Interview with Dr Susan Blackmore - by Jody Franklin

http://www.mungbeing.com/issue_3.html?page=22&full_article=yes

I encountered Dr. Susan Blackmore at the 'Toward A Science Of Consciousness' conference in Tucson, Arizona, in April 2004, where hundreds of scientists, philosophers, psychologists, New Agers and artists gathered to exchange ideas on the nature of human consciousness. Never had I participated in such a collective of concentrated brain power. Dr. Blackmore stood out in this crowd, which is not an easy feat when all is considered. While her dynamic personality likely didn't hurt, it was obvious she commanded much respect amongst her colleagues for her visionary work in the field of consciousness studies.

Curious, it is, as her background is atypical in the world of science: she spent two decades investigating psychic phenomena following an out of body experience. Ultimately, she was unable to validate any claims of the paranormal through the application of scientific method. In the nineties she turned her energies toward two relatively new and emerging sciences, memetics and consciousness studies. In many ways she was well-suited to explore these largely uncharted memescapes after spending so much time working with the abstract and intangible, largely theoretical, world of the paranormal.

Dr. Blackmore wrote The Meme Machine, widely regarded by peers and laypersons alike as one of the definitive treatises on the science and philosophy of memetics. It was endorsed by no-one less than Richard Dawkins, the geneticist who introduced meme theory to the world. More recently she penned 'Consciousness: An Introduction', a work that neatly summarizes most of the issues debated within the science of consciousness community. It is well-positioned to become the primary text for students of consciousness studies in universities.

I was fortunate enough to have an informal hour long chat with her on the telephone last summer.

Jody
First off, looking back to your earlier academic background, you received a PhD in parapsychology and spent many years investigating paranormal phenomena, with a particular interest in out of body and near death experiences.

Susan
I started out because I had a very dramatic out of body experience. But I did years and years of work on sort of more ordinary parapsychology, if you like, before I finally came back to studying out of body and near death experiences, probably ten years later.

Jody
Right. And you became known for a unique and thorough approach to paranormal investigation: skeptical, yet open to the possibility that these phenomena could be proven scientifically. I'm used to seeing both sides of this debate, the scientific skeptics and the believers in the paranormal, as being somewhat dogmatic.

Susan
I agree, and that was one of the problems that I coped with for years and years and, as far as I know, I'm the only person who has ever been simultaneously on the council of the Society of Psychical Research in London and on the on the executive council of CSICOP

in the states. In other words, I was actually helping to run societies on both sides, which was very difficult because I was sometimes loved and sometimes hated by both sides. I was hated by the psychical researchers because I was skeptical, because I was always investigating things very thoroughly and showing alternative explanations. And sometimes I was hated by the skeptics because I would talk about mystical experiences, self-transformation and the importance of some of these things, trying to take them seriously as parts of peoples' lives.

So it was a very uncomfortable position to be in but it seemed to me to be necessary to try to bridge that horrendous gap. Because, after all, the scientific question is: do these phenomena exist, and, if they do, how do they work? Both the skeptics and the believers are actually officially asking the same question. They should be able to work together but very often they can't.

Jody
They seem to come at the issue with their minds already made up, a "guilty until proven innocent" kind of methodology.

Susan
Some of them do. I would not tar them all with the same brush. Generally speaking that's true of a lot of them but I'm not the only one who struggles very hard to be open minded. You say that I had a reputation for an open mind and I'm very glad to hear that but it is terribly difficult to have an open mind. Frequently in my years as a parapsychologist I would go on TV programs and there would be audiences of people there, there would be people shouting, "you should have an open mind, if you had an open mind you'd realize there are spirits all around you now." And what they meant by an open mind was being able to believe any batty theory that they thought was true. I think what truly is an open mind is being prepared to change your views in light of the evidence. It means not that you have an open mind like a trash can that anybody can throw their rubbish in. Not that you don't have any opinions... you may even have very strong opinions but you must be prepared to change those opinions if the evidence proves you're wrong. Now that is actually psychologically and emotionally hard work. I found as I went on with it I had to change my mind many times in my life, academically and intellectually. Then it gets easier and you kind of get used to it and you realize that actually it's fine, I can drop my entire theory, it was wrong. Let go.

But it is demanding, it is difficult and I think we shouldn't underestimate what it means to truly have an open mind. And that's one of the reasons I gave up. Because I really, really tried hard to have an open mind for probably 30 years and in the end I thought, "I've seen enough, I've heard enough. In my heart of hearts I know as much as anyone can know, which is not a hundred percent, but as much as anyone can know that psychic phenomena do not exist." I was not prepared any longer to keep my mind open for the possibility that they do. I've done it long enough and thoroughly enough. I've gone through so many investigations, done so many experiments and I thought, "if I can't have that kind of genuine openmindedness then I shouldn't be doing it anymore." That's the main reason why I stopped.

Jody
Do you believe there is still a possibility that paranormal phenomena may exist and that science can one day find ways to accurately measure or detect some of these mysteries?

Susan
Of course it's possible and it would be thrilling for science if it were true but I don't think it's at all likely. If it does happen in my lifetime I shall have a curious reaction. Part of me will be going, "Oh my God! I was wrong, I shall have to change my line again," and part of me will go "Wow! How exciting! This will overturn so much of physics, so much of psychology, I must get back in there."

Jody
How did these earlier experiences inform your more recent work on memes and consciousness?

Susan
Looking back, I would say what set me off wanting to be a parapsychologist in the first place was specifically this very dramatic out of the body experience I had as a student in 1970. And, more generally, things like drug experiences with LSD, experiences with meditation, those sorts of things. The real question those experiences provoked was to do with consciousness: what is the mind? What is consciousness? Why am I aware at all? Why is there experience at all? What is experience? And what is possible beyond ordinary experience? Those were the sort of questions that drove me into parapsychology because I thought parapsychology was a way to understand all the states of consciousness, out of the body experiences and so on. So, in a way, all I've done after 25 years of parapsychology is to say "that was a massive detour!" I want to go back to the questions that originally movitated me in the first place. In a way, everything I did in between contributes to learning more about the mind, more about the brain, learning more neuroscience, learning how to be a better scientist, learning how to be openminded, learning research skills. All of those things are still relevant. Even though the actual subject matter, I would say, it was a load of tosh.

Jody
It boils down to the basic question of "what is consciousness?" The question goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks.

Susan
Yes. I'm only answering the same kinds of questions as them. And Descartes in the 17th century, any of those people, they were driven by those questions. Who am I? What am I? What kind of a thing is an "I"?

Jody
Why should we be exploring the issue of consciousness?

Susan
There is no "should" about it. I think that if you have the luxury to be an intelligent, questioning person, in a society that is rich enough to sustain intellectual life, it is the obvious central question you want to ask. It is the central question of human nature, of human purpose, the whole question of our existence. Why are we here? What's the point of it all? What should I do? We are questioning animals. We have brains clever enough to ask.

Jody
In the past decade we've seen the growth of consciousness studies, which seems to be a wide open field that has attracted the participation of people all different disciplines: neuroscience, psychology, philosophy. A lot of persons in various fields of scientific study

are known for orthodoxy and sometimes unwillingness to explore concepts that stray from their beliefs. At the 'Toward a Science of Consciousness' conference, it wasn't out of the ordinary to see a New Age idealist presenting near someone from one of the hard sciences. How important is this openness and diversity, this multidisciplinary approach? What impact is it likely to have on the future development of our understanding of consciousness?

Susan
I love the Tucson conferences precisely for that eclectic mixture. I find them much more fun than the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness conferences which stick very much to the neuroscience and straight psychology. Because I think we really don't know at the moment which are going to be the productive ways of understanding consciousness. We need neuroscience, we need the brain scans and the understanding of the neural structure for sure, but what else we need is not so sure. I'm very happy that at this stage consciousness studies is multidisciplinary and wide open and all these different people are talking to each other.

But there's always a danger that you get everything diluted, or distracted by useless and stupid ideas. That's a danger but you know, that's the fun of science, isn't it, especially a new science such as this. We've got to start with an open mind and lots and lots of ideas if we have any hope of finding which ones are going to be productive.

Jody
The strongest meme will probably emerge anyway, yes?

Susan
Yes. Certainly the strongest meme will emerge but it depends on what you mean by strong. From the point of view of meme theory, by definition the memes that succeed will be best memes in survival terms. The critical question is will they succeed because they're more truthful than the others? Will the most useful one, the one most helpful to understanding consciousness, emerge as the winner in the new science of consciousness, or will the memes that emerge be the ones that people like best?

I trust, which may sound naive in my faith in science, I trust that the scientific message, imperfect as it is, is the best hope for getting the true memes to win. Because you're trained as a scientist to test ideas again and again, not to accept things just by dogma or because they're written in a book or you like them. But to test them against the evidence. That's the point of science and that's the way you get rid of the rubbish.

There's always a problem, particularly with consciousness and studying the nature of self... these things touch people's emotions so deeply that there is a huge difference between the ideas people like and the ones they don't, so there's a danger that the ideas people like will win.

To give you an example: Right now I'm having a particular conscious experience of this kitchen and the picture I'm looking at and the mugs on their hooks on the wall and that is in my consciousness. We think of consciousness as a kind of container and talk about the contents of consciousness. In consciousness studies at the moment, people like the idea that there is something called our consciousness. That's the natural way of thinking about it. I believe it's wrong.

Dan Dennet showed why it's wrong and I think his demonstrations were correct and we've got to get out of that intuition which is part of the illusion. But getting out of the illusion is really difficult. So I think these ideas about contents of consciousness, consciousness as a kind of mental theatre in which things happen, these ideas are very popular and they'll always be around, even if they're wrong. But it's very difficult to know at this stage whether they're right or wrong. I think they're wrong, other people think they're right.

To give another example closer to what you were saying about the New Agey people and so on Vast numbers of people want to believe that their consciousness is a kind of power, that their thoughts cause their action, that they could, by the power of their own consciousness, not only raise their own hands but perhaps do other things, perhaps elevate themselves spiritually or get in contact with someone else by telepathy, or survive death. That's what people like and want to believe. Scientific evidence, as far as I can see, is going more and more against those kinds of ideas. It's really, really hard so no wonder those New Agey memes get on better, despite that I think the truest are the scientifically more valuable theories.

Jody
Now we've got the question of the subjectivity of consciousness. Subjectivity, which David Chalmers termed the hard problem, seems to dominate the various debates in the field. What do you think it will take to solve this question?

Susan
It could take an amazing new physics discovery such as quantum coherence in the microtubules. It might take understanding of some kind of emergent theory such as how consciousness, this stream of subjective experiences emerges from brain processing.

My own personal opinion is that what has to happen is that we completely dismantle all our false illusions about the nature of consciousness then we can begin to see clearly, then we will see why neurons firing in the brain are this experience.

Jody
Does consciousness exist outside the ego-identity?

Susan
I don't accept the ego-identity. I don't accept the question. I would say consciousness doesn't exist outside of anything. I would say that consciousness is the functioning of a certain kind of brain in a certain kind of world. Now, human beings have the kind of brain that leads them to the false idea that they have a (you might call it an ego identity, I would call it a self) self, inside, who is conscious and is having these experiences and has free will. I think all of that is untrue. I would say that we are living beings, constructing worlds. We have brains, we are constructing worlds all day long, multiplying, and none of those are either in or out of consciousness but we end up with the illusion that there is self in here having a stream of experiences. And we try to explain the illusion, which is impossible because we've got it wrong, it's like trying to explain the life force or things that were shown as not to exist in the end. I think it's like that with consciousness. When we really understand it we will not see it that way.

Jody
What can we learn from purposefully altered states of consciousness? Do they have something to add to the field of consciousness studies?

Susan
Oh, absolutely. We can learn loads and loads.

I think the most interesting drugs are the major hallucinogens, LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, that sort of thing. They change absolutely the way one feels about the nature of oneself and consciousness. I don't know whether you've had them but if you have, you know what I mean, (the feeling) that I might dissolve into that tree over there. I think some of these drugs can give true insight into the nature of consciousness. Some give you just mad ideas. The ones that give true insights are going to be useful from that point of view. The non-existence of self, the oneness of the universe, that kind of thing you can get from LSD, you can get a deep mystical experience of oneness. Not always, but you can get it.

The more basic way in which it's useful is understanding the brain mechanisms which produce the normal illusion of consciousness, the normal illusion of "I'm in here looking out through my eyes, having a conscious experience." When we see how that is demolished by certain drugs, or just changed in simpler ways, then we understand much more about the construction of the illusion. On an even more mundane level, drugs like tranquilizers and sleeping pills and take you into much less interesting altered states, (but) it's still very interesting neuro-chemically to understand how those things function and alter consciousness.

Let's take another kind of purposefully altered consciousness which is meditation or mindfulness. I've been practising zen meditation and mindfulness for more than twenty years now and I would say that it has informed all my thinking and, in some ways, underlies all my scientific work. With the subject of consciousness we are asking about subjectivity - it's enormously helpful to go at it from both directions. To go at it from the scientific direction, looking at the brain and how it does the trick, and going at it personally, really learning to look into the nature of consciousness.

I think what many scientists are doing now is saying, "Hey, well I know what my own consciousness is like, it's like this and now I'm going to try to explain it." And they can't. What is needed is people who are able to say, "I actually have no idea what my consciousness is like, I'm making huge assumptions. Okay, I'm going to sit down, I'm going to look at this white wall for hours on end. I'm going to look at it and see what consciousness is actually like." And when you sit there you find you just see a mess, a total mess. "Oh, I wonder if I left the gas on" - first you have to learn to calm the mind. And when you've calmed the mind enough that you can pay attention to a white wall without thought going past for some length of time and you can see more clearly, you can begin to let go of many of the assumptions you have about consciousness. So, to that extent, I think, the practice of mediation and other disciplines of that kind are beginning to play an important role in consciousness studies and will play an even more important role in the future. There are many people like myself, I am certainly not the only one, who are working a bit from this direction.

Jody
And recent studies have actually proven that meditation induces brain changes.

Susan
I wouldn't say that at all. I would say that they have shown that meditation is the brain change. Sitting down and looking at a wall and doing that, your brain is inevitably different Anyway that's a slight quibble. I would go along with James Austin who says zen training is brain training. The person who has picked up the meme of meditation and sits down and

practices every day is training their brain to be different. Training skill... skills such as paying attention, skills such as letting go of troublesome memes, skills such as relaxing and opening the mind, letting go of emotional attachment... those are skills the brain and the body acquire.

Jody
I'd like to switch gears over to memes now. In recent years, the term meme has insinuated itself in popular culture. It's kind of expanded beyond the frontiers of science and part of this is probably attributable to books such as yours and Richard Brodie's which are accessible to the broader lay audiences. It seems that the meme meme has really caught on with internet users and you can see it in daily parlance in various net communities. Like for example, I see the word meme commonly used to casually describe quizzes that are passed around and posted in blogs. Now, this popular perception of the meme, how is this effecting memetic science?

Susan
Sadly, there is not really a thriving field of memetic science. And I don't yet know whether there ever will be. My own view is that memetics is the best possible way we have of looking at human evolution, and looking at some aspects of how our minds work. But there is not a thriving field of memetics. Some people say that this popular misperception of memes is the reason why memetics haven't really taken off properly scientifically. I don't think that's true but I must say I do get infuriated by people who completely misunderstand the idea of memes.

The worst misunderstandings are people who think of memes as some kind of, I don't know, spooky astral thought form or something that is supposed to float around in some kind of memetic universe. Memes are information. If I do a little dance and someone copies it, the meme is the little dance. It is whatever is copied. I like to define memes as that which are copied, or that which is imitated.

And people misunderstand it as being something separate. There are many many other misunderstanding, which do a great deal of harm in that they put off serious scientists from wanting to study it because it gets all the bad press. But there is always that kind of problem in science and I don't want to whinge about it too much.

Jody
In The Meme Machine you discuss a problem confronting memetic studies, that being the difficulty in identifying the unit of the meme.

Susan
Memes are information and you can chop them up into bits if it's useful. They're streams of information. If you go watch a play, think of all the information there is in there. There are people moving about the stage, people speaking, people doing actions to each other, people hitting each other, kissing each other, I don't know, whatever, for an hour and half. Massive amount of information. Now if you're going to tell somebody what was the play like, you're going to chop that play up into bits. You're going to say, "Oh, well first the heroine did this and then this happened and then..." You know you're kind of artificially chopping it up but that's what we do in ordinary human discourse anyway. And it's the same in memetics. There is no ultimate unit that is the right answer. You could say for example that the four notes in Beethoven's 9th are a meme because on their own those four notes are so well known all over the world. Whereas for most pieces of music it's the whole, or at least a long phrase, that has to be the one that gets copied.

By definition, if a meme is what is copied or imitated, there's your answer. The unit is only what is copied in one go and passed on but that might be a huge memeplex. The whole memeplex of Roman Catholicism that is passed on by children going and learning the catchecism and being trained for their confirmation, all that stuff. Huge memeplex but in a way it's a unit because that's what gets passed on to little kids being brought up as Catholics. And it's the same with islam. You could say the Koran is a meme or a memeplex because it's all put in one book and that's what they believe and it has it's own structure. But this is not intrinsic to the universe that there is an answer for the question how big is the unit.

You may say, "well, that's totally different from genes." Genes are a much more organized system and they've had billions of years to evolve and memes have only had a few million at most. And they evolved to a very highly specified system but even with that you can't say here is the beginning of this gene, here is the end of that one on your DNA molecule. To some extent it's the same problem.

Jody
Something I've always been fascinated with is sometimes you get what seems to be simultaneous point of origin of memes. Like what I mean is that an original or specific idea is born and becomes manifest and somewhere else in culture an almost identical idea is born seemingly at the same time with no apparent connection to the other. And both begin the process of self replication.

Susan
That happens because the substrate is ready for it. I mean it's happened in science a lot because the mathematics is all in place or the methodology is all put in place or whatever it is, and all that is simmering away amongst the minds of all the people. I mean if you go back two or three hundred years then these things happened very slowly because communications were slow but you still got these things happening and all the few hundred scientists there were getting the same ideas, the same mathematical tools, the same experimental tools, telescopes or whatever it might be. You invent something like the telescope, the meme of the telescope, how to make a telescope, how to look through it, spreads across and once you've got a telescope people will start looking at the sky and asking the same kinds of questions. And inevitably some will come up with the same answers and the same thing will happen. In more modern times it all happened much faster so the whole structure of science spread really quickly.

Perhaps you make a theory where two different ideas have to come together, one from psychology and one from chemistry. Well, those memes, if they're around on the planet, bumping around into each other in different peoples' heads, that's the two you need to make this new fantastic theory, it's going to happen. Several times. And so the same or similar new theory will appear in different places. I don't think it's surprising though it is interesting. If you believe that innovation, creativity, having new ideas, is some product of individual human consciousness, our inner self is creative, then it seems terribly odd that the same thing pops up all over the rest of the planet. But if you believe, as I do, that the creative force behind all of human endeavour is actually the evolutionary algorhythm, the memetic process of copying with variation and selection, then it's absolutely obvious why this happens. Once you've got certain necessary ideas out there in the memepool, they're bound to bump into each other in somebodys head and that person will then be the so called creator of those ideas, it's not at all surprising from a memetic point of view. Of

course it takes a genius, or a very clever person, to notice when these two ideas bump into each other.

Jody
So it will still only be the rare geniuses who publish the paper or write about it, and the fact that it appears simultaneously in many places is exactly what you'd expect of ideas which are spread memetically.

While you're talking about this "cultural substrate" other theories are popping to mind that may resonate with, or eventually complement or be integrated into, memetic studies, such quantum theory, perhaps Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields, Carl Jung's theories of the collective unconscious and sychronicity. What is going on in this substrate? Is there a memetic memory field that exists in, or underlies, culture?

Susan
Not if you mean something separate from the brain. A whole lot of brains, which are copying machines, meme machines, can store and pass on information, that's all. There is nothing else, there is no field. There is nothing remotely like Sheldrake's morphogenetic field, absolutely not. I mean that's totally anathema to whole the memetic way of thinking about things. Absolutely not collective unconscious. If you take the modern interpretation of collective unconscious as some kind of spooky field or something, absolutely not. I mean there's a whole value of memetics that you don't need that kind of false idea at all. What was the other example you gave?

Jody
Quantum theory.

Susan
You don't need that, you don't need any of those things. What you need is an understanding of the power of the evolutionary process. When you have information which is copied with variation and selection you get evolution. This is the heart of the whole thing, this is what Darwin saw. This is the critical point of understanding memetic theory.

That's the process, which, when applied to DNA in living creatures, produced the whole of the living world. When it's applied to information that's copied between brains it produces the whole of the social world, human creativity. So, what do you need? You need a copying machine and you need the information that is copied. We have six billion people on the planet, they are all copying machines, they are all capable of speaking, listening, hearing and passing on memes. Whats exciting about memetics is that we have the building blocks. You just have to turn your mind inside out and see it all in a different way.

Jody
We've got a human memeplex that's becoming increasingly diverse and complex. What do you see as the the future evolution of human culture with this increasingly diverse and complex memeplex?

Susan
What I see happening is what you'd expect of any evolutionary process. That once it's got the basic building blocks in place, which have all been created by the evolutionary process, you get a co-evolution between the information that's copied and the copying machine. In memetics we've had co-evolution between the human brain and human language and behaviour that's produced the human brain, which is the biggest brain

relative to body size on the planet. It's extraordinary. But now the memes are building amazing meme machines. You can say the whole of the web, our computers and everything, are the results of a co-evolution between all the information that humans pass around and that machinery that copies it. It's speeding up and it's going to go on speeding up. It is going to go unbelieveably fast and the old meme machines, that is us humans, are going to be outpaced, way outpaced by the new meme machines. We're not yet: our vision systems are streets ahead of any artificial machines, so is our capacity to walk, really basic biological things like that which have evolved genetically are streets ahead of their artificial equivalent. But that won't stay the same. So I think what will be happening is massive expansion and extension of the world wide web and the marginalization of what any human being knows. I find it terrifying to think that a hundred years ago a scientist could have read most of the serious science that there was. And now, if you even take one small subfield of science, like neuroscience or even something smaller like consciousness studies, one person can't know it all. And it's going to go more and more and more in that direction.

Jody
I find it interesting there is no one "authority" on any given subject anymore.

Susan
Your question was about the future. What I don't know is will the artificial systems, the web and all the computers connected to it, actually start doing the serious science and we'll just be told the results. I mean, as a scientist, I am interested in the future of science. Will we bother to have humans writing journal papers or will we let the machines do the whole thing?

Jody
There are people who believe that the net itself, being a repository of all the information of human culture, is basically turning into our collective brain.

Susan
I think that's right but I want to put some provisos on it. I would say it doesn't hold all the information, it really doesn't. It holds a massive amounts of information but it's selective. There will always be things going on in families, in friendships in all walks of life which just don't get on the web at all.

Jody
Right. The real human stuff.

Susan
Exactly. So that it's not all of it but its going to be massive and having made that proviso, I agree. You can look on it as a living organism. I would look on the web even now as a set of mutually interacting... a bit like a macrobacteria. I suspect it will get more organized and it will become more like a living organism in the way that you can say that cities are like living organisms in the sense that the roads are transporting the people along, and the heating systems are keeping the temperature right. You can look on cities as loosely connected by roads and what have you and it's a bit like that in the web. The potential for growth and development and self control and homeostasis within the web is enormous and I think it will be like a massively growing organism.

Jody
And you could say that any given memeplex or the entire cultural memeplex is analogous to a living system.

Susan
When you get into these analogies to some extent it's just a matter of words. I would say if you took a memeplex like a book, let's say your favourite novel... what's your favourite book?

Jody
Finnegans Wake.

Susan
God, that's a heavy choice. But okay, is that like a living organism? Well, kind of but basically it's pretty static. It was written by James Joyce and you know he wrote it and now it's the same, every single one.

Jody
But there are certain memeplexes that perhaps more dynamic than that...

Susan
I wanted to start with a more static one like that. But take a religion, take Islam. Now that is something like a living organism. Although it has been static for a very long time it keeps being passed from different people to different people and it's adapting to different niches and it now is adapting in the new world, fighting to keep its place. To some extent it's like a living organism, but it only has certain points in common. If you take something like the whole of the world wide web, well, that has got very many more things that are like a living organism in terms of the way it is interrelated to all the computers on which it runs and the ways the networks are connected together and the way it's constantly being reorganized. Things like viruses that are spread in it and the way it protects itself, all of that makes it much more like a living organism.

Jody
Do memes exist independent of consciousness or is consciousness a prerequisite for meme production?

Susan
Consciousness is an illusion constructed by the memes.

To answer you more fluidly, is consciousness required? I don't think consciousness is required for anything. I think that question implies a certain kind of theory about consciousness. The relationship between consciousness and memes is very interesting. You see people unconsciously copy a whole lot of things. For example, you probably know that people who like each other, when they're in conversation, they copy each other's way of standing, facial expressions, and so on. That's memetic. They're actually copying them. And people they don't like, they sort of stand back and they don't do that. That's entirely unconscious but people also unconsciously copy gestures, all sorts of things. And those are memes, they've been copied unconsciously. To some extent we're not really conscious at all of most of the memes we copy. We chat and we pass things on without really thinking about it.

What interests me is why do we have these false theories about consciousness and in particular, false theories about the self. You know, this idea that I am somehow inside my body running the show and that I have conscious experiences, I'm sure this is false. One of the things that I did in 'The Meme Machine' and have done subsequently in more detail is to ask the question why should we have such an illusion? It doesn't benefit the genes for us to have an illusion, I don't think. But it does benefit the memes because if we have this false idea of self and go around, "I want this and I do that and I need that" and so on, all of this encourages these memes. "I believe in God" - that helps the idea of God rather that me just saying God. "I believe in God" passes it on. It is to the meme's benefit, to cluster around and make a huge memplex, this selfplex, and I think that the memes have caused us to get into this illusion of a self, an illusion of what consciousness is like - which we're completely wrong about - so I blame the memes.

Jody
So memetic theory could actually help us better understand consciousness?

Susan
Absolutely, I think it really could. I also think one of the ways I use it is to use it as a sort of trick in meditation. If you think of all the troublesome thoughts that come into your mind when you're trying to meditate, you're trying to clear the mind and let go and really see how it really is and you get all this troublesome stuff coming along. When you understand that they're memes, they're selfish bits of information trying to use your brain to keep themselves going, then it's easier to let go of them. I call that memeweeding and I think of meditation as memeweeding. It's like you've got a garden and you pull out all the weeds until you've got lovely bare earth where stuff can flourish. And there will always be more weeds, more memes, trying to use your brain. It can help us clear our minds of the garbage if we see things from a memetic perspective.

Jody
I think that's a really nice way of putting it.