

The Truth Mandala

A ritual container for pain that has nowhere else to go

A strand for the Kindling Commons

Tradition: Work That Reconnects. Original design: Joanna Macy. This guide: David Green.

THE PRACTICE IN ONE LINE

A circle with four objects laid in its quadrants — a stone, dead leaves, a thick stick, an empty bowl — into which people step, one at a time, to speak the truth of what they carry for the world, while everyone else does nothing but receive it.

WHERE IT COMES FROM

Joanna Macy developed this near Frankfurt in 1990, in a large and tension-filled workshop, on the day East and West Germany were reunified. It has since become one of the most widely used rituals in the Work That Reconnects, and although you could gather the objects from a hedgerow in ten minutes, the practice is not a light one. Of everything in the tradition, this is the piece that most asks of whoever holds it.

The full description is chapter seven of *Coming Back to Life* by Macy and Molly Brown. What follows is a working guide and not a substitute for reading her. The Work That Reconnects offers its practices open-source and asks only that the source be acknowledged, which seems a fair exchange and which I would do anyway.

WHY IT HAS TO BE A RITUAL

There is a thing that happens when a group tries to talk honestly about what is happening to the world. Somebody says something true. Somebody else, meaning entirely well, softens it — offers the hopeful counter-example, or contextualises it, or reaches over and puts a hand on their arm. And the true thing, which took some courage to get out, is closed down inside thirty seconds by kindness.

We are very good at this. Most of us learned it early, and we do it without deciding to, because another person's raw grief is uncomfortable to sit inside and comforting them relieves our own discomfort at least as much as theirs.

The ritual removes the possibility. No cross-talk, no response, no fixing. The structure forbids the exact thing ordinary conversation would demand, and in forbidding it makes something sayable that could not otherwise be said.

The objects are doing something similar. Announcing an emotion in front of twenty people is exposing; picking up a stone and speaking while you hold it is doing something. The object takes part of the weight. It gives the hands a job, gives the speaking a shape, and lets a person locate themselves without having to explain or justify anything.

WHAT YOU NEED

Time: ninety minutes, and hold that line. Twenty to thirty of those go on setup and framing before a word is spoken in the circle, and the framing is not preamble — it is the container being built.

Numbers: twenty to forty sits most comfortably. Twelve to a hundred is the working range, and Macy reports fine mandalas with as few as four. Below twelve the circle can feel exposing; above forty the time runs away from you.

Space: quiet, with room for everyone to sit in a tightly packed circle. Packed matters. A loose wide circle does not hold — people need to be close enough to feel the group as a single body.

Where in the day: near the middle, with a break straight after, and something else together before people go their separate ways. Not last thing. Never last thing.

The objects:

A stone — fear. How the heart feels when afraid: tight, contracted, hard.

Dry leaves — sorrow. The sadness for what is happening.

A thick stick — anger, outrage. Held hard in both hands while speaking.

An empty bowl — deprivation, need, the hunger for what is missing.

A cushion or cloth at the centre — for anything that fits none of the four. A song, a prayer, a line of verse.

Gather them yourself, from outside, that morning if you can. It matters more than it sounds like it should.

Before you begin: the group must already have made some contact with their pain for the world — Open Sentences is the usual door. Dropped cold into a group that has not done that, the mandala either stays shallow or opens something with no floor beneath it.

SETTING IT UP

Lay the four objects in four quadrants inside the circle, cushion at the centre. You do not need to mark the quadrants; people find them.

Keep the ground clear. No bags, no water bottles, no boxes of tissues at the edges, and people sitting on the inner rim keep their feet out of the space. This sounds fussy and it is not — the clear ground is what makes it a mandala rather than a floor.

THE FRAMING

Take your time. Everything afterwards rests on it.

Pick up each object in turn and say what it holds. Speak plainly and don't over-explain: this stone is for fear, and it is how the heart feels when we are afraid — tight, hard, contracted. With it, our fear can speak. These dry leaves are our sorrow for what we see happening. This stick is for anger, and anger needs speaking for the sake of clear thinking; hold it hard in both hands while you do, not raised, not swung. This bowl is our emptiness, our sense of what is missing.

And the cushion at the centre is for whatever fits none of that.

Then the question people are usually holding by this point, which is worth answering before they ask it: **where is hope?**

The ground itself is hope. All of it. Nobody would be sitting here at all if they had none.

CHAPTER THE GUIDELINES

Give them plainly, and make clear that the inner circle is sacred ground, made so by the truth told in it.

One person at a time, entering when they enter — randomly, spontaneously, no order and no going round.

Speak from one quadrant and leave, or move between them. Hold an object and say nothing if that is what is true. Come in more than once, or not at all. There is no pressure on anybody to enter.

Keep it brief. Brevity and power are related here. This is not for lectures or reports but for direct, simple expression — let the object hold the focus.

The group's response is a refrain, spoken during or after each person, **and not in unison**: *I hear you.* Or *I'm with you.*

What is said here stays here. And nobody's words are referred to afterwards — including to the person who said them.

No personal references to anyone present. No cross-talk.

Concerns about our own lives are as welcome as concerns about the world. There is no separation; it is all one thing.

Speak in your first language if you want to, whether or not anybody else understands it.

Speak as another being if that is what wants to speak — and make it clear to us when you are.

Do not reach out to comfort. However kind the impulse.

That last one is the hardest to ask and the most important, so give it a sentence of its own. A hand on the shoulder in that moment, however well meant, is received as *that's enough now*, and the person will feel it and stop. What you offer instead is presence, steadiness, and a completely matter-of-fact acceptance that this is exactly what we came here for.

Tell them how long it will run. Tell them they can go to the bathroom whenever they need to.

Before the ritual begins, and not only at the end, name what Macy calls the **tantric side** of each object. Its source. What it is made of.

Point to each in turn and say something like: our sorrow is love in equal measure — we only mourn what we deeply care for. To speak fear in a fear-phobic culture takes trust and courage, so in speaking it you are also showing those. The anger we express has its source in a passion for justice. And the emptiness of the bowl is to be honoured too, because empty is what makes room for the new to arise.

I used to save this for the closing, thinking of it as the resolution. It is not a resolution, and it belongs at both ends. People need to enter the mandala already knowing that what they carry in is not a defect — that the grief is love and the anger is justice — because knowing that is part of what makes the entering possible.

THE RITUAL

Dedicate it. To the welfare of all beings and the healing of our world, in whatever words are yours.

Open with sound. A collective *AH* — which in Sanskrit is the seed syllable for what has not yet been spoken, and for all the voices not yet heard. Let it run its length and finish when it finishes.

Then wait. People come when they come. The group receives each one with the refrain, or with nothing.

Long silences will happen and you sit inside them. The pull to fill a silence in this ritual is strong and it is nearly always the facilitator's discomfort rather than the group's need.

Warn them before the end. Say that the truth-telling will carry on in their lives but that this chapter of it is drawing to a close, and

invite anybody who has not yet entered and wants to. Somebody who has spent forty minutes circling the decision needs that door held open.

Draw it to a close at ninety minutes even with a large group. People are riveted and do not notice how tired they are becoming until afterwards.

CLOSING

Not decoration. This is what makes the ritual a ritual rather than an ordeal.

First, honour what happened. The truth each person spoke, and the respectful support each person gave. Macy puts it in a way I have never been able to improve on: truth-telling is like oxygen. Without it we grow confused and numb. With it, we come into our own authority.

Then name the tantric side again, briefly, pointing to each object as you go — the sorrow spoken over the leaves was love in equal measure; in the fear we heard, we also heard the courage it took; in the anger, a passion for justice; and the empty bowl made space for what is not yet here.

Second time. Same words. They land differently now.

A final *AH*. Then three bows, and say what each is for as it is made:

To the Earth, returning the energy — head and hands on the floor.

To yourself, for having been fully present — hands on the heart.

To each other, for their brave presence and support — palm to palm.

Then let it be. Mingling, conversation, silence, sometimes singing. Let it arise on its own rather than organising it. Rest or journalling helps people absorb what happened, and there should be a break, and then something else together before anybody goes off alone.

FACILITATOR NOTES

Participate. Don't hold aloof. Enter the mandala honestly if something true is there, while keeping an eye on the whole. A facilitator who appears untouched by any of this is not modelling steadiness, they are modelling distance, and the group will calibrate to whichever one you are actually doing.

Intervene rarely. Nearly everything that looks like it needs handling does not.

Read the chapter on strong emotions. Chapter five of *Coming Back to Life* covers this properly and is worth going over before you run this for the first time.

If somebody comes untethered. Rare, but it happens — eyes closed, spiralling somewhere private, no longer with the room. Then you move, gently and definitely. Go to them. Light touch on the arm or back. Invite the breath, especially a long slow out-breath. Bring them to sensation: the soles of the feet on the floor, the weight of the body. Invite them to soothe themselves with their own hands — palm on the chest, arms crossed over. And ask the plain questions that fetch a person back. *Who are you? Where are you right now?*

Adapt the arrangements to the people in front of you. With elderly participants, set the mandala on a table so people can approach it with a stick or a walker or from a wheelchair. Macy notes that in a psychiatric ward the stone and stick were replaced with a vine and a picture, which is a sound instinct anywhere there is risk of self-harm.

And watch for the conditioning in the room. For some people the word *feelings* closes a door before anything starts. Speak about **truth-telling** instead. Same practice, different handle, and it lets in people who would otherwise be standing outside it.

WHAT TO PAIR IT WITH

Open Sentences on Honouring the Pain beforehand, always. The Milling before or after. The Cairn of Mourning as a gentler companion — or as the alternative, if you judge the group is not ready for this.

Movement, meditation or singing either side deepens the embodiment. Journalling afterwards catches what surfaces late, and something usually does.

A LAST WORD ON WHETHER TO RUN IT AT ALL

This asks a great deal of whoever holds it, and the useful question beforehand is not whether the group can handle it. It is whether you can — whether you can sit inside ninety minutes of other people's grief without flinching, without filling the silences, without reaching over to make it better, and without needing anything back from the room.

If the answer is not yet, the Cairn of Mourning will take a group somewhere real and ask less of you while you get there.

STRAND BANK FIELDS

Name: Truth Mandala

Type: WTR

WTR Phase: Honouring the Pain for the World

Journey phase: Threshold / Reclaiming / Initiation

Min time: 90 · **Max time:** 120

Format: Whole group circle, 20–40 (works 12–100; possible with 4)

Care level: Red

Description:

A ritual circle with four objects laid in its quadrants — a stone for fear, dry leaves for sorrow, a thick stick for anger, an empty bowl for emptiness — with a cushion at the centre for whatever fits none of them. Participants enter one at a time, spontaneously, taking up whichever object matches what they carry; they may speak from one quadrant or move between them, hold an object in silence, enter more than once, or not at all. The group's only response is a refrain spoken not in unison: *I hear you*, or *I'm with you*. No cross-talk, no comfort, no advice. The structure removes the reflex that ordinarily closes down honest speech about the state of the world, and so makes something sayable that otherwise cannot be said. The deeper source of each object — sorrow as love, fear as courage, anger as passion for justice, emptiness as space for the new — is named both before the ritual begins and again at its close. Ends with a collective sounding of AH and three bows: to the Earth, to oneself, to each other.

Facilitator notes:

The most demanding practice in the tradition. Requires an experienced facilitator and a group that has already touched its pain for the world, usually through Open Sentences. Allow 20-30 minutes for setup and framing — the framing *is* the container. Keep the central ground entirely clear. Name the tantric side of each object *before* people enter, not only at the close: they need to know the grief is love before they can carry it in. Give permissions explicitly — silence is a complete offering; personal concerns are as welcome as world concerns; first languages welcome; speaking as another being welcome if declared. Instruct the group not to comfort anybody, however kind the impulse: a hand on the shoulder reads as *that's enough now*. The stick is held hard in both hands, not raised or swung. Participate yourself rather than holding aloof. Close at 90 minutes even with large groups — people tire more than they notice. Place near the middle of the day with a break after and another shared activity before anyone leaves. If somebody loses connection with the room: approach, touch lightly, invite a long out-breath, bring them to sensation, ask *who are you, where are you right now*. Adaptations: table rather than floor for limited mobility; soft objects such as a vine and a picture where there is risk of self-harm; use

truth-telling rather than *feelings* where conditioning makes the latter a closed door. Review ch. 5 of *Coming Back to Life* on strong emotions before first running it.

Reflection questions:

What became sayable in there that isn't sayable elsewhere? / What did you hear that you recognised? / What was underneath the thing you carried in?

Pairings: Open Sentences on Honouring Pain, The Milling, Cairn of Mourning, Breathing Through, Gratitude Practice

Credit: Joanna Macy & Molly Brown

Source: Macy, J. & Brown, M.Y. (2014), *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects*, 2nd edition, ch. 7. New Society Publishers. Developed by Macy near Frankfurt, 1990. Full practice text at workthatreconnects.org/resources/truth-mandala — shared open-source with attribution requested.