

Unusual Play in Young Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives

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Abstract—Among 278 cases of children who claim to remember previous lives, 66 (23.7%) engaged in play that was unusual for their families and had no model in family members or other obvious normal stimulus. This paper reports 25 examples of such atypical play. The play accorded with claimed memories of previous lives expressed by the children when they could speak. The child's unusual play sometimes gave its parents the first indication they had that the child was possibly remembering a previous life. In 22 cases the child's statements were found to match events in the life of a specific deceased person. In such cases the play was also found to correspond to some aspects of that deceased person's life, such as his or her vocation, avocation, or mode of death.

Keywords: Play — previous lives — behavioral memories — reincarnation — memories of trauma

Introduction

The concept of play has received much attention from psychologists and psychiatrists, several of whom have offered general explanatory theories of play. In the late 19th century, Lazarus (1883) wrote that play resulted from the need of human beings for constant activity, which he described as a primary impulse. For him, “Activity is life ... Its opposite is nothingness, emptiness” (p. 45; my translation). According to this view, if we have no other activity, we invent one and call it play. Freud (1920/1961) considered play an attempt to master a stressful situation, and the play of children following a significantly traumatic event may have this motive: the reenactment in play supposedly reduces the negative emotional accompaniment of memories of the trauma. Later theorists of play have emphasized its value in developing physical capacities and physical and cognitive skills (Bornstein et al., 1996; Cotton, 1984; Lillard, 1993; Millar, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978). The kitten that chases a ball learns and practices the skill needed to chase a mouse; similarly, a child given a toy automobile can learn with it the rudiments of driving a real automobile.

I think it is fair to say that most investigators of play in children have sought

for some general principle explanatory of all play. Few have concerned themselves with the question of why a child selects one theme for its play rather than another. This, however, is an old question. Commenting on Lazarus's assertion, mentioned earlier, that play derived from an ineluctable need for activity, William James wrote "No doubt this is true, but why the *particular* forms of sham occupation" (James, 1890, vol. 2, p. 429; my emphasis). Later investigators of play have ignored James's pertinent question, with three exceptions. First, there are familiar instances in which a child in its play imitates a parent or an older sibling; a common example is a female child's play at "keeping house" in imitation of her mother. Second, boys between 1 and 2 years old show different preferences for the objects of their play than girls of the same age (Fagot, 1974; Jacklin, Maccoby, & Dick, 1973). Also, children with gender identity disorder usually show preferences for the play that is more common with members of the opposite sex (Doering et al., 1989; Rekers & Morey, 1990). Third, children who have undergone some severe trauma frequently seem to reenact the stressful experience in their play (Saylor, Swenson, & Powell, 1992; Terr, 1981, 1988, 1991).

This article contributes to the understanding of why a child's play develops around one theme instead of another. It reports a variety of unusual types of play in young children: that corresponding to the statements about previous lives made by some young children, usually between the ages of 2 and 5.

Children who claim to remember previous lives can be found in almost all countries, including European countries (Stevenson, 1987) and the United States (Stevenson, 1983a), although they are more readily discerned in some parts of the world, such as South Asia, than in others. Such children, on average, begin to speak about a previous life at the age of about 2 and continue until the age of about 5 (Cook et al., 1983; Stevenson, 1987). Early investigators of these cases gave attention almost exclusively to the questions of, first, whether the child's statements referred to a particular deceased person and no other person, and, second, whether in at least some cases the child and its family had no prior knowledge of the concerned deceased person (Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1987). (For convenience only, I sometimes refer to this person as "the previous personality.")

In recent years, my colleagues and I have extended the studies of these children to other features of their personalities compared with those of their peers who do not claim to remember a previous life (Haraldsson, 1995, 1997) and to a wide range of behavior shown by the children that is unusual in the child's family, but appropriate for the person whose life the child claims to have lived (Stevenson, 2000). Such behavior includes a variety of likes and dislikes for particular persons, foods, clothing, climates, and places. In an earlier article I described and discussed the phobias among these children; among a group of 387 children 141 (36%) showed a phobia, nearly always corresponding to the mode of death in the claimed previous life (Stevenson, 1990).

In the present article I describe, with examples, another type of unusual be-

havior that these children often show: play that seems to have no contemporary model in the child's life or other normal explanation. I am not suggesting that the play of these children adds importantly to the evidence that reincarnation is the best interpretation of their cases. Their play is, however, consistent with that interpretation.

Methods

Selection of Cases for This Report

In order to obtain an estimate of the frequency of play in the cases, 278 cases, which have been published (by myself), were examined. Of these, 225 were reported in Stevenson (1997) and the remainder in earlier works, mostly of detailed case reports (Stevenson 1966/1974, 1975, 1977, 1980, 1983b, and 1987). The total of 278 provided a denominator of all investigated cases studied and previously reported by myself.

I did not count as play instances in which the child practiced a style of worship that was wrong for its family, but correct for the previous personality. For example, I did not include cases in which a Hindu child in India who claimed to remember a previous life as a Moslem practiced *namaz*, the Moslem style of worship. If this kind of unusual behavior occurred in a Western family, it might well be considered play.

Also excluded were instances in which the play, although appropriate for the claimed previous life, had a known model in the child's family or near neighbors. The importance of this exclusion arose in connection with play as a soldier and with kite-flying, both of which types of play children enjoy in many parts of the world. Nevertheless, the details and circumstances of some of the play at being a soldier deserve mention.

The cases of the pool were investigated principally through interviews with multiple firsthand informants, first on the side of the child and then on that of the deceased person, if one has been found whose life corresponded to the child's statements. Whenever attainable, printed documents, such as birth and death certificates, identity cards, and medical records, were consulted and copied. The cases were analyzed individually for competing interpretations, such as fraud, ordinary social knowledge, and paranormal cognition on the part of the child. Series of cases have also been analyzed for recurrent features and variations in the features of the cases in different cultures (Cook et al., 1983; Stevenson, 1986). I have given fuller details of methods elsewhere (Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1975, 1997).

In this report I do not give information about whether some of the children showed knowledge about a previous personality that they could not have obtained normally. Readers interested in that aspect of the cases may find details bearing on it in the references to more detailed reports that I cite. Here I wish only to draw attention to the close correspondence in many cases between the child's statements about a previous life and its unusual play. Accordingly, I

will state, for simplification only, that a child “remembers a previous life,” not that it “claims to remember” one. At the same time, readers should understand that the play I shall describe occurred in the context of a case with many other features, including evidence in the verified cases that the child showed substantial knowledge about a particular deceased person, which knowledge, in many instances, it could not have obtained normally.

My colleagues and I have adopted the convention of describing cases in which the child’s statements were verified as correct for a particular deceased person as “solved” (S); and we describe cases where this has not been possible as “unsolved” (US). Asserting that a case is solved does not exclude the possibility that the child could have acquired its correct information normally; that could have happened when the child and the person about whom it speaks belong to the same family or even the same community. There are, however, numerous cases in which we can exclude such normal transmission of information with reasonable certainty (Haraldsson, 1991; Mills, Haraldsson, and Keil, 1994; Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1975; Stevenson and Samararatne, 1988a, 1988b.)

Social Circumstances of the Families Concerned

Nearly all the cases occurred among families of Asia who lived in villages or small towns. This means that for the period when most of the cases developed (between 1960 and 1985) the child and its family had no access to television by which the child might have become acquainted with a model for the unusual behavior it showed. It cannot be excluded that in some cases a model for the behavior, for example, that of a shopkeeper, might have existed in the village or town where the child lived even though not in the child’s own family.

In each instance the child’s behavior was unique among the play of the children of its family.

Results

Estimated Prevalence of Play in a Series of Cases

Among the 278 cases selected, the feature of unusual play was reported in 66 (23.7%) cases. This is almost certainly a minimal figure of the prevalence of play in the cases. The Registration Form that we use in investigating these cases includes a checklist of features about which we would like to learn. It may happen, however, that the informants may not mention play that they observed in a child, and the investigator may also sometimes have failed to inquire about it, even though the checklist includes an inquiry about play.

Examples of Unusual Play

More than half the examples of unusual play that follow are derived from the 278 cases mentioned above. To these I have added some additional exam-

ples from cases in our files of which neither I nor my colleagues have yet published reports. After each example I will add the reference to a published report, if there is one. I have myself investigated all the cases from which I draw my examples. After each example, I have added the symbols (S) and (US) to indicate whether the case is solved or unsolved.

For many cases I have no information about how long the play persisted during the child's early years. For the cases where this is reported it generally occurred during the period of the child's most active speaking about the previous life and ceased when he or she stopped talking about it, which usually happened between the ages of 5 and 7 (Cook et al., 1983). In a few instances the play lasted longer.

In five cases the child's play gave its parents their first indication that the child might be remembering a previous life. I have included two examples of this group in the present report; in another case of this report the child's play was one of the first indications—but not the very first—of its having memories of a previous life.

The types of play observed corresponded to several features in the life and death of the previous personality. The most numerous feature was the previous personality's profession or vocation, and I describe 17 examples of this. Less frequently the child engaged in play that was typical of the play of the opposite sex (shown by children who claimed to remember a life as a person of the opposite sex) and in play that corresponded to the avocations or hobbies of the previous personality. Another small group of children named their dolls or other play objects after the previous personality's children. In a fourth small group the child reenacted the mode of death of the previous personality. I describe two examples of each of these four smaller groups.

Play Corresponding to Vocations of the Previous Life

The most frequent category of play was that of reenacting the vocation of the previous personality. Among the examples of this are the following:

Shopkeeper. P.S. was the son of a professor in a college in Bisauli, a small town of northern India. P.S. remembered the life of a prosperous businessman who had owned shops, the most important of which was one (in the city of Moradabad) where biscuits were manufactured and soda water produced (Stevenson, 1966/1974) (S). At the age of about 2 1/2, P.S. began making models of what appeared to be shops, with wires running around them. He made "biscuits" from mud and served these with "tea" (actually water). He began to talk of soda water. While engaged in this kind of play, he gradually described a previous life in which he had owned a shop where biscuits and soda water were provided for the customers. (At that time in India bottled soda water was not readily available; it was mainly found in specially equipped shops that made it and sold it directly to customers.) Tea would almost certainly have also been offered at such a shop. P.S. played little with other children; he became so totally absorbed in his play at managing a biscuit and soda water shop that he fell

markedly behind at school. His mother blamed his failures at school—which restricted his later vocational opportunities—to the time he had lost in childhood when he was playing at shopkeeping. In Bisauli, where P.S. lived, biscuits would have been sold in some shops, but it would have had no shop where biscuits were made and soda water produced.

S.K., a young girl of Burma, was the daughter of a cotton farmer. (Myanmar is now the name of the country formerly called Burma; but for the period when most of these cases were investigated the country was called Burma.) She remembered the life of a woman who had sold pickled tea, a stimulant much appreciated in Burma (unpubl. data) (S). When she was young, S.K. played at setting up a stall from which she sold pickled tea and also dried tea leaves. She would not play at other games and would not change the commodity she sold.

Schoolteacher. L.A. was a young girl of Sri Lanka who began speaking about the previous life of a housewife and schoolteacher at the age of about 2 1/2 (Stevenson, 1977) (S). She began to play at being a schoolteacher when she was about 3 years old, before she had seen any adult teaching. (Her father was an instructor in a carpentry school.) She would wrap herself in a garment to imitate a teacher's sari. Then, using a cane as a pointer and a door for a blackboard, she would teach the imagined class. She would ask the members of the class to give her their copybooks. L.A. did not draw other children into her teaching, but acted the scene alone. Her play at teaching school was continuing at the age of 5 1/2, by which time she had begun school herself.

Nightclub owner. E.K. was the son of an unskilled laborer in Adana, a city of south central Turkey. He remembered the previous life of a man who owned a nightclub in Istanbul (Stevenson, 1980) (S). As a young child, E.K. regularly played at managing a nightclub. He arranged boxes to represent a bar and placed bottles on them. He assigned roles in the club to neighborhood girls and gave one a stick that represented the microphone held by a singer. He put out two chairs for the wives of the club's owner. (Polygamy was then illegal in Turkey but still practiced by some men, including the man whose life E.K. remembered. He had had two wives, although we may doubt whether he ever brought them together in his nightclub.)

Operator of a flour mill. V. was the son of a small farmer in northern India. As a young child, V. remembered the life of a prosperous owner of a flour mill (unpubl. data) (S). When he was about 2 years old, he was playing with sand. He erected what looked like a flour mill with sand and said to his grandmother: "Bring some grain for grinding." This was his family's first indication that V. was remembering a previous life about which, on being encouraged to say more, he gave numerous details.

Physician. V.R. was the son of a businessman of northern India. He remembered the life of a physician, Dr. S.S.D. (unpubl. data) (S). Like many physicians in India, Dr. S.S.D. had a shop where he both examined patients and sold the medicines that he prescribed. As a child V.R. played at being a doctor. He set up a clinic shop with bottles and a thermometer. He would take tempera-

tures with a stick and then shake down the stick as one shakes a medical thermometer to lower the level of the mercury. He examined his playmates as patients. I did not learn V.R.'s age when he engaged in this sort of play. One informant told us that he continued with it for about a year. Many years later, in an interview, V.R. recalled his play in childhood at being a doctor. He said that a woman he knew had a high fever, and he mixed salt and pepper into water and "prescribed" this for the patient; she took it and recovered.

Well digger. M.S. was a young boy of Lebanon whose father was a small farmer and collector of pine cones for their seeds. M.S. remembered the previous life of a man who had been a professional well digger (unpubl. data) (S). He had died when a heavy stone that was being raised out of a partially dug well slipped out of the lifting basket and fell on his head. M.S.'s mother observed him playing at digging a well in sand. I did not learn other details of this play or how long it lasted.

Garage mechanic. D.J. was the son of a technician at a radio station in Lebanon. As a young child, D.J. remembered the previous life of an automobile mechanic (unpubl. data) (S). When he was about 2 1/2, he began to speak some names that his parents did not recognize. During the next year he said that he was from a place called Kfermatta, and he spoke about a vehicular accident near the sea. His parents had still not identified D.J.'s statements with the life and death of anyone they knew when they observed him lying under furniture, such as a sofa, and seeming to be unscrewing something. His family did not understand this behavior and became concerned that he would damage the furniture. When they told him to stop, he replied imperturbably: "I am working." They only understood his behavior when he was able to give enough information to permit them to learn that the previous life he was remembering was that of an automobile mechanic who had worked in a garage in Beirut.

Vehicle driver. V.M. was the son of a farmer of northern India. When he could speak, he began to make statements about the life of a tonga (pony-cart) driver, Kallu, whom his father had known (unpubl. data) (S). V.M., at this age, would put a towel on his shoulder, as tonga drivers in India do, take a piece of cord to serve as reins, and act as if he were guiding a horse. While playing in this way he would say "tic, tic" repeatedly, in imitation of the sound the tonga drivers make when they wish to signal to pedestrians that they are coming. They do this by letting their whip strike against the spokes of the tonga's wheels, thus producing the repetitive sound that V.M. was imitating. At such times V.M. would also say "I am a tonga driver." Once he remarked: "I used to charge 1/2 a rupee; now I will charge a rupee." (This presumably referred to the charge for taking passengers from the railway station to their homes, which Kallu had done with his tonga.)

Washerman. G.N. was the son of an Ayurvedic physician of northern India. The family were Brahmins. G.N. remembered a previous life as a washerman, who are low-caste persons in India (Stevenson, 1997) (US). As a young child, when G.N. saw his mother washing clothes, he would offer to help her, saying

“I will do the ironing.” At other times he said: “Give me your clothes. I will wash them for you.” He became such a nuisance with his insistence on participating in the washing that his mother in exasperation beat him to make him go away. Sometimes he would talk to himself and play at being a washerman. His mother would hear him say: “My wife is sitting here and cooking food, and I am washing the clothes.”

Nun. T.T.A., a young girl of Burma, remembered the previous life of a Buddhist nun (unpubl. data) (S). During her early childhood, up to the age of 4 or 5 she would play at being a nun. She would put a tray on her head, walk around, say that she was a nun, and ask for alms. (Buddhist nuns do not carry the black bowls that the monks carry to receive the rice or other food that householders give them; they may carry what they are given on a tray.)

Sweepress. Sweepers, the persons who sweep the streets, clean latrines, and dispose of garbage, belong to the lowest classes (castes) in India. I have investigated two cases in which children of middle-class families remembered the lives of sweepresses, and both played at being a sweepress. I include here one of these.

S.L. was a young girl of northern India who happily cleaned up the stools of her younger brothers when they defecated in the house (unpubl. data) (S). She was a sister of G.N. (mentioned above, who played at being a washerman). Their family were Brahmins. S.L. liked to clean the house, saying “We used to do this work.” At times she took a broom and swept the floor. She also made a broom for herself, using twigs and neem leaves, and would sweep with it. Sometimes she dressed herself in a petticoat, put a scarf on her head, and carried a basket. Asked what she was doing, she would say: “I am a sweepress.” (Sweepers typically wear a scarf that they can pull over their noses when cleaning latrines; and the basket is to convey refuse that cannot be swept away.)

Bandit. C.F. was a young boy of Turkey who remembered the life of a bandit, Cemil Hayik, who had committed suicide rather than be captured (and probably executed) by the police (Stevenson, 1997) (S). As a young child C.F. threw stones at soldiers and policemen. He played with a stick as if it were a rifle.

Soldier. I have already said that play at being a soldier is so common among boys of all countries that we should not consider it unusual. Our series includes nine children who claimed to remember previous lives as soldiers and who, when young, played at being a soldier. Most of these might be explained as imitation of soldiers they had seen or learned about normally. Nevertheless, other features in four of these cases make them deserving of attention, and I give one example of this subgroup.

B.B. was born in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India, in 1918. He had diminished pigmentation of the skin and hair to the extent that he should be considered an albino. As a young child he said that he had been a soldier named Arthur and had been killed in the “German War” (World War I) (Stevenson, 1997) (US).

He had numerous Western behavioral traits. From the age of about 3, he played at being a soldier. He would give military commands, such as “Left, right” and “March.” He would pretend that a stick was a rifle, and he asked to have a gun. I cite his case here because his parents were Indians who could not speak English. His father was a scrivener. No one can imagine that they or anyone in their circle would have inculcated or encouraged B.B.’s play at being a soldier. The British Army had a cantonment in Bareilly for many years, and soldiers stationed there had fought and been killed in Europe during World War I. B.B. seems to have been referring to the life of a professional officer in the British Army.

Bomber pilot. C.E. was born in Middlesbrough, England. When he became able to speak he said “I crashed a plane through a window.” He gradually stated additional details. He said that he had been the pilot of a Messerschmitt and had been on a bombing mission. When he was between 2 and 3 years old he began to draw insignias and badges of military uniforms. These were at first crude, but improved as he became older. He drew an airplane with a swastika on it. He demonstrated the Nazi salute with his arm straight and raised and the German goose-step march. His classmates at school mocked him and he gradually stopped speaking about a previous life (unpubl. data) (US).

For several of the vocations illustrated above we have observed additional examples. Also, limitations of space prevent the inclusion here of examples of children who showed in their play the following occupations corresponding to the vocations of the presumed previous life: mason, policeman, building constructor, elephant driver, monk, and snake charmer.

Play at Parenting

S.G. was a young girl of India who remembered the life of a woman who had died, leaving an infant daughter called Minu (Stevenson, 1966/1974) (S). The woman’s last words before dying, spoken to her aunt, were: “Who will look after Minu?” (The aunt said that she would look after Minu.) When S.G. was about 1 1/2 years old and barely able to talk, she was observed cradling a block of wood or a pillow and addressing it as “Minu.” Someone thought to ask her who “Minu” was, and S.G. replied: “My daughter.” Thereafter, she stated additional details of the life of a young mother who had died while her daughter, Minu, was still an infant. S.G.’s play was her family’s first indication that she was remembering a previous life.

I.A. was a young girl of Lebanon who remembered the previous life of a woman, Selma, whose husband shot and killed her 5 days after she had given birth to a boy called Gandi (unpubl. data) (S). When she was a young child, I.A. used to hold a doll to her breast as if the doll were suckling milk from her. She called the doll Leyla, which was the name of one of Selma’s daughters. One day her family found her missing and traced her to a neighbor’s home, where there was a boy who happened to be called Gandi. I.A. said that she wanted to feed Gandi from her breasts.

Play Appropriate for the Sex of the Previous Life

Nearly all the children who claim to remember a previous life as a person of the opposite sex engage in cross-dressing when they are young children. I do not subsume this behavior under play. Reports that a girl played “rough like a boy” also seem insufficient to count as examples of play appropriate for the opposite sex. I do count as such examples (a) a distinct or exclusive preference for the play of the opposite sex and (b) a preference to play with persons of the opposite sex.

R.K. was a young girl of Sri Lanka who remembered the life of a boy who drowned in a well when he was a little more than 7 years old (Stevenson, 1977) (S). When R.K. was young, she showed a preference for boys’ activities such as kite-flying and *cadju*, which is a game somewhat like marbles as played in the United States. She was skillful at these games. R.K. also joined boys when they played cricket. She rode her brother’s bicycle, and, perhaps most masculine of all, at least for Sri Lanka, she climbed trees.

A.P. was a young girl of Thailand who, like R.K., remembered the life of a young boy who had drowned (Stevenson, 1983b) (S). When she was young, A.P. liked boys’ games and sports such as boxing. Boxing is associated with males everywhere, but nowhere more than in Thailand, where the rules permit the use of elbows, knees, and feet. At a follow-up meeting that I had with A.P. when she was 15 years old, she told me that she still engaged in boxing.

Naming Dolls or Other Objects After the Previous Personality’s Children or Other Relatives

In the section above on play at parenting, I mentioned that S.G. and I.A. had given a block of wood and a doll respectively the names of a daughter of the woman whose life each remembered. We have studied five other examples of this behavior, and I will mention two of these.

S.B. was a young boy of Syria who remembered the life of a relative, Said (Stevenson 1966/1974) (S). The names of Said’s seven children were almost the first words that S.B. spoke. When he was still extremely young—I did not learn his exact age—he found five eggplants and two potatoes. He then gave the eggplants the names of Said’s five sons and the potatoes the names of his two daughters. If anyone touched these vegetables, he became angry, and he wanted to keep them indefinitely.

H.I. was a young girl of Lebanon who remembered the life of a woman called Wadad, who had had five children (unpubl. data) (S). When she was still a young child, her mother bought for her a small toy coffee mill. This had figures of three persons on its top. H.I. gave these figures the names of three of Wadad’s children: May, Raja, and Samia.

Play at the Games or Avocations of the Previous Personality

M.M.T. was a male child of Burma who remembered the life of the abbot of

a Buddhist monastery, Ven. U Warthawa (Stevenson, 1997) (S). The abbot was fond of theatricals, and he both wrote and produced plays. He organized a dancing troupe, and he taught his students to sing, dance, and play musical instruments. He himself was an accomplished player of the flute and xylophone. As a young child, M.M.T. showed much interest in music and was fond of singing and dancing. He often played with dolls and set up a miniature toy stage. He presented plays with the dolls and other toys.

G.P., a female child of England, remembered the previous life of her older sister, Joanna, who had been killed (at the age of 11) in a vehicular accident. Joanna's younger sister, Jacqueline, had been killed at the same time. G.P.'s monozygotic twin sister, J.P., remembered the life of Jacqueline (Stevenson, 1997) (S). Joanna had liked to wear costumes, and she had acted in little plays that she wrote. As a young child G.P. showed an interest in playing at acting with costumes. J.P. took no initiative in this play, but entered into it with her sister.

Play Reenacting the Mode of Death in the Previous Life

M.S. was a young boy of Burma who remembered the life of a man who had drowned when a ferry on which he was a passenger capsized and sank (Stevenson, 1997) (S). When M.S. was between 2 and 3 years old, he would sometimes in his play enact a scene of a man trying to escape from a sinking ship. He would shout: "The boat is sinking. Help! Help!" He enacted this scene with playmates, but I did not learn what role he assigned to them. His mother tried to suppress this play, because she was afraid that M.S. might cause a panic, or even an accident, if he behaved in this way when they were actually on a boat.

R.S. was a young boy of Lebanon who remembered the life of a man, Sami Abutin, who had killed himself by holding the muzzle of a gun under his chin and somehow activating the trigger (unpubl. data) (S). He was alone when he killed himself and left no note behind. He had quarreled with his brother and was also frustrated because his wish to marry a woman he loved had been thwarted when she became interested in another man. When R.S. was about 3, he put a stick under his chin as if it were a gun and told his brothers: "Do not do this." He continued with this behavior for more than a year. When he was about 5 and playing at pointing a stick to his chin, his father asked him what he was doing. He said that he had done this to himself. He explained: "I did this for my cousin. They promised to give her to me, but they didn't."

Discussion

Much of the play of the children who remember previous lives appears to repeat, automatically, what was done many times before. It suggests the unconscious expression of a habit. As I was writing a draft of this paper, I had a minor operation on my left hand, and for several weeks I had to wear my wristwatch on my right wrist instead of the left one, which was in a splint; I noticed

that when I wished to know the correct time I would, from habit, hold up my left arm, as if the watch were still on that arm. The interpretation that the play of children who remember previous lives is the expression of a habit seems applicable to the types of play that I have listed under vocations, under avocations, and under play appropriate for the sex of the previous life.

We need a different explanation for the cases of the children who remembered the lives of parents who died leaving behind an infant or other young children. Their play attempts to recreate and continue the uncompleted role of parenting, as if no death had intervened.

The reenactment by a child of the death in a previous life may express memories of a traumatic event that are forceful enough to manifest, not only in inwardly experienced images, but in the physical activity that we call play. Such children seem to have involuntary memories similar to those experienced by persons traumatized in this life, such as the victims of the Holocaust (Kuch and Cox, 1992). Children may express in play memories of a traumatic event in this life (Saylor et al., 1992; Terr, 1981, 1988, 1991). The cases I have described differ only in that they seem to derive not from a trauma in this life but from one in a previous life.

Although all but two of the examples of unusual play that I have described occurred in Asia, I believe more examples will be found in Europe and North America when they are looked for more systematically than has hitherto been done. An important motive for presenting these cases is the hope of stimulating persons concerned with child development to observe and report unusual play in children. Some of the children who engage in unusual play may conceivably talk spontaneously about previous lives. If they do, parents should listen to them carefully. If they do not, parents may legitimately ask them why they engage in such unusual play.

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