

"In this very elegant book, Dr. Tucker offers the most convincing scientific evidence for the fact that our consciousness survives physical death."
—DEEPAK CHOPRA, author of *Life After Death: The Burden of Proof*



LIFE BEFORE LIFE

Children's
Memories of
Previous Lives

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Foreword by
Ian Stevenson, M.D.

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Foreword by Ian Stevenson, M.D.

Numerous authors have written about reincarnation, nearly always affirming it, some of them even purporting to describe its processes; a few writers dismiss the idea of reincarnation as absurd. Few of these authors seem interested in the question of evidence for or against reincarnation. Jim Tucker has written a different kind of book. For him evidence has become central. Does it, he asks, support or even compel a belief in reincarnation? One can easily think of objections to reincarnation: the paucity of persons who actually claim to remember a past life, the fragility of memories, the population explosion, the mind-body problem, fraud, and others. Jim Tucker discusses these, one by one and thoroughly.

His book resembles no other, because it has no predecessor of its type. I found particularly impressive Jim Tucker's guidance of his readers. He asks, almost requires, them to reason along with him as he describes and discusses each objection to the idea of reincarnation. He writes so well that he may beguile a casual reader into thinking he or she has no work to do. Read on, and learn that evidence may answer—sooner than you expected—the most important question we can ask ourselves: “What happens after death?”

INTRODUCTION

Some young children say that they have been here before. They give various details about previous lives, often describing the way in which they died. Of course, young children say a lot of things, and we may simply think that they are fantasizing as children often do. But what if, in a number of instances, people listened to the children and then tried to find out if the events they described had actually happened? And what if, when those people went to the places the children had named, they found that what the children had said about the past events was indeed true? What then?

The Case of Kemal Atasoy

Dr. Jürgen Keil, a psychologist from Australia, listened as Kemal Atasoy, a six-year-old boy in Turkey, confidently recounted details of a previous life that he claimed to remember. They were meeting in the boy's home, a comfortable house in an upper middle class neighborhood, and with them were Dr. Keil's interpreter and Kemal's parents, a well-educated couple who seemed amused at times by the enthusiasm that the little boy showed in describing his experiences. He said that he had lived in Istanbul, 500 miles away. He stated that his family's name had been Karakas and that he had been a rich Armenian Christian who lived in a large three-story house.

The house, he said, was next to the house of a woman named Aysegul, a well-known personality in Turkey, who had left the country because of legal problems. Kemal said that his house had been on the water, where boats were tied up, and that a church was behind it. He said that his wife and children had Greek first names. He also said that he often carried a large leather bag and that he only lived in the house for part of the year. No one knew if Kemal's story was true when he met Dr. Keil in 1997. His parents did not know anyone in Istanbul. In fact, Kemal and his mother had never been there, and his father had only visited the city twice on business. In addition, the family knew no Armenians.

His parents were Alevi Muslims, a group with a belief in reincarnation, but they did not seem to think that Kemal's statements, which he had been making from the time he was just a toddler at two years of age, were particularly important. Dr. Keil set out to determine if the statements that Kemal had given fit with someone who had actually lived. The work that Dr. Keil had to perform to find out if such a person even existed demonstrates that Kemal could not have come across the details of the man's life by accident. When Dr. Keil and his interpreter went to Istanbul, they found the house of Aysegul, the woman whom Kemal had named.

Next to the house was an empty three-story residence that precisely matched Kemal's description—it was at the edge of the water, where boats were tied up, with a church behind it. Dr. Keil then had trouble finding any evidence that a person like the one Kemal described had ever lived there. No Armenians were living in that part of Istanbul at the time, and Dr. Keil could not find anyone who remembered any Armenians ever having lived there. When he returned to Istanbul later that year, he talked with Armenian church officials, who told him that they were not aware that an Armenian had ever lived in the house. No church records indicated one had, but a fire had destroyed many of the records.

Dr. Keil talked with an elderly man in the neighborhood who said that an Armenian had definitely lived there many years before and that the church officials were simply too young to remember that long ago. Armed with that report, Dr. Keil decided to continue his search for information. The next year, he made a third trip to the area and interviewed a well-respected local historian. During the interview, Dr. Keil made sure he did not prompt any answers or make any suggestions. The historian told a story strikingly similar to the one Kemal had told. The historian said that a rich Armenian Christian had, in fact, lived in that house. He had been the only Armenian in that area, and his family's name was Karakas. His wife was Greek Orthodox, and her family did not approve of the marriage.

The couple had three children, but the historian did not know their names. He

said that the Karakas clan lived in another part of Istanbul, that they dealt in leather goods, and that the deceased man in question often carried a large leather bag. He also said that the deceased man lived in the house only during the summer months of the year. He had died in 1940 or 1941. Though Dr. Keil was not able to verify Kemal's statement that the wife and children had Greek first names, the wife came from a Greek family. The first name that Kemal had given for the man turned out to be an Armenian term meaning "nice man." Dr. Keil could not confirm that people actually called Mr. Karakas that, but he was struck by the fact that, even though no one around him knew the expression, Kemal had given a name that could easily have been used to describe Mr. Karakas.

How did this little boy, living in a town 500 miles away, know so many things about a man who had died in Istanbul fifty years before he was born? He could not have heard about the man Dr. Keil had to work so hard to learn anything about. What possible explanation could there be? Kemal had a very simple answer: he said that he had been the man in a previous life. Kemal is not alone in his claims. Children all over the world have described memories of previous lives. For more than forty years, researchers have investigated their reports. More than 2,500 cases are registered in the files of the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia.

Some of the children have said they were deceased family members, and others described previous lives as strangers. In a typical case, a very young child begins to describe memories of another life. The child is persistent about this and often demands to be taken to his other family in another location. When the child has given names or enough details about the other location, the family often goes there to find that the child's statements fit the life of a person who has died in the recent past. Were Kemal and the other 2,500 children remembering what they thought they were remembering—events from lives they had previously experienced? That question has occupied researchers for years, and this book will attempt to answer it.

Previously, we have only written for a scientific audience, but now that we have forty years' worth of data, the general public deserves the opportunity to evaluate the evidence as well. I will try to present it in as fair a way as possible so that you can judge for yourself. The phenomenon of young children reporting past-life memories is fascinating in and of itself, and as you learn about it, you can gradually form an opinion about what it means. You can eventually decide whether you think that children like Kemal really have come back after having previous lives—and whether the rest of us may be able to come back, too.

CHAPTER 1 Children Who Report Memories of Previous Lives

John McConnell, a retired New York City policeman working as a security guard, stopped at an electronics store after work one night in 1992. He saw two men robbing the store and pulled out his pistol. Another thief behind a counter began shooting at him. John tried to shoot back, and even after he fell, he got up and shot again. He 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 takes blood from the right side of the heart to the lungs to receive oxygen.

He was rushed to the hospital but did not survive. John had been close to his family and had frequently told one of his daughters, Doreen, "No matter what, I'm always going to take care of you." Five years after John died, Doreen gave birth to a son named William. William began passing out soon after he was born. Doctors diagnosed him with a condition called pulmonary valve atresia, in which the valve of the pulmonary artery has not adequately formed, so blood cannot travel through it to the lungs. In addition, one of the chambers of his heart, the right ventricle, had not formed properly as a result of the problem with the valve.

He underwent several surgeries. Although he will need to take medication indefinitely, he has done quite well. William had birth defects that were very similar to the fatal wounds suffered by his grandfather. In addition, when he became old enough to talk, he began talking about his grandfather's life. One day when he was three years old, his mother was at home trying to work in her study when William kept acting up. Finally, she told him, "Sit down, or I'm going to spank you." William replied, "Mom, when you were a little girl and I was your daddy, you were bad a lot of times, and I never hit you!" His mother was initially taken aback by this.

As William talked more about the life of his grandfather, she began to feel comforted by the idea that her father had returned. William talked about being his grandfather a number of times and discussed his death. He told his mother that several people were shooting during the incident when he was killed, and he asked a lot of questions about it. One time, he said to his mother, "When you were a little girl and I was your daddy, what was my cat's name?" She responded, "You mean Maniac?" "No, not that one," William answered. "The white one." "Boston?" his mom asked. "Yeah," William responded. "I used to call him Boss, right?" That was correct.

The family had two cats, named Maniac and Boston, and only John referred to the white one as Boss. One day, Doreen asked William if he remembered anything about the time before he was born. He said that he died on Thursday and went to heaven. He said that he saw animals there and also

talked to God. He said, “I told God I was ready to come back, and I got born on Tuesday.” Doreen was amazed that William mentioned days since he did not even know his days of the week without prompting. She tested him by saying, “So, you were born on a Thursday and died on Tuesday?” He quickly responded, “No, I died Thursday at night and was born Tuesday in the morning.” He was correct on both counts—John died on a Thursday, and William was born on a Tuesday five years later.

He talked about the period between lives at other times. He told his mother, “When you die, you don’t go right to heaven. You go to different levels—here, then here, then here” as he moved his hand up each time. He said that animals are reborn as well as humans and that the animals he saw in heaven did not bite or scratch. John had been a practicing Roman Catholic, but he believed in reincarnation and said that he would take care of animals in his next life. His grandson, William, says that he will be an animal doctor and will take care of large animals at a zoo. William reminds Doreen of her father in several ways. He loves books, as his grandfather did.

When they visit William’s grandmother, he can spend hours looking at books in John’s study, duplicating his grandfather’s behavior from years before. William, like his grandfather, is good at putting things together and can be a “nonstop talker.” William especially reminds Doreen of her father when he tells her, “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll take care of you.” The idea that research could actually support the concept of reincarnation is surprising to many people in the West, since reincarnation may seem foreign or even absurd.

People sometimes joke about their past lives or about their next one. The media document people dramatically describing lives from ancient times after being hypnotized. Reincarnation conflicts with the view of the majority of scientists that the material world is all that exists, and with many people’s religious beliefs. Although some people find the idea of reincarnation to be ridiculous or offensive, others accept it on faith. The idea of reincarnation has appealed to many throughout history and into the present day, including Plato and the ancient Greeks, Hindus and Buddhists in Asia, various West Africans, many Native Americans in northwest North America, and even some groups of early Christians.

Today, people in the world who believe in reincarnation may outnumber those who do not. Such beliefs are not restricted to distant places. A surprising number of Americans believe in reincarnation—between 20 and 27 percent, depending on the poll—and a similar percentage of Europeans do as well. They cannot base this belief on the evidence for reincarnation since most people do not know about this research done at the University of Virginia. They often do not base it on formal religious doctrine since many believers attend churches that do not hold such a view. In fact, a Harris poll in 2003

found that 21 percent of Christians in the United States believe in reincarnation.

The work described here may give such individuals support for their beliefs, but the researchers have not operated from the perspective of any particular religious doctrine or bias. Our goals have been to determine the best explanation for the statements by the children and to see if science should consider reincarnation as a possibility. Most people probably hope that the answer is yes. After all, the idea that we cease to exist when we die is unsettling for many of us. Though many in the United States may not be comfortable with the concept of reincarnation, the idea that part of us continues after we die is certainly appealing.

If a deceased individual can survive death in some form and be reborn, then this means that we can continue on. Perhaps we can stay close to loved ones as they continue their lives or perhaps go to heaven or to other dimensions or who knows what. If these children are correct when they report that they lived before, then a part of us can survive the death of our bodies. More specifically, the concept of reincarnation is compelling because the idea of being able to come back to try again may appeal to a lot of people. We cannot change the mistakes we have made in the past, but being able to try to do better the next time would certainly be a comfort.

If we get to live repeated lives, then perhaps we can make progress across lifetimes and become better people. As much as we might wish to come back ourselves, we also wish that the people we love could do so. Surely, William's mother must have been thrilled and comforted by her impression that her adoring father survived death and was reborn as her son. She had to deal with the horror of knowing that her father was murdered, and the idea that he was reborn as her son undoubtedly helped her change her grief into acceptance. We will meet others in this book who have dealt with similar losses: for example, a mother who watched her toddler die from cancer and a man whose father was closed off from his children before he died.

In such situations, people would love the possibility of a second chance, of another opportunity to love and to share moments with the person who died. When any of us grieve for loved ones we have lost, we would certainly be comforted to know that those people have continued in some form and that they may come back into our lives. Believing in that possibility may seem like wishful thinking and nothing more. But could life after death be more than wishful thinking? Even though it may seem hard to believe, evidence might exist that life after death is actually a reality.

Life Before Life will describe the cases researchers have collected that suggest that some people can survive death and be reborn into another life.

This is not work that we have undertaken lightly. Researchers have addressed this issue with the same open-minded analytical approach that we would use with any question. We have approached the work rationally instead of emotionally, so it is analytical rather than emotional. In addition, we have done this work with clearheaded care, not with religious zeal. Of course, many people believe in life after death based purely on their religious faith. Though I mean to take nothing away from faith, religious belief need not keep us from looking for evidence that supports the idea.

Faith should not prevent us from trying to gain a better understanding of the nature of life, and we have made this a scientific endeavor rather than a religious one. *Life Before Life* is therefore analytical rather than emotional or religious. I will not try to convince you that these cases prove that reincarnation occurs, to promote a theory. Instead, I will present the cases so that you can assess them and reach your own conclusions about what they mean. I will give my analysis of where I think the evidence leads us, but you should also be forming your own opinions along the way.

In doing so, you should not be too quick to make a judgment, either that the cases are nonsense or that they are definitive proof of reincarnation. Instead, I would encourage you to take the same analytical approach that we have used in doing the research. These cases are not about “proof,” they are about evidence. Since this work has taken place in the messy real world rather than a tightly controlled laboratory, proof is not possible. This is often the case in science and medicine. For example, many medications are judged to be helpful, because evidence indicates that they work even though they have not been absolutely proven to do so.

Our work also involves an area, the possibility of life after death, that does not easily lend itself to being researched. Some people even say that researchers should not try to study the subject of life after death scientifically since it is so far removed from usual empirical areas of investigation. Nevertheless, there is no bigger question in the world than whether we can survive death, and researchers have attempted to collect the best evidence possible to answer it, evidence that I will share with you. Each case of course has its unique aspects, but we can discuss typical features found in many of the cases. In later chapters, we will then examine in depth a number of cases that include each of these features.

Predictions, Experimental Birthmarks, and Dreams Before Birth

Sometimes, the case begins before the child, the subject of the case, is even born. One situation involves an elderly or dying individual, the previous personality, making a prediction about his or her next life. Such cases are rare, but they do occur with some frequency among two groups. One is the

lamas of Tibet. Though their predictions can be vague or unclear, others use these predictions to identify young children as the lamas reborn. In the case of the current Dalai Lama, his predecessor apparently did not make any predictions, so other clues such as meditation visions after his death were used to find the boy identified as his rebirth.

The Tlingits, a tribe in Alaska, frequently make predictions about rebirth. Of forty-six cases there, the previous personality made a prediction about his or her subsequent rebirth in ten of them. In eight of the ten, the person gave the names of the parents to which he or she wanted to be reborn. For example, a man named Victor Vincent told his niece that he was going to come back as her son. He showed her two scars he had from minor surgeries and predicted that he would carry those marks to his next life. Eighteen months after he died, she gave birth to a boy who had birthmarks in the same spots.

One of them even had small round marks lined up beside the main linear mark, giving the appearance of stitch wounds from a surgical scar. The boy later said that he was the previous personality, and he seemed to recognize several people from Victor's life. Some cases involve another feature that occurs before the child is born. In several Asian countries, a family member or friend may mark the body of a dying or deceased individual in hopes that when that person is reborn, the baby will have a birthmark that matches the marking.

This practice is known as experimental birthmarks, and we will look at it in detail in Chapter 4. An announcing dream can occur before the birth of the child. With this feature, a family member, usually the subject's mother, has a dream before or during the pregnancy in which the previous personality either announces that he or she is coming to the expecting mother or asks to come to her. Such dreams usually occur in same-family cases, ones in which the previous personality is a deceased member of the subject's family, or in cases in which the subject's mother at least knew the previous personality. Exceptions do occur as we will soon see.

Cases from all the various cultures have included announcing dreams, which have occurred in approximately 22 percent of the first 1,100 cases in our computer database. They are much more common in some places than others, and they also tend to occur at different times in different places. In Myanmar, families generally report that the dreams occur before the child is conceived, whereas among the tribes in northwest North America, they tend to occur at the very end of the pregnancy.

Birthmarks and Birth Defects

Many of the subjects in our cases are born with birthmarks or birth defects

that match wounds on the body of the previous personality, usually fatal wounds. One case that includes both an announcing dream and a birth defect is that of Süleyman Çaper in Turkey. His mother dreamed during her pregnancy that a man she did not recognize told her, "I was killed with a blow from a shovel. I want to stay with you and not anyone else." When Süleyman was born, the back of his skull was partially depressed, and he also had a birthmark there. When he became able to talk, he said that he had been a miller who died when an angry customer hit him on the head.

Along with other details, he gave the first name of the miller and the village where he had lived. In fact, an angry customer had killed a miller with that name in that village by hitting him on the back of the head with a shovel. Many of the birthmarks are not small discolorations. Instead, they are often unusual in shape or size and are often puckered or raised rather than simply being flat. Some can be quite dramatic and unusual in appearance. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the case of Patrick, a boy in Michigan, who had three distinct lesions that matched those of the previous personality.

There are several cases in which a small, round birthmark matching a typical bullet entrance wound and a larger, more irregularly shaped birthmark matching a typical exit wound were both present. Other examples include cases with birthmarks in such unusual places as wrapping around an ankle and cases with deformities like missing or malformed limbs or digits. In these cases, the birthmarks and birth defects can provide a concrete indication of a connection between the subject and the previous personality. Since they remain on the body, birthmarks and defects are not dependent on witnesses' memories to be part of the case. When an autopsy report or a medical record of the previous personality is available, as it was in Süleyman's case, researchers can objectively compare it to the birthmarks to see how well they correspond.

Such birthmarks and birth defects are not rare among our cases. A third of the cases from India include birthmarks or birth defects that are thought to correspond to wounds on the previous personalities, with 18 percent of those including medical records that confirm the match. I should note that the actual percentage of all children reporting past-life memories who have birthmarks might be much lower. We often have to make decisions about which cases to investigate, and since we are particularly interested in the birthmark cases, we are more likely to pursue them than other types of cases. Thus, we end up registering more of them.

Past-life Statements

The key feature in our cases, of course, is the statements that the children make about a past life. As an example, when Suzanne Ghanem of Lebanon

was less than a year old, her first word was “Leila,” and she would pick up the telephone and say, “Hello, Leila.” She began telling her family about a previous life that ended when she went to the United States for heart surgery.

She talked about this life a great deal, but her family was not able to track down the previous personality until Suzanne was five years old. At that point, Suzanne met the family of the woman who she thought she had been, and she convinced them that she was the woman reborn when she knew details about that life. The woman, who died at a medical center in the United States after heart surgery, turned out to have a daughter named Leila, who was not able to join her there because of passport problems.

Before the woman died, her brother at the hospital tried to telephone Leila for her but was unsuccessful. In all, Suzanne made forty statements about the previous life that were verified as accurate, including the names of twenty-five people. The children make these statements at a very early age. Most who talk about a past life begin doing so between the ages of two and four. Some parents say that their children made detailed statements about a previous life at a surprisingly young age, but as we will discuss later, psychological testing has now shown that many of these children are very intelligent.

The early advanced language skills necessary to make such statements would be consistent with the testing. The children almost always stop talking about the past life around the age of six or seven, and they seem to go on to lead normal lives after that. During the time that the children are talking about the past life, some do so in a very matter-of-fact manner while others show great emotion. One example of the latter is a boy in Seattle named Joey. He talked a number of times about his other mother dying in a car accident.

One night at dinner when he was almost four years old, he stood up in his chair and appeared pale as he looked intently at his mother and said, “You are not my family—my family is dead.” He cried quietly for a minute as a tear rolled down his cheek, then sat back down and continued with his meal. The fact that his mother had a dinner guest that night did not help the awkwardness of the situation, though she proved to be quite understanding. Some children only make a few comments about the past life and only talk about it at certain times, often during relaxed periods, while others talk about it almost constantly and make many statements.

In general, the children tend to talk about people and events from near the end of the previous life. A child who describes a past life that ended in adulthood is likely to talk about a spouse or children rather than talking about parents. Seventy-five percent of the children describe the way that they died in their previous life, and the mode of death is frequently violent or sudden. The lives that the children describe tend to be very recent ones, and in fact,

the median time between the death of the previous personality and the birth of the subject is only fifteen to sixteen months.

Exceptions certainly exist, as Kemal's case in the Introduction shows, but most of the children describe very recent lives. Few report having been famous personalities, as almost all describe ordinary lives, often ending in very unpleasant ways. When the children give enough information so that one particular deceased individual can be identified as the previous personality, we say that the case is solved. If the previous personality has not been identified, we say that the case is unsolved. A colleague told me that he objects to the term "unsolved" in this instance, because it implies that the child is actually remembering the life of one unique previous personality who could be identified if the case could only be solved.

This is not what we mean when we use the term. We can all agree that an unsolved case, or a solved one for that matter, does not automatically indicate a case of reincarnation. With only rare exceptions, almost all of the children describe only one previous life. In addition, though most children do not talk about the time between lives, some occasionally do. Their statements can involve either events that took place on earth, for example the funeral of the previous personality, or descriptions of other realms.

An example of the latter is a boy named Kenny who, though his case was unsolved, gave numerous details about the life of a man who died in an automobile accident. He said that after he died, another spirit, probably the driver of the vehicle, took him by the hand, and the two of them were with other spirits in what seemed to be a huge hall. He said another spirit he took to be God told him that there were people wishing for a child and that he had been chosen to go down to be born.

Past-life Behaviors

In addition to the statements, many children show behaviors that seem connected to the past-life memories they are reporting. Many show strong emotions related to their memories. In some cases, the children cry and beg their parents to take them to their previous family until their parents finally relent. In a case in which the previous personality was murdered, the subject may also display an immense anger toward the killer. I will discuss a case later in which a toddler tried to strangle the man he said had killed him in his previous life. The children often demonstrate unusual play.

For instance, Parmod Sharma in India became wrapped up in his play as a shopkeeper of biscuits and soda water, the occupation of the previous personality, from the ages of four to seven. This caused him to neglect his work when he started school, and he never seemed to fully recover. His

mother blamed his poor school performance and subsequent limited vocational opportunities on his preoccupation with his past-life memories and his shopkeeping play as a young child. That case is an extreme example, but the play can be excessive.

In these cases, the children repeat the same play over and over, and it is play that is not seen in the other children of the family or modeled after an adult family member or close family friend. Most commonly, the child mimics the occupation of the previous personality as Parmod did, and the drive that some of these children demonstrate in wanting to engage repeatedly in the play can be quite striking. Other children have repeatedly acted out the death scene from the previous life. This can be similar to the post-traumatic play of children who have been through difficult experiences, only in this case the trauma is thought to be from a previous life rather than the current one.

Phobias seem to be linked to the past-life memories at times. Many of the children show intense fear related to the method of the previous personality's death. Often, these fears will show up before the child has begun to report past-life memories. For example, a very young child may show an intense fear of water. As a baby in Sri Lanka, Shamlinie Prema always had to be held down by three adults in order to be bathed, and then later told of having drowned in the previous life. Some children are also unusually fond of certain things, including foods the previous personality especially enjoyed or even alcohol or tobacco products.

Though the use of alcohol and tobacco is common in various cultures, consumption is not considered appropriate for three-year-olds. Parents have been amused and appalled by their children's attempts to get alcohol. As for foods, one particularly prominent example is the request to eat raw fish from Burmese children who say they remember lives as Japanese soldiers. When unusual play, phobias, and preferences are present along with statements or birthmarks or other features, the impression of a link between the subject and the previous personality is strengthened. Such cases are often about more than possible memories or statements; they suggest that behaviors and emotions have carried over as well.

Past-life Recognitions

Sometimes subjects recognize, or are thought to recognize, people or places from their past lives. Frequently, when the subject's family takes the child to the home of the previous personality, the subject seems to recognize members of the previous family. At times, the previous family is hoping that their deceased loved one has returned, so they may be open to interpreting anything the child does as evidence that he recognizes them. Others are much more skeptical, and some suspect that the subject's family is hoping for

financial gain in making the claim, even though this seems rarely to be the case. Some will engineer such informal tests for the child as having him identify objects that belonged to the previous personality before deciding whether to accept the claims.

In a much smaller number of cases, subjects have been tested under more controlled conditions, and we will review some of these in Chapter 7. The strongest examples add to the impression that something is going on that cannot be written off as simply wishful thinking or childhood fantasy. In summary, cases from all over the world can include birthmarks that match wounds on the previous personality, statements that are accurate for the life of that person, behaviors that appear to be linked to the person—strong emotions, unusual play, phobias, and unusual preferences—and situations in which the child was judged to recognize something or someone from that life.

CHAPTER 2 Investigating The Cases

The story of this research at the University of Virginia begins in 1958. By any standard, Dr. Ian Stevenson had achieved a successful academic career at that point. After graduating at the top of his medical school class at McGill University, he had initially studied biochemistry before becoming interested in psychosomatic medicine, the study of the connections between emotions and health. He had written extensively, almost always in medical journals but several times also in Harper's Magazine and The New Republic, and by 1958, he had seventy publications to his credit.

A year earlier, he had become the chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia at the unusually young age of thirty-nine. Along with these accomplishments, Dr. Stevenson was interested in paranormal phenomena—ones beyond current scientific explanation. When the American Society for Psychical Research announced a contest in 1958 for the best essay on paranormal mental phenomena and their relationship to life after death, he submitted the winning entry, entitled, "The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations." In this essay, he reviewed forty-four cases that had previously been published of individuals from various parts of the world who had described memories of previous lives.

The reports came from a number of sources—books, magazines, and newspapers. Almost all of the most impressive cases involved children who were under the age of ten when they first reported the memories, and in many of them, the children were three years old or younger. Dr. Stevenson was struck by the pattern of children from very different places making similar statements about past-life memories. As he said later, "These forty-four cases, when you put them together, it just seemed inescapable to me that there must be something there." He ended the paper by saying that the

evidence he presented did not permit any definite conclusion about reincarnation, but he felt that more extensive study was justified.

After the paper was published in 1960, Dr. Stevenson began to hear about new cases. After learning of four or five cases in India and one in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), he took a trip to investigate. Once he got to India, he was surprised by how many cases he found. In four weeks, he investigated twenty-five cases. Likewise, he visited Ceylon for one week and found five or six cases. He concluded that children reported memories of previous lives much more frequently than anyone had previously known. One person who read Dr. Stevenson's essay was Chester Carlson, the inventor of the photocopying process that formed the basis for the Xerox Corporation.

His wife, Dorris Carlson, had gotten him interested in parapsychology. After reading the essay, he contacted Dr. Stevenson to offer financial support. Dr. Stevenson initially declined the offer, because he was busy with his other work, but as he collected more cases and became increasingly intrigued by what he found, he accepted funding support from Carlson. In 1966, he published his first book on the topic, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. Dr. Stevenson had worked hard to verify independently what the twenty children had said and how well their statements matched the lives of the individuals the children were thought to remember.

The book consisted of very detailed reports of cases from India, Ceylon, Brazil, and Lebanon that included lists of every person Dr. Stevenson interviewed about each case, along with lengthy tables in which each of the child's statements about a previous life was listed along with the informant for that statement and the person or persons who had verified that the statement was correct for the life of the deceased individual. Dr. Stevenson presented the cases in an objective, evenhanded manner, and he discussed their weaknesses as well as their strengths.

A number of journals, including the prestigious *American Journal of Psychiatry*, gave the book positive reviews, with reviewers often noting Dr. Stevenson's painstaking work and objectivity, and it has continued to be well regarded over the years because of those features. With the help of assistants, Dr. Stevenson was soon finding cases in a number of countries, and he made trips to India, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Lebanon, Thailand, Burma, Nigeria, Brazil, and Alaska. After publishing *Twenty Cases*, he also began to learn of occasional cases in this country. With Carlson's funding, Dr. Stevenson was able to step down as chairman of the Department of Psychiatry in 1967 to focus full-time on his research.

The dean of the medical school, who did not approve of the work, was happy to see Dr. Stevenson step down, and he agreed to allow the formation of a

small research division, now known as the Division of Personality Studies, where the work would take place. The following year, Chester Carlson died suddenly of a heart attack. Since the division was dependent on Mr. Carlson's funding in order to operate, Dr. Stevenson assumed that he would have to try a return to more routine research. Carlson's will was then opened, and he had left one million dollars to the University of Virginia for Dr. Stevenson's work. At that point, controversy broke out regarding whether the university would accept the money, given the unusual nature of the research.

Universities are not in the habit of turning down million-dollar gifts, but the situation clearly made some people uneasy. The university eventually did decide to accept the money since it had been given to support scholarly work, and the work continued. Dr. Stevenson wrote more books about the cases, and these continued to be well received by at least some in the field. In reviewing one, Lester S. King, the Book Review Editor of *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, wrote that "in regard to reincarnation [Stevenson] has painstakingly and unemotionally collected a detailed series of cases from India, cases in which the evidence is difficult to explain on any other grounds."

He also added, "He has placed on record a large amount of data that cannot be ignored." In 1977, the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* devoted most of one issue to Dr. Stevenson's reincarnation work. It included a paper by Dr. Stevenson and commentaries on it from several others. Dr. Harold Lief, a well-respected figure in the field of psychiatry, wrote one of the commentaries. He described Dr. Stevenson as "a methodical, careful, even cautious, investigator, whose personality is on the obsessive side." He also wrote, "Either he is making a colossal mistake, or he will be known ... as 'the Galileo of the twentieth century.'"

Dr. Stevenson gradually got others interested in investigating cases. Satwant Pasricha, a psychologist in India, began assisting Dr. Stevenson on the cases there, and she continues to research them today. Erlendur Haraldsson, a psychologist at the University of Iceland who had a long history in experimental psychology, became interested in the cases in the 1970s, and he has studied them ever since. Antonia Mills, an anthropologist who received her Ph.D. from Harvard, began assisting Dr. Stevenson on cases in northwest North America, and she has since investigated cases independently there and in India.

Jürgen Keil, who investigated Kemal's case in the Introduction, is a psychologist at the University of Tasmania who was able to establish new contacts in Turkey, Thailand, and Myanmar in order to study cases in those locations. In addition, he and I made two trips to Thailand and Myanmar to study cases together, and I will be describing some of those later in the book.

Dr. Stevenson investigated most of the cases from Asia that I will discuss, and the end notes at the back of the book list the references for his detailed reports of the cases. He became particularly interested in cases in which a child was born with a birthmark that matched a wound on the deceased individual. He believes in strength in numbers, so he held off publishing any of these cases until he could publish a series of them in a book. After several delays, he published *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* in 1997. The work is massive—2,200 pages long in two volumes—and it includes detailed reports of 225 cases along with pictures of the various birthmarks.

Dr. Stevenson published it as he approached his eightieth birthday. Though *Reincarnation and Biology* in some ways represented the culmination of his decades of work, he was still not done and continued to write and research cases. I came onto the scene in 1996, and I eventually left my private practice in psychiatry to pursue this research. Recently, I have been focusing on American cases. Though they are harder to find here, American cases occur without the cultural factors that some critics hold responsible for cases in other parts of the world. I will use a number of these American cases to illustrate the various aspects of the experiences. When I do, I will change the names of the children and other identifying details. I will do so for the international cases as well unless a case report has already been published that used the child's real name.

As for Dr. Stevenson, he has continued to show enthusiasm for the work. He retired in 2002, perhaps with a reluctance that few people in their eighties would feel toward retirement, partly to focus more on his writings but also to spend more time with his wife, Margaret. He had talked about cutting back on the research trips for years but had failed to do so. Even after he retired, he took one final “final trip” to India. Margaret once said that she did not mind his taking the trips, but she wished that he would stop referring to each one as the last. He wrote yet another book in 2003—*European Cases of the Reincarnation Type*—and continued to work on other papers and book projects. His publications now number more than 290.

The Investigations

Before we investigate cases, we have to find them. We have done so wherever we have looked for them, but cases are easiest to find in areas with a general belief in reincarnation. This includes India and Sri Lanka, where Dr. Stevenson made his initial trips, along with other countries with similar beliefs, including Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Turkey, and among the Druses in Lebanon. The geographical pattern of cases is determined to some extent by where we have people looking for them. We have been fortunate to have assistants in each of these countries looking for cases for us. They find them

through a variety of means, some from occasional newspaper articles but most through word of mouth. We go where they find them. That does not mean, of course, that cases do not occur in areas where we are not looking for them. We have many cases from Thailand but essentially none from Vietnam, and this may simply be because we have no connection in Vietnam.