

What Happens When We Die

Part Two: The Case for Reincarnation

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
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When Bruce Leininger's son James was just 18 months old, Bruce took him to a museum. There was an old plane from World War Two on display there. James couldn't take his eyes off it.

A few months later, the nightmares began. James would wake up screaming, "airplane crash, on fire, little man can't get out!"

When James was 2½, he and his mother Andrea were at a store looking at a toy airplane. Andrea said, "Look, it has a bomb on the bottom."

James said, "That's not a bomb, it's a drop tank."

Bruce, a business executive, and Andrea, an accountant, didn't know anything about airplanes, but somehow their little boy did.

After reading a book about reincarnation, Andrea decided to tell her son that the airplane crash happened a long time ago in a different life and a different body. She told him he was safe now. Immediately, James's nightmares stopped.

But James seemed to remember World War Two, which had ended a half-century before his birth.

Once Andrea asked him, what happened to your plane? "Got shot," he said.

Where? "Engine."

Where did it crash? "Water."

Andrea says, "When I asked him who shot the plane, he gave me a look like a teenager, rolling his eyes, 'the Japanese,' like who else could it have been? He said he knew it was a Japanese plane "because of the red sun."—the Japanese national symbol.

James told his parents his name before had also been James. He said he flew an airplane called a Corsair and took off from a boat called the Natoma. He remembered a friend there named Jack Larson.

One night, Andrea made meatloaf. She hadn't made meatloaf in years, and James had never eaten it. When he sat down, he said, "Meatloaf! I haven't had that since I was on the Natoma."

Bruce did some research and found that an aircraft carrier called the Natoma Bay served in the Battle of Iwo Jima. Twenty-one of its crew died. One of them was named James, James Hudson. Struck in the engine by Japanese fire, his plane crashed and sank.

Also on the Natoma Bay was a flyer named Jack Larson.

Bruce and Andrea tracked down the 84-year-old surviving sister of James Hudson, named Anne. Six-year-old James told her so many details of their family life—about their sister Ruth, about their alcoholic father, how he used to call her "Annie"—that Anne was convinced that this boy was her brother in a new lifetime.

Bruce and Andrea were also convinced, even though reincarnation defied their evangelical Christian faith.

Brian Weiss was Chief of Psychiatry at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami. Educated at Columbia and Yale, he'd published extensively on biological psychiatry and substance abuse.

None of this prepared him for Catherine, a lab technician referred to him for psychotherapy.

A Roman Catholic, Catherine had no interest in metaphysics or the occult. What she had was insomnia, panic attacks, and a half-dozen paralyzing phobias. Eighteen months of talk therapy with Dr. Weiss brought no improvement in her symptoms. Under hypnosis, Catherine recalled traumatic childhood events. Still no improvement. Finally, during hypnotherapy, Weiss instructed, "Go back to the time from which your symptoms arise."

"I see . . . a big white building with pillars," she said slowly, "I'm wearing a long dress . . . a sack made of rough material. My hair is braided . . ."

Catherine described her life as a young woman nearly 4,000 years ago in a village destroyed by a flood in which she and her baby perished. In the same session, she told of two other lives, as an 18th-century Spanish prostitute and a student in ancient Greece.

Weiss did not believe in reincarnation. But under repeated hypnosis, Catherine told of many past lives in minute and mundane detail. She was not Cleopatra. She was typically poor, hard working, and prone to disease, like most people throughout history. More important to Weiss, the more Catherine talked about the traumas of these past lives, the more her symptoms improved.

It could all have been her imagination, a pastiche of fairy tales and old movies. Except . . .

When she spoke of dying, Catherine described herself floating above her body, drawn to a light—like the near-death experiences we explored earlier this month.

Once, she spoke to Weiss from this place in a different, confident voice: "Your father is here, and your son, who is a small child. Your father says you will know him because his name is Avrom, and your daughter is named after him. Also, his death was due to his heart [which] was backward He made a great sacrifice for you out of his love . . . he wanted to show you that medicine could only go so far, that its scope is very limited."

For Weiss, the room turned cold. Catherine knew nothing about his personal life. Framed snapshots of his two children were on his desk, but whoever was speaking wasn't talking about them.

Weiss's firstborn son died of a heart defect found once in ten million births. The pulmonary veins entered on the wrong side, as if his heart were backward.

Weiss had been wavering between medicine and psychiatry for his career, but after his son died, he was so angry with the medical profession he chose psychiatry.

Weiss's father died of a heart attack. His name was Alvin, but to his family he was known by his Hebrew name, Avrom. Weiss's daughter Amy was named for him.

In subsequent sessions, Catherine conveyed many more messages from the highly evolved souls she called Masters, though she never remembered them afterward. They told Weiss that our task in each lifetime is to learn, to teach, to help others, and to become more like God. They said there are many worlds, many dimensions, many, many souls.

Years ago during the Watergate hearings, I remember someone saying that one way to judge if a person is lying is to ask where the payoff is. What do they stand to gain by lying—or by telling the truth? Dr. Weiss had a prestigious job, the respect of his colleagues, plenty of money. He risked it all to write about past lives and spirit masters.

Why would he make it up?

Maybe he's delusional or a compulsive liar, and no one ever noticed before he wrote the book.

Or maybe he's telling the truth.

Dr. Ian Stevenson, head of the department of psychiatry at the University of Virginia Medical School, investigated thousands of cases of children who seem to remember past lives—not under hypnosis, but spontaneously at an early age, often, like James Leininger, testifying to inexplicable knowledge. Stevenson, who died four years ago, wrote in academic prose too tedious ever to reach a popular audience. His method was empirical, his bias conservative, his findings astonishing.

A two-and-a-half-year-old boy in India remembers owning a soda shop in another town. He leads his parents there and demonstrates how to fix a complicated soda machine.

A three-year-old in Texas tells of dying in an automobile accident. His details perfectly match the wreck that took the life of his mother's high school boyfriend, whom no one in the family had ever mentioned.

When Sukla was an eighteen-month-old in India, she would cradle a block of wood she called Minu, her daughter. Later she leads her parents to a nearby village, where she is reunited with Minu, a girl whose mother had died when she was a baby.

Adult minds, of course, are vast storehouses of fact and fancy, the flotsam and jetsam of accumulated memory. Children's exposure to the world is far more limited, making their accounts of other places and times more startling and convincing.

Stevenson meticulously documented nearly three thousand such cases from Asia to Africa, from Europe to the United States. Rigorously skeptical, Stevenson still considered more than 800 of these cases "verified," that is, his investigation eliminated every possible explanation for the child's extraordinary knowledge except reincarnation.

A tough-minded Washington Post reporter named Tom Shroder thoroughly investigated Stevenson and his methods, accompanying him on weeks of field research in Lebanon, India, and the United States. Initially resistant, Shroder concluded that Stevenson was no fantasist, but a hard-nosed researcher of strict integrity.

When author Carol Bowman placed an advertisement in *Mothering* magazine soliciting cases of children seeming to remember past lives, stories poured in.

One mother told how her three-year-old son, Blake, said that a truck had hit him.

Thinking he meant a toy, his mother asked who had hit him with a truck. "A man," he answered.

"A man hit you with a toy truck?" his mother asked.

"No," he replied "A big truck." Blake insisted that it really happened. "I went under the wheels."

"Did you die?" his mother finally asked.

"Yes," he answered matter-of-factly.

After this conversation, Blake went into a deep depression. The formerly happy, active child would stare listlessly at the TV screen or out the window.

At Bowman's suggestion, his mother explained to Blake that the truck had hit him in a different life, when he had a different body and a different mommy. Blake's face lit up with surprise and delight. "Really?" he exclaimed. "That was a different body? I had a different mommy?"

"It was like I had told him Santa Clause was coming," his mother reported. "He smiled from ear to ear and lit up like a Christmas tree." The next morning he was playing and laughing like his old self, and the depression never returned.

A few years ago, visiting the home of a family in my Littleton congregation I was instantly charmed by their precocious five-year-old. During my visit, he asked his mother, "Remember when I was big and you were little and we went to California?"

His mother, a little embarrassed, said, "He has this thing about California. We've never been to California."

I was intrigued by the possibility of reincarnation but only partly persuaded.

Then I met a Unitarian Universalist I'll call Jeff. Jeff is a psychologist and therapist with a thriving practice. We got to talking about past life regression. Reluctantly, Jeff recounted experiences very much like Weiss's. Skeptical by nature and a scientist by training, Jeff initially distrusted what his clients were saying under hypnosis.

Then, while conducting hypnotherapy, Jeff found himself speaking to someone through his client who was not his client—someone who explained that he was a Master and advised Jeff quite authoritatively on the best treatment for his client.

Warily, Jeff demanded, "How do I know you are who you say you are?"

The Master asked, "Do you remember the lullaby your grandmother used to sing to you, the one you've always wondered about?"

Chills crawled down Jeff's back.

As a child, he had adored that lullaby. After his grandmother died, he tried to remember it but could never get beyond the first verse. He asked his mother, but she, too, remembered no more than the first few lines. All his life, he'd longed to hear the entire lullaby again.

Now, as Jeff listened in stunned silence, the Master recited every word of every verse.

I wondered, could this have been a lucky guess? Was it a familiar lullaby like "All the Pretty Little Horses" or "All Through the Night"? I asked Jeff to recite a few lines.

I was a professional folksinger for twenty years. I've heard a lot of lullabies. What Jeff recited I'd never heard before in my life.

I urged Jeff to write about his experiences. People need to know, I said. Therapists, clients—everyone—could gain invaluable insights.

He smiled ruefully, all too aware of the professional derision that greeted Brian Weiss when he went public about reincarnation. "I've got three kids to put through college," he told me. "I can't risk my career. I'm taking lots of notes. After I retire, I'll write all about it."

What I've seen and heard isn't absolute proof of reincarnation. There could be another explanation. But reincarnation seems to me the most likely explanation.

You can read the books. You can visit the websites and the skeptics' websites and judge for yourselves. You can talk with parents of young children or with young children themselves, and you might hear stories like these, too.

Unitarian Universalism wisely "warn[s] us against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

Looking at the evidence, using our intellect, listening to intuition, heeding the call of spirit, we can reach any conclusion, following the truth wherever it leads us.

But to reject a conclusion solely because we deem it impossible is not reason. It's not science. It's dogma.

If I'm wrong about reincarnation, no harm done.

If I'm right, what an amazing journey lies behind us and ahead of us.

Maybe I'll see you next time around.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction

by Wendell Berry

We clasp the hands of those who go before us
and the hands of those who come after us.

We enter the little circle of each other's arms
and the larger circle of all creatures

dancing to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
except in fragments.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Suggested Reading

Carol Bowman, *Children's Past Lives: How Past Life Memories Affect Your Child* (Bantam, 1997)

Bruce and Andrea Leininger with Ken Gross, *Soul Survivor: The Reincarnation of a World War II Fighter Pilot* (Grand Central Publishing, 2009)

Tom Shroder, *Old Souls: The Scientific Evidence for Past Lives* (Simon & Schuster, 1999)

Brian Weiss, *Many Lives, Many Masters* (Simon & Schuster, 1988)