

The Skeptic's Guide to Hypnosis

An Industry Insider Reflects on His Profession 18 Years After Certification

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Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet. It will be a relatively fast and easy read, and it will give you a crash course in the modern practice of professional hypnotism, from a rationalist point of view.

The “skeptic” mentioned in the title of this booklet refers to me (particularly before I started my practice, but still today), a sizable group of my clients, and possibly you as well. Even if you aren't skeptical about hypnosis, there are many legitimate reasons why hypnosis has more skeptics than most professions or occupations do. However, the better you understand it, the less skeptical you will be.

Hypnosis, or hypnotherapy, is a relatively new profession, which means there are no universally accepted best practices. It's similar to martial arts or business consulting, in the sense that there are many experts, and many of them disagree with one another. There are also strong competitive pressures for your money, which sometimes has the effect of disincentivizing intellectual rigour, honesty, and openness. I hope that by writing and sharing this document, I will encourage other practitioners to share their own perspectives on hypnosis, in their own words, so that each potential client can make a well-informed decision about the practitioner they would work with.

I felt the need to write this booklet because my current thinking about hypnosis is different from the thinking of many practitioners in the hypnosis field, in Toronto and around the world. Eighteen years after certification, and after sixteen years of professional experience,

my thinking has evolved from many theories that are taught in many books and classes, to the point where I'm no longer practising much of what I've learned in classes. I believe that I owe it to potential clients or students to explain to them how I think about hypnosis, without jargon or mysticism. I also appreciate it when I'm already on the same page as a client from the first minute that I start working with them. This is the reason my practice has the motto: “We make hypnosis make sense.”

In the future, I might publish an expanded version of this booklet as a full-length book, but for now, please enjoy this copy for free.

How a "Good, Smart Kid" Became a Hypnotist

I moved around a lot as a kid. I grew up in Winnipeg, Calgary and Hamilton, as my father pursued higher education (first a doctorate and then a medical degree) at different universities.

Back then, everybody thought I would become a doctor or a computer programmer. I was smart, introverted and bookish. I participated in (and sometimes won) mathematics and trivia competitions. I was known for being habitually quiet and only opening my mouth when I had something important to say, and never getting into trouble with the teachers. Even when I disagreed with them, I had their respect.

In my spare time, I read everything in the public library that captured my interest. Besides novels, I particularly loved books about philosophy, science and quirks of the human mind, including books on hypnosis. Those

early readings would become important later in my life.

At the University of Toronto, I took classes in English literature, life sciences, and semiotics (the study of signs and symbols). I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, except that I wanted to think and communicate for a living — and not necessarily in a conventional way.

In 2004, I graduated with an Honours Bachelor of Arts in English Literature (and minors in Biology and Semiotics). Since I didn't have a job lined up right after university, I decided to take a hypnosis certification program taught by an instructor with the National Guild of Hypnotists.

Just like with my high school teachers, I sometimes had disagreements with my hypnosis teacher. At one point, during one of these disagreements, my instructor told me that unless I became spiritual, I would never become a good hypnotherapist. Thinking back today, her words still sting, but I credit her for helping to fuel my desire to take the mysticism out of hypnosis, so that other practitioners who are like me can feel like they belong in the profession.

Between the ages of 21 and 23, I took a number of odd jobs. I co-wrote some self-help books, became a notetaker for deaf and hard-of-hearing college students, and worked briefly in technical support. It was enough to teach me that the people in charge of companies and organizations aren't necessarily smarter or harder-working than me. They just made different life choices.

My parents wanted me to return to school for law or medicine, but I knew that I could make

a greater impact on the world in a newer and less established field. I had thought of starting a hypnosis practice, but waffled on the decision, because I was afraid of the risk of business failure. Who was I to compete against all the established centres?

In August 2006, at the age of 23, I took a Vipassana meditation retreat where I was bound to silence (piece of cake!) and had no choice but to meditate for 10 days straight. It cleared my head of fear, doubt and worry, at least for a few weeks afterward, and the path forward was clear.

Once I got back to Toronto, I started looking for office space. Two weeks later, I rented an office suite at 15 Elm Street in the downtown core, and I moved in on September 1, 2006. I paid first and last month's rent using the cheques that came with my credit card. My friend Kabral, who was working at a furniture chain at the time, sold me the largest recliner he had in stock, also on credit. I found a web designer who was a friend of a friend, and started advertising on Google. Thus began The Morpheus Clinic for Hypnosis.

I'm writing this in April 2022. Since I opened my practice, we've had over 7000 clients come through our doors for hypnosis sessions. I've trained dozens of students in my thinking around hypnosis, and we've had several associate hypnotists start under my roof before they started their own practices.

I'm proud of what my staff and I have created so far, but I'm still only 39 years old, which means that I'm only about a third of my way through my career. Most likely, I will spend the rest of my life practising, teaching and speaking about hypnosis. By writing this booklet, I'm

hoping to articulate everything I've learned up to this point, so that I can set my sights on bigger goals that I've yet to realize.

Why Hypnotists Need Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge or justified belief — in other words, *how* you know *what* you know. It's essential for the scientific method, modern medicine, many branches of law, most academic disciplines and pretty much every legitimate profession. If hypnosis is to be recognized as a real profession by other professionals, we need to start caring about epistemology.

Every time a client asks, “will you be able to help me?” they're asking an epistemological question. Essentially, they're asking me to predict whether a small number of hypnosis sessions will result in the specific, lasting changes that they're asking for. They're asking me to make that prediction even though I know very little about them, and normally, they're going to hold me to it. It's the kind of question that I can only answer after assessing their suggestibility, and learning about their history, motivation, challenges, needs and goals.

Unfortunately, many hypnotists don't care enough about sound epistemology. Especially if they don't have policies (internal or external) that disincentivize exaggerated claims, or if they're starving for clients, they'll often answer yes to a client's inquiry because it's in their own best interests, not the client's best interests. I've always been an outlier — I've never seen any other practitioner receive reviews for turning

down clients, but I have three of them so far (two 1-star, one 5-star). In fact, most of the bad reviews that I have on Google or Yelp are from people who I turned down as clients (“he needs to go back to hypnosis school,” wrote one of them). Nonetheless, I'm going to continue turning down clients every time I believe that hypnosis is not right for them. The vast majority of them thank me for my honesty rather than complaining about it on the Internet.

Epistemology is also important to the practice of hypnosis because both clients and practitioners need to form working hypotheses about how hypnosis can help with the client's issue. For most of my clients and myself, the explanation of “it'll happen *unconsciously*” isn't good enough. (If that explanation happens to make sense to you now, it won't make sense by the time you're finished reading this booklet.) To give you an example, a working hypothesis might be that “because you had previously stopped smoking for your first child, you can stop smoking again once you come to appreciate your own life and good health as much as your child's.” Without a thoughtful hypothesis for each part of your program, your hypnotist is throwing stuff at the wall and hoping that it sticks.

Epistemology is not intuitive for most human beings. The scientific method wasn't developed until relatively recently in human history. Even now in the 21st century, educated people will unironically express emotional reasoning (“it's right because it feels right”), appeal to authority (“it's true because Dr. Smith says so”) or superstitions, without having these forms of illogic challenged by their peers. Other professionals have to pass exams that

demonstrate their critical thinking abilities, but hypnotists do not, and that means you sometimes have to ask the questions that we won't.

What Is Hypnosis, Anyway?

There are as many definitions of hypnosis as there are practitioners. Some academics think it's just social roleplaying (obviously, these researchers have seen a lot of hypnosis shows in nightclubs) while others think that it's a distinct and measurable state of mind.

For this booklet, our working definition of hypnosis is that it's a state of mind where the client is more open to accepting new ideas. Relaxation is part of hypnosis, and it's normally the way that we get people into hypnosis, but relaxation does not define hypnosis. Brainwave patterns do not define it, either. Suspension of disbelief gets closer, but the key defining quality of hypnosis compared to any other state of mind is *the heightened ability to accept new ideas*.

Subjectively, hypnosis feels like you're half-awake and half-asleep. Imagine nodding off during a train ride and drifting into a deeply absorbing daydream. After an indeterminate amount of time, you hear your stop announced, and suddenly you're wide awake again. In that situation, you were awake enough to hear your stop, but asleep enough that your analytical faculties were suspended and the passage of time felt different. Hypnosis feels like you're in that state, except with the hypnotist's voice guiding your experience. Normally, you would feel especially heavy or light, such that it might be hard to move a

muscle, and time feels like it passes very quickly.

I take it practically for granted that every client will be deeply relaxed during a session, that most of them will enter into a measurable state of hypnosis, that I will be able to affect them for the better one way or another, and that I will be able to give them perspectives that they hadn't considered before. These things happen consistently in every session that I do, and if they don't, I don't charge the client for the session.

However, simply going into hypnosis doesn't predict that you'll get the outcomes you want, just like starting a daydream doesn't predict that you're going to write the next hit novel or screenplay. It's just the first step, which makes change easier.

What actually causes long-term change is the acceptance of ideas suggested during hypnosis. This is a very important point to understand, because most people focus on simply getting into hypnosis, which happens in the first few minutes, rather than the message that is communicated during hypnosis. Getting the message right is where all my thinking, problem-solving and creativity goes when I'm planning or delivering a session, and it's the part that requires the most skill.

There is credence to the idea of hypnotic depth. Not to be confused with phrases like "deeply relaxed" or "deeply rooted," hypnotic depth is a measure of how extreme of a suggestion the client can accept. Different academic researchers have come up with different depth scales, with anywhere from four to fifty levels of hypnosis that can be tested for

by giving the client a particular suggestion and seeing whether or not they accept it.

For example, if the client accepts the suggestion that “your eyelids are so relaxed that they no longer work,” they are in at least a light state of hypnosis (the suggestion is supposed to be strange, because that’s what makes acceptance of the suggestion significant). If they’re able to accept the suggestion that “when you open your eyes, you’ll be unable to see your pen,” they are in a much deeper state. Therefore, we can objectively measure that a client is really hypnotized, and to what degree. These kinds of phenomena tend to happen in hypnosis, but not in a normal waking state, which is what makes them useful for measuring hypnotic states.

Schools of thought around hypnosis can be generally divided into two categories: psychoanalytic or cognitive-behavioural. Most practitioners won’t actually describe their techniques using these terms, especially if they practise in jurisdictions where psychotherapy is regulated, so I’ll break it down further: If your hypnotist talks about delving into the depths of the unconscious mind, exploring childhood memories or how you feel about your mother, their approach is psychoanalytic. On the other hand, if your hypnotist talks about adopting more realistic thoughts and expecting better feelings to follow from better thinking, they’re coming from a cognitive-behavioural perspective. For a skeptic, the cognitive-behavioural approach will make more sense.

When I first started my practice, my approach was much more psychoanalytic (or Freudian) than it is today, because when I studied

hypnosis, I was taught about the importance of the unconscious mind and unconscious processes. The reason I changed my approach is that the analytical approach can take a lot of time, and solutions often can’t be found by exploring the past. Instead, I now believe that the solutions are more abundant in the attitudes of “healthy” individuals who *don’t* have the problem that you have. Part of my job as a hypnotist is to know these attitudes and help you adopt them for the situation you’re in.

In regard to Ericksonian hypnosis, sometimes referred to as conversational or covert hypnosis, I think that Dr. Milton H. Erickson was a genius and deserves the reputation he has among hypnotists. At the same time, my clients want to be formally hypnotized, and to feel unambiguously that they were hypnotized, which means that I don’t use any covert techniques in my work. Covert techniques are the long way around when I’m working with a willing participant who’s ready to accept new ideas, and who would close their eyes when I ask them to.

There are many practices related to hypnosis, and often practised by hypnotists, with fancy names and trademarks. I’m a fan of Neuro-Linguistic Programming in particular, but I’m skeptical of giving any special credence to techniques that are taught primarily by one person or group. Many techniques that sound like hypnosis are just hypnosis under a different name, with a specific protocol that the practitioner is to follow when the client is hypnotized.

The Bold Guarantee That Gave Me a Very Unique Perspective on Hypnosis

One of the most important lessons that I learned early in life is that marketing is a process of figuring out what clients want and giving it to them, *not* tricking people into buying products or services that they don't need. And what I'd noticed when I talked about hypnosis is that it raises a lot of skepticism. If somebody is going to pay for it at all, the thinking goes, it had better work or else the money would be wasted. In other words, potential clients want a guarantee.

If you ask most of my colleagues in the hypnosis profession about guarantees, they would say that "you can't guarantee another person's behaviour" or that "psychologists and doctors don't give guarantees." These statements are true, but both are missing the point. Imagine if your dentist offered a guarantee that no fee is incurred if you're not satisfied with your dental work — don't you think their service and their work would be just a touch better?

The marketing guru Jay Abraham describes money-back guarantees as risk reversal, where the rule of *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) is turned on its head, and it's the seller who has to be critical and mindful. He says that for a guarantee to be ethical, it has to be unconditional (no fine print) and it has to be a full refund policy.

So that's the guarantee that I offered. Guarantees are only a gimmick when there are restrictive conditions (as Tom Waits once sang,

"the large print giveth and the small print taketh away"). In my case, I wanted my guarantee to be a tool for ensuring happy clients and for improving my own work as a hypnotist.

For my first few years, I was guaranteeing results ("stop smoking or you don't pay"), but after hiring my first associates, I bowed to pressure and changed the wording so that it became a satisfaction-based guarantee. It was unconditional for 15 years, but because clients occasionally abused the policy, I recently had to add a condition that requires the client to provide critical feedback that will improve my work with future clients. That made it clearer that the point is to buy their feedback, since I can't buy back their purchase the way that a retailer does.

Having a strong and well-publicized guarantee means that I've been able to avoid a huge pitfall that most hypnotists fall into. Hypnotists almost universally assume they're more successful than they are, because they don't seek or receive enough client feedback. A doctor or psychologist has the long-term view that comes with being able to follow a client for months or years, but a hypnotist only sees the average client for a handful of sessions. Unless they have a robust followup system in place, most of them wouldn't even know it if a client relapsed. On the other hand, when my associates or I have clients who are dissatisfied, we often hear back from them.

There are many things they don't teach you in hypnosis school that you only find out once you start practising. For example, I learned very quickly that "everybody can be hypnotized" is a myth, for all intents and purposes. In fact,

there are many myths promoted in hypnosis schools that are more for the benefit of hypnotists than the general public. Later in this book, I'll cover them.

Having a strong guarantee also means that I can't take everybody as a client, and that I had to get good at predicting who's likely to succeed with hypnosis and who isn't. My response is always the same: The scientific literature supports the idea that different people are suggestible to different degrees. Besides, it's better to find out that you're low in suggestibility during a free consultation rather than five sessions down the line.

Hypnotists can't stick with a money-back guarantee unless they're good at both hypnosis and setting reasonable expectations. I once hired a practitioner who had been trained at another centre that was known for making bigger promises. Her refund rate was 30%, and she did not last long working for me. I was ready to keep her onboard if she scaled back her claims and adapted to client expectations, but she could not stand the repeated blows to her morale, and she quit. Over the years, I've seen competitors offer money-back guarantees and then stop after a few months. I've seen other competitors who advertise guarantees and then don't give any refunds, which is fraud as far as I'm concerned. That's all I'm going to say about guarantees that aren't coming from a sincere and perfectionistic desire to ensure client satisfaction.

Having a money-back guarantee means that none of my associates are able to make extravagant or unrealistic promises, because if the client is disappointed, the session's free. It's a very different way of viewing the

hypnotist–client relationship compared to the usual rule of *caveat emptor*.

Over the years, my practice has refunded enough in client fees that the sum of all the refunds could have paid for a graduate degree — an expensive, real-world education in what works and what doesn't. But the way I see it, this is just the price I had to pay in order to excel at the profession that I've chosen, and to learn lessons that only become evident when things hit the fan.

My refund rate has declined steadily, to the point where it's around 1% every year. I take this to mean that I'm underpromising and overdelivering with all my clients, which is exactly where I want to be.

The Problem with the Unconscious Mind

As a general observation, amateurs tend to talk about the subconscious mind, academics talk about the unconscious mind and professionals talk about strategies and results. We don't get to live in ivory towers and make theories about what could be happening during hypnosis. Our clients expect results, and as a quirk among hypnosis clients, they expect results much faster than they do from any other professional.

The longer I practice, the more I've found that the concept of the unconscious mind is unnecessary for professional practice or a client's understanding of how hypnosis works. It just complicates matters, and it raises an important epistemic question: How is anybody supposed to speak about something that is

unconscious with any degree of confidence or certainty?

It's completely fair to say that the thoughts or perceptions currently in your conscious awareness aren't all of the thoughts or perceptions that your mind could turn its attention to. It's also fair to say that sometimes people do, think or feel things without realizing why. But it's not quite fair to say that hypnosis can reveal to you what's in your unconscious mind with any degree of reliability. Nor is it fair to favour unconscious processes so much that conscious decision-making is forced to ride in the backseat. Instead, when I'm doing a hypnosis session, supporting the client's conscious decision-making with attitudes and perspectives that validate their own decisions strikes me as a more reliable way to help them, when compared to passing responsibility onto a huge unknown.

If you've ever read Freud, you know how wild many of his theories about the unconscious mind are — and he's considered to be one of the greatest thinkers of all time. I believe that the reason many of his theories are so wild is that describing the unconscious mind is a very dubious endeavour, for anybody. So dubious, in fact, that I rarely do it at all anymore.

Trying to figure out the unconscious mind is like peering into a very dark room. So far, nobody has found a light switch, and everybody's just guessing what's inside. As fun as that might be at a dinner party, it's cocktail conversation, and it isn't particularly useful for professional practice.

That's one of my favourite metaphors for the unconscious mind, by the way. The unconscious mind is like a gigantic room that's

completely dark, except for where you're shining a single beam of light. That single light beam is your conscious mind, and when you turn it away from one corner of the room, you're illuminating a different part.

My other favourite metaphor for the unconscious mind is that of the horse and rider: the conscious mind is like a rider sitting on a horse that's running out of control. It doesn't matter how much you're pulling at the reins, the horse has all the power until you calm or tame it.

I have to explain the unconscious mind using metaphors because science doesn't have many theories or explanations for it. It's already hard enough to study subjective experiences using science. How is science supposed to study subjectivity that the client isn't even aware of? The best that science can do is observe people from the outside.

“But if you call yourself a hypnotist,” you might object, “it means that you work with the unconscious mind.” Well, yes and no. I would rephrase the last part of that statement as “speaking in ways designed to change another person's attitudes.” This phrasing describes the same idea — even a novice hypnotist would tell you that a person's attitudes are formed in the unconscious mind — except it's more specific and doesn't require further explanation for clients who don't follow Freud.

How to Critically Evaluate Claims Made by Hypnotists

If you're a client, it's important that you're able to evaluate claims made by a practitioner. If they say that they can help you, they should

also be able to say *how* they can help you. As it should be increasingly clear, “by hypnotizing you” isn’t a complete answer. A more substantial answer would explain how they are going to change your attitudes, beliefs or worldview such that the new attitudes cause you to be better off than you are today.

Hypnosis works when the practitioner uses language (“verbal suggestion”) to affect the way you feel, think or perceive the world or yourself. It requires you to participate fully, which is the part of hypnosis that many clients miss. Therefore, any claim by a hypnotist that they can affect your thinking, attitudes or beliefs is probably true.

What’s unlikely is that hypnosis has any effect beyond changing your thinking, attitudes or beliefs. When it comes to manifestation, the law of attraction, past-life regression, healing of medical disorders or diseases, and psychic or paranormal phenomena, I do not deny that clients can have very powerful and personally significant experiences when participating in hypnosis sessions for these matters. However, it’s a stretch to say that a subjective experience that *feels* true *is* true.

Everybody knows how the placebo effect needs to be ruled out when assessing treatments, because the placebo effect means that *any* treatment will help the client, even when there’s no other mechanism. Here are a few lesser-known phenomena that cause sham treatments to appear effective as well: confirmation bias, where people tend to look for evidence that confirms what they already believe; regression to mean, where any problem (such as stress levels, for example) tends to return closer to normal after a particularly bad

day, even without any treatment; and self-fulfilling prophecies, where people cause things to happen because they expect them to happen.

That’s a dirty secret of the hypnosis business. Many of us say things to create positive expectancy, intending to help you through optimism rather than a cool-headed assessment of your situation. But you won’t find many practitioners who make the most optimistic predictions to create positive expectancy *and* who have a money-back guarantee at the same time, because it’s a strategy that results in consistently overpromising and under-delivering.

Having said all of that, I do think that the practice of hypnosis is more of an art than a science. As a method for studying the world objectively, science isn’t an ideal tool for studying subjective experience. When I am in a creative mood, rather than a strictly logical mood, my sessions get better feedback.

When I’m in a cheeky mood, I say that placebos are a way for doctors and scientists to hypnotize people into thinking that they’re getting help! More fairly, both hypnosis and the placebo effect are examples of the power of suggestion. Even sugar pills aren’t worthless: different colours of placebos have been shown to produce different effects. Only hypnosis is upfront about the fact that it works by suggestion, not any other mechanism.

That point is worth reiterating. Hypnotists might be the only professionals who will openly state that we’re using the power of suggestion to help our clients. I think that’s something to be proud of. Rather than trying to peer into the unconscious mind or doing

spiritualism or therapy under a different name, I think that hypnotists should be proud to be part of a unique profession that specializes in using the power of verbal suggestion to help people.

I hope that this booklet is giving you a good understanding of how hypnosis works. This way, you can make informed decisions about your own treatment, and hypnosis does not have to be a mystery to you. Next, I want to go over some myths that many people believe about hypnosis, before they start to study it further.

Myths Believed by the Public

Myth #1: Hypnosis is trickery

People do not have to be gullible or weak-willed to be hypnotized. This myth comes from the idea that a hypnotist tricks or deceives the client into hypnosis, or that the client has to believe untruths (like that cigarettes taste like dog poop) for hypnosis to work. Instead, I believe that hypnosis should only be used to help people to see truths that they had either overlooked or forgotten.

To use a very common example, smokers tend not to think through the consequences of their smoking, because it's very uncomfortable to contemplate their own early death. Some truths that they had overlooked are: how many cigarettes they had breathed into their own lungs over their entire life when visualized together in a giant pile; the pile of cash they'd burned by buying all those cigarettes; what the inside of their lungs probably look like; how their family would feel if they died 15 years early from preventable causes; how 85% of

their friends and neighbours have similar stresses, yet never smoke a cigarette. These ideas are just matters of fact, and a large part of my job is to show people truths that, once seen, are hard to unsee.

In my opinion, the suggestions given by a hypnotist to a client when they are in hypnosis should be *validated* by reality, rather than disproven by them. Cigarettes don't actually taste like dog poop, but that visual image of a giant, growing pile of cigarettes represents the truth. The reason that hypnosis doesn't require you to believe anything that's untrue is that the truth is compelling enough.

Myth #2: Hypnosis is mind control

Another common myth is that a hypnotist will get you to do or say things against your will. This isn't just a violation of professional ethics—it's very difficult to do. I sometimes joke that if I could control people's minds, I would already have created a legion of servants ready to do my bidding, rather than working for a living.

If a hypnotist says anything that stretches the imagination too far or misses the mark, the client's conscious defenses tend to kick in, and their mind closes at least a little bit.

You are the only person that is in control of your thoughts, your actions and your speech. Hypnosis makes you *more* suggestible, but even the most highly skilled hypnotists cannot make you *completely* suggestible. That's why we have to be careful and measured in the words we choose, the way we speak and the approach we take to help you with your problems.

The hypnotist's role is to guide the client toward the kind of outcomes that the client has asked for, and the client's role is then to follow. If the hypnotist is leading the client in directions other than what the client has asked for, it's not just unethical, it's likely to be noticed by the client.

Myth #3: Hypnosis can make you stuck there

The myth of getting stuck in hypnosis is just like a myth of getting stuck in a daydream: it doesn't happen. People can bring themselves out of hypnosis, even if the hypnotist does not facilitate their emergence, and that means it's impossible to get stuck in hypnosis.

Anybody who seems to be "stuck" in hypnosis is either asleep (which means they'll respond to a tap on the shoulder) or they're not ready to emerge yet (usually because they're feeling really, really good). In either situation, they'll emerge eventually.

Myth #4: Hypnosis is supernatural

Hypnotism has nothing to do with the supernatural, voodoo, black magic, necromancy, Satanic rituals, or anything of the sort.

Hypnotists study how language affects people. We use verbal suggestions to give people better ways to think about their situation. There are no supernatural elements involved in that line of thinking at all. Instead, we teach people how to think, with the client's heightened suggestibility serving as a kind of accelerated learning.

Myth #5: Hypnosis is sleep

When you're in hypnosis, you are not literally unconscious. Hypnotists use the word "unconscious" to refer to processes in your mind that are outside of conscious awareness, rather than to a state of mind.

Instead, hypnosis feels like you're half-awake and half-asleep. You'll be awake enough to hear what your hypnotist is saying and to respond to instructions, but asleep enough that you aren't thinking critically and will have an easier time imagining different scenarios (usually to the point where mental images arise through no conscious effort on your part).

If I believe that a client has fallen asleep, I will ask the client three times to respond to an instruction (usually to lift a finger), and if they don't respond, I will emerge them and bring them back into hypnosis. That's because a person who isn't responding to a simple instruction that they can follow immediately won't be responding to the vastly more complex instructions that they're meant to accept for life.

Myth #6: Hypnosis gives you "superpowers"

Hypnosis is not a shortcut to enlightenment. It doesn't completely quiet your mind, it doesn't perfect your concentration or focus, and it doesn't make you all-wise or all-knowing. It doesn't significantly improve your memory, at least when it comes to arbitrary information.

Sometimes, my office gets phone calls from desperate people who have tried everything, and they want hypnosis to be a magic bullet.

These are the people who need this booklet the most.

Myth #7: Hypnosis is a lie detector or truth serum

Once in a while, my office will receive a call asking us to hypnotize them or their spouse to prove or disprove marital infidelity. The answer is always no.

Above all else, hypnosis is a state of heightened suggestibility. This makes it too easy for somebody who's hypnotized to believe sincerely in a false idea. This is the opposite effect of what you would want a lie detector to do.

In Canada, the Supreme Court has ruled that hypnotically uncovered evidence cannot be admitted in court, out of recognition of how unreliable this kind of evidence is.

Myths Perpetuated by Hypnotists

This chapter has the potential to ruffle some feathers, but I'm willing to stand behind everything I've written here.

Myth #1: Hypnosis is completely safe

This is a good sound bite for a public relations campaign, but the reality is more complicated. Every tool or technique that has an effect can also have side effects. Even pure water, which is essential to life, can drown you if you're careless with it.

If you go into hypnosis and come back out again immediately, the probability that something will go wrong is very small.

However, once the hypnotist starts to give suggestions, that probability goes up.

The biggest risk is accepting false or dangerous ideas. For example, if you're seeking help for weight loss and your hypnotist convinces you to fully accept the idea that you will survive a month-long fast (an idea that some people accept without hypnosis), the effects of your sessions could be disastrous.

Another example is when false memories arise, the hypnotist suggests that they are real, and then the client has full confidence in false memories. This happened a lot in the 1980s, and it tore families apart. The way that I see it, I'm in the business of helping people think more clearly, not the business of creating delusions.

In some cases, a client needs different or more specialized care than what a hypnotist is able to provide. If the hypnotist accepts the client anyway, they are delaying effective treatment and unnecessarily prolonging the client's suffering.

These risks can be mitigated if you know what they are. Instead of pretending that hypnosis is totally safe, I want practitioners to practice in a risk-aware way, and to actually care about good reasoning, sound epistemology and evidence.

Myth #2: Our brain cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined

Like many things that hypnotists say in public, this is an overstatement. Somebody who literally can't tell the difference between reality

and imagination is either dreaming or psychotic.

I agree with the idea that imagination is underrated, and that adults should use theirs more, but the effects of imagination and visualization don't have to be overstated in order to be believed in.

Myth #3: All fears are caused by trauma, which has to be resolved at its root

Often, this myth comes with the metaphor that overcoming a fear is like lancing a boil or pulling out a weed. It's an enticing idea that makes sense intuitively—after all, everything has a cause, right? And if you remove the cause, you'll fix the problem, right?

The problem with this myth is that it discounts human nature. I read an article recently that said 80% of the population has the fear of public speaking. That means a fearless public speaker is *abnormal*, and an anxious public speaker is normal. Not all fears are caused by trauma — some are caused by human nature.

In the ongoing nature vs. nurture debate, evidence supports the fact that both are important, and neither can be ignored. The idea that all fears or other problems are caused by trauma ignores the entire “nature” side of the debate, which means that looking for specific “root causes” in a person's memories often turns into a wild goose chase. Often, the most relevant memory that some clients can come up with is an *early experience* when they felt a fear, which is different from a *cause*.

Myth #4: Our problems stem from past lives

Many hypnotists practise past-life regression, which purports to help clients explore who they were before they were born into their current life. They would say that, if you were a sailor who drowned in 1733, it explains why you're afraid of the ocean today. For past-life regression to be valid, three things would have to be true:

1. We are reincarnated after death.
2. Memories are accessible between incarnations.
3. A specialized form of commercialized hypnosis is how we access these memories.

The first point is accepted by several major world religions. The second point seems plausible if you believe in reincarnation. But it's primarily hypnotists who promote the last point, rather than followers of religions that sincerely believe in reincarnation.

I've only had a small number of clients experience past-life regression spontaneously, and all of them already believed that their issue had past-life causes. If the practitioner doesn't actually advertise past-life regression or ask questions like “is this memory in a past life or your current life?” very few clients will find themselves spontaneously regressed to a “past life.”

Myth #5: Everyone can easily be hypnotized

I decided to write this myth as “everyone can easily be hypnotized” rather than “everyone can be hypnotized,” which are two different

statements. By “easily,” I mean during a first session, after which most clients expect some kind of change.

Like most of these myths, the idea that everybody is a good candidate for hypnosis is promoted primarily by professional hypnotists, rather than academics or researchers in the field, or clients, for that matter.

If you don't trust hypnotists or people in general, if you're not fluent in the language of your hypnotist, if you just can't let go of analytical thought, if you're very concrete in your thinking, if you're thinking about the process rather than engaging in it, then you probably won't be easy to hypnotize.

Suggestibility testing is the most reliable way to determine if somebody is a good candidate for hypnosis. Some people are highly suggestible, and these are a large proportion of clients who write testimonials. Most people (those in the middle part of the suggestibility bell curve) are just average in suggestibility. About 10 or 15% of the people we assess aren't very suggestible, and in this case, we recommend alternative next steps.

Myth #6: Human memory is like computer memory

Back when the steam engine was popular, people used hydraulic metaphors to describe the human mind. In the 21st century, people use computer metaphors. However, it's important not to confuse the metaphor with the actual reality.

Human memory is messy, fragile and unreliable. A dozen people who saw the same incident and are asked to recall it afterward will

have a dozen different stories about it. False memories do occur, and sometimes memories aren't formed properly in the first place, such as when an event occurred in your infancy, or while you were blackout drunk. If you want to learn more about false memories, the preeminent researcher in the field is Elizabeth Loftus.

My office will usually turn down requests to help with memory recall, unless the information that comes out during a session can be immediately corroborated, such as when the request is to find a misplaced object or remember a forgotten safe combination. Otherwise, it's practically impossible to tell the difference between a real memory and a false memory, and I never want to give a client confidence in a false memory.

Myth #7: The unconscious mind contains all the answers we seek

Among some hypnotists, there's a nearly religious reverence for the unconscious mind. It's said to heal us when given the right instructions, know our heart's deepest desires and guide us on the right path. At the same time, it's the part of us that causes us to smoke cigarettes or eat junk food against our better judgment.

My explanation for this logical inconsistency is that people who revere the unconscious mind are making the same mistake as Freud, which is to peer into a completely dark room and explain what's inside.

Myth #8: All hypnosis is self-hypnosis

This is another comforting line that makes for good public relations. But the reason we

distinguish self-hypnosis from hetero-hypnosis (as it's called when the hypnotist and subject are two different people) is that there's a real difference.

Self-hypnosis is more akin to meditation, where the person who's being hypnotized is his or her own guide. When the hypnotist is another person, however, the client can let go much more completely, because they do not need to think or plan ahead at the same time.

How Hypnosis Differs from Related Practices

Stage Hypnosis

Many people were first exposed to hypnosis by watching a stage hypnosis show, which can be very entertaining, but which can leave them with the impression that hypnosis is magic. Just like with stage magic, this impression is just an illusion. If you don't want to have the illusion pierced, please skip to the next session.

Here's how stage hypnosis works: First, the hypnotist will ask audience members to volunteer to come on stage, which means that only the boldest will volunteer in the first place. Second, the show starts with overt or subtle suggestibility exercises, and the volunteers who are not very suggestible are returned back to the audience. Third, we have an authority figure (The Amazing Jack or The Incredible Jill) telling volunteers what to do, which absolves them of responsibility as far as they're concerned. Fourth, the volunteers know that it's a hypnosis show, and they know what's going to be expected of them when they volunteer. And finally, we have an audience

that's cheering and applauding every time a volunteer does something increasingly outrageous. Add everything together, and the hypnosis part is practically of secondary importance. The selection process and social pressures are better explanations for why people do bizarre things on stage.

The challenges of stage hypnosis are different from the challenges of the kind of work that I do. On stage, the challenge is to get the volunteer to accept or act out a bizarre idea temporarily. In my office, the challenge is to get the client to accept a normal and healthy idea permanently.

Psychotherapy

In the province of Ontario, psychotherapy is now a regulated health profession, while hypnosis (or hypnotherapy, to use an older term) is not. I had already opened my practice when the province passed a law to regulate psychotherapy, and I remember having quite a number of panicky conversations at the time about whether or not hypnosis would qualify as psychotherapy for regulatory purposes. As it turns out, the answer is no.

I've come to see psychotherapy and hypnosis as very different practices. That's why the average hypnosis client only attends a handful of sessions, while the average psychotherapy client will attend sessions for months or even years.

On the most surface level, the most visible difference is that psychotherapy is a dialogue, usually with the client doing most of the talking and the therapist taking a somewhat Socratic role, while hypnosis is much more of a monologue from the hypnotist to the client.

Psychotherapists want their clients to realize their own insights while they facilitate the client's own process. They rarely just tell their clients what to think. Hypnotists, on the other hand, specialize in delivering verbal suggestions. That means we explicitly and shamelessly tell clients what to think — at least, within the parameters of why they've hired us.

Because people can spend years in psychotherapy, the course of treatment arises organically, and ends up depending more on the client's needs than the therapist's plans. However, because hypnosis clients expect results very quickly, it's necessary for us to generalize from past experience or human nature, without having the time to learn very much about the client we're working with.

Psychotherapy also tends to be more present- and past-focused, while hypnosis tends to be more present- and future-focused.

I hope you understand why I don't want or need to be treated like a therapist. It's okay to keep your most private thoughts to yourself, because my job is more about delivering solutions than examining problems. It's good enough for me that you are aware of your own thoughts and feelings, so that you can see where my suggestions fill in the gaps or give you stepping stones.

Meditation

Both meditation and hypnosis are relaxed and inwardly focused states of mind, but that's about where the similarities end. Meditation is more observational, while hypnosis is directive. In meditation, you're trying *not* to think or do

anything, while in hypnosis, you're actively trying to change something.

In my opinion, once you add the word "guided" to "meditation," the practice no longer counts as meditation, and it's basically light hypnosis under a softer and gentler name. I believe the same about guided visualization.

How I Use Hypnosis to Help with Common Issues

Hypnosis can help with any issue that can be resolved with a change in attitude, belief or behaviour. Typically, the attitudes, beliefs or behaviours that I want the client to adopt are those that a normal or healthy person would have in the same situations that the client is in. About half of our clients come for the three issues described in this section (smoking, weight loss and fears or anxiety), while the other half come for virtually any problem that exists in the human mind.

Smoking Cessation

I love working with my smoking clients. It's a problem that most psychotherapists have no interest in working with, which means that a lot of clients come to a hypnotist like me instead. If this problem could be solved for everybody, it would save billions of human life-years.

Often, potential clients would ask, "if you can help somebody stop smoking in one or two sessions, why do you have such a hard time knowing how many sessions I would need for my anxiety?"

Smokers are different from every other group of clients. First, they fit a template: Most of my smoking clients started in their teenage years (sometimes a little younger, sometimes a little older), in order to fit in with a certain group. Most of them have tried to stop smoking before, but started again because of stress, alcohol or a vacation. All of them know how unhealthy smoking is, but the knowledge itself isn't enough to make them stop. The first cigarette of the morning always feels the best.

Second, smoking is a problem that many people overcome by making a decision. I would guess that more people stop smoking by making a strong decision during a crisis point — they get dumped again, their uncle gets lung cancer, they calculate that they spent \$5000 on cigarettes in the past year — than through hypnosis. One of my objectives with hypnosis is to re-create this kind of decision point, but without anything bad happening first.

Third, cigarette smoking is entirely detrimental, which means that most people have the motivation to stop by the time they've sought out a hypnotist.

For any health-related issue, the first thing I would want the client to experience is a deep love and appreciation for their own body. Most smokers would never breathe smoke into a cat or dog's face, and sometimes they wouldn't even smoke inside their own cars, but they would breathe smoke directly into their own lungs. So the first step is for the client to love their own body, and their own life, at least as much as their car.

Then, I would talk down the appeal of tobacco. Nicotine is an insecticide that the tobacco plant evolved to kill the bugs that would eat its leaves.

Breathing in smoke just to get a momentary high is just like huffing paint or sniffing glue to get high. Sometimes, I use the analogy that stopping smoking is like breaking up with a toxic partner, because they've tricked you into believing that you need and want them, but it's all a lie. You need oxygen, healthy food, clean water, warmth and even love — you never, ever needed cigarettes.

In a second session, I would usually have the client revisit pleasant, early life experiences as a reminder that they were born as a non-smoker, and they likely abhorred cigarette smoke as a child. Their first cigarette probably made them sick, which is a normal reaction (tolerating smoke is abnormal). Usually the client can imagine their entire life history as a non-smoker and see that it's better in every way.

I recently read that the prevalence of tobacco use in the United States has dropped to 15% of the general population. That's fantastic news. It means that 85% of your neighbours and colleagues would never touch a cigarette even though they have similar stressors that you do. My main objective for my smoking clients is for them to adopt the same attitudes that non-smokers have.

Weight Management

Weight management is an issue that, unlike smoking, could take anywhere from a couple of sessions on the low end to ten sessions or even more on the high end. Ultimately, there's no getting around basic physics and biology: we need to create a caloric deficit for the client to lose weight, and losing any significant amount of weight is going to take time. It won't ever be a strong decision like stopping smoking is.

This means eating less food (or drinking fewer calorie-laden beverages) and getting more movement. Between the two, it's much easier to eat 500 fewer calories than to burn off 500 extra calories, so I tend to focus more on diet than exercise.

Typically, I'll tell the client that they should only aim to lose 1 to 2 pounds per week. A 500 calorie per day deficit will result in about 1 pound lost per week, which is 52 pounds in a year. People want to lose weight fast, but when they deprive themselves and suffer in the process, rapid weight loss is not sustainable. Instead, I want my clients to normalize a healthy lifestyle, and denormalize junk food, inactivity and other unhealthy choices.

Wherever I can find an opportunity to reduce the client's caloric intake, I will focus on it. Emotional eating is the big one, but snacking between meals and portion control are very common as well. Many of my clients who come to me to stop drinking alcohol consider weight loss to be a motivation.

In most of my weight loss programs, I want the client to accept the following attitudes: I love my body unconditionally; I am the guardian of my body; I am just as responsible for my body as I am for a child or pet; my body deserves better than junk; my body isn't just a source of stress or desire, but also a source of comfort, joy and pleasure; I'm okay with feeling hungry sometimes; I'm okay with feeling exhausted sometimes. These kinds of healthy attitudes are what a sustainable weight loss program is based on.

Fears and Anxiety

The most common fears that I see in my office are the fear of public speaking, the fear of flying and the fear of driving. Once in a while, a client will present with a fear of animals or insects. I will only work with irrational fears, which means that I would help a client who wants help walking through a dog park calmly, but I wouldn't help a client become fearless of walking on the railroad tracks.

I'll pick the fear of flying as an example. The kinds of attitudes that I would want to instill are: flying is routine and predictable enough to be boring; the only fair prediction is that the plane will land safely at the end; you trust physics; you can trust the pilots, engineers, air traffic controllers, regulators, mechanics and every other conscientious professional that's dedicated to ensuring aviation safety; a plane in flight isn't suspended over nothing, and instead, air is a tangible substance; turbulence is just like waves on a lake; turbulence always ends unremarkably after a few minutes; you could enjoy turbulence like a rollercoaster; even during turbulence, there's a massive cushion of air keeping the plane aloft; as a vehicle, planes are just as unremarkable as trains and elevators; your fears have always misled you, and the truth always turns out that the plane lands safely at the end.

If you don't have a fear of flying, reading this list of attitudes might evoke a shrug at best. But if you do have a fear of flying, fully accepting all of these attitudes will eliminate that fear.

When I'm planning a session, I want to figure out the attitudes that a normal, healthy person has about the situation that the client is in, and

communicate those attitudes to the client. I would only make suggestions that are true and comforting, or true and empowering at the same time, because only truthful ideas will stand the test of time. In my experience, grounding the client in unshakable truths serves them better than giving them techniques that they will have to keep repeating, when it comes to long-term change.

How Would I Select a Hypnotist If I Were Looking for One

I wasn't sure whether I wanted to include this section, because it's impossible to write it in an unbiased fashion. But if you've read this far, it's probably because you agree with the rest of what I've written in this booklet. So I've decided to write about what criteria I would look for in a hypnotist, as an industry insider. Rather than aiming to be unbiased, I'll tell you how I would shop for a hypnotist for myself or a friend.

My first question would definitely *not* be "How many sessions will it take, and how much does each session cost?" This is a sure way to tell the practitioner or their assistant that I don't know how to shop for a hypnotist and that they have to lead me through their entire sales process so that I will understand the value of what they're offering.

Instead, I want to ask my own questions. For example, the following questions are intended to produce answers that reveal the practitioner's quality of thinking and their processes for working with clients:

- What's your take on how hypnosis actually works?
- How would I know if your sessions are working for me, and whether I should continue?
- Is there any situation where you wouldn't accept me as a client?
- How can your program be so much faster than therapy? Is it just a bandage over my problems?
- Are the results permanent?
- If I haven't noticed any changes after the x sessions that you suggest, what's next?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, as long as they're sincere and well-reasoned. For example, if my question of "Are the results permanent?" is answered with an unqualified "yes," I wouldn't trust the practitioner as much as if they gave me a lengthy answer that can be summed up as "it depends."

I'm not necessarily looking for a confident practitioner. I'm looking for a practitioner who can provide a higher level of thinking than mine. I want to see that they're doing some kind of assessment with me, and aren't just saying yes immediately. I would prefer to hear "I don't know, but here's my best guess" than a confidently stated but unsubstantial answer. I'm listening for sound reasoning and good epistemology. I want to like the sound of their voice. I'm looking for somebody who's willing to speak unpleasant truths as pleasantly as they can. If they have a guarantee, their sense of

responsibility will impress me, but it won't be a deciding factor.

If I think they're smart enough to give me perspectives that I haven't considered before, it doesn't matter as much how many sessions they'll quote, because I know I'll get something out of each session as long as I present my hardest challenges to them. Price matters, but isn't a deciding factor, because I would rather pay top dollar for a top mind than a reasonable price for an average mind. I'm hard to impress, and if I'm going to let somebody put thoughts inside my head, I want those thoughts to be higher-quality than my own. As long as the quality of thought is good, and presented in a way that's easy for me to accept, I know that I won't need many sessions to get their points.

I don't especially care about testimonials, online reviews or signs of what marketers call "social proof," other than that they have some of them. They're always biased, often completely made up and sometimes poorly informed even when they're real. The finest gourmet restaurants have reviews saying that they're too expensive for the portion sizes. You can't satisfy everybody.

Many hypnosis centres have a suspiciously high number of five-star reviews on Google. We've taken in over 7000 clients and we only have 17 reviews on Google with "only" a 4.6-star average. Some newer, less busy practices have 50 reviews or more with a perfect 5-star average. That tells me they're either incentivizing reviews or straight-up buying them.

I don't especially care about formal credentials. One of the best-known psychologists in Toronto once told me that "lay practitioners"

who don't have advanced degrees get roughly the same outcomes as practitioners who have advanced degrees. Degrees, accreditations, licensing, certifications, or registrations just describe a basic level of competence, and every practitioner has one or more of those credentials. If I were hiring a hypnotist, I would assess competence by asking unexpected questions that require original thinking, rather than relying on credentials, just like during a job interview.

Early in my career, I had a prospective client ask me why he should work with me, and among my reasons, I boasted that "I'm certified." He chuckled, but he wouldn't tell me why until I pressed him. "Where I'm from," he said, "being 'certified' means you're certifiably insane!"

I don't necessarily care about years of experience. When I was practising in my 20s, I had a deeper commitment to making sure that every one of my clients was perfectly happy. Now I have more of the attitude that I can't satisfy everybody. The older I get, the more fixed in my ways I become, and that just comes with the territory.

As I mentioned earlier, in Ontario, hypnosis is unregulated. Existing regulatory colleges are treating hypnosis as a distinct practice, as long as we aren't using psychotherapeutic techniques and working with serious mental disorders. I applaud them for this decision. Regulation of hypnosis is essentially the restriction of free speech, which is detrimental to this relatively new and expanding field, in my opinion.

In summary, I'm disillusioned with the ways that people usually shop for a hypnotist. Whenever there's a specific way that people

shop for hypnotists, practitioners respond by perfecting their answers until they're palatable to callers. Instead, I would throw each candidate a series of intellectual curveballs, and decide for myself how many sessions I think I will need with them. Someone who hits the nail on the head repeatedly is worth much more per session-hour than somebody who beats around the bush or wastes my time. But that's just me.

Just like with most services that you're purchasing, the rule of *caveat emptor* applies, and it's up to you to be an informed consumer. The worst that could happen is that you leave your sessions with worse ideas than when you started. For example, if a hypnotist convinces you that your problems are rooted in past lives rather than childhood traumas, it could hinder future treatment through other modalities. Even if you aren't left worse off, you could be spending your money on techniques that make you feel good in the moment, but don't give you any new ways of thinking that are worth keeping in the long run.

The Future of Hypnosis

This section is supposed to be completely speculative. After staying grounded during the rest of the booklet, let's make some predictions about what might become true by the year 2050:

- Hypnosis will have gained more mainstream credibility.
- There won't be a clamour to regulate the practice of hypnosis, and it will remain unregulated in Ontario. This means it still won't be covered by

insurance, and it still won't count as a tax deduction, which keeps the profession small compared to the regulated health professions.

- Hypnosis apps and recordings will become more popular, and they will be well-integrated with biofeedback and virtual or augmented reality devices.
- There will be at least one artificially intelligent hypnotist, and the quality of their sessions will be on par with an average human hypnotist, but most people won't trust it.
- In-office hypnosis sessions will still be popular despite being much more expensive than apps, recordings and AI, because it will be seen as the "real deal." It's similar to how people attend concerts and plays to watch live performances, even though recording technology is very high-fidelity today.
- We will not find a single technique or intervention that is a guaranteed, permanent solution for any problem. Instead, the world of hypnosis (and the related world of mental health treatment) will continue to be a mish-mash of competing schools of thought, most of which will be good enough, and none of which will be perfect or the best.
- The further we get away from Freud's time, the less popular psychoanalytic methods and theories will be.
- Research into psychedelic therapy will cause a wave of interest in the use of

hypnosis as a non-pharmacological (and legal) way to alter human consciousness.

- Trauma, especially complex trauma, will gain recognition as *the* biggest cause of human suffering.
- The prevalence of anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses will increase, despite more mental health awareness and better treatments being available. (I blame perverse incentive structures that start in grade school, and worldviews that are harmful to those who adopt them, such as those that deny objective reality. But that's the subject of another book.)
- There will be even more interest in applying old traditions of thinking, like Buddhism and stoicism, to the treatment of mental health issues.
- We will be embarrassed by many of the commonly accepted ideas and best practices we believed in during the first two decades of the 21st century, including (to pick one example) the serotonin hypothesis of depression.
- Sanism (discrimination against people who have mental illnesses) will become not only a widely used term, but just as unacceptable as racism and sexism have become, at least in polite society and public discourse.

Conclusion

Thank you for reading until the end of this booklet. I hope that you've been able to get

something out of it. If you received a copy because you were considering becoming a client of mine, you now know much more about my background, philosophy, and practice.

If you came across this booklet through a different channel, and you want to know more about me and my work, the best resource is my website:

<https://www.morpheusclinic.com>

My YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/morpheushypnosis>

And my TikTok channel:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@morpheushypnosis>

My latest thoughts, ideas, and work will be shared in these places. If you haven't already joined my newsletter, you can do so from my website. And if you want to experience some free hypnosis sessions that I've recorded, you can find them on my YouTube channel.

I want to thank my teachers, clients, students, employees and associates for their contributions to my knowledge of hypnosis, humanity, and life itself. In addition, I want to thank Mara Bosloy for editing this manuscript and acting as a sounding board for some of my most recent ideas.