

Toronto Star

News, Wednesday, January 5, 2005, p. A08

Mesmerizing art chips away at a craving

Bill Taylor

Part of the proof of all this will be in the sour cream 'n' onion potato chips that used to beckon so seductively from the cafeteria vending machine.

For the first time in a long time, they're no longer beckoning.

It's not that Debbie Papadakis told this reporter flat-out yesterday, "You'll stop eating junk food." Hypnotism, she insists, is not about control, it's about suggestion. Her words, recalled from a state of trance, were, "Your arm is upright and rigid. As you push away your need for junk food, your arm will relax."

Somehow, that made perfect sense. Slowly, my arm fell back.

Yesterday was World Hypnotism Day, designated by the National Guild of Hypnotists (U.S.-based) and the Ontario Association of Hypnotherapists to draw attention to what its practitioners say is a misunderstood art.

No one outside of a comic strip really stands up suddenly in the middle of a business meeting and clucks like a chicken. Stage hypnotists tend to rely on exhibitionists who are willing to meet them more than half way.

Papadakis, 51, runs the Hypno Healing Institute on Keele St. One of a handful of full-time professional hypnotists in Toronto, she's rated by the National Guild as among the best in the world. She charges \$150 an hour. Yesterday, she demonstrated what it's all about.

A sign on her office wall says, "**Hypnosis** is the bypass of the critical factor of the conscious mind and the establishment of acceptable selected thinking."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Too many words. I grew up in Greece and I read what Plato said: 'To heal the body, first you must heal the mind.'"

A hypnotist can help you stop smoking, help control your weight, help you sleep better. But only if that's what you want.

"**Hypnosis** is a two-way street," she said. "It depends on both the hypnotist and the client. All **hypnosis** really is self-**hypnosis**. ... You have to believe in it. You have to believe in yourself."

I'd like to be able to relax more and maybe kick my chip habit. The session started in a reclining chair, with a purple rug over me "to be comfortable."

Papadakis talked me down a series of mental escalators, each level more relaxing. Her place is above an auto radiator shop. Even the sound of drilling from there, she said, was "good, relaxing, taking you deeper."

She told me to count backward from 100. I got halfway through 99 and simply couldn't say it. She told me my hand was getting numb, to the point where I couldn't feel her pinching the skin. "Open your eyes," she said.

What was going on? I don't know. I kept telling myself I could resist her suggestions if I wanted. But they all just seemed so ... reasonable. I felt very, very good.

"Will you be driving?" she said. "You shouldn't right away. Your mind's not ready."

Driving? No. I was trying to think of potato chips. It wasn't working. Let's hope that lasts.

Category: News

Uniform subject(s): Computer and electronics industries

Length: Medium, 399 words

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