



Oliver-Smith, Martha. Martha's Mandala. 2015. Spuyten Duyvil, New York.

Martha's Mandala Review

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This story is filled with the charm and nostalgia of a time gone by, a time from the 1920's to the 1950's; but these stories also contain episodes of great suffering and trauma untreated and unacknowledged except through the painting of mandalas which offer calm and solace to the author's grandmother Martha Stingham Bacon (known as Patty) who paints these images and quietly keeps them in a small room in the family home called the Acorns in Peace Dale, RI. At times it is hard to tell who the protagonist in this book is ---Patty, the author Martha Oliver-Smith (named for her grandmother), the mandala itself, or even C. G. Jung whose life and work touched this family in deep ways. From the image and the text we might say that the mandala has an aliveness, a psychoid or "psyche-like" quality that gives it power and a living presence for the grandmother and granddaughter especially through hard times. It is a physical/spiritual touchstone that symbolizes a higher self. (Caption under mandala above: *Martha's Mandala* by Martha Stingham Bacon, ca. 1940)

In 1922, Patty was overcome by a "tidal wave," was hearing voices with wishes to kill her children and was psychiatrically hospitalized. At the time she had three young daughters Martha (called Marnie and the author's mother) who was six, Helen, aged four and Alice was the youngest at age two. In addition, she was caring for her widowed mother and her dependent sister Harriet. Patty's husband Leonard was working as a university professor and he eventually became Pulitzer Prize winning poet in 1940. As reported by the author and from the excerpts of Patty's writings, the psychiatric treatment available at that time did not help. The voices did not stop but neither did her writing and drawing. An introvert, she kept these life-sustaining activities to herself. Leonard, also a writer, was an extravert and the life of the party.

Five years later in 1927, Leonard, too, had a psychological crisis and consulted Jung's partner Toni Woolf, for treatment returning several times over the years to continue analysis. The author reports that her grandparents did a lot of socializing with the Jungs and with Toni Wolf when staying at the Dolder Hotel in Zurich. One wonders why Patty did not also seek analysis and discuss her mandalas with someone.

In the meantime, the children were back at home in Peace Dale, RI at their home the Acorns. It is curious to think about what this time was like for them. Having been parted from their mother physically and probably psychologically in 1922 and then again in 1927, with hindsight and contemporary knowledge, one is left to speculate about the possibility of post-partum psychosis or depression for Patty; something unheard of back then. Psychotherapy, groups and some medicine bring great relief for women who feel that “cracking up” is their responsibility---something that they have caused. So not true! Their hormones and biology are off and the ability to think and reason are not stable. Husbands are at a loss as to what they should do. They, too, become anxious and depressed and these psychological tumults are left unaddressed as too shameful for conversation and are hidden within the family, known to the children most often as implicit, non-verbal body experiences. Let’s remember that earlier in the century, Jung himself was affected by his own mother’s psychotic depression for which she was hospitalized when he was three. As an adult man, he confessed that he associated the word “love” with “distrust” (MDR). There are many intervening variables but this early relational trauma probably had some significant sequelae in how he handled attachments especially with women.

Patty would have been an ideal candidate for Jungian analysis with her journaling, writing and artwork. According the author:

Over time the voices receded, though never completely. In later years, Patty Bacon confided only to her journal that one voice always lingered. She learned to understand the voice, the one she recognized as her “self” and which she referred to as her “Friend in the Unconscious”...Though it was my grandmother who was truly ill, ironically she never truly had the benefit of Jungian analysis. (Martha Oliver-Smith 2015, p.37)

It is remarkable that she could connect with the “Self” as a central, curative axis without formal analysis. However, exposure to her extraverted husband’s knowledge and understanding of Jungian ideas seemed to help enormously. Apparently, there was a natural fit between her sensitive psyche and keen intelligence with what her husband

and Jung were discussing and generating. We could guess that she had a natural draw to the health oriented aspects of life force energy.

There is documentation that Patty did have some correspondence with Jung and sent him some mandalas. In 1936 (probably in conjunction with Jung's receiving a degree from Harvard), he and Emma visited the Acorns and Patty had a show of her work. Unfortunately, the author could find no journal entries about this experience. What a shame! In an attempt to fill in the gap for what may have transpired during this visit, the author develops her own fictional view. In 1982, Stephen Greenblatt coined the term "new historicism" where he brings together a literary perspective with an historical one. In his 2012 book about Shakespeare called *Will in the World*, Greenblatt employed this method of mixing fact and fiction and was met with complicated and controversial reviews. Hillary Mantel wrote *Wolf Hall* 2009 and *Bring Up the Bodies* in 2012 and was awarded the Booker Prize for both; she artfully develops an engaging admixture of the history Cromwell and Henry the VIII with her own imaginings of the relationships of the historical figures. Greenblatt, Mantel and many others use this method to good effect conveying a sense of what "may" have happened with a tale well told. However, the film "A Dangerous Method" which presents the Jung/Spielrein spanking scenes as fact, leaves many viewers believing or confused about what actually happened.

I come around again and ask whose story is being told in this book? The focus is on mother and granddaughter but what happened to Marne, the author's mother? There are sections with fictional material added and sections where factual material is not included. Nonetheless, as a Jungian analyst interested in history, I found the book to be highly engaging and readable. It is an interesting story about a sophisticated, educated, talented family who had some fascinating contacts with Jung and his circle. I just wish more had been documented about these interactions.

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