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A journey through life after death

Interview with Leslie Kean
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*Leslie Kean is an investigative journalist and author. She wrote **The New York Times** bestseller **UFOs: Generals, Pilots and Government Officials Go On the Record** (2010) (Reviewed, **SI**, January/February 2013). Her most recent book is **Surviving Death: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for an Afterlife** (2017). Jason Francis interviewed Leslie Kean about her research into life after death for **Share International**.*

Past life recall

Share International: Could you talk about some of the more memorable cases of reincarnation that you came across in your research?

Leslie Kean: There are two that I featured extensively in the book. The cases that are most evidential to me as a journalist involve really young children who have specific memories and are able to provide enough details so that investigators can find the person the children say they were and confirm that the information they provided is accurate. If somebody just has memories that can't be verified, it doesn't mean a whole lot. But it's very compelling when you can locate the person they claim to have been and find out that everything they said was accurate to the life of that person.

One of the cases involved a two-year-old boy named James Leininger. He began having memories [of a past life] before he was two. A long series of events occurred over a period of about two years when he became obsessed with playing with airplanes, and demonstrated knowledge of World War II aircraft. James started to develop nightmares in which he was reliving the crash of an airplane. He was in terror and shrieking in his crib. Eventually he started to articulate what was happening. During his nightmares he would scream: "Airplane crash on fire! Little man can't get out!" At certain times his parents would ask him questions about what was going on. Over time he was able to communicate that he had been a pilot who was shot down by the Japanese. His parents didn't know how their two-year-old son knew the word "Japanese".

James talked about how the little man in

the plane was him. He said he flew a Corsair, which is a specific type of aircraft, and that it flew off of a boat called the *Natoma* [later confirmed to be the aircraft carrier *USS Natoma Bay*]. Even more specifically, he said that he had a best friend named Jack Larson, and that his plane had gone down near the island of Iwo Jima. One day James' dad was looking at a book about World War II with him and saw a map. James pointed to the map and said that was where his plane went down.

His dad was going through a lot of trauma around all of this because he was of the Christian faith and was absolutely convinced this was not possible. It was not part of his religion. He was determined to prove his child wrong, but anytime he looked into these memories he found them to be accurate. James' dad actually wrote some excerpts for my book about his own spiritual progression through this, and how he came to realize by the end that it didn't contradict his faith and he was able to accept it. That's an interesting component to the case that many parents will relate to.

Eventually James' father went to a series of reunions for people associated with the aircraft carrier *USS Natoma Bay*. He found Jack Larson, his son's friend in his past life. After much research and talking to a lot of World War II veterans, he was able to find out who the person was that James had memories of being. His name was James Huston Jr. He died as James Leininger described.

When James was about three he began to draw many pictures of his plane crashing in horrifying situations, on fire and with bombs all around. He would always sign them "James 3". When his parents asked why, he would say: "Because I'm the third James." His dad was shocked when he found out the pilot was named James Huston Jr., as the "Jr." implied that the current James was the third one. They also met the older sister of James Huston Jr., who was 84 at the time. She connected very well



photo: Tatiana Deubek

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with little James. And he was able to tell her a lot of details about their childhood that she said he couldn't possibly have known. She became convinced that James was, indeed, who he said he was.

It's one of the strongest cases we have on record of a small child with specific [past life] memories. All of these memories were documented by his father *before* they were able to determine who James was in a past life, which is an important element.

Consciousness outside the body

SI: What happens when someone experiences consciousness outside of their body?

LK: There are two facets of these experiences. There are veridical out-of-the-body experiences and near-death experiences. As a journalist the out-of-body experiences are more important as evidence. The important ones involve people leaving their body when they have no brain activity, such as being in cardiac arrest, have no heartbeat and are essentially clinically dead. When they come back, they are able to report spe-

cific things they've seen or heard in the physical environment when they say they were out of their bodies.

They often describe themselves as being near the ceiling. They can accurately describe what the doctors were saying, the tools they were using, sounds from the machines and things like that. And this was at a time when they weren't supposed to be able to perceive anything at all, with their bodies lying on a table, their eyes closed. Those cases are important because the doctors and nurses can verify the accuracy of what the person said. Therefore, it has to be explained how they could have perceived these things. The suggestion is that their consciousness was, indeed, operating independently of their body while they were clinically dead.

The near-death experiences involve people who, once they left their body under similar circumstances, journey to another, sublime dimensional reality, which they come back and describe. It often involves going down a tunnel, seeing some kind of a mythical Being, and speaking with dead relatives and friends. It's described as being a heightened reality. They often say it seemed more real than real life did – a vivid, beautiful, ecstatic experience. They usually don't want to come back, but are often told they have to.

These experiences happen to people from different cultures and backgrounds all over the world. Many studies have been done, but no one is able to explain how they happen. Plenty of skeptics believe something is going on in the brain. However, the people who study them don't have any model that can explain all the facets of the experience.

They are also life-changing for the experiencers. After they have been in this other realm that they believe to be the after-life and come back, they are no longer afraid of death. Often they make drastic changes in their life, become more focused on being of service to others, and more spiritually oriented. It often has a profound effect on people.

SI: When children have past life memories, do they ever remember the time spent between their past and current life? And are they similar to the experiences of people who have undergone near-death experiences?

LK: I have a chapter called "Intermission Memories" in my book. There have been

studies done on these children who will talk about where they were before they were born into this life. The children with the most memories and the most vivid memories of their previous life tend to be the ones who are more likely to remember the time between lives. But the 'intermission memories' are much harder to verify, because they are talking about some other dimension that they lived in. Sometimes what they are describing within that reality has similar characteristics to what people having near-death experiences describe.

So you can argue they were both perhaps entering the same inter-dimensional realm, the other side, whatever you want to call it. Both James Leininger and Ryan Hammons [the other case of reincarnational memory explored in the book] had memories of times before they were born. They later accurately described to their parents a specific event involving their parents they witnessed from that realm before they were born. Both events did happen close to the time of their conception. Those cases are not as common as the other cases, but very fascinating. Dr Jim Tucker, a child psychiatrist at the University of Virginia, and probably the world's expert on reincarnation memories in children, has done some studies on intermission memories, which are really interesting.

The role of science

SI: How does psychology address the issue of reincarnation and consciousness beyond death?

LK: It's very unusual, unfortunately. Dr Tucker inherited the work of Dr Ian Stevenson [a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia], who was a pioneer in investigating the cases of children with past life memories. Stevenson spent many decades traveling all over the world and publishing thousands of pages of research in books and papers. Jim Tucker worked with him toward the end of Stevenson's life. And when Stevenson died about 10 years ago, Dr Tucker took over his work. That is unusual. I don't think there are a lot of psychiatrists, certainly in America, who deal with this topic. There are some psychologists who have taken an interest and written about it, but they are in the minority. You wonder how many times children go to a psychiatrist with strange memories, but they are not recognized as being memories of past lives because our culture does not accept it.

We are lucky to have Jim Tucker, who is a child psychiatrist by training. He's able to interact with children well, understand the dynamics of what is going on with the child, and discern what is really happening when they talk about these experiences. I wish more psychiatrists would get interested in this topic. It would benefit all of us.

SI: In your opinion, how would a scientific acceptance of life after death, including reincarnation, affect how we perceive our lives and relationships with one another?

LK: There are cultures where it is universally accepted – India, for instance, and Burma, which is a Buddhist country. But in those countries the belief system is basically religious, not scientific. The problem is that I don't think something like this can be proven to be true, at least with the tools we have now. Though even if more scientists just took it seriously, worked with the information, experimented with it and stopped dismissing it as being impossible, we would all benefit. Even if it just reminded us how little we know about the physical world, how much mystery exists and how much we still need to discover. It would open our eyes to the questions that promote wonder for us and encourage us to probe more deeply into the nature of who we are.

We would realize we have a bigger responsibility in life than if we were simply physical, robotic, brain-dominated creatures and all life ended when we die. It would certainly give a lot more meaning to people's lives and make them feel more connected to each other and realms of experience that are not just the physical day-to-day experiences. That can only have a positive effect. It certainly has on me. I was a skeptic when I began my exploration of all of this. It's had a wonderful effect on me in terms of opening me up to a greater sense of purpose and connection to the world, people around me, and the mystery of things.

If it were ever proven that we survive death, people would have a broader sense of purpose and not harming others because if you are going to move on to another reality after you die, you will have to come to terms with the life you led. Perhaps it would create a more peaceful world and prevent cultures and religions from fighting with each other over their belief systems that are, on the surface, different. It might make for a more peaceful world.

More information: survivingdeathkean.com •