

# Dreams and Past-Life Memory

Episodic memories of the present life are known to appear in about 1-2% of nocturnal dreams, so it should not be surprising that apparent past-life memories surface occasionally in the dreams of both children and adults. Although occasionally the dreams alone convey enough information for the previous life to be identified, generally they do not. When cases are solved, it often becomes clear that the dreams include distortions of various kinds.

## Past-Life Dreams in Childhood

### Overview

Dreams with content apparently related to previous lives are widely reported to occur to young children, many of whom also talk about past-life memories arising in the waking state.<sup>[1]</sup> These dreams often are recurrent, and they are described as being especially realistic, unlike ordinary dreams. They become fixed in memory and do not fade upon waking, as ordinary dreams tend to do. Sometimes the dreams diminish in frequency as children age, and they may cease coming altogether.<sup>[2]</sup>

Not uncommonly, children's past-life dreams commemorate deaths and manifest as nightmares. They may begin as night terrors and progress to nightmares over time. [James Leininger](#) was troubled by nightmares of not being able to get out of a fighter plane shot down south of Japan during World War II, and later recalled enough details of the previous life for his parents to identify the person he had been.<sup>[3]</sup> Not all cases suggestive of reincarnation can be 'solved', however. This is especially true of those that consist largely or entirely of dreams. [Antonia Mills](#) investigated three cases of American and Canadian children with nightmares of events seemingly recalled from earlier lives, but was unable to trace the previous persons depicted in any of them.<sup>[4]</sup>

### The Case of Mary Magruder

The dream of Mary Magruder, a girl from the American Midwest, is in many ways typical of past-life dreams, but it is atypical in being partially verified. From early childhood, Mary had a nightmare about a young girl with curly brown hair, chased by Indians during a raid on a pioneer settlement. Sometimes the dream ended before she was caught, but at other times it continued until she was seized by the hair. At this point, Mary would awake, screaming. She would tell her mother, 'Mother, they are taking my curls!', although she as Mary had straight hair.

Mary felt that this was a memory from an earlier life, but she had no other recollections that might have helped her to locate it in space and time. Then, in adulthood, she visited the place in western Virginia where her ancestors had lived two centuries before. She learned that part of the old family property was called Burnt Cabin, due to its having been destroyed in an Indian raid. [Ian Stevenson](#) travelled there and found a highway plaque that stated that the last Indian raid in the area was in 1764. He spoke to one of Mary's distant cousins, who told him that in family tradition, the raid on Burnt Cabin had occurred around 1745-50. Stevenson was unable to get more information about the family who had lived there, so although Mary's dream plausibly depicted an actual event, it was impossible to relate it to any specific deceased person.<sup>[5]</sup>

### The Case of Christina

Dutch researcher [Titus Rivas](#) studied the case of a three-year-old girl he called Christina who was afraid to go up to the attic of her house. She did not know why she felt this fear, but it was a strong

one. Then one morning she told her mother about a nightmare she had had. She was in a big white house in another town. Somehow she knew she was about eleven years old, with a mother and father, and brothers and sisters. It was Easter. Her brothers and sisters were quarreling, so their parents sent them all to their rooms. Her younger brother began playing with matches and set his mattress alight, which caused the house to catch fire. She ran to the balcony of her room and saw her mother and a fireman, who shouted at her to jump. One or two of her sisters did, but she was too scared to follow them. She was overcome by smoke and saw a lady dressed in white who told her that she had died and escorted her through the burning house. The lady showed her several possible mothers and told her to pick one of them for her next life. She chose a woman with blonde hair who was typing in an office.

Christina talked about this dream again and again over the years, but she had no additional memories. Unfortunately, she died in an auto accident the year before Rivas learned about her case, but he interviewed her mother and others with knowledge of it. Christina's mother was dark-haired, not blonde, when Rivas met her, but she recalled hearing of a fire in the neighboring town of Arnhem that could have been the one of Christina's dream. In researching the fire in Arnhem, Rivas discovered that it had occurred on Easter 1973, six years before Christina's birth. One of the children who perished in the fire was a nine-year-old girl named Hendrika, who had died from smoke inhalation. Moreover, Rivas learned, in 1973 Christina's mother had had an office job for which she dyed her hair blonde. At the time, he was unable to find members of Hendrika's family to further confirm events, but he later met one of Hendrika's brothers, who corroborated Christina's dream memories in full.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Past-Life Dreams in Adulthood**

### **Overview**

The past-life dreams of adults closely resemble those of children, although it seems that adults may more often have series of dreams about a given life and these dreams often involve more than nightmares of deaths. Adults' dreams may differ from children's in other respects, or it could be that children simply do not report these features. Frederick Lenz collected nineteen past-life dream accounts, the majority from adults. His respondents reported that their dreams were accompanied by sensations (like smells) that did not appear in their regular dreams, that during the dreams they believed them to be about previous lives, and that afterwards they felt changed by the dreams.<sup>[7]</sup> Sometimes elements of adults' dreams are shown to be correct depictions of events from the past, but only rarely do they allow for identification of the previous person.<sup>[8]</sup> With adults, as with children, cases that can be 'solved' on the basis of dreams alone are rare.

### **The Case of John East**

John East is the pen name of a British man who had three dreams about experiences in England and Burma, the first two on consecutive nights 23 years before the third. In the first dream, he saw a young man come up a companionway to the deck of a ship with the feeling of having been sick and emerging from a long confinement. He was clad in military dress that he was later able to identify with the First Burma War of 1824–26. This scene was succeeded by others in which the man appeared to be an officer in settings appropriate to the British during the First Burma War. On the following night, East dreamed that finally his regiment received the call to return home they had been waiting for. The man showed his excitement at the news, whereupon he was stabbed to death by a Burmese woman with whom he had been romantically involved. This was followed by a scene in which the man was riding toward an English country house in which lived his fiancée, who he was going to tell of his imminent departure for Burma. In the third dream, he was in this house, which

had some distinctive architectural features.<sup>[9]</sup>

East recorded each of these dreams in writing immediately upon waking and set about confirming the imagery in them. He discovered that the details of the earlier dreams were consistent with having been a British officer during the First Burma War. He was able to identify the house in his second and third dreams and to learn about the family who owned it at that time. There were three daughters, one of whom was the right age to have been the man's fiancée, albeit a little young to have married in 1824. East speculated that the man had bought a commission to pass the time, then returned and married her after surviving the knife attack.<sup>[10]</sup> Karl Müller accepted this interpretation,<sup>[11]</sup> but Stevenson, who made an independent investigation, believed that the man would have been killed had he been struck as represented in the dream. He discovered that there were no records of British officers killed by a Burmese mistress and therefore held that East's identification of the man was suspect, despite the dreams overall veridicality.<sup>[12]</sup>

## **The Case of Angela Grubbs**

Angela Grubbs is an American lawyer residing in Atlanta, Georgia. As a young child, she loved old cars and was obsessed with finding one with a rumble seat. When she was five, at an auto show, she recognized a 1918 Cadillac Roadster with a rumble seat. The owner allowed her to sit in it, which she did, then excitedly told her mother, 'This is where you ride when you get married!' Starting at age seven, she had a recurring dream of a young woman walking down the corridor of an opulent hotel, arm-in-arm with her new husband. The woman was ecstatically happy, but then a fire alarm sounded and during the evacuation she was separated from her husband, feeling very concerned about something left behind in the closet of their room. Between the ages of 28 and 31, Angela had an intense series of dreams and visions of the same young woman. In one of these, she entered a church by a front side door. She took a few steps forward and could see light pouring in at the other end of the foyer through an open door. The light was streaming through a tall, narrow stained glass window with a diamond pattern. Then, in a hypnagogic reverie, she asked for her name and heard 'Francine Donovan'. She also received the name of her husband, Klair, and their daughter, Greta.

The names were what Angela needed to begin tracing the young woman of her dreams. In an online search, she found a genealogical record for a Francine Donovan, born 31 January 1895 in Lexington, Kentucky, who had married Augustine Klair Weitzel at St. Paul's Church in Lexington on 22 April 1919. She had two children, including a daughter named Margaret. She had died at age 28 on 23 February 1923, 52 years before Angela's birth. Subsequently Angela drove to Lexington with a friend. They went to St. Paul's Church in that city, which had the general appearance that Angela had dreamed about, although the foyer was different and the stained glass window was not to be seen. She was fortunate to meet a woman from the church's historic preservation committee, however. This woman took her up to the choir loft and showed her to a room from which she could see the now-covered window she had recalled. The hotel in which Francine spent her honeymoon turned out to be owned by her husband's family. Angela was able to confirm many other things from her dreams by consulting records in the court house and other places in Lexington.<sup>[13]</sup>

## **Distortions in Past-Life Dreams**

### **Overview**

The dreams of Christina and Angela Grubbs are noteworthy not only because they permitted the identification of the previous person, but because they contained no significant distortions. John East's dreams might be considered solved, if they included a distorted memory of having been stabbed to death in Burma. Dreams associated with solved reincarnation cases very often include demonstrable distortions, suggesting that it would be unwise to take past-life dreams at face value

unless their details can be substantiated. In one of his books, Stevenson wrote about Som Pit Honcharoen, a Thai man who recalled having been stabbed to death at a festival by a woman to whom he had made unwelcome sexual advances. As a young child, Som Pit described what happened accurately in his waking state, but between the ages of ten and 28, he had a recurring dream in which he came close to being stabbed at a festival by a man.<sup>[14]</sup>

Paul Von Ward described a recurring dream of a car falling from a cliff into the sea. A psychic gave information that led to solving the case, and it turned out that the previous person had died not when his car had gone over a cliff, but when the aircraft in which he was flying had crashed into the sea.<sup>[15]</sup> James Kent dreamed he was with a wounded Confederate general when they were captured by Union troops during the American Civil War. Kent was able to identify the general and confirm his injury with documents from the American National Archives, but could find no record of the general ever having been taken prisoner.<sup>[16]</sup> The following cases provide additional examples of distorted past-life events in dreams.

### **The Case of Arif Hamed**

Stevenson studied the case of a Lebanese boy named Arif Hamed who recalled a previous life in which a large building stone fell off a balcony. He had been sitting under the balcony and died instantly when the stone hit his head. Arif had recurring dreams of goats walking over piles of building stones after the accident, overturning some of them. Stevenson was able to verify some of Arif's memories of the previous life, which had passed in the same region of Lebanon, but not that there were goats in the vicinity of the house at the time the building stones fell. Goats are commonly kept in rural Lebanon, however, and Stevenson concluded that the memory of goats was incorporated by Arif into his recurring dreams of the previous person's death.<sup>[17]</sup>

### **The Case of María Morales López**

María Morales López, a Guatemalan woman, experienced a pain in the back of her left flank whenever someone came near her with a knife. She found this strange, but was unaware until middle adulthood that she had a diamond-shaped birthmark in the place she experienced the phantom pain. Subsequently she learned that her great-uncle had been ambushed and fatally stabbed with a machete in the highlands of her native country, but before she found this out, she had a dream about being stabbed with a machete in a bar.<sup>[18]</sup>

## **Conclusion: Past-Life Memories in Dreams**

Mainstream memory researchers call cohesive memories of events 'episodic memories'. Episodic memories are autobiographical memories but not all autobiographical memories are developed enough to be considered episodic; generally they are more partial or disjointed. Many present-life dreams include elements of memories from waking life, or are influenced in some way by waking activities, but according to one study, true episodic memories appear in no more than 1% to 2% of dream reports.<sup>[19]</sup> A later study supported this conclusion, but went further. 'Dreams frequently contained memory sources with low to moderate levels of episodic richness, indicating that memories for personal experiences do appear in dreams, albeit fragmentarily. We suggest that these memories may be conceived of as autobiographical memories [but not episodic memories]. Rather than replaying experiences intact, [most] dreams constitute autobiographical memory constructions'.<sup>[20]</sup>

This is a useful model for understanding past-life memories in dreams, suggests reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#),<sup>[21]</sup> who has drawn attention to the manifold ways past-life memory resembles present-life memory: Past-life memories that surface in waking life are often cued by

things seen or heard; some are 'flashbulb memories', brief yet durable recollections of events; many show a 'recency effect', clustering around the last days or months of the previous life; a few refer to significant things from the middle years of life, demonstrating a 'reminiscence bump'. Past-life memories may also include errors and confusions, just as present-life memories do.<sup>[22]</sup> Given the strong similarities between present- and past-life memory in the waking state, it is no surprise to find similarities in the presentation of remembered events in dreams as well. Fully authenticated episodic memories of previous lives in dreams are rare, but fragmentary memories may appear, and there frequently are fantasy intrusions and other sorts of distortions.

James G Matlock

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## References

### Footnotes

- 1.^ For reviews of research on reincarnation cases, see Stevenson (2001) and Matlock (2019).
- 2.^ Stevenson (2001), 49.
- 3.^ Leininger & Leininger, with Gross (2009); Tucker (2016).
- 4.^ Mills (1994).
- 5.^ Stevenson (2001), 50-51.
- 6.^ Rivas (2004), 18; Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 101. See also [here](#).
- 7.^ Lenz (1979), 34.
- 8.^ For accounts of adult dreams with past-life content, see Muller (1970), Lenz (1979), and Stevenson (2003).
- 9.^ East (1960), 146-52. See East's account for many additional details about his dreams.
- 10.^ East (1960), 152-55.
- 11.^ Muller (1970), 93-94.
- 12.^ Stevenson (2003), 195-97.
- 13.^ Grubbs (2006). Grubb's dreams and visions were greatly more complex than indicated in the summary here.
- 14.^ Stevenson (1997), 210.
- 15.^ Von Ward (2008), 27-28.
- 16.^ Kent (2003).
- 17.^ Stevenson (2001), 51.
- 18.^ Matlock (2019), 157, 210. María Morales López is a pseudonym.
- 19.^ Fosse, Fosse, Hobson, & Stickgold (2003).
- 20.^ Malinowski & Horton (2014).
- 21.^ Matlock (2016).
- 22.^ Matlock (2019), 123-36.