

Speaking in Symbols: Healing Dialogues via the MARI® Card Test

by Helene V. Ramos

We swim constantly in a sea of symbols. Language - both written and spoken - is the expression of thought communicated in the symbols we call words. Supplemented by nuances of tone, pitch and vibration (feeling) language is for most of us, the primary means of everyday communication.



Spirals suggest beginnings and the forward movement of energy

Visual symbols can however be even more powerful on a variety of levels. In their directness, simplicity and universality, they connect us viscerally to complicated concept/feeling complexes. The richness of these intricate connections is often held at an unconscious level. Corporations ranging from Nike and Target to the Red Cross and Apple have long known and taken full advantage of our facility to think and make symbolic associations. When the symbols used are universal in nature, they serve as an open doorway to the connection between the subconscious and conscious levels of our awareness.

We can recognize that for as long as humans have attempted to communicate, visual symbols have been part of that process. The universality of certain symbols - if not their precise meaning - has been codified and employed by cultures from early earth-centered societies to those of classical Greece and Asia.

The work of modern symbologists such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell has reshaped understanding of these icons in a psychological and mythic context for the needs of contemporary society. How could the insights of these and other scholars be brought into the modern arena of practical application for purposes of dialogue, assessment and ultimately healing - restoring wholeness?

In 1969 Joan Kellogg, an artist with an interest in Carl Jung's work with the mandala as a reflection of the individual's unconscious,

became intrigued with using these circular drawings as a tool for clinical assessment. She concurrently became involved in the newly emerging field of art therapy and applied her intuitive ability to interpret art and its underlying symbols with practical clinical experience evaluating clients undergoing psychotherapy. The result of these many experiential streams was her professional development as a registered art therapist and the crystallization of her work in the creation of the Joan Kellogg Mandala Card Test - now the MARI Card Test. The test is used as an assessment and evaluation tool for those undergoing physiological and/or psychological change.

The elegance of using the MARI Card Test is that it takes full advantage of the innate human capacity to create and respond to symbols as a doorway to the level of awareness below the conscious mind. This makes interaction possible with a variety of clients and allows the process of change to become richer and more productive. You can, for instance, work with a client with limited verbal skills or with someone who is extremely withdrawn.

Or, you could communicate more easily with a client who is uncertain about their needs, or work with greater depth in the early stages of therapy.

The test is simple to administer and enjoyable to take. The client chooses 6 of the 39 symbol cards that they instinctively like and one card they don't. Then, from a selection of 47 color cards, they instinctively match the "right" color to each of the chosen symbols. The colors represent the entire spectrum of hues from jewel tones and pastels to neutrals, dark colors and sparkles.

Analysis begins as the MARI practitioner places the cards selected by the client in their proper place on the "Great Round" - a 13-segment diagram representing stages in the human life and developmental cycles. The "round" then becomes a mandala representing the client's inner knowing and consciousness.

Interpreting the symbol/color

combination provides insights into the literal or symbolic meanings and emotional content of the client's situation on a variety of levels. These insights can be useful in evaluating the client state, establishing the direction of therapeutic emphasis, tracking the client progress and reinforcing that progress.

It's important to understand that the benefit of the skillful use of MARI is as a tool to increase comprehension - not as a predictor developed in isolation. Informed by the analysis, the practitioner can ask insightful questions that lead to a clarifying conversation about general personality characteristics, exploration of response patterns and insight into hidden issues. In addition to taking the card test, asking the client to draw and title a mandala and analyzing it will provide a more detailed snapshot of their current state.



The Rose window can speak to the importance of community or crystalization into static forms.

MARI takes a positive, strength-based approach where the client is engaged and actually empowered to provide their own guidance for any issue being examined. At the end of the session, the client is asked to think of an issue that is critical in their life. They allow themselves to be intuitively drawn to one or two symbols and colors that seem to represent guidance for the issue. The cards then provide the ideal insight or solution for the individual because the solution comes from their own intuitive

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wisdom. Prior to the next session, they can then interact with the symbols in a variety of ways limited only by their and the practitioner's imaginations. This moves the change process forward at an accelerated pace.



The equal-armed cross suggests the emergence of the individual into the outer world.

In addition to addressing concerns of pathological behavior, the MARI® also delves into spiritual concerns as well as religious, spiritual, and deeply mystical orientations and issues. This is particularly helpful because of MARI's visual nature, which enables a client to imagine more concretely these intangibles and their possible solutions. Deep core beliefs - such as feeling abandoned or punished by Source - or archetypal associations - such as a Wounded Healer, Divine Fool or Great Mother - are represented visually by the symbols and become a portal into deeper understanding.

In its depth and complexity, the MARI card test reflects the many facets of the individual which makes this evaluation system a perfect fit with today's more positive psychological approaches.

Helene has a private practice in downtown Charlottesville. She specializes in providing support to those who are actively engaged with change in their lives - particularly on a spiritual level. In addition to evaluation using the MARI card system, she is also skilled in working with intuitive energy medicine, engaging the subconscious through the use of hypnosis, working with dreams as a pathway to healing and facilitating inner creative dialogues via mandala, tarot and sacred ritual.

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