

## **You Are Getting Very Sleepy - Anaesthetic?**

### **The Outer by Robert Hercz**

WHEN VICTOR RAUSCH HAD HIS GALLBLADDER removed in 1978, it was a major operation. "They cut open your belly, open it up with clamps and get in there and move your guts around," the Waterloo dentist recalls.

Of course Rausch would have an excellent recollection of the procedure, since it was performed without anaesthetic or painkillers. He was awake through the whole operation, and when it was over, he stood up and walked out of the operating room.

Rausch had hypnotized himself. Having used hypnosis for years on his dental patients including those he saw while working for the Canadian Armed Forces, he simply had to see for himself how, and if, it worked.

The operation was not without sensation, but it was without pain. 'Once I found out how simple it was to control the perception of pain, it was just amazing," he says. "I didn't want to believe it. It was quite bizarre."

Not everyone was impressed. When Rausch left the operating room, the curious hospital staff that had gathered in the hallway first assumed the surgery had been postponed, After all, if you've just had an organ yanked out, you don't usually leave the scene on foot. But as the news spread, one of the doctors approached him. "I knew this gentleman personally; he was a good surgeon," says Rausch. "He looked at me, stuck his finger in my face, totally frustrated, He said, 'I don't want to hear about it. I don't want to talk about it. As far as I'm concerned it never happened.' He turned around and walked away, For him to accept what just happened, he'd have to discard 90 per cent of what he had learned."

Perhaps many of us would, yet there is no doubt that hypnosis works. Demonstrations like Rausch's operation may only come along every couple of decades, but finding people who have been helped in ways that, if less dramatic, are just as significant is not difficult. Nor is finding respectable scientific backing for the practice. The more you examine hypnosis, however, the more slippery it becomes.

It has taken a long time for hypnosis to reach its present teetering legitimacy. Modern hypnosis dates to the late 1700s, when Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer claimed miraculous cures with magnets. A French royal commission concluded that Mesmer's results were due more to his subjects' powers of imagination than any "animal magnetism" passing between him and his patients. Despite that verdict, mesmerism, as it became known, continued to attract interest.

Mid 19th century British surgeon James Braid used it to treat deafness, rheumatic disorders and paralysis. He coined "hypnosis" from the Greek word for sleep; an unfortunate choice, since the hypnotized subject is actually in a heightened state of alertness.

At the end of the 19th century, Sigmund Freud became interested in the technique and used it on some of his patients. His endorsement would have changed the history of hypnosis, but he discarded it, partly because it didn't fit his theoretical model and partly because he wasn't very good at it.

At the same time, the public perception of hypnosis was being influenced by stage hypnotists who were turning groups of volunteers into flocks of chickens. A flood of popular literature, including George Du Maurier's 1894 novel *Trial* wherein the heroine falls under the hypnotic influence of the demonic Svengali sparked a movement to outlaw hypnosis. Such popular myths hypnosis is a state of near sleep in which the patient is unable to resist the commands of the mesmerist and, upon waking, "invariably forgets what happened" couldn't be further from the truth. But they persist, encouraged by self-styled therapists (with no more than a few hours of training in some cases) who promise everything from past life regression, bust enlargement and relief from constipation.

Meanwhile, many researchers have been making real contributions. Scientific studies have documented the efficacy of hypnosis in managing pain, bleeding and vomiting, anxiety, and phobias. Some studies indicate that women giving birth under hypnosis have shorter labours than non-hypnotized women, and their babies have higher Apgar scores (a measure of the newborn's health).

The British Medical Association approved hypnosis as a valid medical treatment in 1955 and the American Medical Association followed in 1958. Today, patients in the cancer wards of the larger hospitals and in the offices of psychiatrists, psychologists, dentists and general practitioners are often taught self-hypnosis as part of their treatment.

Paul Kelly, a Toronto psychologist, uses hypnosis with about one out of five clients in his practice. "Headache, menstrual cramps, pain related to childbirth, irritable bowel syndrome, cancer, arthritis, chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia. For people with exceptional talent for hypnosis," explains Kelly, "the degree of relief is equivalent to what you can get from morphine."

Nevertheless, hypnosis remains controversial. According to *The Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 55 per cent of physicians accept its effectiveness, which means 45 per cent don't, possibly because we still don't know much more about how hypnosis works than Mesmer did. In a hypnotic trance, the theory goes, a door to your subconscious swings open to suggestion. Despite the mountain of research, that's pretty much all the explanation we have.

While researching this story, I was hypnotized three times. I heard every word the hypnotists said; I didn't feel any more or less receptive than usual and if someone had slit my abdomen with a scalpel while I was in trance, I'm pretty sure it would have hurt. I wouldn't say I was skeptical, but it did surprise me how "normal" I felt. It also surprised me that 20 minutes in that state seemed to cure my chronic aching jaw.

I had asked Georgina Cannon, a well known Toronto Consulting Hypnotist and director of the Ontario Hypnosis Centre, to illustrate hypnosis by trying to help me with my night time teeth grinding. It was a stress related problem which, on two or three mornings a month, reminded me upon waking with aching jaw, aching teeth and aching head that a new cluster of deadlines was closing in.

My session was not convincing or so I thought at the time. In Cannon's periwinkle walled office bathed in tinkling New Age music, I sat in an armchair with my eyes closed and feet up. She "induced" me with a soothing monologue. Once I was deeply relaxed, she asked me to walk along my life's timeline "to the point where the problem began before, during or after your birth without needing to know exactly what caused it." I was told to raise a finger when I got there, but nothing presented itself. It seemed inappropriate to open my eyes, sit up and ask, 'What if I can't find it?,' so after a suitable interval, I lifted a finger just to get on with the proceedings. The whole thing seemed faintly absurd, even though I was supposed to be in trance.

It was a relief to hear Cannon say: "Come all the way back now, holding onto the wisdom," she said. "Come back feeling refreshed, rejuvenated, very, very proud of the work you've done." I didn't think I had much to be proud of, but I haven't woken up with any pain since.

First time mother Sabrina Blais wanted a drug free delivery, so she took Hypnosis for Childbirth, a franchised four session course in self hypnosis that was developed in the U.S. and is now available in Canada. She learned visualizations for the actual delivery, such as setting an imaginary dial to the level of pain she was going to accept, and took home affirmation tapes which reassured her that she could have a normal, comfortable labour. The result "The pain wasn't unmanageable. I had to call my backup midwife when I was between one and two hours away from delivering, and it was no problem. I was still able to do that,"

For something even more dramatic, talk to Vincente (not his real name), a

19 year old high school student: "I had these blisters on my lips, and they got worse and worse. They'd start bleeding, there was always this fluid coming out of them. I got medicine to numb my mouth so I could eat, because it was really painful." Doctors couldn't cure him, so he turned to Debbie Despina Papadakis, a Toronto Consulting Hypnotist.

"We did a hypnosis session where I didn't speak," says Vincente. "I'd lift one finger for yes, another for no. She asked me a whole bunch of questions, is this bothering you, is that bothering you. By the end of the session, the blisters already stopped leaking. In only two or three sessions I was back to normal."

"I'd recommend it to people who have an open mind," Vincente adds. "if you don't believe in it, if you don't want it to happen, then I don't think it will happen."

You've got to believe. Every client I talked to said the same thing, unprompted. A good Consulting Hypnotist knows that, and builds the entire experience around nurturing it. People think the "magic" is in the induction, but the induction is almost irrelevant.

"Almost anything works as long as the person expects it should work," says Erik Woody, a psychologist at the University of Waterloo who researches hypnosis, Even the hypnosis itself can be omitted. Studies have found that suggestion, with or without a hypnotic procedure, reduces pain.

The patient, not the hypnotist, does the real work. All hypnosis is self hypnosis, as every therapist will tell you. The question is, are all patients equally good at it? "One on one in this office, I never have a single person who doesn't go into trance very quickly, Not one," says Mike Mandel, a Toronto hypnotist who does therapy, forensic hypnosis (helping witnesses in criminal cases recall faces and other details) and has been a stage hypnotist for 25 years, But he admits he's not dealing with a very representative sample. "A lot of people who come here are desperate. They can't take more pain killers, or they have a phobia that's crippling them in their work," says Mandel. "So I have tremendous leverage. They're at a point where they really want to change, and that helps tremendously."

Both Kelly and Woody representing the "scientific" approach to hypnotism believe that susceptibility varies widely. "To some extent you can train people," says Kelly, "but my opinion would be that not everyone has the same amount of talent. For people that have real talent, it's like money in the bank."

Kelly says Rausch is "one in a hundred," but the patient disagrees, "What determines hypnotizability is need," Rausch says. "People go into spontaneous hypnosis in emergency situations very often, where they perform miraculous feats the mother lifting the car off the baby."

But if the patient's will (or need) to believe is so important, is there really even such a thing as hypnosis? One small camp of researchers believes hypnosis is almost pure placebo and no one doubts that is at least part of the explanation, But so what? What if hypnosis really doesn't exist at all? What if it is just another name for the placebo effect?

The idea doesn't bother therapists. As Kelly points out, the placebo effect may be a bad thing if you're a drug company, but not as much if you're a therapist. For healers, it's something to honour because it's a very big part of efficacy, of why this treatment works. Our healing systems are really sensitive to hope and expectation of benefit. That's the good news. It changes our physiology." says Kelly.

Remember that we're talking about something that can make surgery without anaesthetic painless. That capacity which lives, to a greater or lesser extent, in each of us is something that ought to be tapped, not dismissed.

*Fashion Toronto Edition Magazine, May 2000*