

Reincarnation, Part I: The Facts and the Questions

by

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INTRODUCTION

There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of books about reincarnation. Until recently, the vast majority of them have been written by mediums, who tell about reincarnation as they see and understand it. I have always been skeptical of these accounts, because they are basically assertions without evidence. At least the evidence is not the kind I can verify in any objective way.

So, for me the real issue is evidence. What would an engineer—a skeptical retired engineer like myself—accept as evidence? In contrast to many physical scientists, I have always been willing to consider anecdotal evidence, that is, the stories people tell from their own experience. But these stories have to be consistent with one another and with what I know from my own experience. And being more than a bit cynical, I always ask who profits from a person revealing her or his experience. Is a person trying to get their few minutes of fame in an otherwise boring life? If so, then the story deserves the trash can. On the other hand, if the story is an embarrassment or an inconvenience, and the person asks that their real name not be used, then I give increased credibility to the story. A second criterion is: Can the material facts be verified? If the alleged events took place in 1500 BC, then I take the story with a grain of salt. On the other hand, if the events took place in 1923, say, and can be verified with a newspaper article, then the credibility is very high. A third criterion I use is the outcome, or the consequences, of the therapy. Is a patient healed of his or her psychosis?

Does a healthy patient gain understanding of her or his life? In either of these cases, I give increased credibility to the story.

IAN STEVENSON

The first researcher that I read who provided some kind of objective evidence was Dr. Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist turned detective. He began in 1957, at the age of thirty-nine. I will let him tell it in his own words:

... I began to find in books here and there, and in newspapers and magazines, reports of what were usually individual cases of reincarnation memories. In the end [after three years], I found forty-four cases here and there. The thing that came out when you got them all together was that they predominantly featured young children, ages two to five, who spoke of previous-life memories for a brief time, until they were about eight. But you had to get them all together first before that was obvious. Many were little more than journalistic anecdotes, but some were considerably more serious...

Numbers count in science, and these forty-four cases, when you put them together, it just seemed inescapable to me that there must be something there... I couldn't see how they could all be faked or they could all be a deception.

My conclusion was that this might be a promising line of investigation if more cases could be found and studied earlier and more carefully. I don't

think it occurred to me that I might be the one to carry out the investigations.¹

In 1960, Stevenson wrote an essay about those forty-four cases that won a prize from the American Society for Psychical Research. His essay came to the attention of the head of the Parapsychology Foundation in New York, who had heard of a similar case in India.

Stevenson was awarded a small grant to go to India and investigate. By the time he got there he had leads on five cases. In a month he found twenty-five. The same thing happened in Sri Lanka. He began with a lead on a case and found seven. Stevenson wrote up his results in a book, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, which was published in 1966.^{2,3}

Over the next several decades Stevenson patiently collected case after case. As he said, “Numbers count in science.” By the late 1990s he had more than 2,500 cases suggestive of reincarnation. What are these cases like? Robert was three years old and liked cowboy boots and Levis. He lived with his mother and father in a housing development in rural Virginia. Robert talked all the time about his farm, with its house, shed, and cows. He became something of a family embarrassment, so Robert isn’t his real name. One day he was in the back seat of the family car, when his father decided to turn right at an intersection and drive down a road they had *never* driven before. Robert became excited—more than excited—yelling, “My farm, this is to my farm, Mama, this is it, this is where it’s at!” His mother said, “It made your hair stand on end.” They passed a school and came to a fork in the road, and there was the farm just as Robert described it.⁴

To say that cases like these are difficult to explain with our usual paradigm of life is putting it rather mildly. When you put them all together it seems inescapable to me that there is something there. In 1997, Tom Shroder asked Stevenson if he thought his investigations

had proven reincarnation. Abridging his reply, Stevenson said, “Of the cases we know now—at least for some—reincarnation is the best explanation we have been able to come up with. There is an impressive body of evidence, and I think it is getting stronger all the time. I think a rational person, if he wants, can believe in reincarnation on the basis of evidence.”⁵

BRIAN WEISS

Dr. Brian Weiss is a psychiatrist practicing in the Miami area. In 1980 he met a patient whom he called Catherine. Catherine suffered from “anxiety, panic attacks, and phobias” especially related to choking. These symptoms had her emotionally paralyzed. After eighteen months of standard psychiatric therapy, with one or two sessions a week, Catherine was no better. In desperation, Weiss tried hypnosis. When he said a key sentence, Catherine was suddenly experiencing a life in ancient Arabia where she choked to death in a flash flood. With post-hypnotic suggestion, those memories were brought into the present where they could be processed openly. The therapy could now be summarized in a sentence: That experience was then, and we are here now. Catherine was healed of her phobias in less than a month and went on to live a healthy life. It took Weiss four years to gain courage to tell anyone about this experience, and the book was *Many Lives, Many Masters*.^{6,7}

Over the ensuing two decades, Weiss accumulated some four thousand people “whose souls have journeyed through past lives, carrying the immortal part of them to the present.”⁸ Numbers count in science. In addition to his own practice, Weiss asserts that

Hundreds of other therapists have taped thousands of past life sessions, and many of their patients’ experiences have been verified. I myself have

checked specific details and events recorded in Catherine's and others' past life memories—accurate details and events impossible to ascribe to false memory or fantasy. I no longer doubt that reincarnation is real. Our souls have lived before and will live again. That is our immortality.⁹

The case of Catherine fails the second of my three criteria, because how can anyone check the events of “ancient Arabia”? You can't. But it does pass the third criterion, because by all accounts Catherine was healed of her phobias. “By their fruits shall ye know them,” and the fruits were very positive.

MICHAEL NEWTON

Michael Newton is a psychotherapist, and in 1968 was practicing in Los Angeles. Similar to Weiss, Newton was using hypnosis to find the source of a patient's problems. He relates the story in his introduction to the book *Memories of the Afterlife*.¹⁰ He unwittingly said a key word, and his patient was suddenly in a place that she called the Spirit World, where our souls go between incarnations. Newton studied the tape of that session and identified the key word. Subsequently, he found that the phenomenon was reproducible, and he spent the next three and a half decades exploring the Spirit World. Over his career he collected some seven thousand case histories.¹¹ It's all anecdotal evidence, but the stories are consistent. The first edition of *Journey of Souls* was published in 1994, and the fifth edition is available today in bookstores everywhere.¹² This is the book we used as a text for the adult education course in January and February of this year.

Journey of Souls takes the reader into the Spirit World and describes that World in considerable detail. In our brief time this morning, I will attempt an overview that summarizes our souls' activities in the Spirit World. My summary might be called an organizing generalization. Newton emphasizes that not every soul experiences every facet of the following scenario. And yet in Newton's words, "People come to us from all walks of life, with many belief systems, ranging from atheism to a fundamentalist religious persuasion ... once in deep hypnosis, they all recount memories of an afterlife that is strangely uniform in concept and perception."¹³

I had a life-between-lives session on February 27th, conducted by Jeri Roraback, a member of the Michael Newton Institute for Life Between Lives Hypnotherapy, who practices in Sacramento. It began in typical fashion, with memory warm-ups that regressed me to age ten, to age five, and then to inside my mother's womb. Mom was eagerly anticipating my birth and was hoping for a boy. Then I was taken by a tunnel into my next previous life. It was 1842, and I was a young woman, about sixteen or so, who had gotten herself pregnant out of wedlock. I arrived, so to speak, at the conclusion of a kangaroo court that had just banished me from that society because of unacceptable behavior. The details were fascinating, and we spent a long time on the subject. At one point, Roraback froze the action and asked me if I recognized any of the other people in that scene who are or were in my present life. Among others, I recognized my mother, father, and paternal grandfather. They were my mother and father in that life, and the judge of that kangaroo court. The karmic entanglements are fascinating and explain a great deal about my present life.

From that crucial scene I progressed to my death scene a few hours later. After my death in 1842, I was drawn upward, as is typical. However, my experience then began to depart

from the norm, and its uniqueness makes it less than helpful for today's summary. But I will say this: It was worth every dollar I spent, and I would do it again in a heartbeat.

Continuing with the organizing generalization, when our soul leaves our physical body, it enters a different dimension of some kind. Some souls stay around the location for a time, perhaps to witness their memorial service. Others don't loiter at all. There is usually a pulling sensation that draws them toward the Spirit World. Some move slowly, others quickly. Eventually our soul is met by our soul guide or by someone significant, such as a close friend or relative. Many times there's a welcoming committee.

After the welcome, a soul typically moves to what Newton calls the healing shower, where our energy is restored and rebalanced. One soul, after a particularly difficult life in which his energy was "shredded," described the shower as being hosed down with a fire hose.

Next there is a life review of the life just past, conducted by our soul guide. We are held accountable for our every action, and we are our own worst critic. Good things are noted as well. In the reincarnation class, we spent a long time on a case where the individual committed suicide in his previous life. The soul's guide would not put up with any rationalizations or self pity, but on the other hand, the greatest condemnation the guide ever said was, "Your response lacks merit." That case is worth a great deal of study on our part today, because it illustrates many traps we can fall into.¹⁴

Moving on, after the life review our soul goes to its home group, where we are welcomed home with joy and enthusiasm. Souls are organized into soul groups of typically a dozen or so members. Each soul group has two guides: Newton calls them junior guides and senior guides. The junior guides have frequent contact with the souls in their charge, while the

senior guide less frequent contact. Some groups have a student teacher, who is apprenticing a more experienced guide. The character of guides is important, and Newton devotes an entire chapter to the topic of guides.¹⁵

Shortly after arriving back at our group, we go before a Council of Elders. The purpose of our Council is to take a higher perspective, or an overview, of all our past lives. *Journey of Souls* doesn't spend much time on the Council of Elders, but Newton's sequel, *Destiny of Souls*, has a lengthy chapter devoted to Councils.¹⁶ In Newton's words,

Where a personal guide will review how we prioritized our objectives and analyze each step after a life, our Elders ask more overview-type questions.

The council just doesn't inquire into our most immediate past life. Lines of questioning follow across the sum of all our lives and cover the larger picture of our progress toward self-fulfillment. The Elders wish to explore if we are developing to our potential.¹⁷

Our councils also point out positive actions that we may have forgotten. In *Destiny of Souls* there is a particularly important session involving a wealthy man during the Great Depression in the United States. He happened to be hurrying to work one day when he passed a lady sitting at a bus stop. He noticed she was crying, so he stopped, sat down beside her, put his arm around her shoulder, and gave her some compassionate comfort. They were together for only a few minutes, and he never saw her again. In fact, before the soul's council session he had completely forgotten about it, because the incident seemed such a

small thing. But the council valued his act of compassion more highly than “An entire lifetime of giving money to charity...”¹⁸

[Pause for dramatic effect!]

Another characteristic of the Spirit World is a loving presence that permeates the whole place. This is mentioned only briefly in *Journey of Souls*, but in *Destiny of Souls* Newton devotes two sections to the topic.¹⁹ This presence is not God, at least people do not use that word. Rather, they use such words as the Source, or the One, or the Creator, or the Oversoul. Unitarians should rejoice in this knowledge, because whatever word people in trance use, it is clear there is only *one* of this entity. And while I’m on the subject, Universalists should also rejoice, because we all go to heaven—that’s the only place there is. But that’s not the whole truth, so don’t quote me out of context. When people commit deliberate evil during a life, their souls are separated from others in the Spirit World, and they go to special places where their energy is remodeled or rehabilitated. The subject of evil is of great importance, so let me digress for a moment.

A particularly telling example of this remodeling is the chapter “Lothar the Barbarian” in the book *Memories of the Afterlife*.²⁰ As a barbarian, Lothar loved violence—killing, raping, pillaging, all that, and more. In the Spirit World he was isolated. In his words, “When I say isolation, I’m talking *isolation!* Nobody comes around other than the specialized guides that are helping me through this, this transition. The ones I’m dealing with are very old souls, very experienced, and very powerful.”²¹ The purpose of this remodeling is revealed in the following words by Lothar,

Well, I'm told that my love of violence has, in a way, created something good in me also. It's a unique experience that can be turned in a different direction. It gives me an extraordinary power and strength that could be used for good eventually. But it has to be honed and sent into a different direction. But they don't want to destroy it, they don't want to waste it. It's very, very valuable to the collective. And it is with great joy that I understand this—that there is nothing wrong with me, that I am just utterly unique. I have a need for intense experience. And that my ability to be violent can also be an intense experience to love. I can love intensely also. This is what my main lesson is.²²

This case is an instructive example for all of us when dealing with our character defects. Through introspection and self-examination, find the core or the essence of that characteristic and then turn it in a constructive direction.

What do souls do in the Spirit World? First, they individually study their personal Life Books, which contain a record of all their activities in all of their previous lives. The more advanced souls, with the aid of their guides, seem to examine their previous lives in minute detail. The purpose of this study is to improve their decision making in their next life. Second, they have group study of their Life Books. Newton has found that groups of souls incarnate together over many lives in order to help one another learn. So these groups also study together. But it is not all work and no play in the Spirit World. There are a wide variety of community activities, and *Destiny of Souls* describes half a dozen activities that souls do for R&R.²³

Eventually, after the Life Books are studied, there comes a time when further work in the Spirit World has diminishing returns, and then it's time for another incarnation. Newton devotes four chapters to this process in *Journey of Souls*.²⁴ The process begins with a soul deciding what attribute of itself it wants to develop or what its goal is for its next incarnation. Next the soul has to decide where on Earth will be best in order to achieve this goal. For example, Newton reports one soul who wanted to be a concert pianist. Then the question was which city would be best: His choices were New York, Los Angeles, Oslo, or Rio de Janeiro.²⁵ With the goal and the place decided, the final decision is which family to be born into in order to best serve the purpose of the next incarnation. This is a lengthy process, and during the process there is a great deal of discussion in the Spirit World with our soul groups and our guides. Our Council of Elders also reviews our decision prior to our reincarnation. "The Spirit World is an environment personified by order."²⁶

This talk has been cursory in the extreme, and a thoughtful listener probably has a hundred questions at this point. As I suggested, I summarized some chapters of *Journey of Souls* with a single sentence. Several other chapters haven't been mentioned at all. In addition, the sequel, *Destiny of Souls*, goes into much more detail on many of these topics.

THE QUESTIONS

I will conclude with three questions. First and foremost, is this all real? Quoting Newton, "... I found no evidence of anyone faking their spiritual experiences to please me. In fact, subjects in hypnosis are not hesitant in correcting my misinterpretations of their statement."²⁷ I concur with that statement. As a partial answer to this question, during my own life-between-lives session with Jeri Roraback, there was one time when I was five that I

refused to do something she instructed me to do, because it wasn't safe. Further, my experience departed significantly from the organizing generalization I described, and it is impossible to explain how my experience could have been programmed by my prior knowledge of Newton's books. In addition, many people, after a life-between-lives session, declare that the Spirit World is more real than this physical one we're living in.

The second question is, are our past lives real? In my next sermon, scheduled for September 12, I will propose a test that we here in UUCM can conduct to answer this question. This paradigm satisfies a vital condition to be a legitimate theory in science: It is testable, and I will describe that test. In fact the test has already been conducted and is reported in *Destiny of Souls*,²⁸ but there are many people who will not believe it true until they have experienced it themselves.

And finally, a month and a half ago in mid-June, my wife and I were talking about this subject and she brought the issue to a focus, which I paraphrase: "Okay! Suppose reincarnation is a fact. So what?" Jan's point was and is that ethical behavior in the *presence* of reincarnation is still ethical behavior in the *absence* of reincarnation, so what's the big deal? Newton answers that question in the last few pages of his third book in the series, *Life Between Lives*.²⁹

It promises to be a lively sermon. Be sure to be here.

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REFERENCES

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- 4 Shroder, op cit., p. 246.

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- 8 Ibid, p. 8.
- 9 Ibid, p. 9.
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- 12 Michael Newton, *Journey of Souls*, fifth edition, 1996.
- 13 *Memories*, op cit., p. xiv.
- 14 *Journey*, op cit., p. 57-68.
- 15 Ibid, p. 107-122.
- 16 Michael Newton, *Destiny of Souls*, Llewellyn Publication, 2000, p. 201-258.
- 17 Ibid, p. 216.
- 18 Ibid, p. 223.
- 19 Ibid, p. 243-251.
- 20 *Memories*, op cit., p. 65-76.
- 21 Ibid, p. 73.
- 22 Ibid, p. 72.
- 23 *Destiny*, op cit., p. 290-315.
- 24 See *Journey of Souls*, chapters 12, 13, 14, and 15.
- 25 Ibid, p. 214-218.
- 26 Ibid, p. 261.
- 27 Ibid, p. 4.
- 28 *Destiny*, op cit., Case 46, p. 266-273.
- 29 *Life*, op cit., p. 211-213.

READING

Henry Ford was born on July 30, 1863, so he was twenty-six on July 30, 1889. When he was sixty-five, the *San Francisco Examiner* from August 26, 1928, published a quote which described Ford's belief:

I adopted the theory of Reincarnation when I was twenty six. Religion offered nothing to the point. Even work could not give me complete satisfaction. Work is futile if we cannot utilise [sic] the experience we collect in one life in the next. When I discovered Reincarnation it was as if I had found a universal plan I

realised [sic] that there was a chance to work out my ideas. Time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the hands of the clock. Genius is experience. Some seem to think that it is a gift or talent, but it is the fruit of long experience in many lives. Some are older souls than others, and so they know more. The discovery of Reincarnation put my mind at ease. If you preserve a record of this conversation, write it so that it puts men's minds at ease. I would like to communicate to others the calmness that the long view of life gives to us.

From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Ford, page 15 of 21 pages, copied on July 6, 2010.