



“I Must Do What I Want To”

(For Ten Minutes)

A Therapeutic Game For
Therapists, Patients And
Other People

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ground of wealth and two streams of culture fused into one — born into a German-Jewish family . . . Struggle between much closeness and much separation. Early poetry to bridge the gap . . . Hitler — reality gone terror. Switzerland 1933 . . . Psychoanalysis as a passionate hope . . . U.S.A. 1941.” — She received her M.A. at T.C. Columbia in 1944, and is on the group therapy faculties at NPAP, Postgraduate Center M.H. She is director of the Workshop Institute for Living-Learning. Her interests include fusing psychoanalytic and experiential concepts, and conveying the essence of psychotherapy through artistic media. — 333 Central Park West, New York, N. Y. 10025.

I want to write about this game in the style I play it.

I am sitting at a pond. Water noisily like ocean waves swirling into the pond drain. I want to write what I want to, in the style I want. I am going along with whatever comes to my mind which fits into what I want to tell you about this game.

I have a choice. I can write this in formal style. Or I can write this in my game-style, choosing from my associations so that they say what I want to in a way that you who read it are likely to understand what I want you to know.

I would like you to go along with me, for the time it will take you to read this, on minimum trust — that reading this strangely styled paper may tell you something which I believe to be an important contribution to living; it has been for me and for a number of my friends and patients.

It is a game of ten minutes time which, when played repetitively, is likely to spill over, in some essential way, into days and years.

The Rules of this Self-Therapy Game: I call it a game because it has definite rules in time and space; and I’m using the word “game” only in this technical sense — it is a piece of time and space, used by me — any me — in a meaningful way.

The Frame: I must be alone in a room, preferably my own, in which I will not have to consider others or be disturbed by them.

Activity: For ten minutes, I must do what I want to. I must check at every moment what I am doing (including body and mental activity and whether I am *really* still doing what I want to and, if not, change to what I want to do.

Comments: The rule is not I must do what I *feel* like doing, but what I *want* to do. What I "want to" includes my judgment as well as my impulses; i.e., if I feel like smashing an object, I must check whether I want to follow the impulse which I know will destroy this object, then check whether I would rather vent my feeling now and not have this object thereafter, or whether I would sufficiently enjoy smashing it to take the loss of the object in my stride.

In my checking it is important to include the awareness of messages from my body. I might have a fantasy that I want to dance, but my body may signal that I am tired now and what I really want to is to have a fantasy of dancing. The opposite may be true; I might think dancing is silly, but my body may want to dance. I then have to make a decision: Which is it that I want? And the decision may come effortlessly by itself, within a few seconds, or a third idea may pop up and ring the bell of "this is it!"

Many people's reaction to the suggestion of this game has been "But I do this all the time." This is as impossible as being aware of the way I breathe all the time. I can make myself aware of the breathing process but cannot check on it throughout the day. However, as awareness of breathing (in the form of exercises) spills over into better breathing throughout the day, awareness of what I really want in this checking game has a generally beneficial effect.

I would now like to suggest to you that you play this game once, or preferably a few times, before you go on reading this. You may have more understanding for the game and its impact if you have experimented with it before I explain further.

Okay. You may have played this game and you may have experienced conflict between two or more choices and not have known how to resolve it. The suggestion is: Follow the rule, which is to check at every moment what you are doing and whether you are still doing what you want to do. You check and you see what you do is being aware of conflict (for instance, whether to empty an ashtray or read a newspaper). Your experience is "I am in conflict!" So the question is, "Do I want to be in conflict?" The answer may be "Yes, I want to be in this conflict," and you may remain there for awhile, not wanting to know which of the two activities to do. In all likelihood, you won't stay there too long. You will want to do either one of them, or perhaps a third thing that you had not previously thought of. Or, you may decide you hate to be in conflict and you hate this and don't want to continue this way, with the similar result of choosing one, or the other, or a third activity. And then, you check again.

People report very different experiences. Frequently, there is a great sense of relief resulting in a lovely feeling of serenity and being at one with self and the world. Some people experience anxiety and panic which usually disappear within a few sessions of playing the game. To them, the permission to do "what I want to" and not "what I should do" appears to hold an awesome threat.^o

^oFred Farau, a friend, psychotherapist and philosopher, suggests that this panic may be related to the panic of forbidden masturbation "to do what I want to." It may also have to do with the fear of losing identity by removing the possibility of rebellion. See my paper, "Masturbation and Love," Complex 1952.

I am now still sitting at the pond, playing another game related to the one I asked you to join. My game right now is to tell you, the reader, about this self-therapy game the way I want to and the way I think you may most easily follow my writing. As you see, this is only a "relative" of the game, not identical, because the goal is different and, therefore, there are different rules. The rule of this style is: I must say what I want to say in a way which includes the spirit of the game as well as my fantasy of you, a reader.

There was a distraction now in my talking to you — the sun on my head. I put my kerchief on. Rule: "Disturbances take precedence." I want to be as comfortable as I can. Then, I want to go on thinking of you and me. I want to rest now and I believe that after that I will want to continue writing about the game. I have learned something from the game which, as a teacher, I already knew on other levels; I have learned to take any distraction or disturbance seriously, as a reality to be affirmed and dealt with, rather than as something to deny or hate. If I give disturbances to the goal their due, they fall into place. (This appears to be true for any creative or even routine endeavor.)

I have rested on a plank on the pond. I wanted to let my mind float like the plank on the water and I did. Some associations of this rest period come back now as distractions to my desire to write: cooking pots with vertical sides or sides leaning towards the center must be more practical (in heat distribution) than those where the sides lean outward. I want to plan for more quiet weekends like this one with good friends in their country homes rather than spending weekends in hotels or at home in the city. This environment is what I like now — quietude and beauty in people and nature. I accepted the distractions and something more closely related came into my mind:

The words "My time and I are one" came back to me. They stem from a poem I wrote and did not understand fully when I wrote it — five years ago. Now, since I have played and understood the game, I know what they mean. "My time and I are one" . . . my time . . . the game time . . . at first, and then, on a less structured but spiritual level, "My time and I are one: I own my time, I own my life. I am the owner of each second of my life. My choices in living are based more and more on awareness that my time belongs to me — me in awareness of whatever frame of reality I am in — with specific people in specific situations, in specific functions, within a society in specific moments in history." But within this framework, all choices are mine — often with much freedom, often with relatively little leeway, mostly a mixture of self-selected and other-directed possibilities. Most of us don't realize how much more freedom of choice we do have than we are aware of at any given moment.

I have, with increasing frequency, played this game for about two years and have suggested it to more and more people. A number of my patients have experienced accelerated progress in their treatment which they attribute to something indefinable about the game. Some of my friends and I — who are not in therapy at this time — have felt a greater sense of freedom and productivity when we play the game more often. But for a long time I did feel frustrated that I had no rationale for something that has worked so well.

Recently, some ideas about why it works well have occurred to me. I want to share some of my hypotheses with you.

I guess we all experience often the feeling that what we must do seems

to be the opposite of what we want to do. This means that the Should tells me what I think or feel I must do. The Should and the Want, then, are opponents. In the game, the Should loses the power of opposition to the Want because I may not do what I don't want to do: The Should in the game always says what I want to (by rule!).

This paradox resembles the therapeutic fact that obsolete defenses most likely are resolved when the therapist accepts the patient's right to be anxious and resistive rather than when he tries to break through his defensiveness. The therapist joins the patient's antiquated defenses which are often (sometimes explicit, more often implicit) "shoulds" working as blocks against lively "wants." (This is what we call, in therapeutic lingo, "joining the resistance.")

Going along with the resistance works therapeutically on many levels:

In physiotherapy, one of the basic principles is to encourage the patient with a rigid limb to go along with the tension of the rigidity (stiffen the arm even more, and then relax it). Or, the physiotherapist, recognizing the patient's frozen motion, can make the patient more comfortable through physical support of the frozen part, and either actively or passively can help the body unfreeze and release more realistic movement.^o

In psychotherapy, going along with the resistance means to support the patient's frozen emotions (detachment, superstitions, hostility, transference, etc.) — the person's right to be unhappy, unproductive, or asocial.^{oo} With the therapist's support for his illness, the patient can afford to unfreeze his attitudes and let go because the therapist has helped him to establish faith in his — whatever — existence. Once the frozen emotionality has begun to thaw, the direction of all living is toward life (which includes change, growth, and sociability).

In the game, going along with the resistance implies joining my "should" with my "want." Examples: "I should work, but I don't want to; I should be friendly, but I feel angry; I should not eat so much, but I want to." The game says I must do what I want to do. This means that the power of the "should" is put into the service of the "want." My want is now a should. I can't say, for example, "I should not eat, but I do." I must decide which of the two I want more at this moment — to eat or not to eat. This decision includes my physical desires and my knowledge of the consequences of eating. (In playing the game, several obese friends and patients of mine have been surprised to find themselves in front of the refrigerator thinking that they wanted to eat but discovering, with amazement, that there was no feeling whatsoever of desire for food.)

The power of the "should" previously may have rendered us apathetic or impotent because we experienced it as if we were children with the feeling of rebellion or submissiveness. The super-ego or the "top dog"^{ooo} has told us what to do and has made us rebel against "it" or "him" respectively — even if what we experience as a "should" is actually what we "want." A habitually disorderly friend of mine found herself cleaning up her house whenever she played the game. Her disorder was the response to her mother's "should" which, for her, as an adult, was really a "want" suppressed by the antiquated rebellion against this

^oPersonal communication with Ruth Wallach, physiotherapist, N.Y.C.

^{oo}See Harold Greenwald's brilliant paper on "Treatment of the Psychopath," VOICES, issue 7.

^{ooo}Fritz Perls' use of this word.

"should." In the game, the should has joined the want. We have, for the ten minutes of the game, fused the power of the should with the power of the want. (Such want is experienced as an amalgamation of impulses and considerations guided by a sense of reality, and personal goal-directedness; it is a situation in which ego-integration becomes transparent as under an "experiential microscope.")

This, right now, is what I want to tell you about the game. I would also like you to know that I would appreciate any response you might want to give me, if and when you have played the game.

R.C.C.