I would be disturbing the fresh snow and the clear path I was hoping to create. I wanted the rest of the yard to remain untouched snow. I realized I was creating some internal anxiety as I hoped for a "perfect" scene in my yard for my guests. I had a little self talk and decided it would be the path it was meant to be and that would be just fine as it was. I shoveled my driveway, baked some bread for my guests and sent out the second email invitation to

the walkers. By ten-thirty that morning I had my first guests - neighbors from across the street with their three children.

It occurred to me on that busy Saturday and Sunday that for the most part this was not meditative to me at the present time. I found myself hosting and questioning my guests on their experience of walking the labyrinth as well as keeping the path and driveway cleared. I loved the stream of walkers throughout the day stopping by - some just walking and filling out the questionnaire, others using the time to catch up with friends and family. It basically turned in a snow labyrinth open house and I welcomed the experience.

The labyrinth actually lasted a full week. I had taken a long term elementary art education subbing position this winter and invited guests to walk during the day even if I wasn't home if that accommodated their schedule. One evening before the guests came I decided to walk the labyrinth - Not as the one that created it, not as the one maintaining the clear path, but as a guest in my backyard. It took three rounds before I realized I was relaxed and nonjudgmental about how it looked. This didn't come as a surprise to me as I have always felt a heavy self judgement about my own work but I was glad to develop the calm I had hoped to obtain. Experiencing the judgement and letting it go was an important growth for me. The labyrinth was especially calming in the evening....the darkness, the white lights and quiet of the neighborhood were quite peaceful. I found myself taking the time to walk the labyrinth every evening that week. By the end of February eighth it was melted enough that the path was barely recognizable. Impermanence. By that date I had thirty guests walk the labyrinth.

The Guests and Their Responses

The guests who walked the labyrinth come from all aspects of my life. My family, who has been incredibly supportive of my yoga journey. Neighbors and acquaintances that happen to be on my email list. Friends, yoga friends and teacher friends who have been patience listeners to my quest to become a yoga teacher and to combine this report with my love of art. I am very grateful for all of their support for I know that walking in the cold snowy winter weather for many of them is not a choice they would most likely choose.

The age range of guests was from eighty-four to age six. My father was the oldest walker and my friend's son the youngest. I have included photos of them in this report. I was happy to include children in the labyrinth, not because I expected them to connect with some form of meditation during their walk, but to encourage them to stop and observe nature as they journeyed the path. I loved listening to their verbal observations about walking (and eventually running;-) the labyrinth. Several adults remarked how it brought back memories of creating paths in the snow as children. I feel children need to be taught ways to quiet their minds and relax and as adults we need to model and provide these alternatives. My father is a daily walker and in wonderful health for his age. He walks year round and is as fond of winter walking as I am. We come from Norwegian heritage and perhaps that influences our love of snow and outdoor exercise. My mother, although not in good health, wanted to be part of the experience so she sat as she watched my father walk the labyrinth.

The goal of my questionnaire was to help me discern what walking the labyrinth felt like to my guests. I was interested if they ever thought about the benefits of meditation and if they ever considered ways to calm their mind. All guests took the time to finish the questionnaire - some to great lengths, others not so much;-) The questionnaire was formed around the thought that the whole concept of walking a labyrinth might be a new experience, that meditation contemplation may be unfamiliar to some of them and that calming your mind is important.

The following questions were asked:

1. Were you familiar with walking a labyrinth?
2. Do you ever take walks in the snow just for fun or exercise?
3. Do you enjoy our winters cold weather?
4. What time of day did you walk the snow labyrinth?
5. Were you aware of neighborhood sounds - traffic, voices, etc. Were you able to block out noises for the most part when you were walking?
6. Labyrinths are meant to be walked slow and mindful. Were you able to do this? Did the process of mindful and meditative walking change the longer you walked the labyrinth?
7. Was there anyone else on the labyrinth when you were walking? Would it been more meditative for you if you were alone?
8. Have you ever considered a meditative practice for yourself? Any thoughts you'd like to share?

Although I got a range of answers, they had some similarities. Please allow me to generalize their responses. I purposely did not ask for names on the questionnaire so that I would not place names with responses. I did note female and male responses because I wondered about any differences the gender might make. Some of my interpretations came from discussions and observations during the time after the walk when we were sharing tea and bread together.

Almost all recognized the need to slow down and to be more mindful throughout the walk and throughout their lives. For many walkers this was their first experience with

walking a labyrinth. Just a handful of walkers walk in the winter for personal enjoyment. Most mentioned sounds of nature that they typically overlook. Many mentioned that a sense of calm came after they forced themselves to walk slowly and stop along the path to observe. Most females mentioned that they needed to find ways to relieve stress and that meditation was a means of doing that. Most walkers were females. Male walkers (6) did not focus on the meditation as much as the act of walking. Evening walkers loved the atmosphere created by the snow and the lights. Walkers who happen to be walking when it was snowing enjoyed the experience enough to mention the falling snow. Few walkers have ever considered a meditative practice enough to take a yoga class although they see the value in their lives. Some walkers felt that if they were alone on the labyrinth they might have been able to meditate/concentrate more. Most walkers commented on the “quiet” they experienced although I live in an area where homes are close and the high school is down the street. Younger adult walkers seemed more open to experimentation with meditation when it was discussed. Some walkers mentioned that their meditation was through prayer. Several walkers made additional trips around the labyrinth to slow down their walk. A few walkers made comments about the cold, but generally it was not part of the conversation. Meditative art forms can bring a wide range of appreciation of the arts - music, dance, textile arts, painting and drawing were a few mentioned in the discussion and in particular music. For a few walkers, particularly family members, meditation is not a topic we have a comfort level in discussing. The importance of yoga as a means of gaining flexibility and strength held value but discussions about meditation is unfamiliar territory. All walkers thanked

me for including them in my research which was interesting to me since I considered their walking and time as such a favor.

My thoughts after completion of this project are many. I loved the gathering it created in my home - the meeting of friends and family. I loved opening my home to my guests to discuss ways to calm our minds even if it meant the conversation was a little awkward sometimes. I loved the physical labor of designing, clearing and maintaining the labyrinth as well as baking for my guests. I come from a family that is often times at it's best when we have some chore or work that we need to do together. It's the beginning of a seed of thought that we all need to find ways to bring peace to our lives that I was most pleased with. It was the discussion and the comments made from almost all walkers that they felt the need to explore some means to help them find calm and peace in their lives. It wasn't the physical aspect of yoga that brought a sense of calm to me these past couple of years it was finding a sense of calm within my center that held me together.

I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of developing the snow labyrinth. It's made me grow in my knowledge of yoga off the mat and into my life - and with some hope maybe I've planted a small seed of the benefits of meditation and yoga to those I've had the pleasure of meeting through this journey.

Labyrinth photos are on pages 20-21 of this report.



Labyrinth resources:

www.labyrinthcompany.com

www.the.labyrinth.society.org

www.lessons4living.com







