

by Jane Alexander

A sceptical JANE ALEXANDER tries a new cocktail and counselling party...



Picture OF JANE: L+R

Bonkers board game that promises to change your life

BOARD games have never been my thing. Even Snakes and Ladders made me anxious when I was a child.

So if someone had told me I'd play a game for four hours, I would've said they were crazy. Yet The Transformation Game®, a sort of spiritual Monopoly, has me hooked — and I'm not the only one.

The game, originally devised in the Seventies, is enjoying a renaissance. A Place To Heal, the new healing hub in London's Holland Park, is launching evening and weekend workshops where you can play, guided by a trained facilitator. Psychotherapist Fiona Arrigo, founder of A Place To Heal, finds the Game so powerful she includes it in her award-winning retreats. She believes it's time it reached a wider audience.

'It's a serious, funny, inspiring and educational way to look at life,' she says. 'It's a wonderful tool for when you're feeling lost or perplexed.'

The Game originated in Findhorn, the uber-hippy spiritual community in Scotland (north-east of Inverness). Joy Drake, a long-term resident, wanted to recreate that 'Findhorn experience' so people could receive insights.

She came up with The Planetary Game, which had up to 120 players moving across a life-sized board. It seemed to give insights and advice, but wasn't exactly user-friendly. So, with another Findhorn resident, Kathy Tyler, Joy condensed it into a board game, to be played with two facilitators, and created The Transformation Game.

It looks just like any other board game from the outside. 'For 2-4 players. Age 16 and up,' it says, innocuously. It has the counters, die and cards you'd expect from something like Monopoly.

The board looks standard, too. Then you realise there are four segments. Instead of pitting yourself against fellow players, you have your own section: your 'life path'. There are no winners or losers here. The aim isn't to be first to finish or to have most hotels on Park Lane, but to 'deepen your understanding of yourself and others'.

AS YOU play you meet challenges and setbacks. You gather 'Pain' cards and, if really unlucky, get stuck on a Depression Life Square (the psychic equivalent of Go To Jail).

Yet equally there are blessings and insights. Playing is supposed to give a 'playful yet substantial way of understanding and transforming key issues in your life'.

I was sceptical, to put it mildly. How could a board game possibly sort anybody's life out?

Although you can play at home, having a facilitator apparently makes the experience deeper. So I joined three others and facilitator Jacqueline to try it. We introduced ourselves over drinks and nibbles: it felt more like a cocktail party than a game of spiritual Risk — until we settled at the board.

'First choose a question that needs answers or insights,' said Jacqueline. 'It could be about a personal issue, new possibilities or maybe overcoming stress. The object is to shift your perspective; to show how to make changes in your life. You could call it a personal consulting tool.'

I needed careers advice on whether to continue as a journalist. Could the game deliver or would it prescribe fluffy unicorns and whale song? It soon became clear this was no Tiddlywinks. One woman described grief at a bereavement; another was angry at a friend's betrayal.

There's no rule saying you have to spill the beans, yet there is something liberating in talking openly. I realised I'd been ashamed at what I judged to be my backwards career trajectory. We

took it in turns to roll the die and pick cards to place in Personal Unconscious envelopes.

I threw a one and picked one Life Angel card. My next throws netted me five Life Insight cards and three Life Setback cards. Jacqueline told us to tuck them away without reading them.

Next we chose a crystal to act as our 'Personality' and put it on the board. To be 'born' into the game, you need to land on a certain square type. After two unsuccessful attempts, I wondered if I'd spend the evening as a disembodied soul. 'Don't panic,' Jacqueline soothed. 'If you don't make it this time, your Guardian Angel will give you a pull and you'll be born by Spiritual Caesarean!'

Fortunately my next throw launched me and everybody sang a rendition of Happy Birthday.

It was now time to meet the 'Guardian Angel' who would watch over me. Jacqueline clocked my furrowed brow. 'Think of it as an energy or type of wisdom, if that's more palatable than angels,' she said.

My card said Trust, with a picture of a cute angel hugging a unicorn. 'Close your eyes,' said Jacqueline. 'Breathe in the quality of Trust; see how it feels.' I gave it

a shot and was surprised by a tangible sense of warmth as an image of being wrapped in a cloak popped into my head.

So far, so totally, utterly woo-woo. Yet, as we continued to play, the game took a more practical turn. Our Setback cards indicated what was blocking us, while Insight cards illuminated things that could help us achieve goals.

'Your ego receives a minor dent, and you react by getting uptight, cutting off effective communication,' said the first card I turned.

OUCH, that was on the money. I am ridiculously over-sensitive to criticism or rejection in work.

The game dished out home truths: 'You're set back by your need for approval,' it lectured. 'You're set back by your withdrawal.' OK, OK, I get it! I need to woman up.

It also nudged me to recognise my strengths. 'Awareness' cards reminded me I have Vitality, Excellence and Experience (well, yes) alongside Sunshine and Style (not so sure). Jacqueline encouraged us to chip in with

thoughts about each other's cards and it became as much gentle group therapy as a game. You don't get that with Ludo. I was stunned when Jacqueline said we'd been playing for four hours.

We only played for an evening (A Place To Heal is planning weekend workshops for a deeper immersion) yet the Game had given me some surprisingly solid advice. I should get over perceived rejections and not take things so personally. I needed to relax. I had to take my years of experience and wisdom and find new ways of using them.

Since playing the game (just over a month ago) my career has — dare I say it — transformed. I've landed a book deal, new consultancy work and been asked to co-host retreats. It could all be coincidence, of course, but I'm not so sure.

For now, I'm wrapping myself in my cloak of trust, winking at my angel and counting the days before I can play again.

■ *The Transformation Game*® costs £60 from amazon.co.uk. *Events at A Place To Heal* (aplacetoheal.co.uk) cost from £140 per person. For other UK facilitators see innerlinks.com/united-kingdom

Is it just ME?

Or are there just too many bank holidays?

by Sarah Vine

OH NO, NOT again. Another sodding bank holiday. Don't get me wrong. I like a day off as much as the next person. But there is something about bank holidays that just feels outdated.

For a start they're a bit like buses: you wait all winter for one and then four come along at once.

It seems only yesterday that we were all enjoying a hot four-day Easter weekend. Do we really need another one so soon — and again on the 27th?

There were talks of shifting today's holiday to somewhere more useful like October — first mooted in 2010 by the Coalition government in the days when ministers had time to think about anything other than Brexit. But that seems to have come to nothing.

Then there's the kind of collective madness they

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seem to engender. If it's not rushing to B&Q to spend three days hammering things together, it's getting drunk, setting fire to hamburgers and, weather permitting, giving yourself third-degree sunburn.

But mainly it's the fact that the whole concept of the bank holiday makes no sense in the 24-hour digital nightmare that is the modern world.

They belong to a slower age, one where communities were close knit, where the majority of work was of a physical nature, where we lived to a much greater degree according to the rhythm of the seasons.

In that context, several Spring holidays in a row makes sense, as does the one at the end of August, timed for Harvest. Coming together for a communal day of rest and celebration still had some kind of genuine meaning. Now it's just another opportunity for a half-price DFS sofa sale.