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August 27, 2010

# Remembrances of Lives Past

By LISA MILLER

IN one of his past lives, Dr. Paul DeBell believes, he was a caveman. The gray-haired Cornell-trained psychiatrist has a gentle, serious manner, and his appearance, together with the generic shrink décor of his office — leather couch, granite-topped coffee table — makes this pronouncement seem particularly jarring.

In that earlier incarnation, “I was going along, going along, going along, and I got eaten,” said Dr. DeBell, who has a private practice on the Upper East Side where he specializes in hypnotizing those hoping to retrieve memories of past lives. Dr. DeBell likes to reflect on how previous lives can alter one’s sense of self. He, for example, is more than a psychiatrist in 21st-century Manhattan; he believes he is an eternal soul who also inhabited the body of a Tibetan monk and a conscientious German who refused to betray his Jewish neighbors in the Holocaust.

Belief in reincarnation, he said, “allows you to experience history as yours. It gives you a different sense of what it means to be human.”

Peter Bostock, a retired language teacher from Winnipeg, Manitoba, says that in the early 1880s he managed a large estate — possibly Chatsworth — in Derbyshire, England.

In a twist that would make Jane Austen blush, he thinks he was in love with the soul of his current wife, Jo-Anne, then embodied as a cook in the estate’s kitchen. Married to someone else, Mr. Bostock could not act on his feelings.

He says he and his wife share the kind “of attraction and recognition that a soul makes when it encounters the familiar.” In that spirit, the couple traveled last month to Rhinebeck, N.Y., where they and more than 200 others paid \$355 each to attend a weekend seminar run by one of America’s pre-eminent proselytizers on the subject of reincarnation, Dr. Brian Weiss.

On this second, sweltering day of the seminar, Dr. Weiss, a 65-year-old Florida resident with a hawk-like visage and placid blue eyes, was wearing a polo shirt the color of robins’ eggs. He took a break from teaching and, over a healthy lunch, reflected on the rise of

interest in the West in reincarnation. Like Dr. DeBell, he is a psychiatrist with an [Ivy League](#) pedigree ([Columbia University](#) and [Yale Medical School](#)).

Dr. Weiss was censured by the medical establishment in 1988 after he published “Many Lives, Many Masters.” In it he details his work with a patient he calls Catherine, who, under hypnosis, the book says, remembered multiple past lives, relieving her of paralyzing phobias. It has sold more than a million copies.

Now, Dr. Weiss said: “Doctors are e-mailing me. They’re not so concerned with their reputations and careers. We can talk about this openly. And it’s not just psychiatrists, but surgeons and architects.”

According to data released last year by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, a quarter of Americans now believe in reincarnation. (Women are more likely to believe than men; Democrats more likely than Republicans.) [Julia Roberts](#) recently told *Elle* magazine that though she was raised Christian, she had become “very Hindu.” Ms. Roberts believes that in her past life she was a “peasant revolutionary,” and said that when her daughter sits in a certain way she knows “there’s someone there I didn’t get the benefit of knowing ... It’s an honor for me to continue to shepherd that.”

At Cannes in May, a Thai film about reincarnation, “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives,” won the highest prize. In it, an old man on his deathbed sees the dead as vividly as the living, and his past life as an ox is as clear as his present one.

In religious terms, the human narrative — birth, life, death and rebirth — has for millennia been relatively straightforward in the West. You were born. You lived. You died. After a judgment you went to heaven (or hell) forever and ever. Eternity was the end: no appeals allowed.

But nearly a billion Hindus and a half-billion Buddhists — not to mention the ancient Greeks, certain Jews and a few Christians — have for thousands of years believed something entirely different. Theirs is, as the theologians say, a cyclical view. You are born. You live. You die. And because nobody’s perfect, your soul is born again — not in another location or sphere, and not in any metaphorical sense, but right here on earth.

Gadadhara Pandit Dasa, Columbia University’s first Hindu chaplain, called it “a re-do,” like a test you get to take over. After an unspecified number of tries, the eternal soul finally achieves perfection. Only then, in what Hindus call *moksha* (or release), does the soul go to live with God.

SPIRITUALLY minded Americans have had a love affair with Eastern religion at least since the Beatles traveled to India in 1968, but for more than a generation, reincarnation

remained a fringe or even shameful belief.

“I can remember, 30 years ago, if a person wanted to learn about reincarnation, they would go into a bookstore and go into a very back corner, to a section called ‘Occult,’ ” said Janet Cunningham, president of the International Board for Regression Therapy, a professional standards group for past-life therapists and researchers. “It felt sneaky.” Now the East is in our backyards, accessible on the Internet and in every [yoga](#) studio.

At the same time, Western religion is failing to satisfy growing numbers of people — especially young adults. College students Mr. Dasa encounters, most of them raised as Christians or Jews, “haven’t given up on the idea of spirituality or religion,” he said. “They’re tired of the dogma they grew up with.” According to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, 15 percent of Americans express no affiliation with any religious tradition, nearly double the number in 1990.

Stephen Prothero, religion professor at [Boston University](#) and author of “God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World,” has made a study of Western interest in Eastern religious practice and suggests that our fascination with reincarnation is related to Americans’ relative prosperity. Modern Americans, in their optimism and material success, see reincarnation as a chance to postpone eternity for another day, he explained by e-mail. “Reincarnation means never having to say you’re dead,” he wrote.

The popular purveyors of reincarnation belief these days are not monks or theologians, but therapists — intermediaries between science and religion who authenticate irrational belief.

Dr. Weiss stresses that he is a medical doctor who was not expecting to encounter past lives in a conventional therapeutic setting. (His favorite title, he says, is not “guru” but “professor.”) Under hypnosis, Catherine, the patient in his book, had memories of times and places, and in such extraordinary and historically accurate detail, he said, that she could never have invented them. (In one life she is an Egyptian servant in charge of embalming corpses. “I see eyes,” she told Dr. Weiss under hypnosis. “I see a woman, a goddess, with some type of a headpiece on ... Osiris ... Sirius ... something like that.”)

Critics of hypnotic regression dismiss such visions as scientifically dubious. “The mind fills in the blanks, basically,” said Dr. Jim Tucker, a child psychiatrist at the [University of Virginia](#) who studies accounts of past lives. “How are these visions different from dream material: that’s quite the question.” Nonetheless, Dr. Weiss’s elite credentials, and his initial skepticism, open the door to belief for people who might otherwise stay away.

“I’m not a big New Age person,” said a 47-year-old woman from Harlem who saw Dr. DeBell to cope with grief after her mother’s death. “I was really, really angry at the way my

mother died. It's almost as if I took it personally. How could this horrible thing have happened to my family? I've been such a good person." (She declined to have her name published.) After two sessions of conventional talk therapy, Dr. DeBell hypnotized her and, she believes, led her to discover images of past lives. In one, she was an Italian merchant, a man, who sold textiles along the Amalfi Coast; in another, she was an African herbalist; in a third, she was a freed slave in New Orleans who healed the sick and ministered to those in need. This deep dive "was a tremendous help," she said. It gave her a broader perspective on her life — and on the death of her mother: "I felt more at peace. My mother came, she did great things for me and she moved on."

In a post-Freudian world, past-lives therapy has its advantages. For one thing, it's quick. A regression session usually takes several hours — and costs more than \$100 an hour. Under hypnosis, the patient follows a guided visualization. In his workshop in Rhinebeck, Dr. Weiss talked more than 200 people into a meditative state and then encouraged them to imagine walking through one of five doors. One had on it the year 1850, another 1700, another 1500 and so on. (All this reporter could visualize were Vermeer paintings; peasants in homey kitchens and the bourgeoisie at play.) "Any good therapist can use these techniques and you can learn them in a week," Dr. Weiss said.

Whereas in classic psychoanalysis, patients used to have to see their doctors multiple times a week to talk about parents, childhood traumas and dreams, past-life therapists promise they can access the memories from which troubles stem in just one session. Catharsis and healing are nearly instantaneous results, Dr. Weiss said. "You don't need six months of trust," he explained. "This is the fast form."

Among past-lives therapists, a debate rages about whether it's possible to solve emotional problems by "changing" a past-life memory. To learn to swim instead of drowning, for example; or to strike a killing blow at a killer. Dr. Weiss said he opposes such memory manipulation. "I want the memory to come out unedited, unchanged," he said. Further, therapists have begun to broaden their definition of "memory," leaving aside the question of whether a scene uncovered during hypnosis is "real" or not.

"I have done several thousand individual past-life regressions," said Ms. Cunningham, of the International Board for Regression Therapy. "And I will also say that I don't know where these memories come from. So when we say 'reincarnation,' it may be our singular soul that reincarnates again and again and again. It may be an aspect of soul energy. It may be a collective unconscious. I think some people might go into fantasy. It may be an allegory or metaphor from the mind." No matter what these visions are, Ms. Cunningham said, uncovering them can be therapeutic.

ON the fringes of legitimate science, some researchers persist in studying consciousness

and its durability beyond the body. Though Dr. Tucker, who directs the Child and Family Psychiatry Clinic at the University of Virginia, has few kind words for regression therapy or its practitioners, he continues to be committed to the scientific study of what can only be called reincarnation.

He is carrying on the pioneering research of his mentor, Dr. Ian Stevenson, who beginning in the 1960s collected more than 2,000 accounts of children between the ages of 2 and 7 who seemed to remember previous lives vividly without the help of hypnosis.

Dr. Stevenson did most of his casework in Asia, where belief in reincarnation is common. There he found a child born with a deformed hand who remembered having his fingers chopped off in a previous life (Dr. Stevenson went to the village the child recalled and verified that such an incident had taken place), and Burmese children who said they had previously been Japanese soldiers killed in World War II and preferred sushi over their native cuisine.

Dr. Tucker studies American children and in one case found a young boy who started to say, around the age of 18 months, that he was his own (deceased) grandfather. “He eventually told details of his grandfather’s life that his parents felt certain he could not have learned through normal means,” Dr. Tucker wrote in *Explore*, which calls itself a journal of science and healing, “such as the fact that his grandfather’s sister had been murdered and that his grandmother had used a food processor to make milkshakes for his grandfather every day at the end of his life.”

Dr. Tucker won’t say such cases add up to proof of reincarnation, but he likes to keep an open mind.

“There can be something that survives after the death of the brain and the death of the body that is somehow connected to a new child,” he said. “I have become convinced that there is more to the world than the physical universe. There’s the mind piece, which is its own entity.”

*Lisa Miller, the religion editor for Newsweek, is the author of “Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination With the Afterlife.”*

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