

Birthmarks and Reincarnation

| Larry Dossey, MD |

After your death you will be what you were before your birth.¹

—Arthur Schopenhauer

Birthmarks are common, occurring in up to 80% of infants.² Many fade with time, while others persist. Parents in Western cultures often refer to them as angel kisses, stork bites, or other cute terms that are intended to diminish the concern of the affected child.

There is widespread gender bias about the origins of birthmarks. In many parts of the world, they are believed to be related to the thoughts and actions of the mother. They are called *voglie* in Italian, *antojos* in Spanish, and *wiham* in Arabic, all of which translate to “wishes,” because of the assumption that birthmarks are caused by unsatisfied wishes of the mother during pregnancy. For example, if a pregnant woman does not satisfy a sudden wish or craving for strawberries, it is said that the infant may bear a strawberry birthmark; if she desires wine and does not satisfy the wish, a port-wine stain birthmark may result; and if the desire for coffee is not satisfied, café au lait spots may result.³ In Dutch, birthmarks are called *moeder-vlekken*, in Danish *modermærke*, and in German *Muttermal* (mother-spots), because it was thought that an infant inherited the marks solely from the mother.² In Iranian folklore, it is said that a birthmark appears when the pregnant mother touches a part of her body during a solar eclipse.² Some beliefs hinge on “maternal impressions”—birthmarks and birth defects appearing when an expectant mother sees something strange or experiences profound emotional shock or fear.³

CHILDREN WHO REMEMBER PREVIOUS LIVES

Birth and death are not two different states, but they are different aspects of the same state. There is as little reason to deplore the one as

there is to be pleased over the other.⁴

—Mahatma Gandhi

The late Ian Stevenson (1918–2007), who was Carlson Professor of Psychiatry and Director of the Division of Personality Studies at the Health Sciences Center, University of Virginia, investigated thousands of children who, about the age of two years, begin making comments suggesting a previous life.⁵ In many of these cases, birthmarks and physical deformities in the child correlated with events in the alleged former life. For instance, malformed fingers corresponded to the amputation of fingers from a sword in a remembered lifetime; a birthmark corresponded to the entry and exit wounds of bullets in the remembered personality; congenital constriction rings in the legs of an individual mirrored being bound by ropes in a previous existence; the congenital absence of the lower leg corresponded to an accidental amputation of the leg in the previous personality; and various birthmarks corresponded to burns, knife wounds, and various other traumas occurring in the life of the remembered individual.

In addition to memories, birth defects, and birthmarks, Stevenson believed specific behaviors might be carried over from life to life. For example, he found that children often experience phobias consistent with the mode of death of the remembered personality. A child remembering a life that ended in drowning might be afraid of being immersed in water. One who recalls a life terminated by a shooting might demonstrate a phobia for guns and loud noises. If death involved an auto accident, the child might be phobic of cars, buses, and trucks. These phobias often begin before the child can speak, and there may be no obvious factor in the family that might explain them.

Phobias also occur. These may take the form of a desire for particular foods not eaten in the subject's family or for clothes that are entirely different from those worn by family members. For example, there might be craving for tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs the previous personality was known to use, although they are tabooed in the current family.

Some subjects show skills they have not been taught or have not witnessed, which the remembered personality was known to possess.

EXPERIMENTAL BIRTHMARKS

If reincarnation is a useful biological idea it is certain that somewhere in the universe it will happen.⁶

—Kary Mullis, Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 1993

Stevenson coined the term “experimental birthmark” to describe a custom found in several countries in Asia. In this practice, the body of a dying or recently deceased person is marked with a substance, most often soot, in the belief that if the individual is reborn the infant's body will bear a birthmark corresponding to the placement of the mark on the deceased—a death mark becoming a birthmark. The mark on the body serves as a kind of bar code confirming identity through time. Stevenson found that this custom was widespread in Asia, particularly in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). In the 1990s, he reported 20 such cases.^{5,7}

Psychiatrist Jim B. Tucker, who now occupies Stevenson's position at the University of Virginia, and psychologist H. H. Jurgen Keil, of the University of Tasmania, have reopened this line of research. In 2013, they reported 18 cases of experimental birthmarks—13 in northeastern Thailand and five in Myanmar.⁸

TWO CASES

I started out really young, when I was four, five, six, writing poems, before I could play an instrument. I was writing about things when I was eight or 10 years old that I hadn't lived long enough to experience. That's why I also believe in reincarnation, that we were put here with ideas to pass around.⁹

—Willie Nelson

Let us take a look at examples from the seminal article on experimental birthmarks by Tucker and Keil.

Five years after her maternal grandfather died at the age of 59 years, Ning (not her real name), a girl, was born with an unusual birthmark in Loei province in Thailand. The birthmark carried special significance in Ning's family. At the time of her grandfather's death, one of his daughters decided to mark his body about two hours after he had expired in order to determine if rebirth occurred. She scraped soot from the bottom of a rice pot with her index finger and made a black mark above the deceased man's right lateral ankle.

The daughter doing the marking, Ning's aunt, made a mental wish that her father would take the mark with him should he be reborn, as a sign he had been reincarnated. Following her father's death, Ning's mother, a sister of the woman who marked the body, dreamed more than 10 times about him shortly after he died. In the first dream, he told her that he wanted to live with her family again.

Ning's birthmark was a flat, hyperpigmented nevus on her outer right lower leg. It was in good agreement with the location of the mark her aunt made on her grandfather's body.

Had the grandfather reincarnated as Ning, or was the correspondence of the marks a coincidence? Gender crossovers at rebirth are considered common in cultures that believe in reincarnation. Sometimes the ostensible reincarnated individual will speak of a former life as the deceased person, but Ning said very little that could be construed as a previous existence. One possible link, however, was that she vigorously opposed her mother's interest in gambling; the grandfather had also criticized his daughter's gambling habit. Another

behavior of interest was that Ning stood while urinating approximately half of the time. Other cases have been reported in which girls who urinate while standing up claim to remember previous lives as males.⁸

Another case reported by Tucker and Keil involves not one but two experimental birthmarks. Mya (not her real name), a girl, was born outside of Yangon, Myanmar, and raised by her maternal aunt and her husband. Her maternal grandmother had died of kidney disease at the age of 68 years, nine years before Mya was born. About two hours after she died, her daughter, Mya's aunt, made two marks on her body with soot—one on the lateral surface of the left leg just proximal to the ankle and the other on the medial surface of the right leg on and distal to the ankle.

Before Mya's mother became pregnant with her, she dreamed three times that her mother said she wanted to come live with her. Mya's mother initially said no, but the grandmother became more insistent and her mother eventually said, "As you wish." She became pregnant one month later. When Mya was born, she had birthmarks corresponding to the two marks made by her aunt on her grandmother's body. She had no other birthmarks, and neither did her two brothers.

At about 18 months of age, she began speaking about a variety of personal idiosyncrasies, habits, and events suggesting her deceased grandmother. Among these was one habit of particular interest to her family. She would eat with one leg hiked up in her chair. She and her grandmother were the only two in the family to do that. This, and a variety of additional memories she could seemingly not have invented, as well as the two birthmarks, convinced the mother and other family members that Mya was the reincarnation of her grandmother.

PROBLEMS WITH CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind, and another woman shall bear me.¹⁰

—Kahlil Gibran

Only 30–50% of birth defects can currently be explained by genetic abnormalities, teratogens such as thalidomide and alcohol, and infections such as rubella.¹¹ This leaves 50–70% in the "cause unknown" category. Moreover, geneticists cannot tell us *why* one fetus and not another is affected, nor why a birth defect takes a particular *form*, nor why a birthmark occurs at a particular *place*. In contrast, reincarnation, if real, provides a reason *why* a particular defect or birthmark occurs in one individual and not another, *where* it occurs on the body, and the *shape* it takes.

Genes, in Stevenson's view, are being asked to explain far more than they are capable of. They provide instructions for the production of proteins, yet they give us almost no knowledge about how proteins and other metabolites become organized into cells and the complex organs that make up our bodies. These limitations are not widely admitted. As Stevenson says, "Some geneticists are not modest in assuring us that they will in due course supply all the information we need to understand embryology and morphology. This amounts to a promissory note with no immediate cash value, and in the meantime we are free to consider the possibility of other contributory factors,"¹² such as reincarnation.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

I died as a mineral and became a plant, I died as a plant and rose to animal, I died as an animal and I was Man. Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?¹³

—Rumi, 13th century Persia

What difference would it make if reincarnation were accepted? The most important consequence, Stevenson believes, would be the recognition of the duality of mind and body. "We cannot imagine reincarnation without the corollary belief that minds are associated with bodies during our familiar life, but are also independent of bodies to the extent of being fully separable from them and surviving the death of their associated body [and at some later time becoming associated with another body]."¹⁴

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