

Rolling with intention



Gulcin Bulut reflects
on what the game of
backgammon has taught
her about life and therapy

Backgammon – or *tavla*, as we call it in Turkish – has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Like many who grew up in Türkiye, the game was the background music of my childhood. The light rattle of dice across wood and the sharp click of moving checkers accompanied countless afternoons in tea gardens, bustling cafés and family living rooms. It seemed that wherever people gathered, someone would eventually bring out a board. My best friend, Eylem, and I could spend hours playing, watching games stretch late into the night. To us, *tavla* wasn't just a pastime; it was a shared language of friendship, community and storytelling.

I still vividly remember Emin, who worked at a tea garden by the harbour. He was one of those local legends who knew every variation of the game and every trick hidden inside it. Eylem and I were forever persuading him to play with us because, in our eyes, he was the master. At the time, I thought I was simply learning a game. Looking back as a psychotherapist, I suspect I was learning a profound phenomenological framework for navigating life, uncertainty and the therapeutic encounter itself.

The language of the board

Recently, I have been teaching backgammon to my partner. Coming from different cultures, we have enjoyed exchanging the traditions that shaped us. Introducing him to *tavla* felt deeply important because the game has witnessed so much of my journey. As we played, I found myself explaining a concept that might sound strange to anyone outside Turkish backgammon culture: the game possesses its own living, breathing language.

The *tavla* environment is filled with teasing, joking, superstition and endless commentary. Certain dice combinations are announced using their traditional Persian names – such as *Şeş-Beş* (6–5) or *Dü-Se* (3–3) – often followed by rhyming riddles, ancient sayings, or sharp, good-natured jokes. Players complain dramatically about their bad luck, celebrate highly unlikely victories and playfully try to distract one another with perfectly timed remarks. To an outsider, this might look like a mere distraction from strategic focus. For us, the banter is not an interruption of the game; the banter *is* the game itself. It constitutes what relational psychoanalysis would call an intersubjective field – a co-created space where affect is processed, metabolised and shared.

One of the most distinct rituals in this relational space is the practice of a player loudly announcing exactly what they need before throwing the dice: ‘Come on, six-two’, ‘Just give me double fives’, ‘Anything but that’.

My mother was particularly brilliant at this. She always knew exactly what she wanted from the dice and was never shy about demanding it out loud. Miraculously, she often got it, leaving my father staring at the board in sheer disbelief. As a child, I secretly sided with my father’s approach. It felt unfair. He was the stronger, more analytical player, meticulously calculating probabilities. My mother was less experienced, yet she remained entirely engaged, never lost heart and always spoke to the dice as if the next roll would turn the game completely in her favour.

I realise now that I misunderstood what she was doing. Her vocalisations were not a naïve belief that she could alter the physical laws of gravity or probability. The lesson was not about controlling

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the dice; it was about active participation. When I explained this to my partner, the phrase that came to me was *rolling with intention*. Whether saying what you need out loud actually changes what the dice bring is beside the point. What matters is that the player is fully awake to the moment. They know what they need, risk saying it aloud and remain actively engaged with the game.

Shrinking worlds
Over the years, I have encountered clinical versions of this exact backgammon dynamic within the therapeutic setting. Clients frequently arrive in the therapy room carrying the heavy burdens of anxiety, complex trauma, profound grief, or chronic disappointment – shattering experiences that have gradually persuaded them to step back from life. In existential terms, their relational world has collapsed.

When faced with the terrifying unpredictability of existence, human beings tend to adopt one of two defensive postures, both of which mirror poor backgammon strategies. The first is a hyper-fixation on control. These clients attempt to analytically calculate and manipulate every variable of their lives to prevent future injury. This reflects one of the existential defences described by Irvin Yalom: the attempt to deny the uncertainty and groundlessness of existence.¹ The second posture is radical withdrawal – a psychological state of resignation. Disappointed or traumatised too many times, these individuals protect themselves by narrowing their world, lowering their expectations and refusing to invest hope in any future outcome.

From a clinical perspective, what strikes me most is how psychological suffering shrinks our capacity for participation. Anxiety walls us in, trapping us in a state of hypervigilance. Grief obscures the horizon, making the future impossible to envision. Trauma whispers that engagement is inherently dangerous, freezing the client in a state of defensive isolation. Bit by bit, the individual stops conversing with life. They sit at the edge of the board, watching the checkers move but refusing to throw the dice themselves.

Yet healing rarely emerges from control or avoidance. Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) suggests that psychological rigidity and experiential avoidance can lead to a life alienated from our core values.² Healing requires a return to psychological flexibility: finding our way back to meaningful engagement with relationships, creativity, community and ourselves. Life seldom offers us certainty, but it always offers us a seat at the table. The clinical task is to help the client safely pick up the dice and roll again.

The spiritual matrix
The ideas undergirding this ethos began to crystallise during a personal period of deep reflection on uncertainty, trust and disappointment. I found myself wrestling with questions that sit at the intersection of psychotherapy and spirituality: How do we remain open without becoming naïve? How do we stay hopeful without becoming attached? How do we engage deeply with our choices without demanding certainty from the universe?

As I searched for a framework to hold these paradoxes, I looked beyond modern psychological models to ancient spiritual traditions that view life not as a mechanical problem to be solved, but as a living current to be navigated. I turned to the *I Ching*, where I drew Hexagram 1, *The Creative* (乾, Qián).

Instead of a promise of material success or static safety, I found within this hexagram a profound emphasis on movement and alignment with cosmic energy. In the *I Ching*, creative energy is framed not as a final destination but as a continuous, generative process. It demands active initiative, undivided presence and ongoing participation with the world. It reminded me that the spiritual antidote to fear is not absolute certainty but conscious, intentional movement.

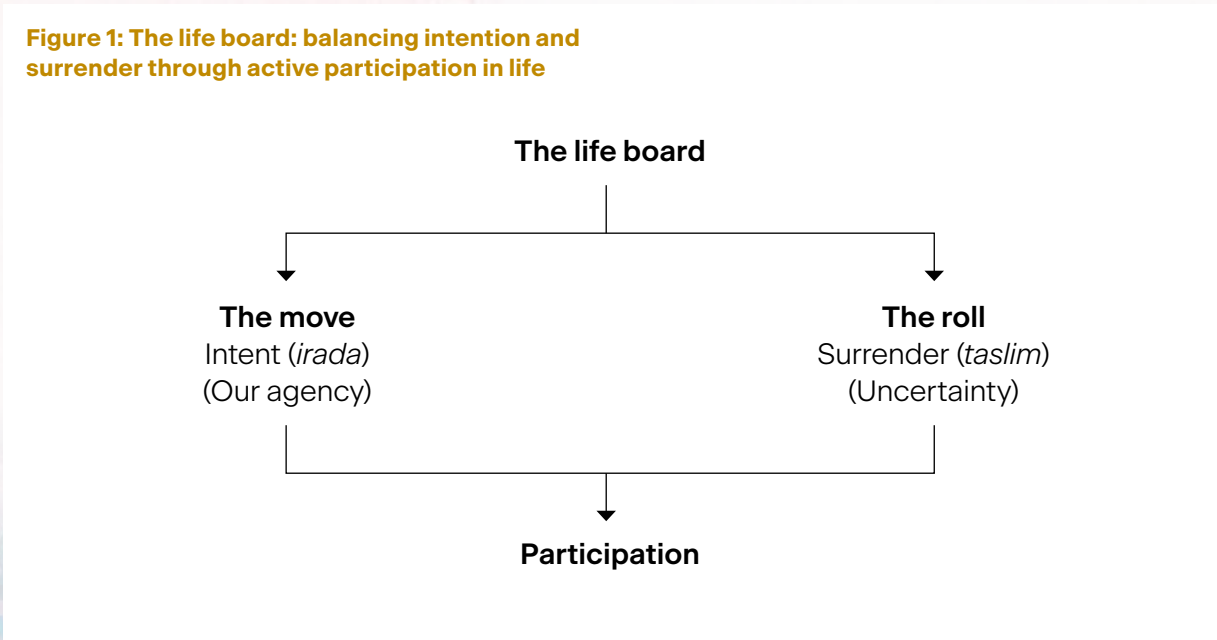
This cross-cultural realisation of dynamic movement resonates beautifully with the rich spiritual tradition of Sufism, which has long influenced my personal and clinical orientation. Sufi psychology operates within a delicate, paradoxical dance between two seemingly opposing states: *irada* (human will, agency and intention) and *taslim* (radical spiritual surrender to the divine decree). In the context of the backgammon board, *irada* is the

conscious intention we bring when we announce our desires out loud and strategically move our checkers across the points. It represents our ethical obligation to use our agency fully, to care about the game and to invest our energy into the current moment. Conversely, *taslim* is our relationship to the dice once they leave our hand. We do not control the roll; the roll

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belongs to the realm of the unseen (*ghayb*). *Taslim* is the spiritual maturity to accept the numbers that land on the wood with an open heart (*rida*), recognising that true peace comes from surrendering the illusion of ultimate control while remaining fully committed to the next move (Figure 1).

When we bring Sufi thought into conversation with existential psychotherapy, we find a striking harmony. Irvin Yalom emphasises that although we are responsible for creating our lives through the choices we make (our moves), we must do so in the face of the givens of existence over which we have no control (our roll).¹ Maturity, both psychological and spiritual, lies in navigating this exact tension. It requires us to bring our absolute authenticity and intention to the roll, while simultaneously maintaining a posture of non-attachment to the final outcome.



Reflections

Staying in the conversation

When we synthesise these clinical and spiritual frameworks, we see that creativity is the ultimate antidote to traumatic withdrawal. By creativity, I do not mean a specialised artistic output, but rather the broader, existential creativity of being – what DW Winnicott described as 'creative living', the state that makes the individual feel that life is really worth it.³

It takes immense creativity to rebuild an internal world after devastating loss. It requires spiritual courage to form new relationships when older ones have fractured. It demands creative imagination to envision possibilities that do not yet exist and to stay robustly engaged when certainty is completely unavailable.

This is the deeper meaning of continuity. Life continues. Relationships evolve. Conversations shift and plans either succeed or fail. The ultimate spiritual or clinical question is not whether painful change will come – for change is the fundamental law of the cosmos – but whether we choose to remain in an active, loving relationship with life as it unfolds.

The next roll: clinical implications

For me, rolling with intention begins before the dice even leave my hand. In the therapy room, this translates to helping clients access their buried desires, identify their core values and risk voicing them out loud. It means encouraging them to know

what matters to them, to ask for it, to hope for it and to allow themselves to dream it into being. After all, it is incredibly difficult for a client to move towards the psychological future they no longer allow themselves to envision. Naming the intention is often the first act of therapeutic agency.

And then, the dice fall. Sometimes exactly as you hoped; sometimes not at all. You can choose your move, but you cannot choose your roll.

Maturity, as both a therapist and a traveller on a spiritual path, lies in how we model and hold that distinction. It is learning how to trust without becoming naïve, how to love without abandoning yourself, how to facilitate deep healing without codependently carrying our clients' ultimate destiny, and how to remain profoundly centred without becoming clinically rigid.

There is a deeper confidence that emerges over time within the therapeutic container. It does not come from a magical guarantee that our clinical interventions will always succeed, or that our clients will never suffer disappointment again. Rather, it comes from a deep trust that whatever arrives on the board, we can remain entirely ourselves while meeting it.

The dice will keep rolling. Plans will change. People will surprise, delight and disappoint us. The cosmic conversation will continue to shift in ways we could never have calculated. All we can do as clinicians, and as human beings, is stay present, stay engaged, bring our purest intention to the table and keep playing. Stay in the game. ●

References

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Gulcin Bulut is a psychotherapist based in Manchester, working in the NHS and private practice. Her interests bring together psychology, creativity and culture, exploring how we understand ourselves, connect with others and make sense of existence. Her writing explores what it means to live authentically and meaningfully. <https://tinyurl.com/3nzwzz4t>

