

Susan Blackmore 'Being wrong and taking drugs'

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I can tell you lots of things I don't believe, rather than what I do believe. That's because I've been finding things that don't work and then moving on into the great wide world of more things that might work if this one doesn't.

Let's start with that, then. If that's your approach, where do you think that came from? Is that scientific training?

Well, it's partly that, but mostly from very early on, as you know, when I had a dramatic out-of-body experience. I was convinced that this was proof of life after death, souls and spirits, telepathy and clairvoyance - you name it, all paranormal phenomena. It took me several years of research and a PhD in parapsychology to find that, as far as I can tell, there's no such thing. Each time I found that something doesn't work... it was, 'oh, maybe this next idea works... well what's around the next corner? Maybe if clairvoyance doesn't work, maybe telepathy does... if telepathy doesn't work, maybe tarot cards work' - you know, on and on and on until I got to the point of thinking that maybe none of these is true. So that was a really very powerful lesson in the scientific method. I wouldn't have called it that then. But it was a lesson in having a theory that you really, really care about and invest yourself in. "I'm the one who believes in psychic phenomena, and I'm going to prove to the world, to all those close-minded scientists who don't believe in it, that they're wrong." And then I was wrong. That was tough. It's fine, and it's fantastic to look back on and think that that was really good training, to take your theories, work as hard as you can to see if they're right, and then when they're wrong... "Oh, actually, the world opens up to all the more possibilities". And so you move on. And in my case, you find out you're wrong, lots of times, but you kind of get used to it.

That's a very positive way of looking at it, being happy to find out you're wrong, and then move on to other things.

Well I'd much rather be right!

I was going to ask, did you want to be right! Presumably, you wanted to be right?

I very, very, very, very, very, very much wanted it to be right, yes.

Why was that? Why do you think you had so much invested in wanting it to be right?

Now, of all the millions of questions people ask again and again, nobody's asked me that one. Very interesting. I would say there were two reasons why I so desperately wanted to be right. One was the out-of-body experience and some other experiences of 'oneness', and expansion into the universe - these seemed more real than real. And we have reasons now to understand why they seem more real than real because of how the brain manages reality discrimination, and because during those experiences there's nothing else, and you're totally invested in this reality. So the fact that it feels and looks real in every way, it seems more real than ordinary life - that was one driving emotional reason. And the other reason for wanting to be right was - I kind of demonstrated it a moment ago - "I'm going to prove to all those scientists that they're wrong. I'm going to be right about this amazing theory I've got about memory and ESP [extra sensory perception] being out in the Akashic record..." and blah, blah, blah, you know: my crazy theory. And "I'll show them."

Was it an important part of your identity during the time you were doing it?

Yes. Not only that, but I dressed in the hippie gear and I ran the Oxford University Society for Psychical Research. And we invited mediums and spiritualists, psychical researchers and ghostbusters, and people to come and give us talks and demonstrations. And we did ouija boards, and we went looking for haunted houses around the colleges. That's who I was.

What has your time researching these things left you with in terms of beliefs about the people who do believe in them?

There's no one answer to that. There are a few really awful frauds. I came across very, very few, but those were horrible – exploiting people for their own ends. Then there are the sappy, soft people, for whom you can tell that it's so important to their life to believe in God, or the next life, or that their wife is in heaven, and they're going to meet her again, and I don't want to argue with them. Then there are the types who 'know' they are right, for example, in the Society for Psychical Research or in parapsychology in general. Some of them are so committed to their views, that they don't want to listen to any alternatives, and it's really, really annoying. What upset me most though was when mediums, psychics, or spiritualists would say, 'If you had an open mind, then you would believe X'. That made me so angry, because having an open mind means you're willing to change your mind! It doesn't mean you're willing to believe something crazy just because you like it. Well it can do... they can be the same thing, but they often aren't. And clearly one woman - the one I remember particularly - was never going to change her mind about anything. And then finally, there are also - rather few but very valuable to me - scientists who believe in the paranormal or who do research on near death experiences and are totally convinced that their findings prove life after death but are still open-minded. There are some like this who are still my friends and I can talk to them and enjoy their ideas and the differences we have... We can argue about it and enjoy it. That's nice.

Is that something that you value and believe in, that sort of argumentative life?

Yes, yes, yes, yes. Okay. We found something I believe in! I'm not sure 'belief' is quite the word but it'll do. Yes.

Committed to?

Yes, I find myself doing it and smiling at the same time. 'What! You believe that?! Come on... Now what about this evidence?' Yes, I enjoy that.

A sort of joy of arguing.

It's an enjoyment but in what sense is it a belief? It is a belief.... you're forcing me into finding out what I believe, as I thought you might. It is a belief that that kind of argument leads you somewhere, that you learn something from that kind of argument. You learn to firm up your own arguments, your own beliefs, your own ideas, you learn to take note of other people's and either go, "Oh, I must think about that some more as it might be true", or "That's absolute rubbish. Now, how can I find out it's rubbish? Is it really rubbish?". That's the way you learn. I keep going into "What is the point of life anyway? There's no point. So why is learning important?" And I think, well, you've got to make something important because there's no ultimate importance. And you're smiling while you're doing it.

That's a brilliant description of how you know what's giving you happiness in life - you find yourself smiling while you're doing it.

Yes, yes. I get quite a lot of emails from people who are really distressed by my not believing in free will and I've been writing to one recently, who said, since he's watched lots of my videos and read stuff I've written about no free will, it's made him terribly depressed and one of the things he said is, "You always look so happy talking about this." So I tried to explain how it does make me happy to think there's no free will. And it is possible to live a happy, moral, kind life - or attempting to be kind and moral - without having to base that in free will. So I hope I'm managing to explain it to him.

...

I want to come on to talk a little bit about drugs and their legalisation because that's one of the many causes you're associated with. There are two aspects there that I think that it might be useful to find out what you really believe about. Firstly, the use of drugs generally, because I think you think that drugs can have life enhancing effects in various ways. And secondly, the whole policy question of legalisation of drugs and what's going on in the world, and in our own country with this losing war on drugs. So do you think you think drugs can be for many people, an ingredient in a good life?

Oh, absolutely, they can. But I would first of all say you can't just go "drugs". Nicotine has precious little use but is very addictive, and it spoils a lot of lives. Alcohol is very mixed. Heroin's fantastic sometimes but horribly addictive, morphine is great for painkilling and when seriously needed but not in people who use it only to escape from the miseries or difficulties of their life.

The drugs that I'm really interested in are cannabis and the psychedelics. I find them especially inspiring for creative and original thoughts. And I'm so pleased that, at last, there is enough willingness in government and grant giving bodies to allow research on psychedelics such as LSD, psilocybin, and DMT. This should have been going on since these drugs first emerged into the West a century ago, or certainly, since the research that was going on when LSD was discovered in 1943. There was lots of research in the 50s and then it all had to stop with the passing of the drug laws in the late 1960s. This research was already showing some fantastic things. For example, take the use of LSD or psilocybin, or any of the major hallucinogens, for end-of-life care. Many people facing the end of their life who know they're going to die with whatever disease, can be terrified, upset by wondering what was the point of it all, afraid of the pain, feeling guilty about things they haven't sorted out beforehand, or angry about things they remember. All the usual stuff that we have as humans can be much worse when you think you're going to die. These drugs open up your mind and this can be horrendous, terrifying – but if you have people sitting with you who know what to do, the horrible thoughts, realisations, and visions can be very useful and need not even last very long. This can mean opening up to questions like 'Who am I? What have I done? What's important to me?', and the sense of self can change dramatically - can be transformed. Research on this was effectively banned for decades but now there are people trained to help the terminally ill in a safe environment. Typically they'll have two sessions of the drug, occasionally three, and the transformation in how those people face their own death can be profound.

Take also the use of certain psychedelics for depression, or for helping release from addiction. Again, it's the insights that happen during the trip that are important, and they very often continue during the following 24/48 hours. In depression, those changes to the self, to how you feel about things, how you feel about your past can be quite dramatic. Addiction can be helped too with one, or two, or three trips. Then you need quite a long time after each one to integrate it. But you don't need to keep on taking the drug.

This is important because it means that these substances are of no use to the drug companies. Drug companies are never going to make money out of something that you can get from a mushroom in your garden... well, probably not your garden, but somewhere. Or that you can just go and buy once they're legal. They're never going to be able to make money out of drugs that you don't take very often. I was at a wonderful conference long ago. There's a website called Erowid. It's an anagram of 'WEIRDO' because the people who run it are self professed weirdos. But at this conference, they were doing mega online surveys. And they asked users of LSD, if LSD was cheap and readily available and you could buy it any time, how often would you take it? Now, what do you think their answer was? I mean, the average answer, obviously, they varied.

Once a month?

Not bad. It was about once or twice a year on average. You'd probably find if you started taking it once a month, you'd probably find it was a bit much. I don't know. I tend to have it every two or three years. I've actually had long gaps and then I might have it two or three times in a year and then another long gap but again, it's not something that most people want to do very often

because the changes take a long time to integrate with your life, and a trip can be quite an undertaking as well.

That's your position then, that it's like learning a new thing, or taking a new idea, you take time then to integrate the experience into yourself?

Yes, that's true when you take psychedelics with that sort of attitude. Alternatively, you can just party with drugs and people do. I've never been to a party drinking alcohol, smoking dope, and taking LSD all at the same time. I wouldn't, I think it would be a waste of all three of them. So I don't know very much about what that's like. But yes, as far as these drugs are concerned, we can use them well in our lives. We can use them rather than abuse them. And we need to learn more which is why I am so glad that, at last, the research is going on.

Then, about legalisation. Well, the whole war on drugs is an utter disaster, always has been right from the start. I don't blame them for not realising at the beginning but I certainly blame them for not realising after five years, or 10 years or 20 years, that if you go on, what you're basically doing by making drugs illegal is handing the power of very powerful substances over to criminals who have no interest whatsoever in what happens to the people who take them. They don't care if they contaminate them with poisons of various kinds, they don't care if they keep changing the dose, the strength of it, so that people take overdoses and die because of it. Of course they don't care. We would have more control if it was all legal. We're going to get there. As a country, we should be able to look at different methods used around the world. We should be having, in Parliament, serious debates about this! Which way should we go with it?

I have noticed that in Parliament, a lot of the prominent parliamentarians who are advocating drug law reform have often been members of the humanist group. Maybe there's a tendency here.

I think there should be, don't you? I would think in my idea of what a humanist is, you are compassionate about other people, you care about what happens to them and what their lives are like. Now, if you look with that attitude towards the war on drugs, you see ordinary people using drugs sensibly who shouldn't be in prison, you see the kids who get sucked into county lines and have their teenage years utterly ruined; you see violent criminals making money out of other people's suffering. These are the consequences. If you care about people's lives, you'd make the drugs legal, controlled, and taxed. You'd work out ways to make it hard to abuse those drugs, you'd share ways of learning to use them well, and you'd help people who did get into trouble with them. And you wouldn't have the criminals making all this money and exploiting people. So I think it's quite understandable that the humanist view coheres so well with an attitude towards drugs that says let's make a way in which drugs can be positive in society, not the opposite. I keep writing to my MP about this. He is very anti-drugs. He is also a Christian, and also a creationist. He genuinely believes that God made us in his image. Now, he's going to stick to those views. And that's going to make it very difficult for him to take what I think of as a humanist view – which is that it doesn't matter now what was written in the Bible, because that's a long time ago – what matters now is the effects of our laws.