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EVIDENCE OF PAST-LIFE MEMORY IN A MILDLY AUTISTIC BOY

Introduction

By this point in our panel, you may be wondering whether there is some substance to the belief in reincarnation, whether the belief has an empirical basis in observation and experience.

Erlendur Haraldsson and Antonia Mills described cases of apparent past-life memory that are highly evidential. It is hard to understand what could have produced the observed phenomena, unless it was reincarnation. The case I will be describing is not strong evidentially, although viewed within the context of our large dataset of published and unpublished cases, it has significant markers that suggest that it very possibly is a case of reincarnation. If it is, it reveals rather clearly some of the psychological dynamics of reincarnation and teaches us things about how reincarnation affects personality development and inter-personal relations that make it worth exploring here.

The main weakness of the case is that the subject seems to have been his own grandfather, his mother’s father. Cases of reincarnation in family lines are not uncommon, but because it is especially difficult to rule out the possibility that knowledge has been acquired by normal means when the present and previous persons are related, reincarnation researchers

place more emphasis on studying cases in which the two families were strangers to each other before the cases developed.

This case is especially weak because the subject has never spoken about past-life memories. Only on a single occasion, when he was 3 years old, did he say anything that connected him to his grandfather, and he was already a teenager when he expressed an aversion for a behavior (smoking) that contributed to his grandfather's death. He has exhibited several personality and behavioral traits reminiscent of his grandfather, but the evidence for reincarnation in this case is largely circumstantial.

As a preschooler, the boy was diagnosed with a mild form of autism, a neurological disorder that frequently causes him to act in unexpected ways. He has difficulty communicating his thoughts and feelings to others, and he may have (or have had) memories beyond those he has related to his mother, who is my main informant for the case. I will address the autism issue and how it impacts the case at the conclusion of this presentation.

[I interviewed the boy's mother and other witnesses via instant messaging, e-mail, and Skype, and met them and the boy for further interviews in October, 2015. Besides interviews, I draw on contemporary emails and on medical and other documents that allow me to establish a more definite timeline and account of events than is usual in cases of this sort. I have changed the names of the people involved to disguise their identities, but all other details remain unaltered.]

“I'm Sorry! I'm Sorry! I'm Sorry!”

I will call the subject of the case Craig Mitchell. He is now 17. His birth was planned. His mother, Katherine, is now single, but at the time of his birth and for his early years she was in a same-sex, Lesbian, relationship. She and her partner Gail Paterson decided they wanted children, and so arranged to become impregnated by a man of their acquaintance. Gail went first and Craig has a half-brother three years older than he is.

Now I need to tell you something about Katherine. She had a difficult upbringing. Her parents did not have a happy marriage but had agreed to stay together until the youngest of

their four children was grown. The youngest was Katherine, born in 1961. She was repeatedly abused sexually by her father Michael between the ages of 11 and 19, when he left the home and she finally felt strong enough to put a stop to it. Although she and Michael continued to meet socially for three years after that, he never again molested her.

Michael and Katherine's mother were divorced in 1983 and for the first time Katherine told her mother about her father's abuse. This led to her siblings and others learning about it, and resulted in Michael's estrangement from all of his children, Katherine included. Michael tried to resume contact with Katherine in 1991, immediately following her mother's death, blaming her mother for their falling out. But Katherine rebuffed him, telling him that if he heard from her again it would be through a lawyer.

Katherine's mother had urged her to sue Michael for sexual assault in 1983, but Katherine held off acting on the suggestion until 1992. By that time she was emotionally ready to go forward and there had been a change in the legal code in her jurisdiction, altering the statute of limitations in a way that made legal action possible. Katherine keenly wished to receive an apology from her father, but did not want to ask for this outright. Michael never admitted to or apologized for the abuse and trauma he had caused Katherine, but he did settle the suit out of court for a five-figure sum, giving her a sense of satisfaction.

The emotional scars persisted, however. Katherine was not notified when her father died but learned about his death later from a family friend, when she was already pregnant with Craig. The thought that he might return as her child occurred to her as a "horrific" possibility. [She continued to be troubled by it after Craig's birth in 1998 and in January, 2001, sought answers through precision muscle testing, a biofeedback procedure used to bypass conscious belief systems, thus helping to identify and clear traumas. In muscle testing, a question is asked and pressure applied to the patient's arm, with the level of resistance indicating the response.

[On the assumption that Katherine was subconsciously aware of whether or not Craig was her father reincarnated, Gail took her through a series of questions that led to determining that it was true. The positive result was confirmed by Sarah Jones, a friend who had taught them the technique. Katherine was devastated. On January 31, 2001, she emailed Sarah and

others, "I still feel like [Craig] is no longer my child, like I'm saying a long, slow, bitter goodbye to him." Friends helped bring her to the view that Craig and her father were different people, even if Craig embodied something of her father, and by early February she was able to understand the situation as an opportunity for healing. On February 5, she wrote, "I was thinking, it's going to take me MONTHS to get over [Craig] having been my father and... it seems... I'm fine. ??? I've gone back to the tenderness I had before, I'm not pushing him away too soon when he wants to nurse, I'm being gentle and loving with him, I'm seeing him as my sweet little baby again...???"]

In November, 2001, when was Craig 3 years, 8 months old, Gail decided to try to help relieve Katherine's persisting distress with shiatsu finger massage, [another alternative therapy] in which she was trained. Katherine reacted by releasing her emotions, as usual. Normally Craig avoided being with her as she was experiencing these crises, but on this occasion he settled beside her on the mat, Katherine related to Sarah in an email written no more than 30 minutes after the event.

Craig was looking at her more than usual and he started putting his hands on her, telling her over and over, "It's OK." Then he looked at her and said, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Astonished, she asked Gail, "Do you think he means 'I'm sorry' for what I think he means?" Gail said yes, she thought so. "And [Craig] said, a little mushily as he usually speaks, but clear enough to understand, 'I never said so,'" Katherine wrote in her email.

["We both sort of froze in amazement. And he kept on looking at me as if unsure or afraid of my reaction; at one point he even put his hands over his mouth, as I've never seen him do. And I bawled my eyes out. I'm still in shock -- part of me just can't believe this has happened -- or I'd be feeling more emotion still, I'm sure. I need to kind of settle, snuggle my way into accepting the reality of this, I guess. . . . I know, I can tell my thoughts and perception have that shocky sort of quality. Once my head is clear, I guess, I'll figure out what to say back to him. Probably it will be difficult for him to hear anyway... but we'll be able to make our final reconciliation."]

Craig has never said anything else that suggested that he recalls having been Michael, and Katherine has never told him that is what she believes. Although Craig continues to have

the sense that he lived before and says that he chose Katherine to be his mother, it is unclear to what extent he still believes he was or might have been Michael. This however is Katherine's sincere belief and there are reasons to think that she may be right.

Getting Pregnant

I have said that Katherine and Gail were in a same-sex relationship and that the pregnancy with Craig was planned, but it was not Katherine's first pregnancy.

Katherine received the settlement from the lawsuit against her father on December 31, 1996. The funds allowed her to carry through her plan to become pregnant, and she made her first two attempts in January, 1997, when she was 35. She had arranged to have sexual intercourse twice during each of her monthly fertile periods, two days apart. Neither of the January attempts succeeded, but one of those in February did, according to a home pregnancy test confirmed by a midwife. Then in March, after only a few weeks, she miscarried.

The miscarriage was accompanied by such a loss of blood that the midwife advised Katherine to go to a hospital. There a dilation and curettage procedure was performed and the miscarriage confirmed. According to hospital records, this was done on March 14. The miscarriage itself had occurred the day before.

Katherine skipped her April sex sessions, but in May she tried again. Because of a scheduling issue, there was only one attempt made that month, on May 21, 1997, but it was successful, and Craig was born on March 1, 1998. Neither pregnancy was accompanied by any changes Katherine, Gail or others around them judged unusual.

Michael Mitchell

Michael Mitchell was born in 1923 into a devout Roman Catholic family. [He likely attended church and received Communion as a child], but he renounced the faith and became a dedicated atheist and humanist as an adult. [After marrying Katherine's mother, he began going to a Unitarian church.]

Michael was an engineer by trade. He was mechanically inclined and enjoyed building and doing things with his hands, although he was multi-talented and possessed considerable musical ability as well. He could pick up a tune by ear and create harmony in singing. He was a perfectionist, who worked at things until he was satisfied that he had them right, [and he had a tenacious streak. He did not like to leave things undone, and would carry on until the job was complete]. He had a knack for color-coordinating his wardrobe, and dressed well. He was also a lifelong smoker.

[Michael was born in Lviv (Lwów), Poland, in an area that is now part of Ukraine. His father was employed in the Polish government service, and so was in the upper echelon of the society. Both of Michael's parents were cold and distant and his closest relationships were with the household servants, especially the chauffeur.

[In 1939, when he was 16, Germany invaded Poland from the west. When the Soviets moved in from the east later that same year, his father was arrested and Michael himself was taken prisoner. He spent the next two years in a concentration camp but was released to fight the Germans after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, breaking the non-aggression pact he had made with Stalin.

[After the war was over, Michael left Poland. He met and married Katherine's mother and spent the rest of this life as an expatriate, but his formative years influenced him greatly. He began to smoke while in the camp and Katherine believes he very likely was sexually assaulted there. As a father, he was distant and forbidding. "I yearned for his love, but don't feel I really got it until he wanted something from me, and of course that's not real love," Katherine told me. "He was a cold person."]

Michael sexually abused Katherine's elder sister, although not for as long a period as he did Katherine. Neither sister knew about the other's abuse until 1983, when Katherine acknowledged hers, but Katherine then learned that her sister had secured an apology from her father along with a promise that he would not do the same to her. This broken promise is one of the reasons she had not wanted to ask him for an apology for what he had done, and in fact, she never let on to him how devastating she found his violations. She contemplated killing

herself on more than one occasion during those years. She confessed this to him once, and he replied unfeelingly, "If you commit suicide, it will be your own fault."

After the abuse became public in 1983 and Michael lost contact with his children, he too considered taking his own life. We know this because he told Katherine so at their meeting in 1991. "If you commit suicide, it will be your own fault," she told him, quoting his words back to him.

[Katherine does not know whether Michael came to believe in reincarnation but if he was aware that Katherine had spoken about remembering a past life when she was a young child, he may well have started to wonder. As a toddler, Katherine had pointed out a figure in a picture as her past self and she made hundreds of drawings of the images in her mind. Her mother was quite forceful in her rejection of Katherine's apparent memories. She punished her for her talk and threw out or burned all but two of her drawings. Michael was at work for most of these events and Katherine is not sure that he ever knew about them. But when she was 9, he tried to hypnotize her to learn "where she got her ideas from." She remembers being confused as to what he was talking about. She did not think she had any ideas worth probing. She was not relaxed enough to enter a trance state and the experiment was not repeated.]

When he left Katherine's mother in 1980, Michael moved in with a woman he had been seeing for five years and eventually married. They were married at the time of his death in 1997, we know from his death certificate. This woman does not accept that Michael abused Katherine and believes that Katherine made up the story to relieve him of his money. She resents Katherine's lawsuit, which naturally diminished the inheritance she received, and Katherine has had no contact with her since the settlement. [As a result of these attitudes, I have not tried to contact this woman.]

I have not yet obtained records of Michael's hospitalization and his death from lung cancer. [Katherine has been assured that she can get copies of the records with the assistance of a lawyer, but we have not yet had time and resources to pursue this.] We know that Michael was hospitalized for the last months of his life, but because of Katherine's long estrangement from him, we do not know anything about the course of his illness during that period. We only know that he died on May 11, 1997, ten days before Craig's conception.

Growing up Craig

That Craig was developmentally delayed had become apparent by 30 months. He was officially diagnosed with “autism, mild” in September, 2001, when he was 3 ½ years (or 42 months) old. His elder half-brother, Gail’s son by the same man, has been diagnosed with “Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified,” another condition on the autism spectrum. Craig’s biological father sired a neurotypical child before Craig and his brother, but with two children by the same father on the spectrum, we may conclude that Craig’s condition is hereditary and not specific to him.

Craig has continued to be challenged in various ways, but he attends school and enjoys activities with other children and with his mother. When he was 13, his general intelligence was measured at 53, well below average. This is common with autistic children, who do not do well on standardized tests. [When I met him, he did not strike me as of subnormal intelligence.] In contrast to his general intelligence, Craig’s spatial intelligence was measured as “high normal.” This again is not uncommon with autistics, perhaps because the spatial tests are more suited to them. With Craig it is interesting, though, because of Michael’s engineering background.

Craig has several character traits that remind Katherine of her father. He is mechanically inclined and enjoys molding clay and working with his hands, as Michael did, yet he also is multi-talented and possesses strong musical abilities. He picks up tunes easily and knows the lyrics of his favorite songs. He is a perfectionist, as Michael was, [and has the same tenacity—unlike Katherine, who sometimes leaves things undone]. When he was young, Craig had trouble with fine motor skills, but his creative drive and his perfectionistic side mean that it is now one of his strengths, as it was for Michael. Craig reminds Katherine of her father too in his facility for color-coordinating his clothing, something in which Michael took pride.

[Interestingly, Craig has shown an eagerness to attend church and has demonstrated an untaught knowledge of Catholic rituals, prayers, and songs. When he was 8, he began to spend two weeks each summer at a camp for children with neurological disorders. On Sundays, the children are asked if they would like to go to a Catholic Mass, and Craig has raised his hand immediately each time. Neither Katherine nor Gail took him to church of any kind and he has

no model for this activity in his family. Nor has he ever spoken about religion at home. Sister Mary Rose, who accompanies the children to Mass, is surprised that Craig does not attend church at home, because he is always so eager to go while at camp. She has noticed that the older songs come to him more easily and she often has to prompt him to take Communion in the modern way.]

Nonetheless, there are aspects of Michael's personality that do not match Craig's, and vice versa. Craig is less distant and more demonstrative than Michael was. He is more extroverted than Michael and enjoys going out, to parties, to the theater, et cetera. These differences may be attributable to differences in the way he has been brought up. Katherine has made a point of being affectionate to Craig, correcting the way both she and Michael were raised. Other differences are more likely hereditary. Craig is very gentle, like his biological father, but unlike Michael, who could be very rough. The traits stemming from his autism clearly have a genetic origin as well.

One difference is quite significant. Michael smoked heavily for decades and died of lung cancer. Craig has a dislike for smoking that is so intense that Katherine describes him as "rabid about it, like a reformed smoker." At 13, he would march up to strangers he saw smoking and tell them, "You shouldn't smoke!" When Katherine asked him why he said that, he explained, "Cause it's bad for them." "What's it going to do to them?" she pressed. "Kill them!" he replied. "How?" she wanted to know. "Burn them," he said, and then, "by giving them cancer." "He said it very definitely," Katherine told me.

[Now, at 17, Craig no longer admonishes people not to smoke, but he is equally certain of the consequences of doing so and has further specified that it will affect the lungs. Because by this age he could have been exposed to anti-smoking messages in the media, it is the emotion he invests in his attitudes rather than the attitudes themselves that should impress us. In May of this year, Katherine reported another conversation she had had with him on the subject. "I said to him, 'Remember how last night we were talking about how people shouldn't smoke because they could die of cancer? I think it's because you used to be someone who smoked and died of cancer. Does that make sense to you?' With some emotion—a bit of a sob—he said 'Yeah.'"]

[Katherine has explained the concept of reincarnation to Craig and asked him what he thinks about it. He says that he believes it to be true. Remember, she has never told him that she believes him to be her father come back. She has told him that her father died of lung cancer, though. When she asked him if he thought he himself might have died of lung cancer in his previous life, he said, "I don't know."

[Katherine heard from a friend that the author of the book, *Ten Things Every Child With Autism Wishes You Knew*, had asked her young autistic son while he was half asleep if he had chosen her to be his mother, and he had said, "Yes, mom," in a *duh* kind of tone. She decided to ask Craig the same question on Mother's Day of this year. Without hesitation, he nodded, *Yes*. She asked why, and he answered simply but earnestly, "Because I love you." This is a natural response for a child to have, and we may rightly wonder about its significance, but it has been very meaningful to Katherine, partly because of the assuredness with which he said it.

[On two recent occasions, Craig made unwelcome advances to adolescent girls. On Christmas Day of last year, 2014, he apparently touched a girl's breasts (although accounts of what exactly happened differ). And on Easter of this year, he kissed the daughter of a family friend. Here we are dealing with behaviors that may not be atypical for boys his age, and autistics frequently have trouble grasping social boundaries, so although interesting given his possible past life as Michael, I do not think we should place much emphasis on them.]

Could it Be?

As I said in my opening, if this is a case of reincarnation, it is evidentially very weak. Nonetheless, Katherine firmly believes that Craig is her father reborn, and this has allowed her come to terms with her father's actions. She believes that their relationship has also helped Craig, even if his memories of having been his grandfather are subliminal only.

How realistic are Katherine's beliefs? It would be easy to dismiss them as fantasies, but this would require assuming that she was looking for a way to forgive her father and so latched onto her son's words and behaviors as an instrument to accomplish this. We would have to treat her deep animosity toward her father as masking a conflict for which we have no

independent evidence. The distress that the thought that Craig might be her father returned caused her certainly does not suggest that this is the case.

Nor does this explanation permit us to understand why Craig suddenly exclaimed, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" and followed it up with the admission, "I never said that." His outburst was highly uncharacteristic, and is something we must account for. [Also, notice Craig's use of the first person pronoun, "I." This expresses quite clearly his identification with Michael and is typical of people (children and adults) relating past life memories.]

On the other hand, if this is indeed a case of reincarnation, Craig's outburst makes sense. In many of our stronger cases, perhaps in most of them, the first things children say about the life they remember are triggered by something they see or hear. [Katherine's muscle testing, of which Craig must have been aware, would have provided plenty of cues to recall before the shiatsu massage in which he participated and made his apology.] In this respect and others, past-life memory is no different from memory of our present lives. Moreover, in the majority of cases children begin speaking about their memories between the ages of 2 and 4 years, so Craig fits this pattern as well.

If we view this as a case of reincarnation, it makes sense in psychological terms. What we see is a man utterly obsessed with his daughter. Not only did he force himself on her repeatedly during her teens, he blamed her mother for their eventual falling out and doubtless also for the lawsuit brought against him. He settled that lawsuit out of court shortly before his death and was reborn in a body conceived only ten days later.

[We have evidence from many cases that we have some say over where and when we reincarnate. It is clear that we do not always choose our parents, but when circumstances are right, we may do so. In a number of verified cases, people have stated where they intend to be reborn before they die. With planned reincarnation, especially, returns in the same family are frequent. So we should not be skeptical of Michael's apparent determination to return as Katherine's child.

[When we get his hospital records, I think we will see indications of a decline during the period of Katherine's first pregnancy with an unexpected recovery at the time she suffered the miscarriage. Although rare, cases of reincarnation beginning before death are not unknown. In

this case, that would amount to a sort of suicide with the intent to be reborn as soon as possible to the daughter he could not stay away from. This interpretation would be stronger if we knew that Michael had come to believe in reincarnation, but we have reason at least to think that he might have.]

If this is a case of reincarnation, we would have a natural explanation for the many similarities between Michael and Craig. The sorts of carryovers in personality and behavior that we see here appear in many cases of this type. [Craig's eagerness to attend Mass and his familiarity with Catholic ritual is especially significant. His knowledge of how to behave in Church at times amounts to a remembered skill, something we see in many cases. This knowledge might have stemmed from early in Michael's life, but the woman he married after Katherine's mother was Portuguese, and she may have reintroduced him to the church, reinforcing his early experiences. Katherine remembers seeing a cross hanging on the wall of her house the one time she visited her.]

Craig's strong opposition to smoking also would make sense, because smoking and lung cancer were major contributors to Michael's death. Reactions of this kind are common in reincarnation cases. Often they manifest as phobias that have to do with the way the previous person died, but there are other cases in which children voice opposition to activities that brought about that person's death.

The short intermission—ten days if counted from death to conception or nine months if counted from death to birth—is no reason to dismiss this case. We see short intermissions in many cases, and in fact the median length in 1700 solved cases from different societies worldwide is only 18 months, death to birth. It is often longer in Western than in Asian cases, though. In that respect the brief intermission here is unusual, and suggests an especially strong desire or pull to return to life.

But how are we to understand Craig's apology to Katherine when he was 3? If Craig is Michael reborn, this represents a marked change in attitude from his previous life. Where did that change come from? Did Michael feel the remorse before he died, making this merely another psychological carryover, or was it something that developed after his death, thanks to a clarity of vision that comes with being dead, at least for a little while?

I am inclined to see the apology as deriving from something that concerned Michael before he died. Perhaps it was something he felt but was unable to express, for whatever reason that might be. Our cases provide little evidence that death confers any sort of insight into or reflection on one's past actions. What we see rather is that our beliefs and expectations, along with our psychological traits, survive death and influence us in future lives. From this perspective, Craig's apology constitutes a sort of unfinished business, a factor we see in many cases.

[If we accept this as a case of reincarnation, what comes through clearly is the need to add past-life influences to the classic influences of genes and environment—of nature and nurture—in the formation of personality. All three influences are important and no one alone explains how and why we become the people we are. Although significant aspects of our identities may carry over in reincarnation, we are not the same people from life to life. Reincarnation it seems is not about the preservation of identity so much as the contribution of the past to the present in a process of continual change.

[I suspect that some of you are wondering whether Craig's autism might be a karmic consequence of Michael's abuse of Katherine. I doubt this, for two reasons. First, as I have explained, Craig's autism seems to be hereditary. His biological father has a second child, by a different mother, on the spectrum. Second, we have found little evidence of karma in other reincarnation cases. There is no discernable effect of actions in one life on another. Instead, what we see in many cases are psychological reasons for choosing one set of parents over another, and we almost always see some continuities in personality, as with Craig. If karma is involved here, it would not be a juridical sort of karma, but rather what I call dispositional karma—psychological dispositions toward behavior that condition our actions and carry over from life to life.]

So although this is a weak case evidentially, it has several features consistent with patterns we see in stronger cases. It also makes good sense psychologically, from the point of view of the previous person. [In this it contrasts sharply with the expectations of philosopher Stephen Braude, who imagines these cases to be due to psychic acquisition of information rather than past-life memory and who has suggested that the cases might be driven by the

needs of the subjects and their families rather than of the previous persons.] Craig's case certainly does not prove reincarnation by itself, but I believe it adds significant data to the material in favor of reincarnation that we are compiling.

Finally, a comment on autism and reincarnation. There has been some suspicion of a link between them, particularly in relation to autistic savants, whose special knowledge is sometimes said to derive from previous lives. Craig cannot be considered a savant, most of whom are more deeply autistic than he is, anyway. Autistics are inner-directed and often lack social inhibitions against speaking what is in their minds. It is possible that Craig's condition made it easier for the memories to surface in his conscious awareness. Katherine suggested this possibility to me, and I don't think it can be ruled out. If it is correct, then autistic populations may be a good place to look for past life memories, not because the condition directly facilitates the memories, but because it does not inhibit their expression.

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