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“Mom, when you were a little girl and I was your daddy, you were bad a lot of times, and I never hit you!”

WITH THESE WORDS, WILLIAM, THEN A rambunctious three-year-old responding to his mother’s warning about a spanking, proclaimed that he had been his maternal grandfather, John.

His mother, Doreen, was initially taken aback by this, but as William talked more, she began to feel comforted by the idea that her father had returned. John had been close to his family and had frequently told Doreen, “No matter what, I’m always going to take care of you.” William talked a number of times about being his

grandfather and also discussed his death. He demonstrated knowledge that amazed his mother, such as the nickname only his grandfather used for a family cat and the day of the week when his grandfather had died.

JIM B. TUCKER

William also talked about the period between lives. “When you die, you don’t go right to heaven,” he told his mother. “You go to different levels—here, then here, then here,” he explained, with his hand moving up at each level. He said that animals are reborn as well as humans and that he saw animals in heaven that did not

I've Been Here Before: Children's Reports of Previous Lives

bite or scratch. John had been a practicing Roman Catholic, but he had believed in reincarnation and had said he would take care of animals in his next life. William said he would be an animal doctor and would take care of large animals at a zoo.

William also had a birth defect that seemed to match the fatal wound his grandfather had suffered. John was a retired New York City policeman working as a security guard when he stopped at an electronics store after work one night. He saw two men robbing the store and pulled out his pistol. Another thief behind a counter began shooting at him. John was hit six times. One of the bullets entered his back and sliced through his left lung, his heart, and the main pulmonary artery—the blood vessel that carries blood from the right side of the heart to the lungs to receive oxygen. He was rushed to the hospital but did not survive.

Five years after John died, Doreen gave birth to William. William began passing out soon after he was born. Doctors diagnosed him with a condition called pulmonary valve

atresia, in which the inadequately formed valve of the main pulmonary artery prevents blood from traveling through it to the lungs. In addition, his heart's right ventricle had not formed properly as a result of the valve problem. William underwent several surgeries. Although he will need to take medication indefinitely, he has done quite well.

Researchers at the University of Virginia have been studying cases like William's for more than 45 years. Ian Stevenson, who passed away in 2007 (*see sidebar on page 17*), started the work when he was chairman of the Department of Psychiatry. When he came to the university, Stevenson had published extensively in medical and psychiatric journals, but he also harbored an interest in parapsychology. After he learned of five cases in India of young children claiming to remember previous lives, Stevenson went there in 1961 to investigate. He stayed for four weeks and discovered 25 cases. He achieved similar results in nearby Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and realized that this phenomenon was much more common than anyone had known. ➔

Stevenson investigated more of these cases from various parts of the world, and in 1966 the American Society for Psychical Research published his first book on them, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. The title reflects Stevenson's even-handed approach: He did not accept that reincarnation occurred and did not take the cases at face value; instead, he attempted to document the cases as carefully as possible—at times in exhaustive detail.

Stevenson stepped down as chairman of the Department of Psychiatry in 1967 to focus full time on this research and created the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia to carry on the work of reincarnation research. Over the past four decades, researchers associated with the Division have investigated more than 2,500 cases of children who say they remember previous lives.

TYPICAL FEATURES

The cases seem to occur most often in cultures with a belief in reincarnation. India, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Lebanon, Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar) have revealed most of them. However, cases have been found wherever anyone has looked for them: Stevenson published a book of European cases, and numerous ones have been found in the United States as well. They often share several features:

1. Past-life statements. When they are two- or three-years-old, the children in these cases often begin to describe a previous life and usually stop by the age of six or seven. They talk about their memories spontaneously, without the use of hypnotic regression. Some are able to recall the memories on demand, but others need to be in a certain frame of mind to access them. They describe recent lives—usually quite ordinary and in the same country—with the median interval between the death of the previous individual and the birth of the child at only 16 months. The one part of the remembered life that is often out of the ordinary is the mode of death: 70 percent recall death by unnatural means.

Like William, some children say they were deceased family members, while others say they were strangers in another location. When those children give enough details—such as the name of that location—people have gone there and indeed identified a deceased individual, the *previous personality*, whose life appears to match the child's report.

Some children talk about their memories with detachment, but many show strong emotions. They may cry and beg to be taken to what they say is their previous family. Others show intense anger, particularly toward their killers in those cases in which the previous personality was murdered. And yet, even the children with strong emotions may show great intensity one moment and then engage in ordinary play a few minutes later.

2. Birthmarks and birth defects. Like William, many of the children have birthmarks or birth defects that appear to match wounds, usually fatal ones, suffered by the previous personalities. Stevenson published a two-volume set of more than two hundred such cases. For example, a girl who was born with markedly deformed fingers remembered the life of a man whose fingers were chopped off. A boy with only stubs for fingers on his right hand remembered the life of a boy in another village who had lost the fingers of his right hand in a fodder-chopping machine. A boy with a birthmark on the back of his head (which was small and round, like an entry wound) and a birthmark toward the front of his head (which was larger and more irregularly shaped, like an exit wound) remembered the life of a teacher who had been shot from behind and killed. Another girl who remembered the life of a man who had undergone skull surgery had what Stevenson called the most extraordinary birthmark he had ever seen—a 3-cm-wide band of pale, scarlike tissue that extended around her entire head.

3. Themes of past-life statements. When children talk about a previous life, they tend to discuss events at the end of the life, and almost three-quarters of them give details about the death. They are also more likely to talk about people from the end of that life, rather than earlier, so a child who describes dying as an adult is more likely to talk about a spouse or children than about parents.

In addition, 20 percent of the children in these cases describe memories of events between lives. Some say they stayed near to where the previous personality had lived or died, and they may describe a funeral or other events involving the family. One girl in Thailand, Ratana Wongsombat, complained that “her” ashes had been scattered rather than buried. In fact, the previous personality had wanted her ashes to be buried under the bo tree at her temple, but the tree's root system was so extensive that her daughter had been

unable to bury the remains and scattered them instead. Another child, Bongkuch Promsin, said he spent seven years hovering over a bamboo tree near where the previous personality's body had been dumped after he was killed. One day he tried to go to his previous mother but got lost in the market. While there, he saw the man who became his current father. Bongkuch followed him home to join his family. Bongkuch's father had in fact attended a meeting on a rainy day in the area Bongkuch reported, during the month when Bongkuch was conceived. Like William, some children have also talked about going to realms such as heaven and seeing other beings there.

4. Past-life behaviors. Many of these children act in ways that appear connected to the lives they describe. Some show emotions toward various members of the previous family that are appropriate for the relationships that the previous personality had with them. The children may be deferential toward previous parents or a spouse but

bossy toward younger siblings of the previous personality, even though those siblings are presently much older than the child. These emotions usually dissipate as the children grow older, but there are exceptions. In at least one case, Maung Aye Kyaw of Burma, the child grew up and married the widow of the previous personality.

Many of the children exhibit phobias toward the mode of death of the previous personality, especially in cases involving a death by unnatural means. These are particularly common in drownings, with 31 out of 53 showing a fear of being in water. Some show likes and dislikes that are similar to those of the previous personality. For example, when Stevenson and Jürgen Keil studied 24 cases of Burmese children who claimed they had been Japanese soldiers killed in Burma during World War II, they found that some of them complained about the spicy Burmese food and asked for raw fish instead. Some of the children also show an unfortunate interest in addictive substances, such as alcohol and tobacco, if



Ian P. Stevenson
(1918–2007)

Dr. Stevenson was educated at St. Andrew's University in Scotland and McGill University in Montreal, where he received his medical degree in 1943. After a brief period of research in biochemistry, he became dissatisfied with its reductionism and looked for a way to study what he considered "something closer to the whole human being." In the late 1940s, he joined a group at New York Hospital and began research in psychosomatic medicine, particularly on the effects of stress and strong emotions on physical symptoms. This work eventually led him to training in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In 1957, at the age of 38, he was appointed professor

and chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia.

He began to search for new theories of the origin of individual differences and the development of personality. He became one of the first academics in the United States to investigate the effects of psychedelic drugs in a psychiatric context. One experience with LSD induced what he described as "a mystical experience," in which he experienced three days of "perfect serenity" and the sense that "I could never be angry again. As it happens, that didn't work out, but the memory of it persisted as something to hope for."

Experiences such as this eventually led Stevenson to undertake extensive reading in the literature of psychical research about extrasensory perception and a variety of experiences suggesting survival after death, such as apparitions, near-death experiences and deathbed visions, and mediumship. He conducted and published research in all these areas, but it was the discovery in obscure publications of numerous scattered reports of young children who seemed to have

memories of a previous life that led to the research Stevenson pioneered and for which he is now best known.

Over the next 35 years, Stevenson traveled extensively throughout the world—logging an average of 55,000 miles a year—identifying and studying nearly 3,000 cases in Asian and Western cultures. He was the author of more than 300 publications, including 14 books. His magnum opus is a two-volume, 2,268-page monograph reporting more than 200 cases in which highly unusual birthmarks or birth defects on a child corresponded with marks, usually fatal wounds, on the previous person. Stevenson's greatest frustration was not that other scientists dismissed his interpretations of the evidence but that most of them did so without even bothering to read the evidence that he had so painstakingly assembled.

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One scale measuring the strength of a case is based on four features: children's statements about the previous life; the presence of birthmarks or birth defects; behaviors that appear related to the previous life; and the distance between the child's family and the family of the previous personality.

the previous personality consumed them.

Children often play in ways that seem connected to their past-life reports, and this usually involves the occupation of the previous personality. One boy became preoccupied with his play as a biscuit shopkeeper and neglected his schoolwork to the point that his academic performance never recovered. Occasionally, children will repeatedly re-enact the death scene of the previous personality, appearing to show the same kind of play as children with posttraumatic stress disorder. When children report past lives as members of the opposite sex, they often show behaviors appropriate for that sex. At times, the behaviors are extreme enough to warrant a diagnosis of gender identity disorder. Although the cross-gender behavior may continue into adulthood, most of these children grow up to lead perfectly ordinary lives.

RECENT WORK

In recent years the research has expanded beyond individual cases to include examinations of groups of cases. At the University of Virginia, each case is rated on two hundred variables, and this information is then entered into a database. This is a long-range, ongoing project, but enough cases have been entered so that certain features can be analyzed.

One scale measuring the strength of a case is based on four features: children's statements about the previous life; the presence of birthmarks or birth defects; behaviors that appear related to the previous life; and the distance

between the child's family and the family of the previous personality. This scale was applied to 799 cases and showed, for example, that the apparent strength of cases was not affected by the initial attitude the parents had toward their child's statements—meaning that parents' enthusiasm did not make a case appear stronger than it actually was. It also showed that in the stronger cases, children started talking earlier about a past life, were more emotional when discussing their memories, and showed more facial resemblance to the deceased individuals.

Another study involved the reports some children made about events occurring during the interval between the death of the previous personality and their own birth. It showed that compared to those who did not have such memories, the children who described these "interval memories" made more statements about the previous life that were verified to be accurate, recalled more names from the previous life, had higher scores on the strength-of-case scale, and were more likely to give the name of the previous personality and accurate details about the death.

Close analysis of 35 such cases in Burma showed that these interval memories could be broken down into three parts: a transitional stage, a stable stage in a particular location, and a return stage involving a choice of parents or conception. The descriptions by the Burmese children were compared to reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) made by patients; they overlapped in many ways with Asian NDEs and had features that were similar to the transcendental feature of Western NDEs. The study suggested

that interval memories and NDEs can be considered examples of the same overall phenomenon of reports about an afterlife.

Another area of recent research has involved psychological testing of the children. Erlendur Haraldsson has published studies of two groups of subjects in Sri Lanka and one in Lebanon. The Sri Lankan children performed better in school than their peers but showed some mild behavioral problems. The children in Lebanon seemed to daydream more and show more attention-seeking behavior than their peers. Testing showed that the children in both places were not unusually suggestible. Psychologist Don Nidiffer has evaluated 15 American children reporting past-life memories, and in yet-to-be-published data, he finds them to be quite intelligent and psychologically healthy. None of these studies indicated any mental illness.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Studies of this phenomenon are continuing in several areas. Haraldsson is conducting a long-term follow-up

study of adults who were studied when they reported past-life memories as children. He has interviewed subjects in Sri Lanka and will be doing the same in Lebanon. This will produce a systematic assessment of how the subjects develop after childhood, which has not yet been done.

At the University of Virginia, work with the database will continue, allowing for further analysis of particular aspects of the cases. In addition, researchers are focusing more on American cases, with a goal to collect more and stronger cases. They also plan further psychological assessment of American cases. Thus the work goes on, continuing the effort that Ian Stevenson began 45 years ago, to understand the unusual phenomenon of these apparent memories of previous lives. 🌐

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