

Survival of Bodily Death

An Esalen Invitational Conference
December 6 - 11, 1998

Reincarnation Emily Kelly

Emily Kelly led this discussion. Though she is not as actively involved in the research as she once was, she has stayed current with the field. A few intriguing lines of research have opened up recently, the main focus of which is birthmarks and birth defects, culminating in the publication of Ian Stevenson's two volumes last year (1998). These are cases of children reporting past life memories who have birthmarks or birth defects that correspond to a fatal wound from that life. They are important because:

1. Physical evidence calls into question some of the alternate explanations of the rebirth cases. If the children are getting information through psi, it doesn't account for birthmarks.
2. They are on the end of a continuum indicating that mind is having an effect on the body. Stigmata cases, hypnotic production of blisters, and the placebo effect are all indications of the power of this effect.

This material also relates to the "maternal impression" cases, many of which were reported in the 19th century. A typical case is one in which a mother sees something in the course of her pregnancy that is very frightening or disturbing to her, such as a birthmark or defect, and then gives birth to a child with the comparable defect. The hypothesis is that the emotional charge in the mother's psyche affects the development of the fetus somehow. Sukie Miller remarked that the causation could run the other direction; the mother could clairvoyantly read the disturbance and then selectively perceive it in the environment.

Returning to the birthmark cases, a classic example is a boy in Turkey who reported memories of being shot with a shotgun. He was born with a scattering of birthmarks on his chest in a patterning consistent with shotgun wounds. Ian Stevenson has more than sixty of these cases for which he has autopsy reports. Most of the cases are highly unusual types of birthmarks; color, texture, and shape are all very irregular. Also, he has a number of cases where there are two or more birthmarks that correspond to the reported previous life.

An area of this research that has gained prominence in the last few years involves experimental birthmarks, which occur mainly in Burma and Thailand. These cultures believe marking the body of a dying or recently deceased person will result in a birthmark when he or she reincarnates, allowing friends and relatives to identify the person. Stevenson has identified about eighteen of these cases. Over the last year, Jurgen Keil, who has been taking over the investigation in Thailand, Burma, and Turkey, and Jim Tucker have come up with 18 more of these cases, especially in a small area of northern Thailand; the numbers are climbing. The cases primarily occur within the same family. In a few, the mother actually saw the marking, while in others she had heard about it but did not see it, and in still others, the mother did not know about the expected birthmark. For instance, in Thailand, an older sister died of heart disease and some friends preparing her for burial marked her on the back of the neck with lipstick. They never told the mother until after a child was born with the analogous birthmark.

Most markings are ash or soot, things that do not penetrate the skin, a fact which amazed several conferees who believed impressions on subtle bodies must result from stronger stimuli. However, a few more serious marking cases occur in Africa. In Nigeria, they believe in what are known as ogbanje spirits, children who are born into a family, live for a while and then die in a repetitive cycle to harass the parents. When this happens a number of times, parents will mutilate the body of the dead child, which is believed to stop this process. They will typically cut off a fingertip or remove part of the ear, acts which are not drastic enough to cause a full deformity but allow recognition of the ogbanje. Occasionally, the mutilation is more severe. In one case, a father chopped off the fingers and toes of the supposed ogbanje and a subsequent child was born with grossly deformed and missing fingers and toes. An interesting dimension of this story is that the enraged father had cut off the fingers and toes, performed a ceremony, and hung them in a bag in the home to ward off the ogbanje spirit. He married a new wife who cut down knowing the story. The birth-deformed child arrived shortly thereafter. An alternative explanation to actual reincarnation is the maternal impression hypothesis, in which the psychological impression in a mother's unconscious mind affects the developing fetus.

The other major focus in recent years has been locating written records cases, where facts were recorded about a child's reported memories before there was any attempt made to verify. This research is designed to address the criticism that many reincarnation cases are ones in which the verification has already taken place. This, in itself, might lead to unconsciously revising a child's memories to fit the story of a deceased person more accurately. There are close to forty of these written records cases now. Erlendur Haraldsson, a psychologist in Iceland, has done research on this in Sri Lanka, where there are a high percentage of "unsolved" cases in which the child has made many statements but no corresponding individual has been found. In one, a child gave the last name of her former family and claimed to have been walking across a footbridge when she fell into a river and drowned. Her husband had jumped in after her and nearly drowned as well. She was pregnant at the time. Haraldsson made a complete listing of what she was saying and was able to locate the family in the correct village and verify the details of death.

The other major development in recent years has been to take non-reincarnation explanations of these cases and look at them critically. Haraldsson is addressing the hypothesis that these children are high fantasizers, may have some dissociative capacities, or are struggling socially, which leads them to withdraw into a fantasy of a previous life as a way of coping. He started with a sample of thirty children who were talking about previous lives and thirty control children. He administered a battery of tests (intelligence, memory, and suggestibility) and had extensive interviews with their parents and their teachers. Additionally, he wanted to gather data on whether these children are actually more mature and intelligent than their peers, as their parents claim. He found that they indeed score better on intelligence, memory, and vocabulary tests and are actually less suggestible than the control children. Suggestibility was gauged with Gudjonsson's scale, which was developed for police work to determine whether witnesses would change their story. The child is read a story and then asked for details that were not in the story. The examiner intentionally leads the child in the direction of fabricating details not in the original. The reincarnation children did indeed have some behavioral problems, but they took the form of being argumentative and oppositional as opposed to withdrawn. One problem in Haraldsson's research stemmed from his inability to find tests suitable to very young children, so most of his testing was done between the ages of 7 and 13, an age when most of the children had forgotten about the memories. The scoring of the tests was blind.

Jurgen Keil has been studying a related hypothesis that parents promote the cases, perhaps unconsciously through expectations, reinforcements, or modeling. He is looking more closely now at the "silent" cases in which parents expected a child to be a particular person based upon dreams or birthmarks, yet the children never do comment on a previous life. He has instituted a longitudinal study in Turkey where he has identified these cases at birth and is following them over time. A Turkish psychologist is visiting the families once per month.

A third study in this direction was conducted by Sybo Schouten, a parapsychologist, who came to Charlottesville to do a study on the written records cases mentioned earlier. The main criticism of these cases is that the families might selectively remember what the child really did say and forget the incorrect statements. Schouten had 21 written records cases to work with and compared them with 82 of the Indian cases which had good records detailing the number of statements made by children. Both groups of children were about 80% correct in their statements. The overall number of statements made was actually higher in the written records group, which also goes against the hypothesis. All three of these studies relate to Emily's feeling that the most fruitful future work will develop predictions based upon the available alternate hypotheses and examine the data through that lens.

Michael Murphy asked for more descriptive detail about the most striking cases. Emily felt that the case in Thailand with the birthmark on the back of the neck was fascinating because the child also had a scar running down the middle of her chest that corresponded to the surgical incision made during heart surgery on the previous person. Another interesting feature of the case occurred while Stevenson was on site investigating. The child had met two of the friends that had marked the previous body but not the third. They arranged a meeting with the third friend without the child's foreknowledge and the child recognized her. Other relevant cases are birthmarks that correspond to both an entry wound (small) and an exit wound (large and irregular). In one case, a prominent bandit in Turkey shot himself in the neck to evade capture. A child was born claiming to be this person, though he never said anything that could not have been picked up via gossip. However, the child did have a prominent birthmark under the chin corresponding to the entry wound. Ian Stevenson investigated this case for a number of years and at one point he interviewed the sister of the bandit, who described in vivid detail how the shotgun had blown off the top of her brother's head. Stevenson hypothesized the presence of a birthmark corresponding to the exit wound and sure enough discovered a large birthmark on the subject's scalp. Another interesting case involved a child with a birthmark forming a bizarre spiraling constriction around his arm. The child reported memories of being caught in a rope and pulled by a horse. An added benefit of the birthmark cases is that there is no real biomedical explanation about their cause; Stevenson is offering a plausible explanation once one is willing to suspend loyalty to a strictly materialistic worldview.

Conferees were very interested in the experimental birthmark group, for it holds clues about possible mechanisms for transmission from life to life, such as the hypothesis of subtle energy bodies upon which impressions can be made. The first variable involves the window of opportunity; almost all the cases involve impressions made in the time leading up to death and/or slightly after. This might validate the Tibetan idea that death takes much longer than we think; there is still an exchange of subtle energies going on well after physical death. However, Emily could think of two cases where the correspondence was with an event much further back: in both cases the mangling of an arm in a machine a year or more before the person's death.

This brought up the issue of emotional charge. The experimental birthmarks in Burma and Thailand take place in a context of strong need in which loved ones wish to find a reincarnated individual. Ash and lipstick might not appear as birthmarks without such a shaping influence. Perhaps strong emotional charge in a situation is necessary to make a cross-lifetime impression. Bruce Greyson made the counterpoint that the Nazis carried out the traumatic tattooing of thirteen million people, but he has not heard of a single person who has been born with these distinctive markings. Steve Dinan hypothesized that markings made with time for anticipation might make less of an impression on subtle energy bodies -- consciousness might draw away from the area to be tattooed -- and thus would not be carried forward. Sudden wounds, such as from a bullet, thus might lead to a more dramatic impression on a subtle body. Emily commented that there are some cases where a mark in the same spot corresponds to a tattoo, though any specific imagery is lost. Frederic Myers (1903) had a case in which a man saw an apparition of his sister with a mark on her. When he told his mother, she was shattered and said, "only I knew about that scratch, which was so disfiguring to the corpse." This adds to the evidence that there may be some carrying of impressions on a subtle body into another life.

Sukie Miller commented that emotional investment is prominent in Nigeria with the ogbanjes and the abiku, the Nigerian name for spirits who harass a family and continue to die. She also related the story of a famous herbalist and healer who claimed to have been an abiku many times before finally deciding to stay. This healer claimed to accumulate knowledge and her remarkable healing gifts during this process.

The group mused about why this remarkable evidence is virtually unknown in mainstream scientific circles. Some felt that attachment to the explanatory paradigm of materialism precludes even looking at the data. Others commented that the location of so many of these cases in Asia or developing countries makes them more easily dismissible since the researchers have to work through interpreters. There are a few American cases, though most are very weak and remain "unsolved." Steve Dinan commented that an increasing number of Tibetan tulkus (reputedly reincarnated teachers) have been found in the West in recent years. Perhaps a window of opportunity to find reincarnation cases is opening in the West. Carol Bowman has been researching this, since her own children had phobias which responded to a guided imagery process which elicited apparent past-life memories. She has written a book (Bowman, 1997) on children who remember previous lives.

Michael Murphy wondered whether it would be useful to bring together some of the people doing past-life regression therapy with people from this conference. Perhaps the information these therapists have accumulated could be mined for leads. Steve Dinan pointed out that Helen Wambach (1978) did an extensive study to test the fantasy-projection hypothesis. She asked her hypnotized American subjects about their recall of lives around certain historical dates -- 1860's, 1700, and AD 25, with the expectation that, were they fantasizing, a disproportionate number would create lives focused upon, respectively, the American civil war, the early pilgrims to America, and ancient Rome or Israel. However, the data showed that this was not the case; of 1050 subjects, only 3 reported involvement with the Civil War. The lives reported were mostly banal rather than those of celebrated historical figures and they were scattered roughly parallel to the demographics of each era. The general sentiment of connecting more with past-life hypnotists was echoed by several attendees. Adam Crabtree commented that a psychiatrist in Toronto, Joel Whitton (1986, 154-6), had a client who spoke in an extinct language that was later verified by scholars.

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