

Comments on Ian Stevenson, M.D., Director of the Division of Personality Studies and Pioneer of Reincarnation Research

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It is an honor to have been invited to write some comments on the life and work of the late Ian Stevenson, just as it has been a honor to have become familiar with the man and his immense, careful, and well-written work on the important issues of survival of bodily death in general (e.g., Stevenson, 1972, 1977b, 1982) and reincarnation in particular (e.g., Stevenson, 1966, 1974, 1975, 1997, 2000b, 2001). These are not topics that are at the forefront of Western thought and education, yet Ian Stevenson spent what he describes as “half a career in the paranormal” (Stevenson, 2006) meticulously investigating, and writing wonderfully clear, well-reasoned, and articulate studies of these phenomena. To me it seems that this work represents more than half a career – it represents a monumental achievement of bringing these topics into the arena of scientific investigation and placing them within the context of understanding the mechanisms that underlie the psychology of human beings. To Ian these studies seemed a logical progression from his research as a psychiatrist with a particular interest in psychosomatic illness. I find it fascinating that in his last article (Stevenson, 2006) he links his own chronic bronchial maladies to the study of psychosomatic illness, and then connects these personal concerns and professional issues with his *magnum opus* on birthmarks and birth defects and their relation to trauma or cause of death in a previous life (Stevenson, 1997). How fortunate that his sickly youth was spent reading the works of theosophists that his mother made available to him; one is left wondering what malady he may have carried from a previous life and whether his long life despite his bronchial condition will render him less impacted by such health concerns in a subsequent life.

However that may play itself out, I am very grateful that I had the good fortune of meeting Ian Stevenson and becoming aware of his work and participating in it. Our meeting took place in Vancouver in about 1984 when he was returning from a study of cases of the reincarnation type among the Gitksan Indians of northwest British Columbia in Canada. While in Vancouver, Ian was hoping to find some researchers who would be interested in carrying on his investigation into reincarnation in BC, and he enquired at the Department of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia about whether there were any faculty members or graduate students so inclined. He was given two names,

one of which was mine. We met, and I was thereby introduced first to this kindly gentleman and then to his impressive research, which I had previously not known about at all. In my Ph.D. thesis I had noted the importance of reincarnation in the Beaver Indian world view, and to learn whether reincarnation was part of the experience of other native groups, I examined the 10 different culture areas in North America, choosing from each the group that had the best documentation about their spiritual views. I was curious because rebirth was one of the essential elements of Beaver Indian/Dune-za philosophy and experience, and yet my graduate studies in Anthropology had not prepared me to expect it as a part of Beaver Indian understanding of personality. Learning of Dr. Stevenson's careful case-by-case research, I was delighted to add such an investigation to the research project that I was planning to carry out during the summer of 1984 with the Beaver Indians, and to accept Dr. Stevenson's proposal that I undertake similar research with the Gitksan First Nation peoples, with whom I had not previously worked.

I was impressed by how much the Beaver Indians had to tell me when I pursued the topic with them *à la* Stevenson, and even more impressed that a week's work with the Gitksan produced information about 33 fascinating cases of reincarnation replete with the characteristics that Stevenson had found in cases throughout the world: birthmarks relating to wounds or markings; recognitions and statements from small children made from the point of view of the previous person; similarities of temperament, skills, and talents; and phobias and phobias explicable on the basis of the previous life but not the current one. It was a real pleasure to write up this research (Mills, 1988), following the admirable example of Ian's measured evaluation of the features of cases. You can imagine my delight when, after that, Ian asked me if I would be interested in undertaking a replication study of his research in India. The answer was a definite "Yes." At about the same time Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson undertook a similar study in Sri Lanka, and Dr. Jürgen Keil conducted one in Turkey. We wrote our respective articles, and then I was delighted when Ian offered me a research assistant position at the Division of Personality Studies (DOPS), combined with a lectureship in the Anthropology Department at the University of Virginia.

Moving to Charlottesville and into an office at the Division of which Ian was the Director, I was ever more impressed by his complete integrity, his perseverance and dedication to documenting and presenting the data, and his thoughtful gentleness. The files contained the data from the cases, but so did Ian's mind. He meticulously presented data on so many aspects of the cases; for example, his assessment of gender dysphoria (e.g., Stevenson, 1977a: 317–318, 1977c, 2000a: 654–655) introduced a fascinating explication of gender orientation at odds with physiology, a topic explored more recently by a number of indigenous and non-indigenous North American scholars. It was a real pleasure to attend the weekly Tuesday luncheon meetings in which Ian or another scholar would present their current research, with Ian always acting as the genteel and insightful host. When Ian eventually retired from his position as Director of DOPS, the University of Virginia Medical School newspaper noted that it took at least three people to replace him: Dr. Bruce Greyson, as the foremost

researcher of near-death experiences; Dr. Emily Williams Kelly, in a variety of topics related to the question or survival after death, as well as a fellow appreciator of F. W. H. Myers; and Dr. Jim Tucker, a child psychiatrist who continues the investigation of children said to remember previous lives. Indeed, in large part because of Ian Stevenson the Division has attracted a larger cohort of researchers, including Dr. Carlos Alvarado, Dr. Nancy Zingrone, Dr. Edward F. Kelly, Dr. Michael Grosso, and Dr. Ross Dunseath, and it has thus become one of the important focal points for parapsychological research and intellectual interchange.

The legacy of Ian Stevenson to the understanding of the dynamics of psychology is huge and not yet fully realized. What he has afforded the intellectual, academic, and professional psychiatric world will slowly and inevitably unfold and unfurl and reach out beyond academe to influence the understanding of personality by the larger culture and public. That is already happening not only through the book of Tom Schroder (1999) but also through the networks and web sites of lay people like Carol Bowman, who was influenced by the work of Ian Stevenson in her personal understanding of the experiences of her own children. I am confident that his work will permeate more deeply into the views of Western lay people as well as psychiatric and psychological practice. I hope that his vision of the role of reincarnation in understanding personality will inspire more research carried out with the care that he exercised in his investigations, and that the legacy of his work will lead to new understandings.

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