

FIFTY-TWO FLOWER MANDALAS



DAVID J. BOOKBINDER

If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change.

- *Jack Kornfield*

Nobody sees a flower – really – it is so small it takes time – we haven't time – and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.

- *Georgia O'Keeffe*

What does seeing clearly mean? It doesn't mean that you look at something and analyze it, noting all its composite parts; no. When you see clearly, when you look at a flower and really see it, the flower sees you. It's not that the flower has eyes, of course. It's that the flower is no longer just a flower, and you are no longer just you.

- *Maurine Stuart*

The earth laughs in flowers.

- *e. e. cummings*

FIFTY-TWO FLOWER MANDALAS

A MEDITATION

By David J. Bookbinder



Fifty-Two Flower Mandalas

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David J. Bookbinder, LMHC
85 Constitution Lane
Danvers, MA 01923

Email: david@davidbookbinder.com
Phone: 978-395-1292

Websites:

davidbookbinder.com

flowermandalas.org

beliefnet.com/columnists/flowermandalas

[facebook.com/flowermandalas](https://www.facebook.com/flowermandalas)

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Acceptance	3
2. Action	7
3. Anger	11
4. Atonement	15
5. Awareness	19
6. Balance	23
7. Caring	27
8. Change	31
9. Choice	35
10. Compassion	39
11. Connection	43
12. Courage	47
13. Curiosity	51
14. Desire	55
15. Dreams	59
16. Failure	63
17. Faith	67
18. Fear	71
19. Forgiveness	75
20. Generosity	79
21. Grace	83
22. Gratitude	89
23. Healing	93
24. Hope	97
25. Humor	101
26. Illumination	105

27. Independence	111
28. Joy	115
29. Justice	119
30. Listening	125
31. Longing	129
32. Love	133
33. Miracles	137
34. Mistakes	141
35. Needs	145
36. Path	149
37. Patience	153
38. Perception	157
39. Perfection	161
40. Perseverance	165
41. Possibility	169
42. Purpose	173
43. Resilience	177
44. Risk	181
45. Self Love	185
46. Silence	189
47. Stillness	193
48. Suffering	197
49. Trust	201
50. Uncertainty	205
51. Uniqueness	209
52. Will	213
Appendices	217

INTRODUCTION

Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.
- Carl Jung

Fifty-Two Flower Mandalas came about because my numbers were in alignment. When I began it, I'd just turned 60, was almost 20 years out from a life-altering event, and had been a psychotherapist for nearly 10 years. My intention was to distill into one volume what I'd gleaned from these experiences. As often happens with art, creating it brought about something more.

The path to the Flower Mandalas themselves goes back to 1993, when a series of medical errors nearly took my life. At the time I was an English grad student at the University at Albany. What happened in a hospital there, which included a near-death experience, divided my life into two parts: who I had been and who I was becoming. To paraphrase the Grateful Dead, it's been a long, strange trip since then.

Ten years later, in 2003, I was still sorting out who that second David was. I was living in Gloucester, MA, and walked Good Harbor beach nearly every evening, usually at around sunset. It had been almost 25 years since I'd done any serious photography, but I found myself yearning to record the patterns of color and light I saw there, so I bought a digital camera and took it with me on my walks.

I found this round of picture-taking to be a much different experience than the one I'd had back in the '70s, when I was shooting street scenes in Manhattan and Brooklyn in harsh, grainy black-and-white. Then, I'd felt like a thief, grabbing and hoarding moments of unsuspecting people's lives. Now, I felt more like a painter, taking in and reflecting on the slowly shifting landscape of light. I started carrying a camera nearly everywhere I went.

Because the image quality of early digital cameras was not up to what I was used to seeing with 35mm film, I taught myself how to manipulate images on my computer, hoping to improve them. I soon realized that once a file was on my hard drive, I could do anything I wanted with it.

Experimentally, I used an image editing program to transform photos of the clouds I'd been shooting into mandala-like images. I enjoyed both the effect and the process and tried it on other images – rocks, wood, textures. Then, I wondered what would happen if I “mandalaized” something that was already mandala-like and tried the technique on a

photo of a dandelion seedhead. That impulse led to my first Flower Mandala, which accompanies the essay “Acceptance.”

Each of the Flower Mandalas is derived from a flower snapshot I took as I walked through various neighborhoods, visited botanical gardens and flower shops, and spotted interesting flowers in the homes and gardens of people I knew. The process of going from flower photograph to finished mandala can take anywhere from a few hours in a single session to a sequence of multi-hour sessions spread out over two or three months. Working on the images at the pixel level feels like I'm reacquainting myself with the world I saw through magnifying glasses and microscopes as a boy, what William Blake called the “minute particulars.” At its best, the experience is a meditation.

I began making these mandalas at a time of personal turbulence. My choice of the hexagram as the underlying shape was initially subconscious, but I don't believe it was accidental. Like the mandala form itself, the hexagram appears in the art of many cultures throughout world history. Composed of two overlapping triangles, it represents the reconciliation of opposites: male/female, fire/water, macrocosm/microcosm, as above / so below, God and man. Their combination symbolizes unity and harmony – qualities I needed then, and took wherever I could find them. That the hexagram is also called the Star of David was not lost on me.

Early in the process of creating the Flower Mandalas, I met with a painter who had been making mandalas for years. She suggested that each of my mandalas was trying to tell me something. “Listen to what they're saying,” she advised. So I hung prints around my apartment and made them the digital wallpaper on my computer desktop.

My painter friend was right. I discovered that looking at these images completed a loop: The mandala-making process distilled a feeling just below my awareness into something more distinctly felt, and looking at the completed mandala brought that enhanced feeling back into me, purified and amplified. With each iteration of the creating/receiving cycle, I felt a little more whole. The Flower Mandalas were more than merely another way to tinker with images. They were part of a continuing reintegration process that helped remedy the shattering aspects of my brush with death and its consequences. Listening to what they were telling me helped put the pieces of Humpty Dumpty back together again, a process essential to my later becoming a psychotherapist.

A year or two later, I began to think about a weekly meditation book that matched Flower Mandalas with a concept and a relevant, meditative quotation. I briefly looked at preexisting symbolic significances for flowers, such as the Chinese and 19th century British and American languages of flowers, but I didn't resonate with them, so I went with my own associations. The process of matching Flower Mandalas to concepts was subjective and intuitive. Sometimes a mandala led me to a matching concept, and sometimes a concept led me to a matching mandala.

The quotations came to me in a similarly subjective manner. Many of them were pivotal at some point in my life and helped to initiate a permanent change in perspective. Others I extracted from the writings of authors I've long admired. A few I discovered only after I started this book, the quotes coming to me in chance comments, something I happened to be reading, or Internet quotation sites.

Once I matched images and quotes, I realized that I, too, had something to say about these concepts. The essays in this book have been a way to discover what I feel and think. I began each with a brain dump quickly poured out onto a blank screen. Then, as I wrote and rewrote, the real knowing began, with each pass through the text homing in on what was there to express.

The essays have continued an integrating process that began in the first moments following my near-death experience. "Acceptance" is chapter one because acceptance initiated a transformational shift – accepting that the path I'd been on as an English graduate student and aspiring fiction writer, although I'd been on it a very long time, was no longer my path, and that I had to embrace the one I was on now. The remaining topics are in alphabetical order, the order in which I wrote them.

The structure of this book reflects how I experience internal change. Most of my major shifts in perspective began in a single moment, but it has taken a lifetime to turn insights into lasting alterations of thought, feeling, and action. The instantaneity of clicking a shutter, represented here by the Flower Mandala images, reflects the felt experience of insight. The linear flow of reading and writing, represented here by the quotations and essays, reflects the necessity of walking through time in order to fully enact new ways of being.

Two years after my near-death experience, I was in a

support group for people who had survived near-death. I was still finding my way back into this world, and although I believed I had returned from the edge with something of value, I was also profoundly disoriented. Responding to my confusion, one of the group members made a wide half-circle gesture with his arm and said, "David, I think you're one of those people who has to take the long way 'round." He paused, his arm fully outstretched. "But when you get there," he said, closing his hand into a fist and pulling it to his chest, "it'll be important."

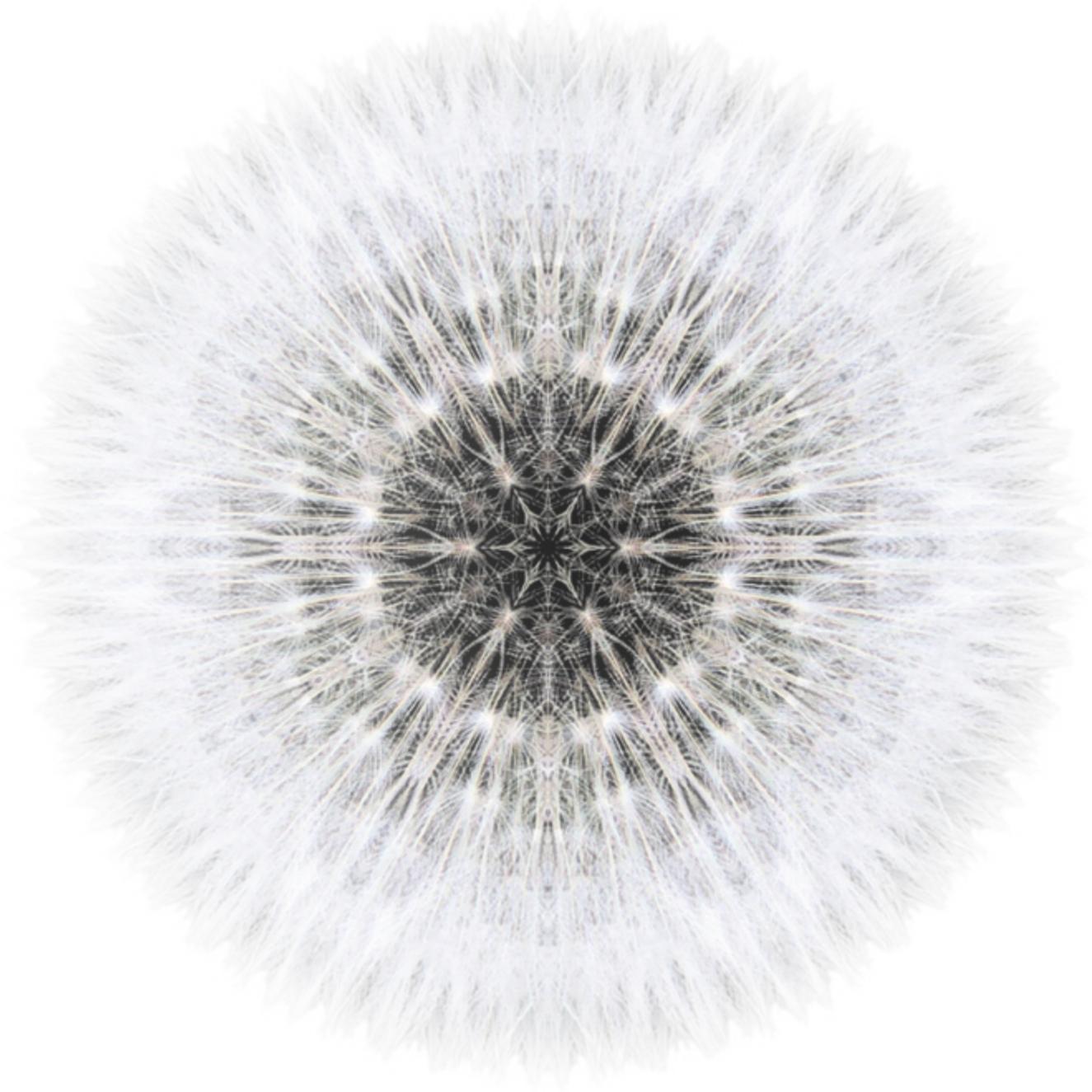
What I do now as an artist, writer, and therapist does feel important. Through these skills, I hope to render a boon that, had I not taken that long, strange trip, I would never have been able to deliver.

Carl Jung, one of the fathers of modern psychology, believed mandalas are a pathway to the essential Self and used them with his patients and in his own personal transformation. In this book, I hope to carry on Jung's tradition of using art as a means for healing and personal growth – the primary purposes it has served for me.

- David J. Bookbinder

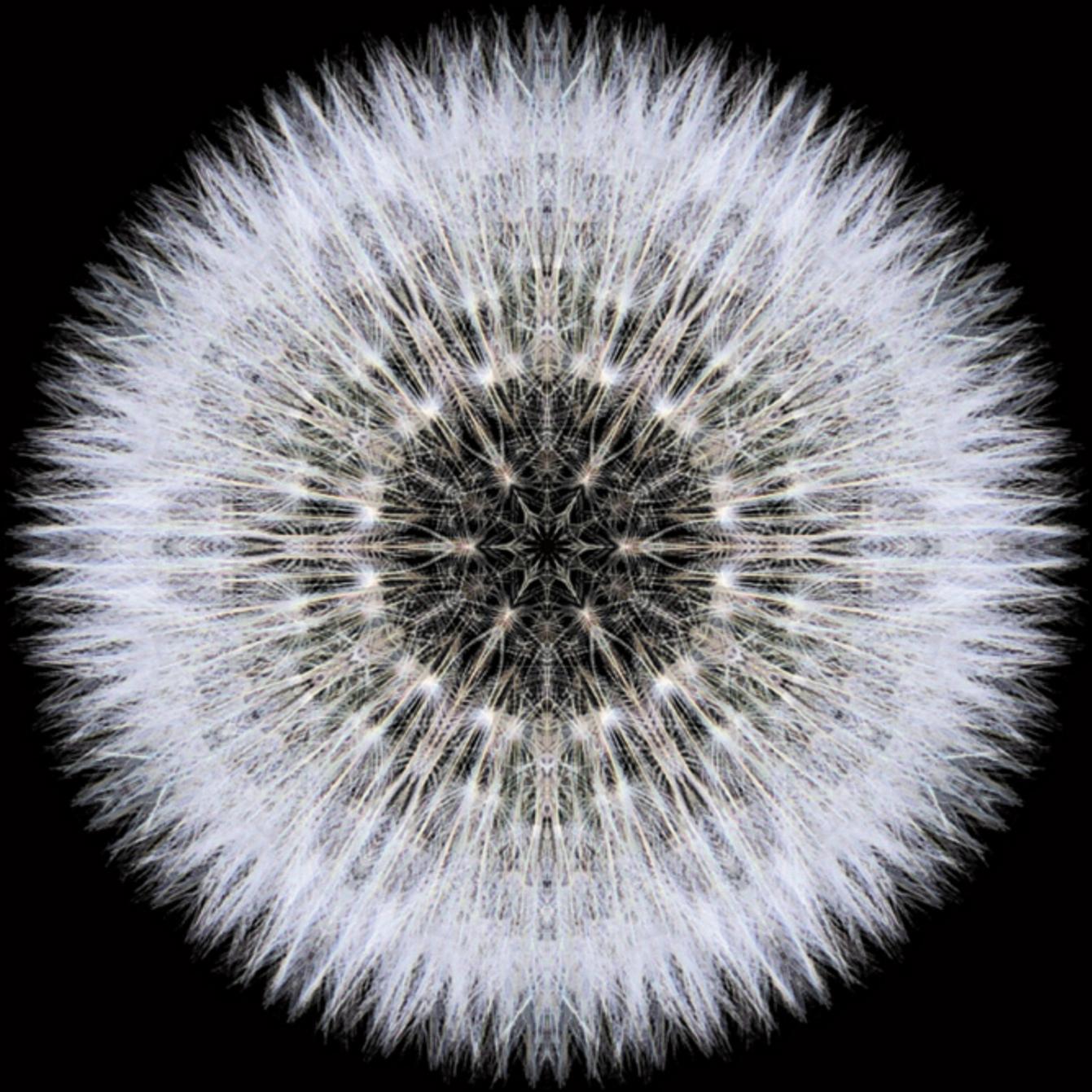


1. ACCEPTANCE



It's all part of it, man.

- Jerry Garcia



Dandelion Head

ACCEPTANCE: IT'S ALREADY THERE

My path to acceptance has been mainly through loss: lost career opportunities, relationships, health and, nearly, the loss of my life. Acceptance has come with the recognition that each loss has also been an opening.

A major turning point occurred several years ago. At that time I was bleeding internally and before I noticed any symptoms, I had already lost about 25% of my blood supply. Though less drastic than a brush with death a few years before, this situation recalled the terror of that time. I grew steadily weaker and underwent a series of increasingly invasive tests, but no diagnosis or treatment emerged. I consulted alternative healers and frantically scanned the Internet. I imagined fatal outcomes. And then one day I stopped fretting.

A Buddhist friend had given me this prayer, with instructions to recite it often, without judgment:

Please grant me enough wisdom and courage to be free from delusion. If I am supposed to get sick, let me get sick, and I'll be happy. May this sickness purify my negative karma and the sickness of all sentient beings. If I am supposed to be healed, let all my sickness and confusion be healed, and I'll be happy. May all sentient beings be healed and filled with happiness. If I am supposed to die, let me die, and I'll be happy. May all the delusion and the causes of suffering of sentient beings die. If I am supposed to live a long life, let me live a long life, and I'll be happy. May my life be meaningful in service to sentient beings. If my life is to be cut short, let it be cut short, and I'll be happy. May I and all others be free from attachment and aversion.

At first, welcoming disease or death scared me even more, but with each recitation, I grew calmer. While I waited for test results, I began to have a different relationship with time. Whether I would live or die, whether I would heal by myself, with interventions, or not at all, was already out there in my future, waiting for me to arrive. I didn't have to plan. I didn't have to do anything differently. I just had to move through time, making the best choices I could, until my fate became clear. I stopped looking things up on the

Internet and returned to my work as a therapist.

That moment of acceptance was liberating. Since then, I have been increasingly able to generalize the process. It's all, already, there. I don't need to fret. I don't need to push. I just need to live my life to the best of my ability and, of the infinite possible futures, I will inevitably arrive at the one that is mine.

If there is one main factor that divides those of us who do not change from those who do, I think it is acceptance: of who we are, how we got to where we are, and that we – and only we – have the power to free ourselves.

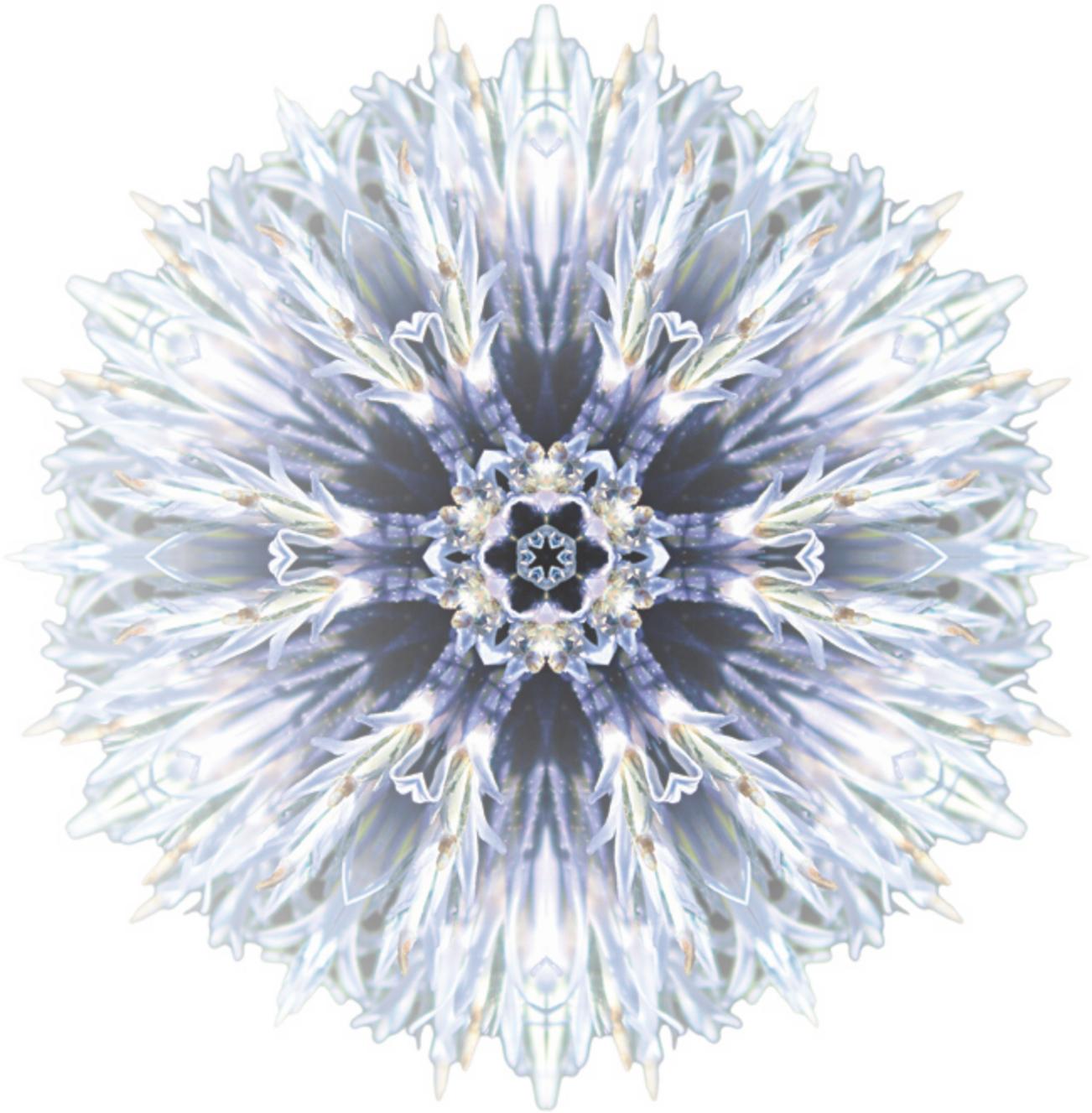
Acceptance is being who we are, in each succession of present moments, swayed neither by avoiding what we fear nor by clinging to what we think we can't live without. In the absence of acceptance, there can be no forward movement. The hidden patterns that create clinging attachment and fearful aversion take over, repeating themselves in our minds, feelings, behaviors, and relationships. We grow older, and the external circumstances of our lives change, but inside it's, as the Talking Heads put it, "the same as it ever was, same as it ever was, same as it ever was."

Acceptance is the door that closes one life chapter and allows another to open. Acceptance is the last of Elizabeth Kubler Ross's five stages of loss and a necessary precursor to moving on from mourning. Acceptance is the first of the 12 steps in addiction recovery programs and essential to beginning a sober life. Acceptance of self, and of responsibility for change, is the start of true recovery from the many unhappinesses that may come our way. Acceptance can be painful, but it is a pain that unburdens. In difficult circumstances, acceptance is the thing most of us try hardest to sidestep – and then try even harder to achieve. In its simplest form, acceptance is saying to ourselves, "Although I may be suffering, I can be content now. Yes, there are things I would like to change, and when I change them my life may have more ease, but I can already be content with my current circumstances."

Accepting our real state, no matter what it is, begins the shift from victim – of external circumstances, of thoughts and feelings, of physical challenges, of past injuries – to victor.

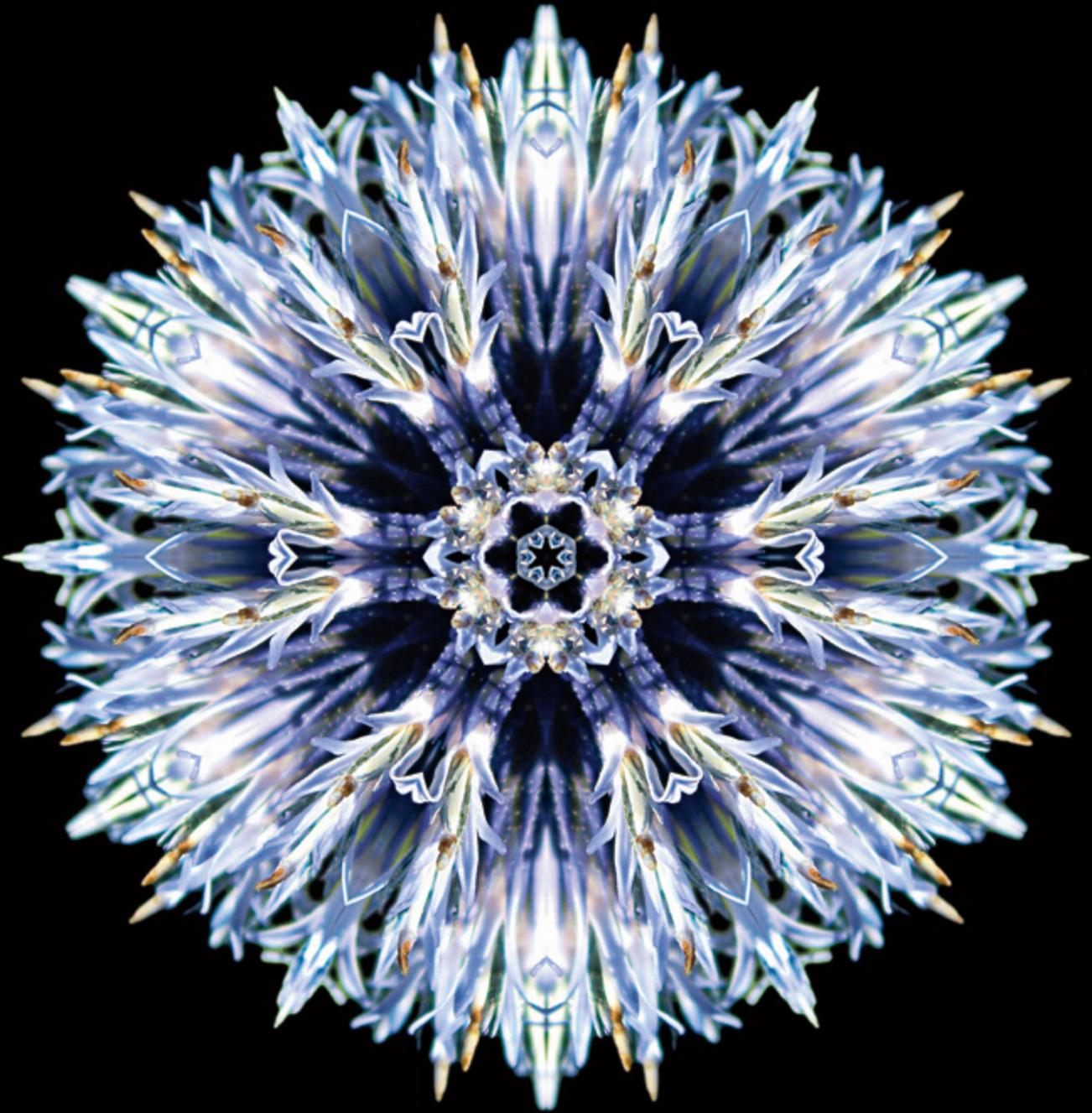


2. ACTION



Actions speak louder than words.

- *Unknown*



Blue Globe Thistle

ACTION: SOMETIMES INSIGHT IS THE LAST DEFENSE

At times I feel like a Sherlock Holmes of the mind, with each of my clients the faithful and resourceful Watson of his or her own unsolved mystery.

A Holmes-like insight is the province of traditional psychotherapy, and it is often a helpful thing. Insight can clarify the causes of anxiety or depression, relieve guilt and shame, explicate the roots of trauma, and point the way to new and better ways to live. But insight is seldom enough to effect lasting change; as one of my former professors, Leroy Kelley, remarked, “Sometimes insight is the last defense.”

In therapy, as in life, actions are more powerful than words. Identifying dysfunctional patterns, self-sabotaging thoughts, and triggered feelings that keep us prisoners of our problems is an important, even vital, preparatory step to change, but it is never enough. For significant growth to occur, we need, also, to change what we do.

Psychologist Jim Grant envisions our patterned thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as akin to a Spell that can lead us to act in ritualized, self-defeating ways. To break the Spell, we need to change our actions. Even a slight change in an old pattern of behavior introduces something new to the equation. It opens the way for future growth that no amount of additional insight, by itself, can create.

For example, addicts typically follow a small but compelling set of commands that perpetuate addictive behavior, such as: “Once I get the idea in my head, I have to get high,” or “If I’m around it, I have to do it,” or “Getting high is the only thing I look forward to.” In therapy, addict clients can learn to identify triggers, challenge their addiction-related thoughts, and work through the feelings and experiences that led them into addiction. But to break the addiction Spell, they also have to *act* differently. They have to change their relationships to friends and family, employment, and community; to avoid situations that tempt them to use; to do new things instead of getting high. In the beginning of their Spell-breaking journey, they have to act *as if* they are through with addiction, “faking it till they make it,” even when every conscious thought and habituated feeling is screaming to them to use. They must, to paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, do the thing they think they cannot do.

What is true for addiction applies to any of the maladies that bring people to therapy. Each of us has our own patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior, and each requires not just insights – words and ideas – but also *actions* to break the

cycle and create new, more fulfilling ways to be in the world.

I have been drawn to schools of therapy that encourage action. But psychotherapy is not the only way to break a Spell. All that’s needed is a practice that allows us to recognize our self-defeating patterns, to identify what they want us to do, and to choose, through whatever means are available to us, to do otherwise.

I frequently give clients this short poem by Portia Nelson, “An Autobiography in Five Short Chapters,” to encourage them to act differently. Maybe you, too, will find it helpful. I have.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE SHORT CHAPTERS

by Portia Nelson

Chapter I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am hopeless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I **pretend** I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in this same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I **see** it there.
I still fall in... it's a habit... but,
my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is **my** fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.



3. ANGER



Treat your anger with the utmost respect and tenderness,
for it is no other than yourself.

- *Thich Nhat Hanh*



Pale Yellow Gerbera Daisy

ANGER: HEAVEN AND HELL

As I emerged from a childhood depression, my first strong emotion was anger. I remember listening to Jimi Hendrix, loud, a foot away from the speakers so that the music rocked my entire body, feeling almost grateful for the Vietnam War because it gave me something to focus my anger on. Anger was energy, and at that time it may even have been life-saving, though looking back, I see that it was also imprisoning.

That is the nature of anger. Anger is difficult.

Many of us act out anger to “make the other person feel the way I do.” But even if we accomplish that goal, instead of the understanding we crave, a mutually damaging struggle usually ensues.

Reenacting anger is portrayed as an alternative. In the movie *Analyze This*, Billy Crystal plays a psychiatrist who tells Robert De Niro, his mobster patient, to “just hit the pillow” when he’s angry. De Niro pulls out his pistol and fires several rounds into the pillow on Crystal’s office chair. Crystal pauses, smiles uneasily, then asks, “Feel better?” De Niro shrugs. “Yeah, I do,” he says. Hitting the pillow *is* preferable to hitting a person. But although letting off steam can help us feel better momentarily, it can also amplify anger and create further barriers to its resolution.

Suppression – holding anger in, “biting your tongue,” “sucking it up” – also has its costs. Anger turned inward leads to depression, builds walls between people, promotes passive aggression, or explosively surfaces elsewhere.

So what *can* we do with our anger?

We can, as Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, relate to it as if it were a baby in distress, crying for help. Once I asked an eight-year-old boy who was often murderously enraged at his mother how he would treat this anger if it were a baby crying. “I’d pick it up and see if it wanted to be held.” And if it still cried? “I’d try giving it a bottle.” And if that didn’t work? “I’d see if it had a poopy diaper.” To deal with our anger, we need to find out if it needs to be held, fed, or has a poopy diaper. Then we can give it the attention it requires. Only then can we safely bring our grievances to those with whom we are angry.

In my therapy practice, I use a technique developed by couples counselor Harville Hendrix to help people with the crying babies of their anger. At the beginning of a couples or parent/child session, I explain that here, they can each fully express their anger, but instead of going back and

forth, arguing as they usually do, they’ll take turns: One person will speak while the other listens actively, and then they will reverse roles.

I ask the first listener to be ready to hear what the first speaker says without reacting, withdrawing, or defending, even when something feels hurtful or sounds “wrong.” Then we begin. The first speaker tells his or her story and the listener mirrors it, one chunk at a time, to make sure he or she “got” it. This process continues until all the important parts of the story have been heard, mirrored, and understood. Then, the listener summarizes it all, making a kind of intellectual sense of it: “So, now that I hear how you experienced what I did/said, I can understand why you’re angry.” Often, the listener also empathizes: “In your shoes, I’d be angry, too.” Sometimes an apology follows: “I’m sorry I hurt you. I didn’t mean to. I don’t want to cause you pain.” Tears may flow. Something has shifted.

After the speaker has been heard, understood, and empathized with, listener and speaker change roles. The process ends when each party has both spoken and been heard. At that point, reconciliation often begins. Over time, this speaking/hearing process can create a durable container to hold the sometimes violent feelings that occur between people. Similar techniques have been used successfully in areas of great historical conflict such as the Middle East, Latin America, and Ireland.

Anger can feel empowering, but only its resolution is a liberation. Author Ken Feit illustrates the difference: “Once a samurai warrior went to a monastery and asked a monk, ‘Can you tell me about heaven and hell?’ The monk answered, ‘I cannot tell you about heaven and hell. You are much too stupid.’ The warrior’s face became contorted with rage. ‘Besides that,’ continued the monk, ‘you are very ugly.’ The warrior gave a scream and raised his sword to strike the monk. ‘That,’ said the monk unflinchingly, ‘is hell.’ The samurai slowly lowered his sword and bowed his head. ‘And that,’ said the monk, ‘is heaven.’”