

Reincarnation: Who said what and who was who

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Our children come to us to make-up for indiscretions in past lives. They are hold-overs from lifetimes we have not solved.

Martin Sheen

At the end of the twentieth century, reincarnation gripped the entertainment industry. Many stars 'came out' about their previous lives. Some took on the belief having become either Buddhists or Scientologists – both of whom accept reincarnation. Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Lisa Presley and Kirstie Alley all belong to the latter sect whilst Richard Gere is a strong supporter of Buddhism and Stephen Seagal has been recognised as an incarnated *tulku* or lama. Actress Shirley MacLaine may have started the reincarnation trend with her published belief that she was a handmaiden to Nefertiti, the wife of Charlemagne, and a model for Toulouse Lautrec amongst other lives. Sylvester Stallone believes he was a boxer killed by a knock-out punch in the 1930s and before that he was a French aristocrat executed by Madame La Guillotine and, prior to that, an American Indian. Fashion guru Paco Rabane has also expressed his strong belief in reincarnation in two books. He says he was one of the priests who helped to kill and then embalm Tukankamen in ancient Egypt and he also remembers being a prostitute in 18th century England, a Mongol prince, a usurer in Lombardy and an Inquisition priest.

Singer Tina Turner took off to Egypt on a quest for her past life as Hapshepsut, the woman who took control and became Egypt's first woman Pharaoh. Tina Turner had been told by a psychic that she had been this powerful Queen, but in her travels with author Moyra Caldecott, who was also researching her own place in the story, the two found no definite indications. However, both have voiced their continued belief in reincarnation.

Almost from pre-history, records exist that tell the reincarnation stories of the famous and not-so-famous. Diogenes Laertius in the *Life of Pythagoras* states that:

"Pythagoras was accustomed to speak of himself in this manner: that he had formerly been Aethalides, and had been accounted the son of Mercury; and that Mercury had offered him any gift he pleased except immortality. Accordingly he had requested that, whether living or dead, he might preserve the memory of what had happened to him... At a subsequent period he was reborn as Euphorbus, and was wounded by Menelaus at the siege of Troy, and so died. In that life he used to say that he had formerly been Aethalides; and that he had received as a gift from Mercury the memory of his soul's transmigrations... also the gift of recollecting what his own soul and the souls of others had experienced between death and rebirth.

Some well-respected people have had particularly strong reincarnation memories. Charles Emerson (1808-1836) a scholar and the brother of Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled his own experiences:

“The reason why Homer is to me like a dewy morning is because I too lived while Troy was, and sailed in the hollow ships of the Grecians to sack the devoted town. The rosy-fingered dawn as it crimsoned the tops of Ida, the broad seashore covered with tents, the Trojan hosts in their painted armor, and the rushing chariots of Diomde and Idomeneus – all these I too saw: my ghost animated the frame of some nameless Argive.. We forget that we have been drugged by the sleepy bowl of the present.

But when a lively chord in the soul is struck, when the windows for a moment are unbarred, the long and varied past is recovered. We recognise it all; we are not mere brief ignoble creatures, we seize our immortality and bind together the related parts of our secular beings.. Something there is in the spirit which changes not, neither is weary, but ever returns into itself, and partakes of the eternity of God”.

Ralph Waldo Emerson graduated from Harvard Divinity School and became a Unitarian minister. He left the church, however, because he wanted to directly experience the divine. After travelling extensively in Europe and meeting poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge – who were strong believers in reincarnation, he became part of the American Transcendentalist movement. It was his assertion that:

All things subsist and do not die, but only retire a little from sight and afterwards return again... Nothing is dead; men feign themselves dead, and endure mock funerals and mourning obituaries, and there they stand looking out of the window, sound and well, in some new and strange disguise. (Nominalist and Realist)

Emerson believed that there was no place for free will in the mechanical chains of cause and effect propounded by rational philosophy and asserted that human spiritual renewal proceeds from the divine ‘oversoul’ that permeates all creation. In his *Journals* he wrote:

The soul is an emanation of the Divinity, a part of the soul of the world.. It comes from without into the human body, as into a temporary abode, it goes out of it anew; it wanders in ethereal regions, it returns to visit it.. it passes into other habitations, for the soul is immortal., Life itself is an interim and a transition; this, O Indur, is my one and twenty thousandth form, and already I feel old Life sprouting underneath in the twenty thousand first, and I know well he builds no new world but by tearing down the old materials.

Reincarnation memories can sometimes cause strange – and overwhelmingly embarrassing – behaviour in the most rational of figures. Charles Kelsey Gains, professor of Greek Philosophy at St Lawrence University had such an experience. In the prologue to the novel, *Gorgo*, Gains vividly recalls such a moment:

I stopped short; I flung down the book. "It is a lie," I cried bitterly, "a cruel, hateful lie." I almost shouted – and the whole class stared at me in amazement.

He had been translating a passage, whilst still a student, from *The Twelfth Oration of Lysias*. The passage that caused the outburst read: "And although he has been the author of all these and still other disasters and disgraces, both old and new, both small and great, some dare to profess themselves his friends, although it was not for the people that Theramenes dies, but because of his own villainy." To his amazement the professor found himself in tears, refusing to read another line as he explains:

For the past had opened like a darkness lightning-cleft, all in one moment I felt the injustices of ages, the shame of an aeon of scorn – and they asked me to read against myself the lying record... Do you imagine that I alone among living men have walked those ancient streets? Not so, but the rest do not remember.

Certain people remember all too well and believe that it is their past that befits them for their present destiny. Napoleon Bonaparte, who rose from humble beginnings in Corsica to become Emperor of the French, believed he was the reincarnation of the Emperor Charlemagne. He gave instructions to his marshals to "Tell the Pope that I am keeping my eyes open; tell him that I am Charlemagne, the Sword of the Church, his Emperor, and as such I expect to be treated." In his memoirs, Prince Talleyrand, a diplomat who held high office under Napoleon, describes a stormy meeting between Bonaparte and Church dignitaries at which Napoleon insisted: "You wish to treat me as if I were Louis le Debonnaire. Do not confound the son with the father. You see in me Charlemagne... I am Charlemagne".

The former Beatle, John Lennon, was convinced that he was the reincarnation of Napoleon and that Yoko Ono had been Josephine. He looked on Yoko as a soul mate of the kind described by Plato. Literally his other half who had been torn from him when the gods became angry at the overweening pride of humans. At that time, humans were two headed beings with four arms and legs. The gods split them asunder and, as Plato tells us, "Each half yearned for the half from which it had been severed" (*Symposium*). A friend of John Lennon and a fellow believer in reincarnation shared with me a conversation he'd had with him:

Before Yoko and I met we were half a person. You know there's an old myth about a person being one half and the other half being somewhere else, in the sky or somewhere, like a mirror image. But we were two halves and now we are whole.

Lennon's controversial biographer Albert Goldman claims that John Lennon also thought that he and Yoko had been other famous lovers and that they had been Pharaoh and Queen in ancient Egypt. Apparently a psychic told Yoko Ono that a sarcophagus which was coming up for sale contained the body of herself in this former incarnation. Yoko and John hurriedly purchased it but Yoko was furious to find that the mummy mask looked nothing like her. When the two travelled to Egypt, John Lennon wandered around the Step Pyramid at Saqqarah murmuring: "This is a magical, magical place. I've been here before!"ⁱ

Napoleon wasn't the only emperor to believe in reincarnation. Frederick the Great of Germany believed that the noble portion of himself would survive death and take on another body. He said that, although he did not expect to be a king in a future life, this was unimportant as he would be on the receiving end of less ingratitude.

The German born Empress Elisabeth of Austria was a firm believer in reincarnation. Her Greek tutor Constantin Christomanos enjoyed numerous conversations with her on the subject. When speaking of Dante and other poets, she said "They are souls, who, from a time long past have come anew to earth to continue their work and to anticipate the development of those still to come". She was of the opinion that "Our innermost being is more valuable than are all titles and honors... Whatever is of value in us we bring from our spiritual pre-existences."

The German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) studied Buddhism and the philosophies of Schopenhauer, who had scornfully written:

Were the Asiatic to ask me for a definition of Europe, I would be forced to answer him that it is that part of the world which is haunted by the incredible delusion that man was created out of nothing and that his present birth is his first entry into life.

Wagner wrote in 1855 that the doctrine of transmigration was the basis for a truly human life, and in 1860 said that only reincarnation could give him consolation since it showed how he could achieve redemption. It is said that a number of his operas are metaphors for reincarnation, the incomplete *Die Siegar* being based on Buddhist teachings. (This opera was later incorporated into *Parsifal*). Wagner said of *Die Siegar* "The simple story assumed significance by having the previous life of the leading characters merge into the present existence by means of an accompanying musical reminiscence".ⁱⁱ

Reincarnation seems to have struck a cord within the German soul. The composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) asserted:

We all return; it is this certainty that gives meaning to life and it does not make the slightest difference whether or not in a later incarnation we remember the former life. What counts is not the individual and his comfort, but the great aspiration to the perfect and the pure which goes on in each incarnation.

A Roman Catholic country such as Poland is not an obvious source of reincarnation material and yet in the nineteenth century, Polish philosophers and poets including Cieszkowski, Towianski, Mickiewicz, Slowacki, Krasinski, Norwid and Wysianski mentioned their past lives as in a most matter of fact way. Slowacki wrote a classic of Polish literature, *The Spirit King*, a mystic autobiography in which he narrates his past incarnations. Two disciples of the mystic philosopher Towianski (1799-1878) converted a Roman Catholic archbishop, Passavalli, to reincarnation. In his letters Passavalli says that the Church does not condemn reincarnation and that the doctrine does not conflict with Catholic dogma.

Many creative people have a close connection to their previous lives. Salvador Dali claimed:

As for me, I am not only a mystic; I am also the reincarnation of one of the greatest of all Spanish mystics, St John of the Cross. I can vividly remember my life as St John... of experiencing divine union, of undergoing the dark night of the soul of which he writes with so much feeling. I can remember the monastery and I can remember many of St John's fellow monks.

American poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau had a strong memory of his previous lives – and those of his friends:

I lived in Judea eighteen hundred years ago, but I never knew that there was such a one as Christ among my contemporaries. And Hawthorne, too, I remember as one with whom I sauntered in old heroic times along the banks of the Camander amid the ruins of chariots and heroes... As the stars looked to me when I was a shepherd in Assyria, they look to me now a New Englander.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes believed in the continuous existence of the human soul and life after death.

The convergence of so many lines of theosophic and Eastern thought upon this one conclusion, and the explanation which it affords in the supplementary doctrine of Karma of the apparent injustice of any single life, are arguments in its favour, and so perhaps are those vague recognitions and memories which are occasionally all too definite to be easily explained as atavistic impression.

But it is not only those with vivid imaginations who apprehend their past. The practical and pragmatic Ernest Thompson Seton (known as The Chief) was head of the American branch of the Boy Scouts from its inception in 1910 until 1915. In the forward to his book *The Gospel of the Red Man*, his wife wrote described how, during a visit to Los Angeles, they were summoned to a small white cottage in the hills where they were greeted by a woman who was introduced as a Mahatma from India. Although born in Iowa, she had travelled to India and studied for many years under 'Great Masters'. After tea and cakes and polite conversation, they rose to leave:

She turned on the Chief with a total change of look and demeanor. Her eyes blazed as she said in tones of authority: "Don't you know who you are?" She continued: "You are a Red Indian Chief, reincarnated to give the message of the Redman to the White race so much in need of it. Why don't you get busy? Why don't you set about your job?"

According to his wife, although nothing more was said, "The Chief" moved like one who was conscience-stricken". From then on, he never ceased to concentrate on what she termed 'his job'.

Scientists too have been much taken with the idea of the immortality of the human soul. Charles Darwin wrote:

With respect to immortality, nothing shows me how strong and almost instinctive a belief it is, as the consideration of the view now held by most physicists, namely, that the sun with all the planets will in time grow too cold for life. Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress. To those who fully admit the immortality of the human soul, the destruction of our world will not appear so dreadful.

On his death bed, Thomas Edison was asked if he believed in survival after death. His answer was that: "The only survival I can conceive is to start a new earth cycle again". In response to a question as to whether he believed in the soul, he stated:

I believe that when a man dies, this swarm [of billions of highly charged entities which live in the cells] deserts the body and goes out into space, but keeps on and enters another cycle of life and is immortal.

Edison also believed that life did not begin on earth:

The particles which combined to evolve living creatures on this planet of ours probably came from some other body elsewhere in the universe.

Albert Einstein said:

It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life, perpetuating itself through all eternity – to reflect upon the marvellous structure of the universe, which we can dimly perceive.

To him mysticism and science were inseparable:

I maintain that cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest incitement to scientific research.

One inventor gave reincarnation as the reason for his abilities:

Genius is experience. Some seem to think that it is a gift or talent, but it is the fruit of long experience in many lives. Some are older souls than others, and so they know more.

His name was Henry Ford and, as he explained in a newspaper interview:

I adopted the theory of Reincarnation when I was twenty six... Work is futile if we cannot utilize the experience we collect in one life in the next. When I discovered Reincarnation it was as if I had found a universal plan. I realised that there was a chance to work out my ideas. Time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the hands of the clock.”

Even the greatest of sceptics Harry Houdini – who spent much of his time trying to prove that Spiritualist mediums were a fake – nevertheless believed:

... and this belief is based on investigation, observation, and in a measure, personal experience – that somehow, somewhere, and sometime, we return in another human form, to carry on, as it were, through another lifetime, perhaps through many succeeding lifetimes, until some strange destiny is worked out to its ultimate solution.

He goes on to recount an experience familiar to countless believers in former lives:

I myself, have entered some Old World city for the first time in my life, so far as I was aware, and found the streets familiar, known just where to go to locate a certain house.

Psychics can have a strong influence in fostering a belief in reincarnation. Princess Diana met a number of psychics in her spiritual search. In *Princess Diana: Her New Life* biographer Andrew Morton speaks of her belief that she had been a nun in a former life.

Past Life Regression convinces most people who undergo it. Lee Everitt, the wife of British disc jockey and entertainer Kenny Everitt, has regressed a number of famous people. In her book *Celebrity Regressions* she quotes the American world champion tennis player Billie Jean King and her regression to lives as an American Indian, a Russian ballerina, a soldier in Charlemagne's army and a European pianist. Billie Jean King's experience convinced singer-songwriter Elton John, a sceptic who believed "it was his first and last time here" to give regression a try. During his session he saw three previous lives including one as a French chevalier and another during the First World War, after which he became a bus driver in London who was killed when the bus crashed. As with so many people, after the regressions, he was no longer a sceptic.

ⁱ Goldman, Albert *The Lives of John Lennon* Bantam Books London 1989 p.744

ⁱⁱ Wagner *Collected Writings*, Vol. V1 p.278 Kapp Edition