

BOOK REVIEW

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Other Lives, Other Selves: A Jungian Psychotherapist Discovers Past Lives, by **Roger J. Woolger**. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1987, xx + 386 pp, \$18.95.

If you think studying near-death experiences is looked at askance by orthodoxy, you should try doing past life therapy for a while. Then you can return to the relatively sober, grounded, and mundane world of near-death experiences (NDEs). Well, perhaps I exaggerate just a bit. Whatever the relative levels of scientific acceptance, there are several parallels between NDEs and past life regressions.

First is that each is a subjective occurrence, and personal acceptance most often comes from the self-evident nature of the experience, not from external corroboration of angels or historical facts. Second, major life changes often result from NDEs and from recall of past life memories in therapy. Third, in past life therapy some people report a death experience, with many characteristics similar to near-death experiences.

Roger Woolger is a Jungian analyst who was originally skeptical about past life memories. He even wrote a critical and disbelieving review of Arthur Guirdham's *The Cathars and Reincarnation* (Woolger, 1970), a classic account of a patient who experienced memories of an earlier life. A few years later, at the invitation of a colleague, he tried (still skeptical) a technique for regressing to a past life. "Imagine

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 he says, to find himself, "not only in southern France, but in the thick of the Albigensian crusade!" Ironically, this is the same period Guirdham's patient remembered. He recalled memories of massacres and funeral pyres that he felt finally accounted for dreams and images of violence, torture, and killing, and an unaccountable fear of fire he had all his life. The story of this past life French mercenary explained many reactions and traits that had been untouched by his personal analysis.

Woolger continued to explore past life recall, first with colleagues, then in his practice of psychotherapy. This book reports the technique, illustrates with many cases, discusses traditional beliefs in reincarnations, and gives Woolger's own transpersonal model in which past lives, archetypes, and perinatal experiences take their place with biographical, existential, and somatic forces as influences on the psyche. He observes that emotionally significant events from past and present lives are often built around archetypes or themes, similar to Carl Jung's idea of a complex, or Stanislav Grof's COEX (condensed experience) systems.

Woolger acknowledges that the lives that are recalled can rarely be validated. Some or all may indeed be memories of a person's previous life, a classical reincarnation interpretation which would be perfectly acceptable in some cultures or times. They might be drawn for therapeutic purposes from the storehouse of collective consciousness. They may be fantasy. Woolger observes that they are similar to deeply submerged secondary personalities, but they are manifested in the garb of another time, with a complete history from birth to death, and often dynamically relevant to the person's present life. Whatever the origin, they present themselves as past lives. Woolger says that he tells patients they do not have to believe in reincarnation, only in the healing power of the unconscious. He views the psyche as capable, given the opportunity, of producing a story or experience that will be healing. However, he appears to take past life memories at face value, at least for the purposes of therapy.

A major portion of the book consists of cases illustrating past life experiences in relation to current problems. A person with a pain in the left eye recalls being struck by an enemy arrow on a battlefield. A man with a history of impotence remembers a life as a court jester who felt feelings of shame and guilt as he witnessed sexual atrocities of the nobles. A woman with a history of abdominal surgery remembers a past life in which she was raped by her father, then later kicked in the belly when she was pregnant.

Woolger says that these past lives are like unfinished dramas of the

soul. Traumatic events and reactions are continued into present lives, and are re-enacted in various ways; somatically, symbolically, with illness, emotional charge, conflicts, and other symptoms and responses. Often the character from the past life can be recognized as a facet of the personality, the "other self" of the book's title. When Woolger's clients recall the experience, the repression is lifted, emotions are expressed, and the experience can be completed. Not only is the symptom understood, but it often dissolves.

Past life therapists recognize the importance of taking clients through to the end of a remembered life, and Woolger says his cases include thousands of past life deaths. The moment of death for most is experienced as a great release. About 95 percent report floating above the body and on up to a realm of peace. Often there is a spontaneous life review, or Woolger may encourage the person to evaluate his or her life. Some persons, about 2.5%, float down into the earth or into vortexes or dark places. About 80 percent of those who float up or down recall another past life or incarnation quickly, going from one drama to another.

Another 2.5% spontaneously encounter spirit figures or discarnate spiritual beings. There are friends and family, children and parents. Occasionally a teacher or guru appears, and rarely there may be an old adversary. The spiritual figures may come in a group (a "karmic committee") or singly. Woolger feels that the spiritual visions are rare because they are part of a stage of integration that occurs when several painful lifetimes have been worked through. They are graces, not to be deliberately sought.

Woolger is aware that these experiences resemble NDEs. He says that his cases have not included the experience of moving through a tunnel. Nevertheless, he is persuaded that both the regression deaths and NDEs are "archetypal or universal experiences of death and transition that are recorded in the collective unconscious of the individual" (p. 297).

Woolger does not give many details of death and after death experiences, but it would seem that they are not so intense as NDEs reported by the living. In any event, he focuses more on the emotional catharsis of past life events than the death, bardo, and rebirth transitions. Parenthetically, another recent book narrating the case of a patient who remembered a series of past lives that helped to resolve crippling symptoms and fears, *Many Lives, Many Masters*, by psychiatrist Brian L. Weiss (1988), reports that death in the woman's past life regressions was an easy floating up from the body, thence to another life or to remain for a time in the presence of guides or masters.

Woolger presents his work in *Other Lives, Other Selves* as a therapeutic technique, not as reincarnation research. How effective is it? The cases in the book show phobias relieved, somatic ailments healed, emotional patterns changed, faulty relationships mended, puzzling reactions understood, and other symptoms relieved as a result of remembering and re-experiencing traumatic relevant past life memories. Some of the individuals discussed were private clients of the author or other therapists and worked with the memories in further therapy. It is not clear how those not in therapy integrated the past life regressions. The book does not report on long term results from the therapy for most of the cases.

Are these really memories of historical past lives and death experiences of the individual? Certainly many of the stories are plausible. However, their validity could only be established by getting specific details that can be checked against historical facts, and by eliminating other interpretations. This level of detail is clearly irrelevant to the purpose of therapy, and would probably even obstruct it.

The methodology for establishing that a memory is probably from a past life is a technically demanding one, best exemplified by the contemporary work of Ian Stevenson, who has documented his investigation of several dozen cases of individuals, mostly children, who appear to remember a past life. The memories Stevenson and others have studied are pieces of information about the remembered life, rather than the emotional experiences that erupt in past life therapy. Stevenson cautiously says the data are suggestive, an understatement in my opinion. One of his findings, of relevance for this book, is that experiences in the previous life can sometimes influence attitudes, reactions, and even physical birthmarks in the present life, though his cases are usually not so dramatic as those of Woolger. On the other hand, there are studies in the literature of many apparent previous incarnation memories that show inconsistencies, contradictory historical data, or that document that the memory has been fabricated out of conscious or unconscious knowledge of the person. Many therapy cases fall into this category.

An ethical question in regard to this approach might be phrased thus: is it ethical to allow the individual to believe that he or she is experiencing a past life as a part of therapy, when it is at least not proved, and may be indeed a total fantasy? Woolger says there are many interpretations of the origin of the events, but he and other past life therapists I know behave as if these are valid memories. Should not therapists be champions of truth?

Of course this is a more general issue. Ordinary therapists rarely try

to document traumatic childhood memories recovered by their clients. If the memories relate to symptoms, they are accepted and worked with therapeutically. Yet, they may be just as uncertain historically as a past life regression. The dilemma about truth also arises with placebos in medicine. These are triggers for physical and mental healing processes, but they are often discounted as false medicine, or not really treatment.

But why should not the psyche be allowed to produce whatever will heal itself? If Freudian patients dream Freudian dreams, and Jungian patients dream Jungian dreams, is it any surprise that Woolgerian patients dream past life dreams? If a person is phobic about water or men or women or violence, or is emotionally crippled, and is miserable, is it not a service for him or her to be freed of the phobia, or something more devastating, even with the side effect of believing in a past life event? Jungian analyst James Hillman has observed that we have many fictions in our psychologies that are nevertheless healing because we believe them. In discussing this, my wife Sandy suggested that perhaps the idea of a past life is an archetype that we fill in with appropriate content. And what if some of these memories are really of past lives, even though we do not have proof of it in the therapeutic situation?

The critical therapeutic factor seems to be the absorption in the experience. The state in which cognitive belief occurs is put aside as the person engages in the emotional drama, just as the Greeks were caught up in the tragedy of Oedipus, just as people shed tears in a touching movie, or patients emotionally relive a childhood experience in imagination. Perhaps afterwards there are some who wonder whether or not they made up the reincarnation experience. Hopefully, whatever gain they achieve is not offset by their objective appraisal.

Of course, the same issues arise with NDEs. Some critics and researchers view them as fantasies generated by the brain to ease a crisis reaction. If so, they nevertheless have profound therapeutic and developmental effects on the individual. One may put aside the ontological questions of reality, and simply trust the experience as a spontaneous, transcendent, crisis experience, to be used in psychological and existential growth. Some have considered re-evoking the experience through hypnosis like a past life memory or creating an NDE for therapeutic purposes through guided imagery.

On the other side are the questions about the origins of the experience and various models of brain and mind, patterns and stages of the experience, and implications for reality. As with past life memories, the straightforward acceptance of the near-death journey as valid is

the most far-reaching and challenging interpretation. It seems to me that near-death research has been focused more on this theoretical interest, in contrast to past life therapy, which is more clinically oriented. Some researchers, like Woolger, are beginning to compare past life accounts of death to descriptions of NDEs. Such investigations may bring new perspectives and data that will enrich understanding in both fields.

This book is worth reading for the vivid portrayal of Woolger's approach to therapy and the challenges that it presents. The model of the psyche developed by Woolger is much broader than just past lives. The consideration of reincarnation memories opens the possibilities that the self draws from many sources, and that the psyche contains the seeds of healing if we but know how to nourish them.

References

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