

BOOK REVIEW

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Many Lives, Many Masters, by Brian L. Weiss. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1988, 219, pp, \$8.95 (pb)

"Nothing in my background had prepared me for this. I was absolutely amazed when these events unfolded" (p. 10). So writes the *magna cum laude* graduate of Columbia University and 1970 M.D. recipient from Yale University School of Medicine who, after ten extremely successful years of traditional practice in psychiatry, stumbled onto past life therapy. In this book, Brian Weiss recounts both the external and internal aspects of the process that was involved in his "discovery"—and glad I am that he did.

His story chronicles, once again, how in the face of seemingly compelling evidence yet another paragon of the Western scientific paradigm throws off the cloak of that world view and emerges with the broader and deeper perspective of the transpersonal. His process is made, for me, even more convincing by the skepticism and psychological struggle that accompanied his transformation, and his lack of proselytizing upon achievement of it. He presents the evidence and, while undauntedly expressing his own conclusions, overtly expresses respect for the reader to draw his or her own.

His process began when "Catherine" showed little improvement during 18 months of traditional psychiatric treatment for anxiety, panic attacks, and phobias. These symptoms had plagued her since childhood

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but had become much more acute just prior to seeking therapy with Weiss in 1980. In a further attempt to find the source of her symptoms, which he believed must have been rooted in early childhood trauma, they began hypnosis.

In an early session, regressed to the brink of her first childhood verbalizations, she revealed no trauma that would account for her symptoms. Clinging still to the psychodynamic assumption that a preverbal trauma may have constituted the root problem, he suggested to her to "go back to the time from which your symptoms arise." When she again began to speak, he was at first confused, then increasingly amazed at his growing realization that she seemed to be speaking from a past life.

In this and subsequent hypnotic sessions she revealed pieces of perhaps as many as twelve past lives. The recollection and working through of traumatic episodes from these past lives proved both etologically meaningful to her present-life symptoms and therapeutically beneficial in the removal of them. But for Weiss, the even more profound aspect of these sessions came when Catherine, still under hypnosis and "between lives," began to channel personal, cosmological, and spiritual material to Weiss himself, from a small group of spirit entities who called themselves "the masters." Catherine post-hypnotically remembered her past life recollections but had total amnesia for the purportedly channeled material. This corroborated the masters' assertion that the past life material was for Catherine's development, the channeled material for Weiss's.

Weiss clearly describes his struggle to reconcile these new experiences with the traditional scientific world view that had, up until that point, served him exceedingly well. Some particularly compelling evidence would be required to shake the foundation of so deeply entrenched a world view. For Weiss, that evidence came in the form of seemingly paranormal material. I respect Weiss's predominant stance of openness to that material, yet caution in jumping to conclusions about it. Yet my only lasting dissatisfaction with the book rests with what, for me, was insufficient critical analysis of that material.

For example, in one case Catherine channeled highly personal information about Weiss's family to him from one of the masters. This information included a description of the congenital heart disorder that had been responsible for the death of Weiss's infant son nearly ten years prior to Weiss's relationship with Catherine, along with Weiss's deceased father's Hebrew name that had been modified to create a name for Weiss's daughter.

Weiss briefly examines, then dismisses, the possibility that Catherine could have acquired this information through normal means. His description of Catherine as a sincere and artless young woman, too preoccupied by her own symptoms to be designing an elaborate hoax, certainly has merit. But the fact that she reportedly worked in the same hospital as he and that she had a "close friendship" with at least one of his medical colleagues complicates the picture. Has Weiss never confided such information to a colleague? Do hospital personnel never gossip about such things?

The puzzle is further complicated by the fact that Weiss "slightly changed" Catherine's identify to ensure confidentiality. It is not clear whether changes were made in these aspects pertaining to her associations with people who might know more personal facts about Weiss. In any case, my own skepticism leads me to question—even doubt—the source of some of the seemingly paranormal revelations. This is not to imply that Catherine necessarily engaged in intentional deceit; she may have recalled under hypnosis information that she had consciously forgotten ever having all-too-normally acquired.

More difficult to dismiss is an incident that grew out of Catherine's increasing extrasensory perception (ESP) during waking consciousness. At one point, having spent a day at the racetrack, she produced winning tickets for every horse race that had been run. Would a hospital laboratory technician of seemingly modest means go to the expense of placing a bet on every horse that ran, just to be able to produce all the winning stubs? Catherine reportedly went through the exercise of betting on every winning horse to convince her father of her growing paranormal powers. Weiss reports that he saw the winning ticket stubs; I wish that he had also sought to verify personally with Catherine's father exactly *how* Catherine came by those stubs.

Although approximately 70 percent of my conviction is swayed by the weight of Weiss's evidence, the other 30 percent is painfully aware of the long history of hoaxes that has plagued the field of parapsychology. It is not so much that I disbelieve the veracity of Catherine's paranormal abilities as that I would have liked Weiss more thoroughly to have researched and discussed alternative explanations for those abilities, in order to provide more forcefully rational arguments against the likelihood of those alternatives.

Of particular interest to the readers of the *Journal* are Catherine's accounts of death from her many past lives. As Weiss himself points out, Catherine seemed to have acquired a different belief system in each of her past lives, yet the process of death was identical with each

life and very much in line with what near-death experiencers (NDErs) report. However, Catherine's channeling revealed a more detailed description of existence between lives than any NDEr, to my knowledge, has ever described. I found this to be thought-provoking reading.

Also of interest is the parallel between some of the changes Catherine apparently experienced as a result of her past life therapy and those reported by NDErs subsequent to their NDEs (Ring, 1984). Most noteworthy were her loss of fear of death and her increased ESP and intuitiveness. Also evident were her increased self-esteem and sense of inner peace. It was not Weiss's purpose to examine these and other possible parallels, such as changes in values and spiritual orientation. But Catherine and others like her might constitute excellent subjects for the research protocol developed by Ring (1984). A tantalizing hypothesis is that the changes he documented among NDErs might be characteristic of anyone who has had a profound transpersonal experience (Holden and Guest, 1990).

I believe that even if I were not a psychotherapist and a parapsychological researcher, but were "merely" a person whose occasional unorthodox experiences had awakened in me a curiosity about the transpersonal, I would have found this book to be compelling reading. Weiss succeeds in writing in a manner that can be understood easily by a reasonably educated lay person, yet will be stimulating to even the most experienced professional.

Prior to reading Weiss's book, I had read Ian Stevenson's *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1966) and Roger Woolger's *Other Lives, Other Selves* (1987)—the latter reviewed in this Journal by Stevenson (1990) and by Arthur Hastings (1990). The three books together provided a synergy to my thinking about reincarnation, past life therapy, and related issues. Yet, personally, I found Weiss's book to be the single most stimulating and convincing treatment of these topics. At least in part, this is because his book covers not only those topics but also his personal paradigm shift. For me, that kind of personal transformation is becoming "an old, old story" that I love to hear yet again.

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