

chapter one

The Quest for Immortality

What happens to us when we die?

It's a question all human beings eventually ask themselves. Transcending racial, social, political, economic, and gender lines, it is the one question common to all human beings, whether we like it or not.

Yet ever since the first men and women began pondering their mortality a hundred thousand years ago, the answer has eluded us. What *does* happen when we die? What becomes of our soul, our mind, our personality—our very essence? For that matter, do we even have such a thing as a soul, or is it all an illusion we have created to give ourselves a sense of permanence and the hope of immortality? Humanity has come up with three possible scenarios to try and answer this question.

The rationalist answers this query by proclaiming that since we are nothing more than a collection of cells and our brains simply tissue encased within a mantle of bone, nothing *can* happen to us when we die. The essence, personality, mind, soul—or whatever we wish to call our consciousness—ceases to exist, endowing our time on this planet with no more meaning than that which we choose to give it during our brief sojourn here. This is, of course, also the position of the atheist, which is what makes atheism, in my opinion, so easy. It requires nothing because it offers nothing, which strikes me as a fair trade.

To most people, however, this answer is unsatisfactory. It suggests that we are little more than some great cosmic accident and that, consequently, our life has no ultimate purpose. No matter how powerful or famous or wealthy we become, for most of us, after a few generations, our name will be at best but a footnote in history, forcing us to contemplate an existence without meaning in a universe that, despite all its beauty and splendor, has no more significance—or ultimate permanence—than a flower that briefly blooms in the spring only to wither and die after a few short days of vibrant life.

I suppose there are people for whom such a prospect is acceptable. It does, after all, tidy things up and make life simply a little game we sentient beings like to play for no particularly good reason other than because we have no choice. Yet something deep within the human heart knows better. We instinctively understand that we are more than the sum of our parts, which is why most people believe their personality will survive their physical demise in some form and will continue on long after their bones have turned to dust.

This, of course, brings us to our second option, which is that the personality/ego/true self/whatever-you-want-to-call-it does survive the demise of the body to exist—at least for a time—as a separate consciousness. If this is the case, however, the next question that logically follows is what exactly happens next. Some believe, for example, that we become ghosts—little more than disembodied spirits aimlessly wandering the earth, capable of perceiving the physical realm but unable to interact with it in any meaningful way. Such people can even point to various pieces of evidence to support this contention, from reported hauntings and EVPs (electronic voice phenomena, which are inaudible voices or sounds on tape thought to be made by the dead) to automatic writing, séances, and apparent spirits caught on film.

While I have no problem with the idea of ghosts, I don't think that is truly a viable long-term option for what exactly happens to us. Ghosts have always struck me as being transitory—beings trapped on the earth plane for a time, perhaps a few months or years (with a few tarrying for decades or even centuries, according to some reports),

but ultimately moving on and so essentially vanishing from our physical realm. As such, even if we are to become ghosts, it will be, at least for the vast majority of us, a brief experience and not our eternity. I suspect we all eventually move on to greener pastures, so to speak.

Now, however, is where it starts to get interesting. Most people, regardless of whether they believe in ghosts or not, believe that the essence of who we are—our soul, if you will—goes *some* place. Heaven is the favored destination for most: a place where our conscious personality, no longer shackled to the limitations and burdens of physical existence, survives within a perpetual state of bliss and joy throughout eternity. Some add to this by also embracing a belief in Hell: a perpetual state of torment for those who turn to evil and thus are doomed to exist forever within a conscious state of agony, regret, and fear.

Both positions, however, suffer from the same problem in my view, which is that they see our time here on this planet as but a blink of the eye of eternity, with the decisions we make—or fail to make—while in the body having profound and eternal ramifications. Unfortunately, this reduces the physical world to little more than a cosmic hatchery that exists only to birth new souls, each of which will spend a short amount of time in it before winging—or, potentially, plunging—to their ultimate estate. While admittedly this idea does manage to make this single life of paramount importance, it also forces one to wonder why a physical realm is necessary at all. If the physical universe exists merely as a vehicle for our creation, why couldn't the process be circumvented entirely and we be created directly into the spiritual realm, as was supposedly the case with God's angels? Why all the unnecessary pain and hardship of a physical existence—especially one in which there exists the very real danger that we might earn Hell through our misdeeds—if the spirit realm is the only destination that awaits us? In such a context, physical existence seems not only pointless, but in many ways even hazardous.

There is, however, a third position to consider. It is one that until recently has been largely ignored in the West but has been embraced by billions of people around the world for thousands of years, and

that is the belief that this physical existence is neither insignificant nor transient, but instead is perpetually ongoing. It is the concept that our soul lives on not in some ethereal Eden—or Hades—somewhere, but rather that it realizes perpetual existence through a process of continual rebirths into the physical realm, making our time on this planet not one single, brief experience, but a repetitive process realized through literally hundreds of lifetimes. It is a timeless belief—one that predates both Christianity and Islam by many centuries—and one that is known by many names in many cultures. It's been called *rebirth*, *regeneration*, *transmigration of the soul*, even *metempsychosis*, but is perhaps best known to us today as *reincarnation*.

Upon first consideration, especially to those who haven't given the idea that much thought, reincarnation may be an idea that seems foreign, exotic, or even a little nonsensical—especially to the Western mind steeped in the scientific method and drenched in two thousand years of monotheistic religion. It may seem to be something for Hindu holy men to ponder, or New Agers to embrace, but nothing that seems particularly relevant to most Westerners today.

I can easily understand this perspective, for it is one I myself held for the first forty years of my life. And truth be told, it *is* an Eastern concept—one in vogue more than four millennia before Christ was born—and a belief held today by nearly two billion of the world's population, mostly in the form of Hinduism and Buddhism, making it one of the oldest and most enduring belief systems known to humanity. In fact, it may be the original postmortem belief among early humans, who probably considered the idea when they began noticing strong similarities between recently born offspring and their deceased ancestors. Perhaps the mannerisms or interests a child displayed reminded one of a deceased loved one, or a birthmark mimicked another birthmark found on a long-dead grandparent, leading village elders to imagine that the dead ancestor had returned a second time—a not unreasonable assumption in cultures that assumed the soul to be naturally immortal.

Unfortunately, Westerners have traditionally had a tendency to dismiss foreign or primordial religious concepts as “primitive” and thus reject them out of hand. However, this is slowly changing as reincarnationist beliefs make headway in the West, especially in the last fifty years, and as such beliefs become increasingly popular to ever-growing numbers of Westerners.

Actually, although relatively few people realize it, reincarnationist beliefs have always been a part of Western thought. For example, reincarnationist ideas flourished in ancient Greece almost three thousand years ago and may have played a far more extensive role in our development as a civilization than traditional histories have led us to believe. Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, and Pythagoras all taught and believed in some form of rebirth, the foundations of which were later adopted by the great Roman philosophers Ovid, Virgil, and Cicero, along with a host of other great thinkers of antiquity. In fact, some of these ideas were so prevalent in the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christ that reincarnationist concepts played a major role in many of the “mystery” religions of the Mediterranean—religions that were themselves to become the template for other, later mystical faith systems of the region. Reincarnation, then, far from being an uncommon idea, was in fact widespread and may have strongly influenced the shape and thrust of Greek and Roman philosophy.

Even more of a surprise to many people, however, is the fact that reincarnationist concepts were also part of some of the more mystical branches of Western religion, from the Sufis of Islam to the Gnostics of the early centuries of Christianity, and even within the Hasidic and Kabbalist traditions in Judaism. In fact, at times it virtually flourished, and especially in the case of Christianity, almost became the predominant belief system, at least through the first few centuries of the church’s existence—until it was forced underground by the more traditional, non-reincarnationist branches of Christianity. Few Christians today realize that it was ever a part of their own faith.

Why were reincarnationist beliefs suppressed? The obvious answer is because such beliefs threatened authority. In promising multiple rebirths, reincarnation rendered the proclamations of the Pope or the Grand Mufti or whoever was the ruling head at the time transitory and, truth be told, irrelevant. Clearly, the religious authorities were dependent upon the single-life scenario for their very livelihood, making the belief in multiple lives far too dangerous to allow to stand. As a result, reincarnation remained largely unknown outside of Asia for the better part of fifteen of the last twenty-one centuries.

Its revival in the West was imminent, however, along with the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, when the long-forgotten writings of the ancient Greeks once again became popular, and Europeans could hold to previously forbidden ideas without forfeiting their lives. Still, reincarnationist beliefs weren't widely disseminated, usually remaining in the realm of the intellectual elite and thus remaining a belief held to by only a tiny percentage of the population (although that list includes such notable figures as Dickens, Emerson, Thoreau, Shaw, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Melville, Benjamin Franklin, Shakespeare, Da Vinci, Kant, Dante, and Voltaire, among others).

Reincarnation finally found its way to America in a major way in the nineteenth century, but even then it did not get off to an auspicious start. First, the most vocal of its adherents was an eccentric and, some maintained, unstable woman by the name of Helen Blavatsky, who emigrated from Russia to establish the Theosophical Society in 1875. Though a woman of considerable intellect and energy, her volatility, when combined with a highly esoteric and mystical teaching style largely beyond the grasp of the average person on the street, ensured that her teachings did not find a particularly extensive audience. As such, even though she and her organization were successful in reintroducing many traditional reincarnationist beliefs to the Western consciousness, they never managed to attract more than a

tiny following, resulting in reincarnation remaining a largely foreign concept to most Americans well into the twentieth century.

That all changed in the mid-twentieth century, however, as a result of two people. The first was a simple Kentucky psychic by the name of Edgar Cayce, and the second was an unassuming Colorado housewife named Virginia Tighe, who was to be better known to history as “Bridey Murphy.” First, Cayce.

Born into poverty on a small farm near Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in 1877, Edgar Cayce did not appear destined to be a man who would influence countless lives through his simple writings, but influence them he did. As a young man, Cayce accidentally discovered that he was able to put himself into self-induced trances and successfully diagnose the various ailments of the people who came to him with a variety of maladies, along with recommended treatments that, in many cases, proved to be remarkably effective. While that alone is curious enough, it turned out that while in these trances, he also spoke about some illnesses or diseases being “karmic” in nature and a byproduct of an experience from a previous lifetime. In essence, Cayce revealed nothing less than that his patients had lived previous lives on Earth, where they underwent some sort of trauma that had impacted their health in their current lifetime.

Now, the revelation that we reincarnate as a matter of course came as quite a shock to Cayce himself, who felt that as an orthodox Christian such ideas were unscriptural. However, as he was intent on helping others, he put his doubts aside and continued to diagnose maladies in his subjects—including those resulting from traumas in their past lives—right up to the time of his death in 1945. While alive, he also was responsible for penning several books (taken from transcripts from his readings and pulled into book form by his descendents) that went into some detail as to how reincarnation worked and what it all meant. He even talked at length about the “in-between” state and how each of our

various lives are recorded in a type of celestial “central library” known as the Hall of Akashic Records.¹

Cayce’s writings on reincarnation were not widely read until many years after his death, leaving the concept still little known to more than a tiny percentage of Americans. This would change a decade after the man’s death, however, due to the efforts of a businessman and self-taught hypnotist named Morey Bernstein and a Pueblo, Colorado, housewife by the name of Virginia Tighe—a woman who would eventually come to be known to the world as Bridey Murphy.

It all started in November of 1952, when Mr. Bernstein, curious about the subject of reincarnation and wondering if the twenty-nine-year-old Mrs. Tighe would be able to recount a past life while under hypnosis, put the woman into a deep trance and asked her to go back in her mind, until she found herself in “some other scene, some other place, or some other time,” and describe what she saw. What happened next came as quite a surprise to everyone involved: speaking in a mild brogue, Tighe identified herself as an Irish woman named Bridey Murphy and claimed to have been born in the town of Cork, Ireland, in the year 1798. Supposedly recounting a life lived in nineteenth-century Ireland, “Bridey” went on to describe in considerable detail a number of facts about her previous existence, all of it told in a lilting and progressively growing Irish accent that proved at times difficult to understand.

Intrigued by the unexpected results, Bernstein conducted five more sessions with Tighe over the next year, each of them tape recorded and witnessed by both Bernstein’s wife and Tighe’s husband, as well as several others. While much of what Virginia Tighe recounted was little more than anecdotal and disjointed stories from her alleged past life, some of it was detailed enough to be historically verifiable. Uncertain what to do with this information, after a few months Morey Bernstein and some journalist acquaintances hired investigators to check out “Bridey’s” story. While some of the people and places the

1. A term or concept, however, that Cayce did not invent but that goes back to antiquity.

woman named turned out to be undocumented—record-keeping in nineteenth-century Ireland being almost nonexistent—other information was verified, and the results were published in a little book entitled *The Search for Bridey Murphy*.

Released in January of 1956, the book became an unexpected best-seller—much to both Bernstein’s and Tighe’s surprise—with over 170,000 copies being sold within just the first two months of its release. Bernstein’s riveting account of past-life recall was even serialized in thirty-nine newspapers; an abridged version appeared in *True* magazine; 30,000 LPs of his recorded sessions were sold; and a Hollywood movie dramatizing the story was made. There was even a popular song inspired by the event, and very quickly the concept of reincarnation entered the public’s consciousness in a major way.

While Tighe’s story was later attacked by the scientific and religious communities and is considered by many skeptics today to have been successfully debunked,² there was no denying that *The Search for Bridey Murphy* was instrumental in bringing reincarnation into the mainstream of Western consciousness. Until then the concept had been held to by only a tiny fragment of the population, but after Tighe’s story hit the bookstores—and despite its later debunking—interest in the subject grew dramatically. By the late 1960s, belief in reincarnation was becoming increasingly popular among the young, who, turned off by traditional Western religion and enticed by the Eastern concepts of gurus and New Age masters, had become much more open to foreign concepts and as such willing to challenge and, when necessary, abandon long-held religious dogmas when they failed to answer their questions. Moreover, the 1970s and 1980s saw a burgeoning crop of books on paranormal and occult subjects, while books by channelers—people who supposedly

2. The general consensus is that Virginia Tighe’s memories were an example of *cryptomnesia*—a common phenomenon in which memories from the past are suppressed or forgotten only to emerge in a regression session as events from a past life. There is some debate today as to whether this was a correct appraisal of what happened, however.

act as conduits for disembodied personalities—and works by such well-known celebrities as Shirley MacLaine began to make reincarnation an increasingly acceptable belief system for many.

Reincarnationist beliefs made inroads into the scientific community as well, mostly through the work of University of Virginia psychiatrist Dr. Ian Stevenson (1918–2007), whose landmark work with children who could spontaneously recall past lives was documented in his 1966 book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. Due largely to Stevenson's work (and as a result of the nine books he was later to pen on the subject), people in the West were much more willing to look at the evidence for past lives than at any other time in history. As a result, today the subject is relatively well known to most Westerners and has been steadily gaining adherents ever since. By way of example, a 2003 Harris poll³ found that a quarter of all Americans believe in some form of reincarnation (fully a third of non-Christians), and even many scientifically literate people, intrigued by a multitude of increasingly well-documented past-life memory cases, are willing to consider the idea. Clearly, the reincarnation genie has been let out and there seems to be no way of getting it back into its bottle.

Before we can undertake any serious investigation of how reincarnation works, however, we need to examine some of the more basic pieces of evidence frequently pointed to in support of the concept, if only to lay an important foundation from which to examine in greater detail the mechanisms that may drive it.

3. *The Harris Poll*® #11, February 26, 2003.