

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. Children's past-life dreams frequently take the form of nightmares and may be only one aspect of a reincarnation case. The past-life dreams of adults by contrast may be the most prominent feature of a case. 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.

Dreams and Memory

Mainstream memory researchers call cohesive memories of events 'episodic memories'. Dreams may include elements of autobiographical memories from one's present life, or be influenced in some way by one's waking activities, but according to one study, true episodic memories of the present life appear in no more than one to two percent of dream reports.¹ 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 as episodic memories]. Rather than replaying experiences intact, [most] dreams constitute autobiographical memory constructions'.²

Given that memories of present-life experiences may be incorporated in dreams, it should not be surprising that memories of past lives sometimes appear in dreams as well. In a cross-cultural survey of exotic dreams, past-life dreams were found to account for about 0.9% of dream reports,³ but it is not clear whether only episodic memories were included in them.

Past-life dreams are described as especially realistic, unlike ordinary dreams. They become fixed in memory and do not fade upon waking, as ordinary dreams tend to do.⁴ Sometimes the dreams are detailed enough to allow for a case to be 'solved', that is, for the memories to be verified and the previous life identified, but generally they are not.

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.⁵ The dreams often are recurrent, diminishing in frequency as children age until eventually they cease coming altogether.⁶

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 locate it in space and time. Then, in adulthood, she visited the place in western Virginia where her ancestors had lived two centuries earlier. 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 in the cabin, so although Mary's dream plausibly depicted an actual event, it was impossible to relate it to any specific deceased person.⁷

Christina K

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 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 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 automobile 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.[8](#)

Past-Life Dreams in Adulthood

Overview

The past-life dreams of adults closely resemble those of children, although it seems that adults more often have series of dreams about a given life and these dreams 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.[9](#) 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.[10](#) With adults, as with children, cases that can be 'solved' on the basis of dreams alone are rare. The only solved adult dream cases besides Angela Grubbs (see below) is that of Udo Wiczorek [11](#)

John East

John East is the nom de plume 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.[12](#)

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.[13](#) Karl Müller accepted this interpretation,[14](#) 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.[15](#)

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 and she 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 wardrobe 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 side front door. She took a few steps forward and could see light pouring in at the other end of the foyer through an open inner 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. Francine 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.[16](#)

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.[17](#)

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 aeroplane in which he was flying had crashed into the sea.[18](#) 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.[19](#) The following cases provide additional examples of distorted past-life events in dreams.

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.[20](#)

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.[21](#)

Nightmares and Past-Life Trauma

Overview

The prevalence of episodic memories appears to be especially high in 'replicative' post-traumatic nightmares, a common feature of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.[22](#)

Not uncommonly, children's past-life dreams commemorate deaths and manifest as night terrors or nightmares. Some nightmares are preceded by night terrors,

although it is often not clear that they relate to the same events. Most night terrors do not occur during REM sleep and are not recalled on waking.

[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.²³ Mary Magruder and Christina K had nightmares but evidently not in as pronounced a way as some children do. The cases of James Leininger and Scott Perry illustrate more pronounced, recurring nightmares in solved reincarnation cases. These experiences are very similar to replicative post-traumatic nightmares that are reported in connection to PTSD arising from present-life experiences, but the precipitating traumatic events are past-life deaths.

James Leininger

From two years of age, [James Leininger](#) had recurrent nightmares during which he kicked his legs upwards and screamed, 'Airplane crash on fire! Little man can't get out!' He would wake up crying. This happened repeatedly, several times a month. Then, when he was three years and four months old, James started talking about the same event in his waking state.²⁴

[He] said 'Mama, the little man's going like this,' and then he kicked his feet up at the ceiling, as if he were upside down in a box, trying to kick his way out. 'Little man's going like this.' And he kicked again. It was the same kind of kick as in his nightmares, but now he was wide awake.²⁵

When asked what happened to his plane, James said it had crashed on fire. Why had it crashed? Because it was shot. What shot it? The Japanese! James said, as if it were obvious. It developed that he was recalling the downing of an American fighter plane by Japanese anti-aircraft fire while attacking ships in the harbor of Chichi Jima in support of the Battle for Iwo Jima, during World War II. Four eyewitnesses said that the plane was hit on the nose, where the engine was situated, and that it was in flames as it descended towards the water. James would have been reenacting the pilot's frantic attempts to kick open the plane's canopy before it struck the water and exploded. He began acting out his memories in his play and art, bashing toy airplanes on a coffee table in the family room of his home and drawing war scenes, particularly of naval battles.

James nightmares continued coming several times a week until his mother wrote to counselor and author Carol Bowman, who advised encouraging him to talk about his memories during the day and reassuring him that what he was recalling had occurred in the past and that he was now safe in his present life. James's mother followed this advice and James's nightmares became much less frequent. Bowman's recommendation is similar to the recommendation for dealing with replicative post-traumatic nightmares whose basis is present-life trauma, which presumes that one reason nightmares recur is that awakening prematurely prevents the psyche from working through the trauma and resolving it.²⁶

Scott Perry

Scott Perry is another American who has suffered from recurrent nightmares, but unlike James Leininger, his were never resolved and the memories of a traumatic death continued to afflict him in his 50s, when his case was studied by [James Matlock](#).²⁷ Scott's dreams began when he was three years old. A year later, he experienced an extended version of this dream, culminating in death by drowning after his family car was struck by a wall of muddy water whilst crossing a bridge. This dream recurred several times a month until Scott was in his twenties. He invariably awoke from the dream clammy and in a cold sweat. The first time he experienced it to its conclusion, he climbed out of his crib and was found on the floor, clinging to a footpost and screaming, 'I died! I died!'

Scott's family could not countenance reincarnation and past-life memory. His mother thought that perhaps he was being possessed by the child's spirit. His step-father was adamantly opposed to the idea and punished Scott both emotionally and physically. As a consequence, Scott kept his dream and his conviction that it represented a memory to himself for many years. This could be a factor in his failure to put it behind him.²⁸ When he was in his twenties, the nightmares began to come less frequently and gradually ceased, but by this time the memory of the tragedy was ingrained in Scott's waking consciousness. Images from the dream, especially its conclusion, continued to come to his mind many times a day and he was aware of the entire sequence replaying constantly in the back of his mind.

From time to time, Scott searched the internet for an account of the tragedy that matched his memories but found nothing until February 2019, when he happened to watch an episode of *Hollywood Graveyard* on YouTube. This mentioned actors who had died in a Los Angeles County flood early on New Year's Day, 1934. Scott began researching this flood and found stories from the *Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers that described five people dying in a car that was hit by a wall of muddy water whilst crossing a bridge. From this, Scott was able to identify the child whose death he seemed to be recalling. Although details of Scott's dream closely matched reality, Matlock points out other elements that seem distorted and more dreamlike, such as a time compression and an emotional tone that looks like a projection of the panicked final seconds back over the memory of the entire experience.

Conclusion: Past-Life Memories in Dreams

Matlock 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.²⁹ Given the strong similarities between present- and past-life memory in the waking state, when we consider that present-life experiences sometimes make their way into dreams, it is no surprise to find past-life memories in dreams. Fully authenticated episodic memories of previous lives are rarer in dreams than in memories that surface in the waking state, however. Fantasy intrusions and other sorts of distortions are more

common in dream reports as well. Nevertheless, it is clear that past-life memories can and do appear in the dreams of both children and adults.

James G Matlock

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Fosse, Fosse, Hobson, & Stickgold (2003).
- [2](#). Malinowski & Horton (2014).
- [3](#). Krippner & Faith (2001).
- [4](#). Rogo (1991), 16-19.
- [5](#). For reviews of research on reincarnation cases, see Stevenson (2001) and Matlock (2019).
- [6](#). Stevenson (2001), 49.
- [7](#). Stevenson (2001), 50-51.
- [8](#). Rivas (2004), 18; Rawat & Rivas (2021), 88-91. See also [here](#).
- [9](#). Lenz (1979), 34.
- [10](#). For accounts of adult dreams with past-life content, see Holzer (1976), Muller (1970), Lenz (1979), Rogo (1991), and Stevenson (2003).
- [11](#). Hassler (2018).

- [12.](#) East (1960), 146-52. See East's account for many additional details about his dreams.
- [13.](#) East (1960), 152-55.
- [14.](#) Muller (1970), 93-94.
- [15.](#) Stevenson (2003), 195-97.
- [16.](#) Grubbs (2006), Matlock (in press). Grubb's dreams and visions were greatly more complex than indicated in the summary here.
- [17.](#) Stevenson (1997), 210.
- [18.](#) Von Ward (2008), 27-28.
- [19.](#) Kent (2003).
- [20.](#) Stevenson (2001), 51.
- [21.](#) Matlock (2019), 157, 210. María Morales López is a pseudonym.
- [22.](#) Matlock (in press).
- [23.](#) Mills (1994).
- [24.](#) The James Leininger case was investigated and reported first by his parents in *Soul Survivor* (Leininger & Leininger, with Gross, 2009). For later treatments, see journal papers by Jim Tucker (2016) and James Matlock (2022b).
- [25.](#) Leininger & Leininger, with Gross (2009), 54.
- [26.](#) Matlock (in press). See also Bowman (2010).
- [27.](#) Matlock (2022a).
- [28.](#) This point is made by Matlock (forthcoming).
- [29.](#) Matlock (2019), 123-36.