

Why I have given up - by Susan Blackmore

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<http://www.susanblackmore.co.uk/Chapters/Kurtz.htm>

Imagine this ... Imagine a world in which if you love someone enough, or need them enough, your minds will communicate across the world wherever you are, regardless of space and time. Imagine a world in which, if only you can think a thought clearly and powerfully enough it can take on a life of its own, moving objects and influencing the outcome of events far away. Imagine a world in which each of us has a special inner core - a 'real self' - that makes us who we are, that can think and move independently of our coarse physical body, and that ultimately survives death, giving meaning to our otherwise short and pointless lives.

This is (roughly speaking) how most people think the world is. It is how I used to think -and even hope - that the world is. I devoted 25 years of my life to trying to find out whether it is. Now I have given up.

If any one of these three possibilities turned out to be true then the world is a fundamentally different place from the one we think we know, and much of our science would have to be overthrown. Any scientist who discovered the truth of any of these propositions - or, even better, was able to provide a theory to explain them - would surely go down in the history of science as a hero; as the woman who changed the face of science for ever. As Richard Dawkins puts it

"The discoverer of the new energy field that links mind to mind in telepathy, or of the new fundamental force that moves objects without trickery around a tabletop, deserves a Nobel Prize, and would probably get one." (Dawkins, 1998, p 128).

This is something that many critics of skepticism just don't see. I am often accosted by people who seem to think that I think as follows:- (Note - I don't!) "I am a scientist. I know the truth about the universe from reading my science books. I know that telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis and life after death are impossible. I don't want to see any evidence that they exist. I am terrified that I might be wrong." The way I really think is more like this "I am a scientist. I think the way to the truth is by investigation. I suspect that telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis and life after death do not exist because I have been looking in vain for them for 25 years. I have been wrong lots of times before and am not afraid of it". Indeed I might add that finding out that you are wrong, and throwing out your previous theories, can be the best way to new knowledge and a deeper understanding.

I long ago threw out my own previous beliefs in a soul, telepathy and an astral world, but even then I kept on searching for evidence that my new skepticism was misplaced, and for new theories that might explain the paranormal if it existed (Blackmore, 1996). I kept doing experiments and investigating claims of psychic powers. Finally I have given up that too.

One of the reasons I have given up is probably a trivial and selfish one - that I have simply had enough of fighting the same old battles, of endlessly being accused of being scared of the truth or even of trying to suppress the truth; of being told that if I don't come and investigate x (my near-death experience, my psychic twin, Edgar Cayce, the miracle of

Lourdes, D.D.Hume, or the haunted pub round the corner) that proves I have a closed mind. It doesn't. It only proves that after years of searching for paranormal phenomena and not finding them, I am no longer prepared to spend my precious time and limited energy in documenting yet another NDE, setting up more carefully designed experiments to test telepathy in twins, going over all the reams of published argument about Cayce, Lourdes or Hume, or sitting up all night waiting for the ghost that (because I am a psi-inhibitory experimenter) will never come.

I am sick of being told that I do not have an open mind. Long ago I wrote about the difficulty of having a truly open mind - or even knowing what this means. I called it 'the elusive open mind' (Blackmore 1987) because I know, after years and years of struggling with competing beliefs, searching for evidence, and looking deep into my own motivations and fears, that having an open mind is not easy. To me an open mind means this - that you are prepared to change your mind if the evidence suggests you should. This sounds simple, but is not. It is a balancing act between having a mind so open that it changes every time the wind blows, and so closed that impossible standards of evidence are required to change it. It is a world away from the kind of 'open mind' that critics love to flaunt - the kind that really means "If you agree with me you have an open mind - if you agree with scientists you don't".

Recently I was on the stage with three other "sceptics" for a TV chat show about mediumship and clairvoyance. We had been explaining various ways in which mediums can appear convincing without any spirits, how Tarot cards work without paranormal powers, and how the evidence refutes the claims of astrology, when a woman in the front row jumped up and said "The trouble with you is you don't have an open mind!". I surprised even myself by jumping right back at her with an impassioned speech, concluding "and would you be prepared to change your mind if you found out you were wrong?". Maybe she would have, but in my research I have learned how hard that is.

A few years ago a young student called James Basil came to interview me for his media project. He asked me lots of interesting questions about alien abductions and sleep paralysis and then shocked me by proclaiming that he knew I was wrong - he had experienced both and knew they were not the same thing at all. I then started asking the questions, and learned about the aliens who landed in the fields outside his house, their visits to his bedroom and the operations they performed on him inside their spaceship, starting when he was only five years old. Finally he showed me a tiny metallic object that the alien creatures had implanted in the roof of his mouth and which he had removed after two weeks of discomfort. Would I, with my 'closed mind' on UFOs, be prepared to analyse it scientifically?

I think he was surprised when I jumped at the chance. He seemed to think I wouldn't want to know - that I would be afraid to learn the truth. Yet, my own sceptical view of abductions was open to test by just this kind of object. Indeed if he had found a piece of alien technology in his mouth every scientist worthy of the name would want to know about it.

But I had no equipment to analyse it with. I put round an e-mail call to everyone in our Faculty of Applied Sciences asking for help. Another myth was incidentally exploded - that hard nosed physical scientists are eager to suppress the truth about the aliens among us. I had not one negative response to my plea - not a single scientist telling me I was wasting my time or theirs. Instead I received several extremely helpful ones - from simple suggestions about what to do, to offers of time and technical help on the scanning electron microscope and X-ray Microanalysis system.

James and I spent a morning in the lab, first looking at the object under a light microscope and then in the electron microscope. He pointed out the similarities with previous published implants, and got increasingly excited as we saw tell-tale hairs and other features that he compared with John Mack's famous implants. Then came the crunch. The mysterious object, though it looked very much like other 'implants' under the electron microscope, turned out to be made of dental amalgam (Blackmore 1997).

I was concerned about how he would react, and over a cup of coffee he struggled to tell me. He did not, as I guessed some people in his situation might, claim that the object had been switched or the machine was not working or the technician in error. He tried to understand how the machines worked and to accept the conclusion. In fact he almost seemed relieved. He likened his feelings to those after having had a brain scan and learning he was not seriously ill. He had clearly been frightened of the aliens implanting more objects in his body and now he knew that this was unlikely. I do not think he stopped believing in the aliens or his abductions, but his views did change in important ways. He also showed me - yet again - how difficult and emotionally taxing it can be to shift your beliefs in the face of the evidence.

People are not always so willing to grapple with evidence. In 1998 I was reading the only newspaper available on a holiday flight, when I saw a photograph of Cherie Blair, the Prime Minister's wife, wearing something called a bio-electric shield. Apparently this attractive pendant hanging round her neck, reduced her stress and protected her from harmful radiation. Hillary Clinton was said to own one too. I was angry. I assumed the pendant had no effect. How could intelligent and high-profile people like this possibly believe in, much less promote, such lies. Then I noticed the price - £119 (\$139) for the cheapest, and £749 (\$995) for the gold version, and was sufficiently angry to want to do something about it.

First I realised I was jumping to conclusions. What if the shields really did work? If they did then some extraordinary new principle must be involved and I would learn something very exciting indeed. If they did not then the facts should be made known. I decided to do some experiments to find out.

The bio-electric shield website and leaflets make several claims - among them that "The shield utilises principles of physics to help you cope with the energy overload/stress of your daily life". Each shield "contains a composition of a matrix of precision-cut quartz and other crystals designed to balance and strengthen your natural energy field." My own favourite is this "Not only does this crystal force field deflect harmful electromagnetic energies coming from your Computer Screens, Cell Phones, Microwaves, Hair Dryers and other electronic equipment but it deflects any personal energy that is incompatible with you. The shield resonates at your personal frequency after wearing it for 24 hours, it will act as a "Gatekeeper" letting in only energies that are compatible with you and deflecting those not compatible with you."

These were the claims I had to test, and test fairly. On the positive side the effects were mostly measurable, such as increasing muscular strength, reducing stress and improving well-being. Among the problems of testing it was that the shield takes some time to balance itself to a person's personal energy and that it cannot be shared with anyone else. This meant doing a long-term study with one shield per person.

I tracked down the British distributor, David Chambers, and through him the American manufacturer, Virginia Brown, and after many discussions they supplied us with six real and six fake shields. Nick Rose and I asked twelve women to wear these for several weeks and measured their hand strength, mood and stress levels at regular intervals, without either them or us knowing which shields were which (Blackmore & Rose, 2000). We tried to arrange the double blind precautions to be fair to both the manufacturers and to us. We did not want to find either that we had negative results and they thought we could have cheated, or positive results and we thought they could have cheated. Arranging this was not easy, partly because they did not seem to understand what was required. Eventually, however, we all agreed that Nick and I would prepare results for each subject coded by letter and a list of who had worn which numbered shield, and that David and Virginia would come to our lab with a list of which of the numbered shields was fake and which real. We would exchange these in front of an independent witness so that neither side could cheat.

Up until the moment they arrived I had been obsessed with the precautions, but as soon as they arrived I knew there was no need. They were genuine, eager to find out the results, and trying to give us their code list even before we got into the lab. We stopped them from doing so and laid out the results for them. This way they could see, out of twelve subjects, who had become stronger, more relaxed or calmer, and we gave them the chance to choose, from these 12 people, which 6 they thought had worn the real shields. By chance they should get three right; with the probability of getting four right 0.24; five 0.04, and six 0.001. In other words, if they correctly chose five or six of the subjects we would have a significant result. We could analyse the complete results later. David and Virginia studied the graphs carefully, made their choice, and then handed over the code list.

It was a genuinely exciting moment. We believed no one could have cheated and we had no idea which shield was which. If they got five or six right we would know we had some strange and incomprehensible effect on our hands. If not we would know we had more false and potentially damaging claims to deal with. We took their list and marked up the graphs. They had got four right.

What happened next was the most informative event of all. They began to explain what had happened. This person had obviously been blocking the shield's energy. This person may have needed longer with the shield - shields can spend at least four weeks rebalancing some people. This person had become more relaxed even with a fake shield. Over lunch we talked more - they seemed disappointed, but only slightly so. They were sure there was some explanation, and they never seemed to entertain the possibility that the shields do nothing at all.

Later we did the full analysis and sent them the results. Virginia wrote that she had initially thought the results were a disaster but finally came to see them as a "blessing in disguise". Apparently her consultant told her that the placebo shields should not be made by the same person as the real shields because the makers "have been making shields with such clear intent that they will strengthen and balance people, that this 'energy' goes into the shield with or without the actual crystals." She seemed surprised by this strange claim but also willing to accept it, and she recommended that we use shields made a different way for our next experiments. Indeed, she kindly had a new set of 3 real and 3 fake shields made especially. Using these we carried out two further experiments to find out whether the shields protect people from the weakening effects of holding a mobile phone (cell phone). The results suggest they do not (Blackmore & Rose, 2000).

I had started this study with the opinion that someone somewhere was maliciously and greedily making false claims to take money from vulnerable people. I ended up with quite a different view - that well-meaning people were selling a product they genuinely believed in to people who also believed in it and felt better, even though the specific claims are false.

One final example concerns a psychic claimant, David Spark; a quietly spoken man in his late thirties who just turned up one day in our lab. David claims to be able to predict the outcome of horse races, not by knowing the form or juggling the odds (though he is very good at that) but by using his psychic powers. He spends three or four hours a day in the 'bookies' practising, and finally decided that he wanted to be properly tested. Nick Rose and I agreed and asked him what he could do. He said he could tell the suit of playing cards, so for six weeks I hid a playing card in a filing cabinet and he rang in with his guess. He was quite successful with this task, getting three out of six guesses right, but said he preferred the horses where you have a list of names to look at. So we devised a new test using lists of words chosen by him.

He made 14 guesses and got none right. Yet he was sure that if he could get more relaxed, or improve his sleep and diet, or find a task more like horse racing, the results would improve. Nick then wrote a programme which displayed a simple horse race on the computer screen, and between April and May 1999 David made 10 guesses from home. Again the results were below chance and again David came up with numerous reasons why he had failed. Finally we invited him to come to the lab for properly controlled tests, and after each experiment I recorded an interview with him.

In the lab David could work in his own time, predicting the outcome and then running the race when he was ready, as often as he liked up to a preset number of trials. In the first experiment we decided on 100 trials (several weeks work with anything between 5 and 15 trials per session) and David predicted he would get about half the winners right. In fact he got just 6 - fewer than the 10 predicted by chance. Afterwards I asked him about these results.

"Well, I was very happy with the results that I got. I was totally pleased with them because one of the things I said was sort of linking some of the numbers up ... like one, two and ten together; three, four and nine together, and five, six, seven and eight together. ... You can look at them in lots of different ways, but looking at them that way, one, two and ten, come up with 39 answers out of a hundred. ... So I was totally happy when I saw the results. The second last session I did, there was still ten more to do and at the end of that I added all the results and come up with a graph and everything and I looked at that and I saw a few things there, and I thought, I'm really pleased with that."

He did indeed make a graph, and a chart of results, and numerous calculations. His understanding of probability was far sharper than mine, and yet he seemed always to conclude that he had succeeded, when I thought he had not. The problem, as so often in psychic claims, is looking for patterns after the fact. If you study the results of any such experiment you can always find interesting patterns, and we did. The question is - are they chance or real? The answer is - if they are different every time, and only visible in retrospect, then they are probably chance. As we explained, if he could predict in advance that he would get, say, more hits on positions seven and eight - or indeed any pattern he cared to predict, then we could test that.

We eventually carried out five experiments of this kind. In the later ones we gave him toy money with which he could bet a different amount on each race. The results of these experiments were fascinating. None of the individual results was significant for first place hits. Overall David completed 210 trials with ten horse races, and obtained exactly 21 hits. In other words it appears as though there is nothing but chance guessing operating. Nonetheless, he came out with a small profit on his winnings, a sum of ranks significantly below chance (which suggests something other than chance going on), and a conviction that his powers were real. After each experiment he explained why he had failed, and maintained great optimism about his achievements.

In our final interview I was quite straight with him. I knew him fairly well by now and really wanted to understand what was going on in his mind. I suggested that "it's all chance, and all these ideas you have are actually completely irrelevant." To my surprise he agreed this was possible, but added "I'm totally convinced that I do have an ability - what the first hundred experiments show is that I can't just do anything I want to, I just can't consciously decide. I have to have my mind in a certain status, a certain way, and it's something I've got to be relaxed about, and I've got to be confident about what I'm doing. ... I'm still learning." I told him that skeptics would not yet be convinced and he replied "but I'm so certain, so positive that I definitely can do it that it's only a matter of time - that it will be there."

In all these cases the people involved stuck to their own familiar paradigms - and here the much over-used word 'paradigm' is quite apposite (Kuhn, 1962). When the results were not as they expected they did not consider the possibility that their whole paradigm was false, but instead preferred to patch it up with ad hoc explanations for every failure. Although James did change his mind in important ways, he did not abandon the idea that aliens were abducting him. But then imagine how hard it would have been for him, or any of them. In all cases they were deeply committed to their world views and to some extent their whole lives were bound up with their beliefs. James was involved with various UFO organisations and with magazines about aliens. David and Virginia made their living out of selling bio-electric shields and other similar products, and David Spark once told me, referring to his work with us "It is the actual focus of my life".

Skepticism is the focus of many skeptics' lives. Some have committed their careers to promoting skepticism and to debunking paranormal claims. Would they find it easy to change their minds if good evidence for the paranormal came along? I think not. The problem in making this comparison is that there is, as far as I can tell, no good evidence for the paranormal. Nevertheless, some skeptics display just the same reluctance to change, and tendency to biased interpretations, as the most ardent believers do. In skeptical books and magazines we can read again and again authors who prefer to accept even the feeblest and least well-founded skeptical explanation of a claim, rather than consider the possibility that the claim might be true. Yet if we are going to study psychic claims at all, we must always consider the possibility that they are true. Unlikely as it is, ESP and PK might exist. There could be new forces as yet undiscovered. We should accept the best explanation we can find - not the one that we like the most. The lesson we should learn from James, David, Virginia and David Spark is not that believers find it hard to be open-minded but that we all do.

Not only is it emotionally taxing to consider our least favourite theories, but it is hard work too. It takes a lot of time and effort to make a reasonably fair and unbiased assessment of any paranormal claim. I knew I was no longer prepared to do it properly when one day a huge pile of papers arrived in the post. The Stargate affair had just broken. The evidence

coming out of all the Stanford Research Institute remote viewing work was published and various people were arguing about whether it did, or did not, provide evidence for psi. Several people asked for my opinion and a friend sent me a huge packet containing all the information. I balked. I was not prepared to be an ignorant parapsychologists/skeptic and give opinions on experiments I had not studied. I knew that I would only be prepared to give an opinion - whether publicly or privately - if I had read all that material. And I knew that I did not want to read it.

I knew then that I had to give up. In the fall of 1998 I gave a lecture to the Society for Psychological Research entitled "Why I must give up psychical research".

The more serious reason why I have given up is that I no longer believe in the world I outlined at the start. Indeed, I no longer believe that the search for paranormal phenomena will provide insight into the "big questions" of life - though when I started out on my career in parapsychology I was sure it would. I really believed that studying the paranormal would help me with such mysteries as "What kind of world is this? What am I? and How should I live my life?"

As the founders of psychical research perceived, questions about ESP, PK, and survival of death strike right to the heart of these big questions. If ESP and PK exist, our minds have the power to reach beyond the body with its ordinary senses and physical limitations. Much of psychology and neuroscience must be wrong because they are entirely founded on the assumption that physical transfer of energy and information is required to produce behaviour, understanding and awareness. If there is personal survival of death then we humans must have some kind of soul or inner self that can survive independently of the body. Some form of dualism must be true, however inconceivable that seems to our present day science and philosophy. The implications are immense.

So too are the implications for how we should live our lives. If telepathy or PK are real then we might be able to help others with their use. Perhaps we should cultivate them, or learn to protect ourselves against their misuse. If survival is real then we must live our lives in the knowledge that there is some realm beyond - where our earthly deeds may have consequences, and which gives some new meaning to our lives here on earth.

But what if they don't exist? Then each of us is a biological creature, designed by natural selection for the survival of our genes and memes; here for no reason at all other than the dictates of chance and necessity, and unable to contact or influence anyone else except through the normal senses and physical processes. Our consciousness, and the perceived world around us, emerge from the complex interactions between brains and their environment, and when those brains decay then our awareness stops.

Living in a world like this is truly scary. There is nothing to hang onto. It seems to me now that free will is an illusion, and even our precious selves are not solid persisting entities but ephemeral constructions that change all the time. There is no continuous self who lives our lives, let alone one that could survive our deaths. There is no point in behaving well so as to have our reward in the afterlife, for there is no afterlife. There is only this world now, and our actions must reflect that knowledge. I say this is genuinely scary, though I think it gets easier with practice. And to those who accuse me of being scared of the paranormal, I can only say "try this instead". But asking which you find most scary really is not the point. Fear is never a good reason for choosing one's view of the world.

How then can we answer the big questions? I would say in two ways. One is by personal experience and disciplined observation; trying to see clearly the truth about oneself and the world. That is why I meditate and practice mindfulness. So throwing out the paranormal does not mean abandoning spirituality or spiritual practice. The other is by doing science, and for me the interesting questions now concern evolutionary processes, memes, and the origins of consciousness (Blackmore, 1999).

What then of parapsychology? The world still might be as I imagined it at the start and because the implications would be so profound I am glad that others are carrying on. The recent resurgence of funding for parapsychology means there are several new labs and many new researchers at work. If psi does exist then one day one of them will find a way to demonstrate it and a theory to explain it. If that happens I shall be back like a shot, but until then, happily, I have given up.