

Ian P. Stevenson, M.D., died February 8, 2007 in Charlottesville, Virginia, at age 88.

Dr. Stevenson is known worldwide for his research, conducted over more than 40 years, on cases of the reincarnation type and other evidence for survival after death. Born in Montreal, Canada, on October 31, 1918, he was educated at St. Andrew's University in Scotland and McGill University in Montreal, and he received his medical degree from McGill in 1943, earning an award for the highest aggregate in all subjects forming the medical curriculum. After a brief period of research in biochemistry, Stevenson, dissatisfied with its reductionism, looked for a way to study what he considered "something closer to the whole human being." In the late 1940s, therefore, he joined a group at New York Hospital and began research in psychosomatic medicine, particularly on the effects of stress and strong emotions on physical symptoms. This work eventually led him to training in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and in 1957, at the young age of 38, he was appointed Professor and Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia.

Long periods of seclusion due to a childhood illness helped foster his lifelong habit of voracious reading. In 1935 he started keeping a list of every book he read, and by 2003 it numbered 3535 books. His extraordinarily wide reading in history in particular showed him the transience of ideas and convictions once considered immutable, and he strongly resisted the temptation of many scientists to "accept current knowledge as forever fixed." As a result, throughout his life he experienced the considerable obstacles confronting a scientist who wishes to conduct and publish unorthodox research. After he published a paper in 1957 questioning the orthodox Freudian view that human personality is determined by early childhood experiences, a colleague asked him whether he could walk the streets unarmed.

Dissatisfied with the reductionism of both biochemistry and Freudian psychoanalysis, Dr. Stevenson began to search for more satisfactory theories of the origin of individual differences and the development of personality. In the early 1950s, encouraged by a meeting with Aldous Huxley, he became one of the first academics in America to investigate the effects of psychedelic drugs in a psychiatric context. One experience with LSD induced what he described as "a mystical experience," in which he experienced three days of "perfect serenity" and the sense that "I could never be angry again. As it happens, that didn't work out, but the memory of it persisted as something to hope for."

Experiences such as this deepened his dissatisfaction with prevailing theories of mind and body and eventually led him to undertake extensive reading in the literature of psychical research about extrasensory perception and a wide variety of experiences suggesting survival after death, such as apparitions, near-death experiences and deathbed visions, and mediumship. He eventually conducted and published research in all these areas, but it was the discovery in obscure publications of numerous scattered reports of young children who seemed to have memories of a previous life that led to the research that he pioneered and for which he is now best known. In 1961 he took his first field trip, to India and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), to study at first hand the reported previous life memories of young children. After this first trip, Chester Carlson, the inventor of the Xerox machine, funded additional trips, and when Carlson died in 1968 he left funds for research and an endowed chair, sufficient to allow Dr. Stevenson to resign from his clinical and administrative duties and devote himself full-time to research. In addition, Dr. Stevenson was able to found the Division of Personality (now Perceptual) Studies,

the only university-based research unit in the world devoted to the study of previous life memories, near-death experiences, and related phenomena.

Over the next 35 years, Dr. Stevenson traveled extensively throughout the world – sometimes logging an average of 55,000 miles a year – identifying and studying nearly 3000 cases in Asian and Western cultures. His research was characterized by an almost obsessive attention to detail and corroboration of reports with interviews with numerous firsthand witnesses as well as with documents such as birth certificates and postmortem reports. His empirical approach made him deeply skeptical of purported accounts of previous lives obtained by hypnosis or “past life regression.” He kept a file in his office which he labeled “Extravagant Claims,” containing numerous Thomas Jeffersons, Mary Magdalenes, Napoleons, and Josephines, and he would speculate amusingly to colleagues about what would happen if they were all to be locked in a room together.

Dr. Stevenson was the author of over 300 publications, including 14 books. In his publications on cases of the reincarnation type, he identified numerous recurring and cross-cultural patterns, including the ages when children would typically speak about their memories (beginning at about 2-3 years and ending by 7 or 8), the mode of death of the previous personality (often violent or sudden), and unusual behaviors (including phobias, unusual skills or interests, and gender confusion when the previous life was that of the opposite sex). His *magnum opus*, however, is a 2-volume, 2268-page monograph reporting over 200 cases in which highly unusual birthmarks or birth defects of the child corresponded with marks, usually fatal wounds, on the previous person.

Dr. Stevenson saw this research as indicating a possible third factor, in addition to genetics and environment, in the development of human personality. His emphasis, however, was always on the evidence, and his greatest frustration was not that other scientists dismissed his interpretations of the evidence, but that most of them did so without even bothering to read the evidence that he had so painstakingly assembled.

In 1982 Dr. Stevenson was instrumental in the founding of the Society for Scientific Exploration, an organization for scientists involved in areas of research challenging many assumptions of contemporary science. Despite his unorthodox interests, he was the embodiment of academic rectitude in both dress and demeanor; but his single-minded, serious devotion to his life’s work was tempered by a wry, dry sense of humor. Commenting, for example, that he was “apprehensive” but not afraid of death, he said: “I have a feeling I’m going to be confronted with memories, some of which I won’t like and would like to expunge. But I do wonder, what parents could possibly want me as a baby?”

Dr. Stevenson’s first wife, Octavia, died in 1983. His second wife, Margaret, survives him, as do his brother, Dr. Kerr L. White of Charlottesville, his sister, Edith Meisner of Knowlton, Quebec, his nieces Margo and Susan, and nephews Preston, Geoffrey, and Mark. He had no children, but he leaves numerous younger colleagues inspired, trained, and encouraged in their own careers by him.

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