

Why I Believe in Reincarnation

*Unabbreviated version of a presentation given by Hank Stupi at
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*“Never utter these words: ‘I do not know this, therefore it is false.’
One must study to know; know to understand; understand to judge.”
~Apothegm of Narada*

*“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”
~Hamlet*

Reading – Christians and Reincarnation: *Why an Eastern idea appeals to Western believers;* from America: The National Catholic Review; Oct. 21, 2015, by Thomas Ryan (excerpt)

Earlier this year, the NBC evening news presented a story about a boy from the Midwest who claims he is the reincarnation of a man who died more than 50 years ago. The presentation included an interview with Dr. Jim Tucker, associate professor of psychiatry and neurobehavioral sciences at the University of Virginia, who has studied the cases of children, usually between the ages of 2 and 6 years old, who say they remember a past life.

According to data released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009 survey), not only do a quarter of Americans believe in reincarnation, but 24 percent of American Christians expressed a belief in reincarnation. This represents a significant deviation from the traditional Judaeo-Christian narrative with which most Americans in the baby-boomer generation grew up. You were born. You lived. You died. And after a judgment you went to heaven or hell forever.

The word “reincarnation” derives from Latin and literally means “entering the flesh again.” The conviction is that an imperishable principle (soul) exists in every human being and comes back on this earth after death in a new form. The fate of every person in this life and in future lives is determined by the consequences of good or bad actions in the past or present (karma).

To be sure, we’re not dealing with a “nonsense” notion here. Nearly a billion Hindus have for thousands of years held a cyclical view of life. You are born. You live. You die. And because nobody’s perfect, your soul is born again and will continue to be born again until the negative karmic imprints on your soul from bad thoughts, words or deeds have been expunged. Behind the doctrine of reincarnation lies the search for a meaningful moral, just world order.

How did your belief in reincarnation come about?

I grew up in Baltimore City and was raised Catholic. There were 4 Catholic churches within walking distance of my house. I only knew of two other churches... both “Protestant” which is how they were referred to by folks I knew. I grew up thinking that most people in the world were Catholic like myself, all of my relatives, my friends and pretty much everyone I knew. I attended Sunday school and was indoctrinated as a young child into the Catholic faith along with all its accompanying guilt and fear.

I became a “done” not long after going off to college. I remember my world history professor saying that Jesus was likely the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier, most likely a result of rape, which was a common event in Palestine during the Roman occupation. What a heretical statement! Yet it made sense to me. That got me to thinking, a dangerous thing in some religions, and I quickly came to the conclusion that God and religion were a fabrication designed to provide comfort over the fear of dying and of death.

Despite my departure from the church, or because of it, I've had a lot of good fortune in my life... I don't think I gave it much thought until I was diagnosed with Waldenstrom's Macroglobulinemia in 2005. I didn't realize it then, but that cancer diagnosis was a turning point for me. Without realizing what I was doing I started working at becoming more "spiritual". I wouldn't have used that language then, not really understanding at the time that spirituality and religion were not the same.

I had always been a reader, but in 2005 I stopped reading "how to" material and turned my attention inward. I read a lot of Richard Carlson, author of "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff" and began the work of reducing stress in my life. I read M. Scott Peck, author of "The Road Less Traveled" and starting paying attention to the many blessings or "miracles of serendipity" that I realized had long been a part of my life. That forced me to question who or what was behind these miracles. I had more questions than answers to that. And there likely was a shift within me from a rigid atheism to a softer agnosticism.

Then in November 2007 a major life-changing event took place. After an unsuccessful clinical trial resulted in chronic pain and extended use of narcotic pain meds, I had a full-blown psychotic break and was involuntarily committed to a psych ward. Still not in my right mind, but no longer a danger to others, or myself, I was released after 11 days. In this fragile mental state, I again found the God of my childhood and immediately began attending Lower United Methodist Church (LUMC), where my wife, Nancy, had been a member for several years. I attended bible study. Over the next year, as I slowly and completely recovered from my psychotic break, the bible study classes stopped making sense, as did the whole Christian doctrine. I began to feel like a hypocrite whenever I recited the Apostles' Creed in church. I no longer believed any of it, so in March 2009, I left LUMC and discovered UUFR, which soon became my spiritual home.

How serendipitous it was that the very first sermon I heard at UUFR was "Are We 'R' Or Aren't We?" ('R' standing for 'a Religion') by Rev. Preston Moore. My "take home" from that sermon can be summed up by quoting Rev. Moore, "... I think it makes sense to cultivate religion where you are, at the grassroots level. How to do that? There are lots of possibilities, but I want to suggest that the most fruitful place to look is in the spiritual practice known as covenant groups, also called small group ministry. A few decades ago, churches began to realize that the large group experience of Sunday morning worship can't meet all of the spiritual needs of a religious community. There are some kinds of spiritual practice that call for a smaller scale. In a small group, a deeper mutual trust can be cultivated, which provides the foundation for what may be the most powerful spiritual practice of all: self-revelation. Covenant groups are about telling one another how it really is with us, about seeing and accepting others for the truth they are and being seen and accepted by them for the truth we are."

So it came to be that at the beginning of 2010 the UUFR started a Covenant Group program. That later morphed into the Circle of Life, which lasted for several years. Over a period of several months in 2010, sixteen of us divided up into two groups of eight and told one another how it really is with us. One evening in February, 2010 we discussed "What Is My Religion?" Here's what I had to say at that time:

"My beliefs are still evolving. I have great difficulty believing in a supernatural creator. I look more toward science than religion to explain the origin of the universe and life. My Sensing (Myer's Brigg's personality type) keeps me grounded in "seeing is believing" and gives me great difficulty in dreaming and imagining other possibilities. I don't believe in an afterlife. I believe that evil is solely a result of unabashed egoism (self importance) on the part of humans. I personally try to "do the right thing" not because of any religious belief, rather, from a desire to just be a decent person – treating others as I would like to be treated seems to just be the right thing. My strong sense of logic tells me that there is no God, however... when I look back on my life, I can see in so many, many unexplainable ways that I have been blessed by Grace (miracles of serendipity) and regardless of paths I've chosen, things have worked out well for me. I believe that as long as I take responsibility for and put in the hard work of achieving my goals in life, that this Grace, whatever it is and wherever it comes from, will continue to stay in my life (to me it is more of an internal force residing within me

than it is an external force coming from somewhere in the great beyond). For me this Grace is as close to a definition of God as I can relate to at this stage of my life. And even though I am grateful and hopeful that it remains in my life, it doesn't require thanks or prayers – it seems not to require anything from me.”

That same evening Eve Jordan said that she believed in reincarnation and that it helped her make sense of the world. Eve was the very first person I knew who professed a belief in reincarnation. I was respectful of her beliefs but frankly, highly skeptical. I must add that since what is said in Covenant Groups is confidential, I did obtain Eve's permission to share her thoughts on reincarnation here.

At some point in 2010 Fran Schelling suggested that I would probably enjoy watching Oprah Winfrey's Lifeclasses on the OWN channel. I checked it out. The Lifeclasses were pretty much ending at that time, but it was then that Oprah had begun her Super Soul Sunday programming which continues to this day. I've watched just about every show and have been exposed to spiritual teachers and leaders from all over the world. I am a member of UUFR, but I think of Super Soul Sunday as my church also... for me it's where *spiritual exploration* kicks into high gear. If you were to google “list of top 100 spiritual teachers” you would find dozens on that list who have been interviewed by Oprah. Here's a sample of her many guests:

Adyashanti	Wayne Dyer	Shirley MacLaine
Eben Alexander	Debbie Ford	Thomas Moore
Karen Armstrong	Elizabeth Gilbert	Caroline Myss
Maya Angelou	Thich Nhat Hanh	Richard Rohr
Michael Bernard Beckwith	Jean Houston	Gretchen Rubin
Rob Bell	Arianna Huffington	Juan Miguel Ruiz
Brene Brown	Pico Iyer	Cheryl Strayed
Pema Chodron	Byron Katie	Eckhart Tolle
Deepak Choprah	John Kabat-Zinn	Iyanla Vanzant
Paulo Coelho	Jack Kornfield	Brian Weiss
Ram Dass	Anne Lamott	Marianne Williamson
Panache Desai	Elizabeth Lesser	Gary Zukov

In 2012 Oprah aired an interview of Shirley MacLaine from the 1980's. What MacLaine was saying in the 1980's was quite similar to what I was hearing from today's top spiritual thinkers and leaders. I bought and read MacLaine's autobiographical book “Out On A Limb”, which received both acclaim and criticism for its candor in dealing with such topics as reincarnation, meditation, mediumship (trance-channeling), and even unidentified flying objects. It made Shirley MacLaine the butt of many jokes, especially by late-night television comedians. Once, when David Letterman would not let up on the New Age subject, she responded by saying, "Maybe Cher was right; maybe you are an asshole!"

“Out On A Limb” was new territory for me. I approached it with an open mind. As I read about past lives, and channeling spiritual entities and the amazing spiritual journey which MacLaine had taken I was profoundly moved. I thought to myself that she has no reason to lie. Her experiences resonated in me. By the time I finished the book I had come to believe in energies and entities beyond what can be experienced by our 5 senses. That actually wasn't a huge leap for me. As I mentioned earlier, I have had far too many experiences in my life where events have unfolded in such a way that I could no longer rationally explain them away as mere coincidences. The reincarnation aspect was new to me, but it rang true down to my core. There was a “knowing” within me, beyond intellect, which remains true for me to this day. I obviously have no absolute scientific proof of reincarnation, but that doesn't matter to me. I have this knowing as described by Thomas Moore in his book, *A Religion Of One's Own*, “I'm referring to a deep kind of knowing that doesn't follow the rules of logic and can't be found through research and reasoning.”

With a new-found belief and interest in reincarnation, I did a bit of research and some reading on the subject. I learned about Ian Stevenson, a Professor of Psychiatry and Researcher at the University of Virginia School of

Medicine for fifty years. Stevenson became known internationally for his research into reincarnation, the idea that emotions, memories, and even physical injuries in the form of birth-marks, can be transferred from one life to another. He traveled extensively over a period of forty years, investigating three thousand cases of children around the world who claimed to remember past lives.

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Brian Weiss appeared as a guest on Super Soul Sunday. Dr. Weiss is Head of Psychiatry at Mount Sinai Medical Center, Miami, hypnotherapist, and author who specializes in past life regression. His research includes reincarnation, past life regression, future life progression, and survival of the human soul after death. According to Weiss, in 1980 one of his patients, "Catherine", began discussing past-life experiences under hypnosis. Weiss did not believe in reincarnation at the time but, after confirming elements of Catherine's stories through public records, came to be convinced of the survival of an element of the human personality after death. Weiss claims he has regressed more than 4,000 patients since 1980. Weiss advocates hypnotic regression as therapy, claiming that many phobias and ailments are rooted in past-life experiences whose acknowledgment by the patient can have a curative effect. Weiss also writes about messages received from the "Masters", or "super-evolved, nonphysical souls", he claims to have communicated with through his subjects.

Three years ago Nancy and I discovered Edgar Cayce's Association for Research and Enlightenment (A.R.E.) in Virginia Beach, VA. We usually visit every year when we vacation there. We have heard several lectures on the subject of reincarnation. Past-life readings were a significant part of Edgar Cayce's work and legacy. The idea of reincarnation is accepted without question or reservation at A.R.E., as it is in much of the non-Western world. Over the last few years it seems that I have quite simply and naturally come to accept it as a fact of life.

Are you interested in past-life regressions (learning about your past lives) and/or have you had any past life experiences?

I'm not sure how much interest I have in a personal past-life regression. I am curious and may explore that some day, but right now I'm more concerned with living the life I have as best I can. The closest thing that I've had to a past life regression or experience happened just this Labor Day weekend, 2016. My long-time best friend, Ron Potter, and his wife, Ellen, were visiting and spending Friday night in our guest cottage as they traveled from their home outside Baltimore, MD to Cape Hatteras, NC. Ellen is an Energy Catalyst. On her website her mission statement reads in part, "My intention is to partner with my client in their journey of remembering who they really are. My goal is that each client realizes their growth vibrationally, with more awareness, love, and joy, and connects with the Spark of the Divine that is within." A few years ago I had asked Ellen how she marketed her services. Ellen responded by saying, "people come to me when they are ready." Apparently I must have been ready that weekend. I am not an early riser. Whenever they visit, Ron and Ellen are up and on the road by the time I awake. For some reason I awoke early that Saturday morning around 7:30. Strangely, I immediately got out of bed. I was surprised to see that Ron's car was still outside. I decided to walk over and say goodbye to them. Due to the poor weather that morning, they were taking their time heading out. As we chatted, the subject turned to memories of my and Ron's Catholic upbringing. I stated that I thought that a lot of my childhood Catholic guilt and fear was still alive and well. I recalled my psychotic break in 2007 in which my reality turned into one where I viewed my hospital caregivers as part of Satan's gang who were all intent on seducing and leading me into hell. Ellen felt that seemed more likely a past-life issue than a childhood issue, perhaps even Inquisition type experiences in a prior life. Her words penetrated me and I felt a strong tightness in my stomach and chest. My breath became shallow. Ellen closed her eyes and started moving her head around somewhat oddly as if tuning into something. She told me to focus on breathing slowly. I did. She told me to repeat silently within my mind, "I trust in the power of unconditional love". I did. She told me that it was safe to let go of old fears of hell, damnation, and harm; that I was safe trusting in the power of unconditional love. I cried. I felt fears being released. I felt safe and I felt loved. Ellen said while trusting in the power of unconditional love that it was still important for me to set boundaries. There will always be people who are hateful and full of negative energy – I can choose to not associate with such people. I have the power to live in a space of love and positive energy. When Ellen "came back" to herself she told me that's the way it works. She likes to look at the universe as if there's a super-computer that aligns everything for each of us at

just the right time and place when we're ready. She told me that my soul was responsible for my awakening so unusually early and coming over to the guest cottage before they left that morning. I was ready to take that next step in my spiritual growth.

How has believing in reincarnation affected your life?

Probably the most significant impact that reincarnation has had on my life is making me aware that my actions in this life – what I think, what I say, and what I do – are important and have consequences. I believe that my purpose in this life is to learn some lessons – patience, trust, love, kindness, compassion, acceptance, courage, generosity – to name a few. I know there are areas of my life where I am falling short. Being born again in another body will present challenges to the next life. I'd like to make it easier on the next reincarnation of my soul, so I feel motivated to work on being the best person that I can be. I don't view reincarnation as a punishment, rather just another opportunity to get it right. The idea that we don't simply cease to exist, as I had believed for most of my life, is of some comfort to me. Also, the idea that the souls of my parents, both deceased, are somehow with me and watching over me is comforting.

As far as what actually will happen after I die, it's not something about which I think too much. I've read many books on Buddhism and books by Buddhist authors and I've actually read very little about reincarnation. As I understand it, Buddha himself taught his followers not to concern themselves with the afterlife - rather that they concern themselves with living wisely and earnestly in this life. So I'm content with letting the mystery be. I figure I'll see what happens when the time comes.

I thought it would be helpful for me to revisit what I wrote in 2011 for the Covenant Group "What Is My Religion?" discussion and re-write it from my current point of view...

"My beliefs and my spirituality have evolved. Many things remain a mystery to me, but I'm OK with the mystery. I believe, and I quote from another writer, "what science can see is limited to that which is physical and objective. Reality itself is not necessarily so limited. If we limit our understanding of what reality can be to just what science can see, we are leaving ourselves half-blind." I do believe in god as an unknowable infinite source of unconditional love. I believe in the existence of spiritual entities who watch over me. I believe I am a spiritual being having a human experience. I believe that when I die my soul will transition to a non-physical realm where it will continue to evolve and likely choose to be reborn again in another body and continue to learn and grow in another life. And lastly, to borrow from David O. Rankin's "What Do Unitarian Universalists Believe?", I "believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theologies, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal."

Top 10 Reasons for Reincarnation - from the website TopTenz posted by Jeff Danelek on July 9, 2010 in Bizarre, Religion, Science - for discussion see <http://www.toptenz.net/top-10-reasons-for-reincarnation.php>

Conscious Past Life Memories in Children
Corresponding Birthmarks
Doctor Helen Wambach's Demographic Studies
Hypnotic Regression
Xenoglossia

Child Prodigies
Déjà Vu
Unexplainable Phobias
Homosexuality and Transgender Tendencies
Hobbies, Interests and Obsessions