

# Native American Children with Past-Life Memories

Reincarnation beliefs are widespread in native American cultures. They are particularly strong in the northwestern part of North America, in Alaska and British Columbia. Reincarnation beliefs were recorded by the first settlers and missionaries to have contact with native North American peoples and are likely very ancient. Significantly, the beliefs are associated with the same phenomena with which reincarnation beliefs are associated elsewhere in the world, including children's memories of previous lives.

## Belief in Reincarnation among Native Americans

The belief in some form of rebirth or [reincarnation](#) is widespread among indigenous people throughout the world,<sup>1</sup> so it is not surprising to find it in native American cultures. The most detailed reports come from North America.

The earliest recorded mention of Amerindian reincarnation is in an account from 1612 by William Strachey, concerning the Powhatan of Virginia.<sup>2</sup> Jesuit missionaries with the Huron and other Iroquoian groups recorded reincarnation beliefs among them beginning in the 1630s.<sup>3</sup> For more than a century after that, there are no allusions to Amerindian reincarnation, and then only occasional mentions until the last decades of the eighteenth century, when references become more plentiful.<sup>4</sup> Anthropologist [Antonia Mills](#) speculates that the beliefs were under-reported, partly because early settlers and missionaries did not expect to find them and so did not ask the right questions concerning the postmortem destiny of the soul. Also, Amerindian ideas of survival and reincarnation are complex and varied, making simple characterizations impossible.<sup>5</sup>

Amerindian ideas differ in important respects from the Hindu and Buddhist precepts that many people associate with reincarnation. Amerindian beliefs lack the concept of karma and do not uniformly allow for humans to return as nonhuman animals or for nonhuman animals to return as humans. Several societies posit either transmigration across species lines or human-to-human reincarnation, but not both.<sup>6</sup> Some societies credit neither cross-species transmigration nor human-to-human reincarnation. By contrast, the assumption that nonhuman animals reincarnate in their own species is common, perhaps universal. Mills found the belief that the souls of game animals returned in their own species in all ten of the Amerindian societies she surveyed.<sup>7</sup>

A curious feature of Amerindian beliefs about the soul – shared with animistic belief systems throughout the world – is the idea that part of the spirit can persist in the afterlife while another part reincarnates. For some peoples, the body is associated with more than one type of soul during life and these different souls go their separate ways at death; for other peoples, a unitary soul splinters at death.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to human-to-human rebirth, some Amerindian cultures expect it only for those who die young or those who die violently. Generally, reincarnation is

thought to occur within the society. In groups with unilineal social organizations – where kinship is reckoned through either the mother or the father but not both together – reincarnation follows a similar pattern. In some groups, it is thought possible to decide on one’s next parents before one dies. A few cultures – mostly in the Arctic and the Pacific Northwest – say that more than one soul may possess a single body at the same time or one spirit may divide or replicate postmortem, then reincarnate in multiple bodies simultaneously.<sup>9</sup>

Reincarnation is not embraced with the same intensity throughout the North American continent. In some societies, the belief is left to the individual, whereas in others, it is an element of the common culture. Interestingly, however, wherever they are found, human-to-human reincarnation beliefs are linked to the same set of signs that appear in conjunction with reincarnation beliefs throughout the world. These signs include [dreams and apparitions announcing rebirth](#);<sup>10</sup> [birthmarks and other congenital physical traits](#);<sup>11</sup> [behavioural traits](#); and [past-life memories](#). There may also be [memories of the intermission period](#) between lives.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes shamans or similar practitioners may tell who a baby was before, but often announcing dreams, birthmarks and telltale behaviors are employed to identify a newborn so that he or she may be given the same name as before and stand to inherit property, prerogatives and status enjoyed in the previous life.<sup>13</sup>

The following is a list of North American native children with past-life memories. These cases were studied and reported by Mills and other anthropologists and by [Ian Stevenson](#).

## **North American Native Children with Past-Life Memories**

### **Alan Gamble (Tsimshian)**

Shortly before Alan Gamble’s birth, his father dreamed that his deceased brother would be returning as his child. His brother said in the dream that he would have to go to hospital once more after birth before he was well. This was a reference to the circumstances of his death. Alan’s uncle had accidentally shot himself through the hand with a shotgun for which he was reaching. He had been in a boat at the time and it took ten hours to get him to the nearest hospital. Meanwhile, a tourniquet was applied to his arm, but because it was not loosened to allow blood to flow into the lower arm, by the time he reached the hospital, gangrene had set in, and he was unconscious. His lower arm was amputated but the stump became infected. He died in hospital some days later without having regained awareness.

Alan was born with two birthmarks, one on the palm of his hand, the other on the back of his wrist. These birthmarks corresponded to places the shell had entered and exited his uncle’s hand, as confirmed by a death registry Stevenson inspected. Alan’s arm began to swell below the elbow and spread down to his hand. He was carried to hospital, where he spent a few weeks, then recovered. As a toddler, he recalled the accident and took responsibility for it, which came as a relief to his former brother-in-law and boating partner, who had had to endure years of

uncertainty over his role in the accident. By the time Stevenson investigated the case, however, Alan had forgotten his memories.[14](#)

### **Amy (Beaver)**

Amy was noticed to have a red mark on her left breast at birth, but her parents did not connect this with anyone they knew. She did not speak of past-life memories until age four, when, while riding on a bus, she suddenly said to her mother, 'I sure hate Frank Alta. I never want to see his face again.' Amy had never met this man, who had moved to a different reserve before her birth. On another occasion she told her mother, 'I'd sure like some fish from Fish Lake. It's been a long time since I've had any.' Amy had never eaten fish from Fish Lake in her lifetime. These two statements made her parents think she was the reincarnation of Marie Alta, Frank's late wife. The Altas had often fished at Fish Lake, where they had dried fish. A Beaver 'prophet' (shaman) confirmed that this was so. Marie had died under suspicious circumstances in a house that had caught fire and burned to the ground. Her parents had suspected Frank's involvement, but because they had no proof, had not contacted the authorities about it.[15](#)

### **Bruce Peck (Haida)**

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### **Charles Porter (Tlingit)**

As a child, Charles Porter would talk about having been killed by a spear in a clan fight some decades prior. In so saying, he pointed to his right side, where he had a diamond-shaped birthmark. The birthmark was not visible to him and the first time he did this, he was not aware of it. He also named his killer, who at that time was an elderly man.[17](#)

### **Corliss Chotkin Jr (Tlingit)**

The case of Corliss Chotkin Jr is one of the most developed Native American reincarnation cases yet recorded. Corliss was recognized as the reincarnation of his mother's uncle, Victor Vincent. Victor had liked Corliss's mother and before his death had told her that he intended to be reborn to her, adding that she would know it was him by birthmarks commemorating his two surgical scars. One of these was at the right side of the base of his nose, the other on his back. Shortly before Corliss's birth, an aunt dreamed that Vincent told her that he would be going to the Chotkins. At birth, Corliss was found to have two prominent birthmarks, matching Victor's surgical scars. The one on his back was especially striking. It consisted of a rectangular patch surrounded by small round points, suggesting stitches. Corliss was aggravated by this birthmark, or the scar it represented. He complained that it itched and continually scratched at it, resulting in its becoming reddened over time.

When he was thirteen months old, and his mother was trying to teach him to say his name, Corliss told her that it was not Corliss, but Kahkody, Victor Vincent's tribal name. When he was two years old, he recognized several people Victor had known when he encountered them on the street. He recalled that once when

Victor's boat motor had given out, he changed into his Salvation Army uniform to attract the attention of a passing ship. On another occasion he identified a room in which Victor used to sleep, although the building had been repurposed and no longer had recognizable bedrooms. Corliss's mother also noted several habits that reminded her of Victor, such as the way he combed his hair. When young, he demonstrated a facility with boat engines, a skill that Victor had developed. Corliss also suffered from a severe stutter, as Victor had, and he was left-handed, like Victor.[18](#)

### **Jeffery (Wet'suwet'en)**

There were no announcing dreams preceding Jeffery's birth, nor were there birthmarks or other signs indicating who he had been in his previous life. An 'Indian doctor' held the infant in his arms and identified him as the reincarnation of Jeffery's mother's brother Will, who had died six years earlier after being kicked in the stomach and head by a horse he was harnessing. An aunt caring for Jeffery awoke one night to see the apparition of Will (her brother) sitting on the bed next to her, from which she realized that Will had returned as Jeffery.

Jeffery gave no sign of remembering Will's life until he was five years old and was taken by his grandparents to the camp where Will had died. He recognized the camp – a logging camp at which trees were felled and prepped to be used as railway ties – and described how they had skidded poles out of the bush. He also identified the area where he and some friends had shot a moose. Jeffery told his grandmother, 'I am not your grandson. I am your son come back to you' and thenceforth went to live with his grandparents, whom he called his parents. He began to dream about Will and continued dreaming about him into adulthood.[19](#)

### **Jimmy Svenson (Tlingit)**

When Jimmy Svenson was about two years old, he began recalling the life of his mother's brother, John Cisco, who had lived in Klukwan, a village one hundred miles away from his own village. John had disappeared from a boating excursion with two women when he was 25. The bodies of the women were found drowned, but John's body was never recovered, perhaps having washed out to sea. Foul play was suspected but could not be proven. Jimmy was born a little more than two years later with four small round birthmarks on his abdomen. These birthmarks had the appearance of entry wounds from gunshots. Jimmy would point to them, saying they were where he had been shot to death, but because John's body had not been recovered, this could not be confirmed. Jimmy said he used to drink wine, which was true of John Cisco, and he spoke frequently and in detail about Klukwan, to which he had never been in his present life.[20](#)

### **Nathan (Gitxsan)**

Nathan recalled having been his great-grandfather, Mark Peters Sr. This man had suffered a serious accident at a logging site, when logs that he was loading on a railway car slipped and he fell, causing a puncture wound to his chest. He was taken to hospital where he recovered, but thereafter had a permanent scar on his chest, where he had been hurt. Mark Peters Sr lived for many more years, eventually dying

in his eighties. Sometime later, his son, Mark Peters Jr, dreamed that his father came to him to say that he would be returning to the family as the child of Mark Jr's daughter, Karen. When Karen gave birth to a boy, whom she named Nathan, it was noticed that he had a birthmark on his chest in the place that Mark Sr had had the scar from the logging accident.

Nathan would point to this birthmark even before he could crawl, much less speak. He pulled up his shirt to display it to Mills when she met him in 2004, when he was four years old. Nathan apparently never spoke about the accident, but he did talk about other memories of Mark Sr's life. He recognized Mark Sr's old fishing boots and when he first saw a helicopter flying overhead, said he had ridden in one, which was correct for Mark Sr. Nathan also revealed his identification with Mark Sr behaviourally. He would point out the best fishing sites on rivers, he knew how to hang fish correctly in the smokehouse and he made sure that his grandmother properly salted the fish they caught. Once after his grandfather's car got a flat tyre he had to change by the side of the road, Nathan made sure he understood what he should do in the event of a bear attack. He was not to run away, but to stand his ground, make his eyes big and jump round like a monkey. If he fell, he was to place his pack behind his head, so the bear would eat the pack rather than his neck.[21](#)

### **Norman Despers (Tlingit)**

Norman Despers said only two things about a previous life, but both matched his grandfather, of whom he was thus assumed to be the reincarnation. When taken to a location on a cove at age three or four, he suddenly proclaimed excitedly, 'I used to have a smokehouse on the straight here and later I was blind'. Norman's grandfather indeed had had a smokehouse there and had been blind for the last four years of his life. Norman himself had poor eyesight and began to wear glasses regularly when he was fourteen.[22](#)

### **Paul (Dene Tha)**

A Dene Tha boy named Paul recalled having been a girl named Denise. Denise fell ill and was taken to hospital, where she died. A year later, the spirit of Paul's mother's deceased sister Rose helped to guide her to Paul's mother, then in labour in the same hospital. Paul's mother saw Rose's and Denise's apparitions enter her hospital room. Denise grabbed Rose from behind and Paul's mother fell unconscious.

Paul's identification with Denise was confirmed by a birthmark on his abdomen, matching one Denise had had in the same place. As he grew up, Paul experienced strong gender identity conflicts. He enjoyed dressing and styling his hair as a girl and using make-up. In Dene Tha culture, those born in bodies of the opposite sex are expected to mature into their biological sex, and although this was delayed in Paul's case, eventually his peers succeeded in giving him a heterosexual initiation and beginning his socialization as a male.[23](#)

### **Rhonda Mead (Gitksan)**

On the eve of Rhonda Mead's birth, her grandmother Margaret flew to Vancouver to be present for it. That night, she had a vivid dream of her mother, Susan Albert. Margaret was surprised to see her and asked her why she was in Vancouver. Susan explained that she wanted to be reborn to Margaret's daughter Cynthia. She told Margaret that she would have blonde hair. Indeed, Rhonda, when born, had blonde hair. On her wrist, she had a birthmark in the shape of an S, Susan's initial, which Susan had had tattooed at the same spot on her wrist. Rhonda never spoke about Susan, although she recognized some of her property, which she claimed as her own. Rhonda was particularly possessive about an easy chair, which she would not allow anyone else to use. She insisted on sitting in it herself, although it was much too large for her. One day, she observed her mother looking through some jewellery and picked out one of Susan's bracelets, which she insisted was hers. Once when someone mentioned the amount 'seven dollars' Rhonda said, 'That's my dog.' Susan had owned a dog, for which she had paid seven dollars, named Seven Dollars.[24](#)

### **Wilfred Meares (Haida)**

Wilfred Meares was identified as the return of his mother's uncle, Victor Smart. Victor was killed in a car crash, thrown from the vehicle at the moment of impact. The back of his head struck the pavement, breaking his neck. He was not driving the car and was not drunk at the time of the accident, although he had been fond of alcohol. During the frequent occasions he and his wife were on a binge, they had his niece, Ruby, take care of their children. This endeared Ruby to Victor and he sometimes told her that he would come back as her child. During her pregnancy, Ruby twice dreamed of Victor. In these dreams, he appeared before her standing and smiling for a moment, then walked away.

Wilfred was born with an open patch on the back of his head. When Ruby first saw him, a green pus oozed from this patch, but it soon healed. As Wilfred grew older, he showed a fondness for alcohol. Even as a toddler, he would stand near people who were drinking until he was given a sip. He did not say much about Victor's life, but on one occasion, when he heard a cousin express her wish to die young like her father, he said, 'Don't say that. I died young too.' Asked how he had died, he said: 'I got killed in a car, but I came back.'[25](#)

### **William George Jr (Tlingit)**

William George Jr was taken to be the reincarnation of a man named William George. Toward the end of his life, William George Sr told his favourite son and daughter-in-law that 'if there is anything to this rebirth business', he would return as their child. He asserted further that they would know him by birthmarks like ones he then bore. These were two prominent moles, each about half an inch in diameter. One was on the top of his left shoulder, the other on the volar surface of his left forearm. Additionally, he gave his son a gold watch he had received from his mother and asked that it be kept for him. 'I'll come back,' he said. 'Keep this watch for me. I am going to be your son. If there is anything like [reincarnation], I'll do it.'

A few weeks after saying this, William George disappeared from his seine fishing boat. Very soon thereafter, his daughter-in-law became pregnant. During her labour, under an anesthetic, she dreamed of William George, and regained

awareness to find she had given birth to a baby boy. The baby had moles on the upper surface of his left shoulder and on the volar surface of his left forearm, exactly where William George Sr had had the moles he had said he would reproduce on his new body, and was named William George Jr. As he matured, his parents observed in him many traits that confirmed this identification. He had many of the same likes and dislikes as his namesake. William George Sr had walked with a limp due to an injury on a basketball court, and William George Jr had a similar gait. He demonstrated a precocious knowledge of boating and seemed to understand how to work seine nets, although he was somewhat fearful of water, more so than other boys his age.

William George Jr expressed his identification with his grandfather in the way he addressed people, using kin terms appropriate to William George Sr. He referred to his great-aunt as 'sister' and his aunts and uncles as his sons and daughters. He demonstrated parental concern with their behaviour. He also showed an uncanny familiarity with places known to William George Sr. William George Jr was four or five when he made one of his most remarkable recognitions. His mother one day decided to go through the items in her jewellery box and laid these out in her bedroom. Wandering into the room while she was doing this, he spotted his grandfather's gold watch. 'That's my watch,' he said. He picked it up, held it tenaciously for a while, and only reluctantly allowed his mother to return it to the jewellery box. Several times thereafter, he asked to see 'his watch', and as he grew older, insisted that it be given to him, although it never was.<sup>26</sup>

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1](#). Compare the *Psi Encyclopedia* article on Signs of Reincarnation in Africa, forthcoming. Cross-cultural studies have found that as many as 60% of tribal societies had some form of rebirth beliefs when contacted by Europeans, with 50% of them affirming human-to-human rebirth, or reincarnation ([Matlock, 1993](#)).
- [2](#). Strachey wrote that the Powhatan believed that after death the soul would 'dissolve and die, and come into a woman's womb againe, and so be a new



borne unto the world' (Wright & Freund, 1953, 100).

- [3.](#) Thwaites (1896-1901), vol. 1, 263; vol. 10, 273, 287; vol. 15, 183; vol. 16, 191.
- [4.](#) See Matlock & Mills (1994) for a trait index of American Indian and Inuit reincarnation beliefs. Matlock and Mills found reports of some sort of rebirth in 130 societies, in all 10 North American culture areas.
- [5.](#) Mills (1994a), 5-7.
- [6.](#) See Matlock & Mills (1994).
- [7.](#) Mills (1982). In each of the ten societies, it was said that treating the animals with respect was important to their rebirth.
- [8.](#) Matlock ([1993](#)).
- [9.](#) Matlock & Mills (1994). For examples of multiple simultaneous reincarnation, see Mills (1988a) and Mills (2010).
- [10.](#) See Goulet (1998) for a description of dreams and apparitions heralding rebirth in one native group.
- [11.](#) See Mills (1994c) for examples of native children with earring birthmarks.
- [12.](#) Matlock ([2017](#)) described Native American intermission memories.
- [13.](#) See Matlock ([1990](#)) for a discussion of signs in relation to identifications and inheritance.
- [14.](#) Stevenson (1997), vol. 1, 382-87.
- [15.](#) Mills (1988b), 29-30.
- [16.](#) Stevenson (1997), vol 2, 1361-66.
- [17.](#) Stevenson (1974), 241-45.
- [18.](#) Stevenson (1974), 259-69.
- [19.](#) Mills (1988a), 393-95, and personal communication from Antonia Mills.
- [20.](#) Stevenson (1974), 225-31.
- [21.](#) Mills (2010), 177-81; Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 183-85.
- [22.](#) Stevenson (1974), 245-48.
- [23.](#) Goulet (1998), 181-86.
- [24.](#) Mills (1988b), 36-39, 43.
- [25.](#) Stevenson (1997), vol. 1, 503-8.
- [26.](#) Stevenson (1974), 231-41.