

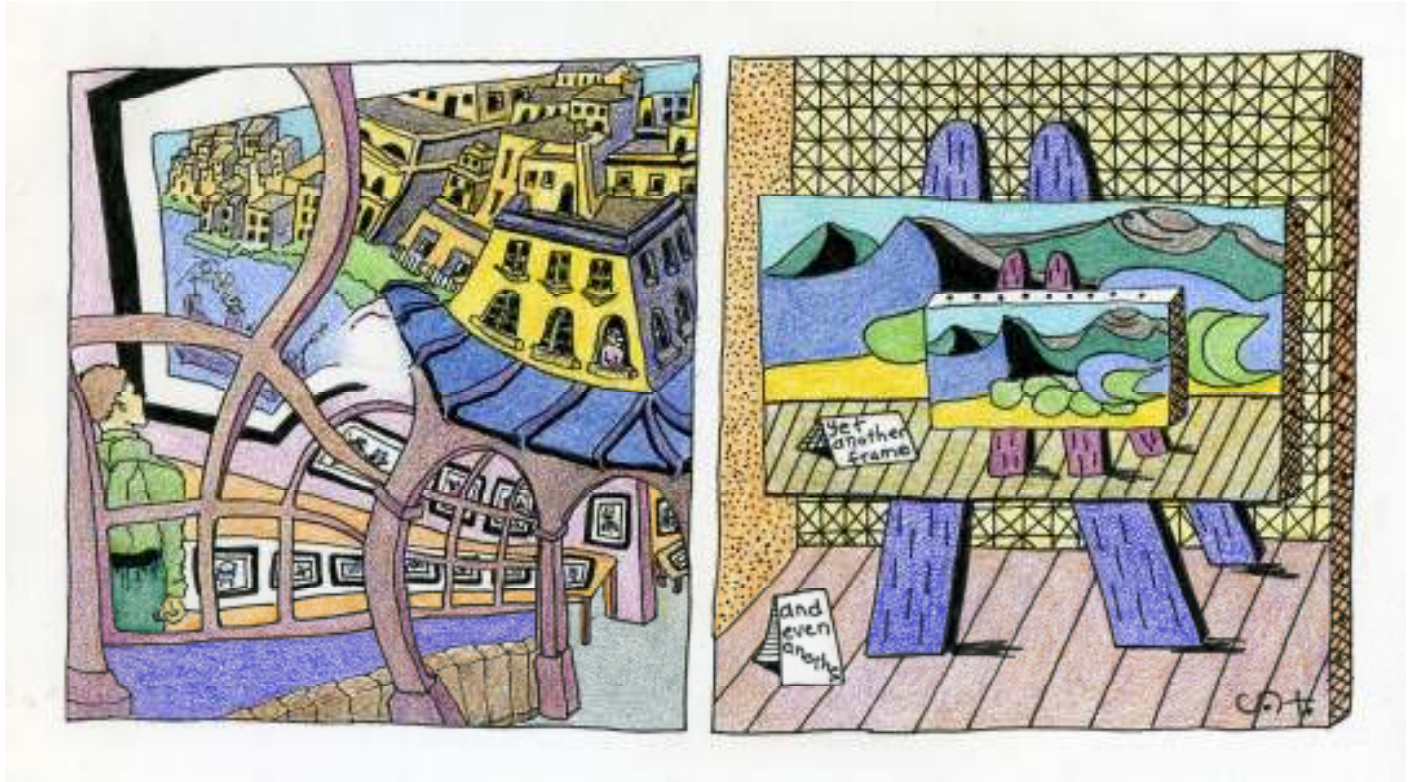
**Self-Reflections about  
Creativity**  
**Through the Production of  
*Truly Mindful Coloring***

**By Terry Marks-Tarlow**



For much of my life, I have concerned myself with the question, “What does it mean to be creative?” When young, I thought being creative meant having raw talent, a view that automatically disqualified me from the ranks. I would peer at the ever-much more elegantly crafted artwork of my elementary school classmates in despair. In fact, this view caused me to set art aside art-making for many decades.

In my 30’s, I returned to drawing by finding a clever way to work around the talent issue. I began drawing in service of communication. In other words, I started to illustrate the concepts I was developing in the books I was writing. This device became especially important in my first psychotherapy book, *Psyche’s Veil*, which applies nonlinear science to clinical practice. Because I was working with such novel concepts, I had to make my own illustrations to facilitate visualizing them. Here is an example from that book that illustrates two forms of self-reference, continuous (Escher on the left) and discrete (Hockney on the right).



Escher

Hockney

During my current stage of life, I have a different view of creativity than talent. I have also gone from focusing on product to focusing on embodied process. I recognize a crucial way that mindfulness and creativity dovetail, as initially inspired by the work of Ellen Langer at Harvard. Langer is both a psychologist as well as an artist, plus an early proponent of mindfulness. Unlike John Kabat-Zinn, another early Buddhist-informed practitioner who views mindfulness as the capacity for present-centered awareness, Langer views mindfulness as the capacity to perceive novelty. From the embodied position of my yoga practice of 40+ years, I completely endorse Langer's perspective. After tens of thousands of sun salutations, the art of the yoga involves making the next sun salutation completely new and distinct from all others.

I now believe in two contrasting ways to approach the essence of creativity. The first implicates traditional productions like painting and sculpture and other works of art, which is all about creative expression, whether as meaningful, novel, or useful product or as enjoyable, productive, or otherwise meaningful process. A second, contrasting way to understand the essence of creativity revolves around creative perception. This approach fits Langer's notion of mindfulness as the perception of novelty. It also fits the kind of creativity involved in being a spectator who fully experiences and deeply appreciates a piece of someone else's art. For example, in literature, to deeply enter into a great piece of fiction is in essence to co-create and re-create the book. In this more receptive sense, creativity emerges in the eyes of the perceiver.

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From an expanded sense of creativity, I suggest that all psychotherapists, whether engaged in somatic work or in traditional talk therapy, are simultaneously artists, and that all effective psychotherapy is co-creative by its very nature. The art of psychotherapy is in the precise timing and subtle choices of what gets said or how touch is delivered. From the perceptual side, psychotherapists pick up on tiny cues that

allow synchronous rhythms of body, mind, heart and soul. Likewise, it is a creative act to encourage, inspire, and welcome in emergent products from the relational unconscious, such as images, symbols, metaphors, or dreams that guide, light, or unblock the path forward. For example, the Wild Woman drawing above (first appearing in *Psyche's Veil*) came from the spontaneous imagery of a patient who felt her aliveness trapped within her body.

Most recently, to innovate a new genre of adult coloring book has, for me, morphed into a creative act of sheer joy, which allowed me to take a walk down memory lane. I began by collecting drawings appearing in my three previous books: *Psyche's Veil*, *Clinical Intuition in Psychotherapy* and *Awakening Clinical Intuition*. To drain out the color on the computer and clean up the lines from noisy backgrounds was thoroughly captivating, much in the way that coloring itself can be. I invented methods to use photographs from trips, including people and artifacts from other cultures. For example, I drew the image below from a photograph of a sculptural relief of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.



Little did I realize how much of my own life and wisdom I had collected in this coloring book until very recently, when I taught a class at Pacifica, a Jungian graduate school in Santa Barbara. I showed the contents of the coloring book to the class, and one student remarked, "This is your Red Book!" To have my little coloring book compared to Jung's *Opus Magnus* from which his ideas sprung was unbelievably thrilling! Only then did I become aware of how archetypal many of the images are. I suppose I instinctively gravitated towards meaningful images in my desire to touch the soul and open up channels of self-awareness.

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Here is a coloring book image that appears to touch many people deeply, called Tree of Life.



While creating *Truly Mindful Coloring*, I had a number of insights. For example, I used to perceive a cavernous divide between creating from the inside-out, e.g., fashioning an idea in imagination that then becomes materialized in the outside world versus operating from the outside-in, as in rendering objects and people from life or

photographs, which is the way I personally started out as an artist. I used to glorify the inside-out direction to elevate imagination as a “higher” kind of creativity, while devaluing my own outside-in process as mere technical skill, not much higher than being a copy-cat of reality.

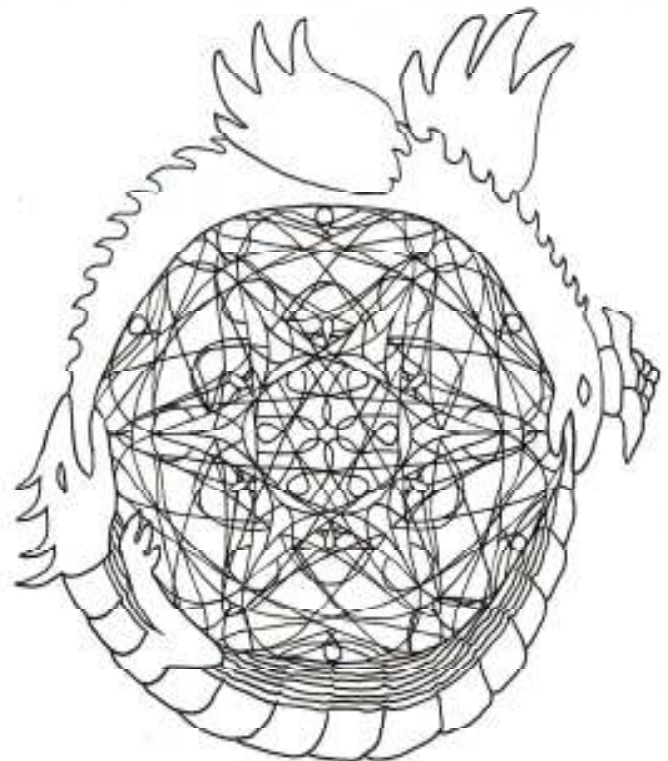
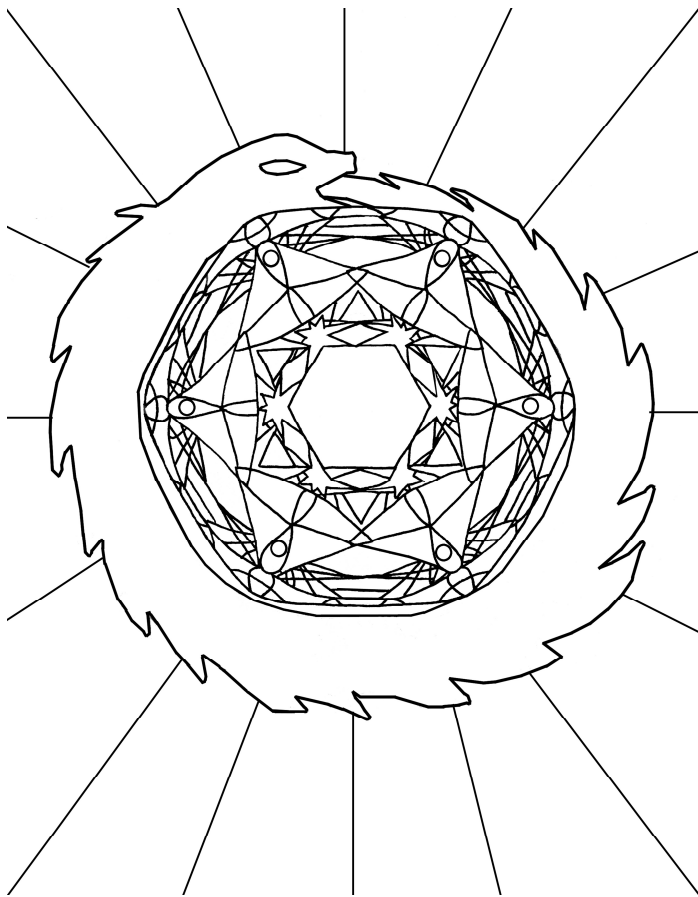
Through creating *Truly Mindful Coloring*, I no longer perceive a big difference between these two directions of inside out versus outside in. Every work of art requires some degree of shuttling between inner and outer faculties. Sometimes this means scrolling through the art of others to borrow certain elements. In this respect, the line between stealing and inventing becomes thin indeed! I'm reminded of Picasso's equation of art with theft, or his infamous claim, "Bad artists copy. Good artists steal." From an embodied perspective, I understand the importance of shuttling back and forth between inner and outer faculties through my five day a week ballet classes, where I continually strive to incorporate feedback. Whether originating from the teacher or from a careful look in the mirror, outside in information I gather then allows me to make an inside out adjustment by contracting this or that muscle, extending the line of this or that foot or finger, or otherwise tweaking some area of my body in service of continual improvement.

The kind of creativity that we therapists employ invites continual exchange between inside and outside faculties. Therapists move in a facile, often elegant manner, from introspection to extrospection, from noticing aspects of the other to feeling aspects of our selves, from outside perceiving to inside imagining. I believe imagination is a central aspect of psychotherapy that is highly undervalued and all too often neglected. For example, have you considered the fact that our central tool of empathy is an act of imagination (see *Clinical Intuition in Psychotherapy*, 2012; and *Awakening Clinical Intuition*, 2014)? Empathy begins with acts of perceiving the states of another which then are partially simulated inside our own minds. Imagination is likewise central to our therapeutic ability to retain hope, e.g., that a patient's future could be different and more positive than the negative or traumatic state of the present.

In many respects, the art of incorporating feedback is tantamount to the art of psychotherapy. All therapists continually take information from the outside to let it move us on the inside. Conversely, we also take in information from the inside in order that it may direct our outside movements and interventions. Whether moving from

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the outside in or the inside out, from an archetypal perspective, the circular incorporation of feedback is captured by the image of the Oroboros, the snake that swallows its own tail/ tale, symbol of self-creation and regeneration (see *Psyche's Veil*, 2008). The Oroboros is a great image for improving through incorporating feedback, whether in dance, language, or the acquisition of any complex skill. Within the practice of psychotherapy, the double Oroboros is a wonderful symbol of mutual incorporation of feedback such that interpersonal patterns continually escalate, whether for better or for the worse. Below is my version of the single and double Oroboros that comes from *Truly Mindful Coloring*. Notice how all of the serpents encircle creative chaos.



Through creating this coloring book, I also learned how to experiment with color on the computer by taking an image and playing with various palettes using the paint bucket function in Photoshop. I experimented this way with the Kokopelli, page and liked the result so much, I had it printed on a large size canvas and subsequently had the honor to exhibit and even sell the piece during Mirrors of the Mind 5: The Psychotherapist as Artist.



As the reader can tell by now, I am a huge fan of the intersection of art, psychotherapy, and self-reflection. I poured so much energy, experimentation, and enthusiasm into my new coloring book. I strived to re-invent the genre, both by providing mindfulness content, but also by offering some wide-open spaces for participant self-expression and creativity. Please have a look for yourself. In the process, I hope you will consider possibilities for co-creativity within psychotherapy by offering this resource to your clients.

**Terry Marks-Tarlow** is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Santa Monica, CA since 1985. She specializes in deep transformation as well as creativity and its blocks. Besides being a psychotherapist and drawing, she has practiced and taught yoga over the past 40 years, and she has been studying ballet and jazz for nearly as long. Before becoming a psychologist, she toyed with the idea of becoming an artist. She's never given up this dream. She draws on a regular basis and has written and illustrated four other books. She writes about nonlinear science and the importance of clinical intuition to effective therapy.