

SoulCollage®:

An Art Process to Use with Breathwork¹

By Kylea Taylor

Breathwork and SoulCollage® – The First Experiment

I pattered around the kitchen in the big open area of our home making brunch for the small group of participants in an intimate Breathwork workshop. On the other side of the kitchen counter, our dining room table was extended to its fullest range to accommodate the six people. This morning, after their Breathwork experiences of the day before, they were sitting around our table, piled with magazines, cans of rubber cement, and small stacks of pre-cut mat board cards. Following the simple SoulCollage® directions, they were moving around fragments of pictures they had cut from magazines, greeting cards, photos, postcards, catalogues, and calendars, fitting them together in surprising new ways and gluing them down on cards.

The deep, meditative mood in the room contrasted with the chaos of magazines, partially cut-out images, half-glued cards. Jai Uttal chanted *Om Namah Shivaya* from my favorite CD, but the mood was due to more than music. These six people and their two facilitators (Jim and I) had spent the whole previous day together during two Holotropic Breathwork sessions. Emerging from the sessions, the breathers had begun to look through magazines, photos, cards, and calendars to find images to make their first SoulCollage cards. This Sunday morning they had returned to finish their cards. All six were silent, yet in communion at a deeper level than words, each also in creative connection with his or her center. They focused during these morning hours on this new SoulCollage method as a way to express their experiences from Breathwork. As I prepared brunch for these engaged and contented artists, I free-associated my own mental collage to represent the moment. Images flashed through my mind of quilting bees, community gardening, and visits to large, ancient cathedrals and generated emotional flavors of community, music, mood, spirit, growing things, and art.

I had made several dozen SoulCollage cards myself. The SoulCollage process had been so satisfying to me as a way to express the inexpressible, that I decided to make it available to others. As a one-person publisher I had been spending the last three years working on producing the book, *SoulCollage: An Intuitive Collage Process for Individuals and Groups* by Seena B. Frost. I believed the process could be a way for people to do self-exploration in an easy, non-threatening, and fulfilling way. I also had suspected that Breathwork and SoulCollage were meant for each other — that the deep experiences of Breathwork could be well-expressed through SoulCollage and that SoulCollage in turn could help amplify and integrate those experiences. I watched that interlacing that first morning and was relieved and happy to see others finding SoulCollage card-making as compelling and valuable as I had found it.

¹Taylor, K. (2002). SoulCollage®: An art process to use with breathwork. *The Inner Door*. 14(3) 1, 4-5. Santa Cruz CA: Association for Holotropic Breathwork™ International. Published subsequently in Taylor, K. [Ed.] (2003). *Exploring Holotropic Breathwork™*. Santa Cruz, CA: Hanford Mead. 168-172.

After that first SoulCollage success, I introduced it at two other Holotropic Breathwork events this year (2001). One was the *Trauma and Transformation* six-day training module of the Grof Transpersonal Training (GTT) in Sedona, AZ, USA. The other was the two-week *Certification Intensive*, which concludes GTT's nine-week, residential training requirements, and this year was held in Taos Ski Valley, NM, USA. Some of the personal quotes that follow in this article are from participants who attended those two Holotropic Breathwork trainings.

Holotropic Breathwork Has Always Included Art

Holotropic Breathwork has always included an art component to its technique. The Grofs, developers of Holotropic Breathwork, both brought art to the technique. Christina Grof had worked as an art teacher. Her own art had facilitated and illustrated her personal spiritual emergence and recovery from post-traumatic stress. Stan Grof had used Joan Kellogg's technique of "mandala" drawing effectively as part of the research protocol for the therapeutic use of LSD in his early work at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Institute in Baltimore, Maryland. From these separate streams, the Grofs had incorporated their own synthesis of "mandala" art into Holotropic Breathwork.

The Mandala Art of Holotropic Breathwork

At the end of a Holotropic Breathwork session, participants usually are presented with a large circle penciled onto a sheet of drawing paper. Breathers are encouraged to take the opportunity to express themselves in this non-verbal, but concrete way even before the verbal sharing. It is a step towards integrating the intangible, non-ordinary experience of Breathwork back into tangible, ordinary life. Often participants draw something that will remind them of the experiential events of their session. Sometimes what they draw is mysterious. Its meaning, immediately after the session, is as yet unclear. These "mandalas," as we call them are usually descriptive of the process just experienced, but occasionally seem to be predictive of an unfolding process through which more will be revealed at a later time. Sometimes the mandala tells a story. Sometimes it simply expresses emotion by the placement and intensity of colors.

What is SoulCollage®?

SoulCollage is an expressive art process — the process of making a deck of cards, one card at a time, using collage to depict one experience or one kind of energy per card. Many pieces of collage art are rather large and have a multiplicity of messages and images. SoulCollage cards often are more simple. Each 5 inch by 8 inch card in one's growing deck of cards represents a facet of oneself (*e.g.*, a sub-personality, an energy, or an

archetype), which one finds relevant to and operant in one's life. Or, a card can depict an experience (dream or journey) such as a Breathwork journey. Author of *SoulCollage* and developer of the process, Seena B. Frost, says that, "the whole deck reflects the panorama which is 'you' — your SoulCollage."

SoulCollage® and the Therapeutic Objectives of Breathwork

High on the list of therapeutic benefits of Breathwork are connection to self and others and increased trust in one's own creativity and self-expression. Breathwork induces a non-ordinary state of consciousness, which enables one to reconnect with parts of oneself from which one has become disconnected. Because Holotropic Breathwork is done mainly in groups, there is also a benefit of reconnection, even sometimes reconciliation, between people and groups. Participants connect to strangers and see the common thread of humanity through entering the deep well of spirit together. People who know each other deepen their relationships by doing the work together. People who come from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds often find that greater respect and understanding replaces their preconceived and alienating beliefs about differences.

SoulCollage also facilitates connection with self, connection with others, and artistic self-expression, which is a way to make both internal and external connection. SoulCollage provides a means for connection and self-expression immediately following the session, The connection continues as people go on to make, reflect on and use, and share their cards.

Maria Santos-Elgart feels that Breathwork and SoulCollage "complement each other as techniques of self-discovery."

After a Breathwork session, doing a artwork such as SoulCollage helps to center oneself, to ground and have more clarity over the experience, have a better sense of one's feelings — something about our hands bringing form out of the inner to the outer world. SoulCollage helps in the integration of a Holotropic Breathwork session.

Connection with One's Own Experience and Self

Arnold theorizes that the Inner Healer² might more easily use collage as an art process in healing work:

² "The Inner Healer" is a term used in Holotropic Breathwork and could be understood as "Higher Power," "Spirit," "Inner Wisdom," or "Creative Force".

SoulCollage is immediately rewarding because one can select/work with pictures that one is not able to draw. This opens up new inner material and relationships to be expressed. I feel that the “resonance” one experiences when tearing out and working with a picture is an important healing signal from one’s Inner Healer. This contrasts the confusion and uncertainty that a wounded person normally feels.

Jeff was surprised to find images, in a synchronistic way, which perfectly expressed his process:

I had a session that involved raging against the unjust use of force, especially by uniformed people against unarmed folks (especially minorities). I was amazed as I ran through a couple magazines how many pictures seemed relevant. This tended to intensify and somehow affirm that the archetype I encountered is really present. Then arranging the images around a central figure that I drew added to this feeling of having touched on a "real" issue. I've not done any sandbox³ work, but there was a "concrete" quality to even the use of the images that added power to the artwork part of my integration. Also I find that the collage "locks in" the energy and feeling of the session in a way that my other art hasn't, when I later want to review it.

Images Bypass the Mind to Select You

Unlike existent decks of cards (Tarot and others) that one can buy ready-made, the SoulCollage cards contain the personal images *you* select — or the images that select *you* — coming straight through your Soul, bypassing the mind. Author Frost says that the process is a somewhat mysterious one:

You may or may not know what the image you select means at first. You may not know how you will use it and even if you will. What you feel is a power in this particular one. As you leaf through magazines, something stops and holds you, calls to you in a mysterious way. Something goes straight into your soul, bypassing the mind. Something vital in the image stirs you, and your imagination becomes engaged. You tear it out and save it!

³ This is a reference to Dora Kalff’s sandplay therapy which is based on Jungian concepts.

Soulcollage Cards Assist in Amplification of Breathwork Experiences

Holotropic Breathwork facilitators are trained never to analyze someone's experience, but to assist in amplifying that experience by increasing awareness, or suggesting resources through which a participant may discover more facets of the experience and find personal meaning from them. For example, Arnold reports:

SoulCollage has amplified my Breathwork process. For example, I start with a picture of myself as a young child who I experience often in my breathing sessions. As the collage develops, I find myself including pictures of trains, which I loved as a child; and also pictures of other favorite activities such as playing in the sand and swimming. The resulting collage consists of my happy childhood interests that I had forgotten about, but were elicited by the SoulCollage process after a breathing session.

Jeff Bassett, who was certified at the two-week intensive in Taos in July found that,

SoulCollage is as (or more) effective as mandala drawing, for me. I find that selecting images (and just going through a lot of them to pick what has charge) is a very evocative process in itself. It definitely helps "draw out" the core feelings from my session.

Soulcollage Cards May Help Integrate Breathwork Experiences

During the *Trauma and Transformation* module, participants depicted both trauma and transformation on their SoulCollage cards. Arnold describes...

the ability of the SoulCollage to express and help integrate opposites within my psyche. A collage can show pictures of strong animals versus weak animals; or loving people versus killing people. The collage provides a safe container for the expression of conflicting, conscious/unconscious energies within myself. The collage is like a snapshot of a whole gestalt or of a COEX⁴ in one's Unconscious. Looking at a collage over time helps me assimilate and gives me a new perspective on previously separated parts of myself.

⁴ COEX is Grof's theory of Condensed System of Experiences. These are experiences which are related by emotion and/or body sensation and grouped together, even though they may be a grouping that includes biographical, perinatal, and transpersonal types of experiences. More can be found about this in Grof's book, *Beyond the Brain* (1985), published by SUNY Press.

In the final session of a group, the cards provide a focus for individual closure and give a tangible art piece for each to take home from the sessions' experiences. The non-ordinary experience is validated and honored by a creation, which can even be used again and again to contact that personality part or archetypal energy. The final sharing group of the *Trauma and Transformation* module was quite moving as participants passed their stunning cards around the group. Parrish wrote about that final sharing,

I saw the power of the cards when everyone shared their mandalas or SoulCollage cards. The expressiveness and creativity I saw on the cards made me realize just how powerful SoulCollage is and especially after a Breathwork.

Using the Soulcollage Cards in an On-Going Way

Claire Parrish described her enjoyment in having the SoulCollage cards as an on-going project during the module:

The way it was set up in the module I attended was perfect because I could go back and work on my cards at different times of the day and on different days. I did not feel pressured to finish. This would be more difficult in a one-day workshop setting due to the time constraints. I would still want to offer it and perhaps let people take cards home to work on.

The process can continue in an on-going way after a workshop as well. The mat board collage cards are easy to make, keep, transport, and use. They can be easily ordered as pre-cut blank cards [<http://www.hanfordmead.com/orderform.asp>]. Many who make the cards cherish them and delight in sharing them with family, friends, or in groups. They are a lovely and tangible reminder of an important experience.

For some the cards become allies on their own Paths. In drawing the SoulCollage cards from their “deck” in a ceremonial way, they find the cards “speaking” to them about the on-going questions of life. This is one way to remember to listen to guidance from different parts of themselves at crucial times. The book gives examples of how to use SoulCollage cards in this divinatory or therapeutic way, both in groups and individually.

Claire Parrish, who is enrolled in the GTT training, suggests that the SoulCollage process may continue the integration process well after a Breathwork session is finished. Integration is the process of bringing more of one's unconscious material to consciousness and into skillful use in ordinary life and relationship. “Reclaiming” a memory, a dis-

owned emotion, or finding new personal meaning from fitting together things that had formerly been kept separately.

Two days after one of my recent Breathwork sessions, I took a magazine I had and saw some pictures that perfectly illustrated what I was feeling around the Breathwork. I felt driven and made three cards out of those pictures. They express so well what I had been feeling inside for years and could not put into words.

Author Frost describes the divinatory process with SoulCollage thus:

When we draw SoulCollage cards from our deck and lay them out to consult, it is like singing over our own dry bones. The cards represent all the many parts of ourselves, the happy and the sad, the wise and the foolish, the large and the small. When we lay them out and sing over them they come to life and reveal to us the wisdom for which we yearn.

Communion in Doing Collage Work Side by Side

Although a mandala drawing room is usually quiet after Holotropic Breathwork, there seems to be a different quality of mood in a room when people are engaged in the SoulCollage process. Arnold, who was present at both residential modules when we used the process, noted that same quality as I had when we did the first SoulCollage/ Breathwork experiment at my private home-based workshop. He says:

The conscious intent of Breathwork participants making their SoulCollages affected me. Everyone seemed to be present and deeply focused in the work. A deep, meditative field seemed to be encompassing everyone, yet everyone was having fun. I felt welcomed and I wanted to join in.

Peggy Wallace has a touching story about bonding with another participant in the “mandala room” while doing her SoulCollage work:

I sat across the table from a man who was diligently working (upside down from my vantage point) on a mandala collage into the early hours of the morning. We said nothing. We were two of only three people in the room for hours on end. The only interaction we had was to pass the paper cement back and forth. I watched as he constructed his strikingly graphic

image — a cross, filled with diverse people's faces on the background of a blue sky filled with clouds in a mandala circle.

Early on, I hated what I was doing, but having been in this same place many times before, I continued trying to hold the words that came to me while doing the body work after the Breathwork session: "Love me, kill me." I was envious of the man across the table from me. His image was better than mine! Old stuff coming up again. Watching, watching - listening to the inner voices of criticism — continuing to meticulously cut out images that drew me to them. Then the pasting... That's when it all started to come together for me. The background that I had done with vivid primary colors: red, black, yellow, blue was the perfect receptacle for the images I had cut out. Finally, the man got up without saying anything and walked toward the door. I hadn't seen what he had ended up with. I ran after him. "May I see what you've done?" These were the first words we had said to each other. He proudly showed me his finished mandala. "It's incredible. How wonderful." I could see in his face that he was not only pleased with his own work, but pleased that I appreciated it as well. I no longer felt any envy, just pride in what he had done — I felt as if I had somehow participated in his work. He asked to see what I was still in process on and commented on the intensity of the work I had done earlier on when I was laying down the pastel crayon color and blending it into the paper. I hadn't noticed, but I knew he was right. I felt as if I was doing something that had great force and energy in it. No woosy pastels or color with the paper showing through for this image! And I also realized when I started to like what I was doing, I also felt no envy of the image work he was doing.

We said "Goodnight" and from then on, we who had not spoken to each other up to that point, greeted each other daily, danced together on the night before closing and said "Goodbye" as intimates. I felt our collage work "together" bonded us to each other in a way that didn't happen for me with anyone else other than my sitting/breathing partner.

Nonverbal People Can Communicate Deep Personal Meaning to Others

Many nonverbal people or people who have something very difficult to say, such as those who have just had a Breathwork experience, find that the cards enable them to communicate in an authentic, satisfying way — first with images, the language of symbols, dreams, and archetypes, and then after that opening, with words.

Even “Non” Artists Can Create Satisfying Art

Self-exploration is usually a lonely process with not many ways of connecting with others. Art or poetry have been traditionally ways in which a few skilled people have been able to bridge that isolation and share at levels below the reach of ordinary conversation. SoulCollage seems to help achieve a communication with others that is not possible for most of us to do using other artistic media. Even if people find words adequate to describe their non-ordinary state experiences, the art done by others can help in understanding them. KiP Walker said, “Seeing the work of others was inspiring as is the sharing of the mandalas. The visual always seems to add another dimension to the words people use to try to describe their work.”

The special advantage of SoulCollage is that it requires no skill in art, yet allows those people with ordinary abilities to express their deepest personal meaning in a way that others can appreciate. By choosing and merging images which resonate at the deepest level, the ordinary person can create an artistic expression which also connects him or her to others who are conscious at that level.

Maria Santos-Elgart’s describes her experience overcoming frustration at not being able to represent by drawing alone what she felt during her Breathwork experience:

It helped me to gather my psychic energy after the Holotropic Breathwork session; to recognize and accept the depth of the process experienced, and to represent the highlights of the session through the images chosen. I always enjoy Stan Grof’s suggestion of drawing mandalas after Holotropic Breathwork sessions, yet I sometimes feel frustrated for being unable to draw what I envision. The SoulCollage is a good option for those moments, at times easier, it is fun how I pick the images, cut and glue and am surprised by what shows up on the card afterwards.

Seeing the Soulcollage Cards of Others Deepens One’s Own Experiences

The cards are filled with images that resonate with people’s most inner experiences and so it is common that the cards of other breathers can affect one at the deepest level. Maria Santos-Elgart said, “I felt affected by other people’s SoulCollage [cards] through the effect of Oneness; One Soul, many collages.” Jeff found that his experiences of viewing another participant’s cards before his own breathing session triggered emotions that had been deeply buried and thus contributed to his Breathwork experience.

I was definitely affected [by her cards] It was very surprising and suddenly overwhelming to see many of her images spread out in the center of our space, and move amongst them.... My breathing session the day after I

encountered [her] SoulCollage cards was filled with rage.... So it definitely facilitated my process!

Would Holotropic Breathwork Trainees and Participants Use Soulcollage in Their Own Groups?

Many participants in the *Trauma and Transformation* module felt SoulCollage was an important part of that module. Patricia Meadows subsequently wrote about the process in *The Inner Door*⁵ [<http://www.breathwork.com/>],

Many participants seemed deeply immersed in the SoulCollage process throughout the week (not only after their Breathwork sessions.) "and highly praised this creative process. One participant expressed: "I was absorbed in the collage technique. I would like to suggest that... this collage technique be offered as part of all modules ..."

Others in the GTT Certification Intensive agreed that SoulCollage is a great addition to Breathwork. Jeff will "definitely make it an option in workshops I conduct in the future." He says that he wants to work with the process, however, without having a set agenda of trying to collect images that seem to fit.

I find those [images] that have charge and stay open to maybe, or not necessarily, completing the collage during the course of the day (or weekend, etc.) But to stay open to the collage letting me know when it is ready to be finished.

Arnold writes also that the collage sets its own pace:

I would include SoulCollage as an optional integration tool in any Breathwork workshop I give because it can appeal to people who cannot draw well. I would state to the group that the process may be time-consuming. There may not be enough time during the workshop to complete one. I definitely would provide magazines, and I would give the general background and instructions for constructing a collage. I would emphasize that no one is under pressure to complete a collage at the workshop. If one makes a collage, it should be done at one's own pace.

⁵ *The Inner Door*. (2001). Santa Cruz, CA: Association for Holotropic Breathwork. 13:3:9

The consensus seems to be that SoulCollage should be offered as an option, but that nothing should be forced. One common suggestion was that there be plenty of time allowed for work on SoulCollage projects. Parrish said, “[SoulCollage] seemed to bring out things from the Breathwork that were there, but not well defined. The only difficulty is that there generally is not enough time in a one-day Breathwork setting to do the cards.” Some suggested that one should offer the opportunity to make either cards or large collages. Peggy Wallace and KiP Walker both suggested that participants be encouraged to use mixed media, such as collage and drawing to represent the inner landscape in the best possible way at the time. Wallace wrote, “I was able to create something of great value to me by the combination of the two techniques.” KiP Walker envisions that SoulCollage “could be of use in other experiential workshops that would incorporate movement, meditation, and such.”

About the Author

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