

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Other Lives, Other Selves: A Jungian Psychotherapist Discovers Past Lives, by Roger J. Woolger.** New York, NY: Doubleday, 1987, xx + 386 pp, \$18.95.

The subtitle of this book runs "A Jungian psychotherapist discovers past lives," and that is a succinct description of it. Roger Woolger starts with a brief introduction that is part autobiography and part a rapid survey of different grounds—religious and empirical—for believing in reincarnation. The bulk of this book, which follows this introductory material, consists of case histories of patients whose symptoms have apparently benefited from their seeming recovery of memories of previous lives.

These past lives are "relived" with a full discharge of emotion, and Woolger (more Freudian than Jungian in this) attaches importance to this "release" of emotion as essential for the patient's improvement. Woolger does not use hypnosis, at least overtly; he merely encourages his patients to let themselves go and try to remember any events, in this life or another one, that may bear on their symptoms. His technique derives from what Carl Jung called "active imagination."

Woolger is, or affects to be, indifferent to the question of whether reincarnation occurs. He acknowledges that many, perhaps most, of his patients are engaging in fantasies, and he mentions having encountered two Anne Boleyns and two Joans of Arc. No matter, says Woolger; the past life fantasies are expressions of the patient's collec-

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tive unconscious and "reliving" an imaginary past life may be as beneficial to the patient as remembering a real one.

As the book continues, however, Woolger's initial stance of neutrality on the question of whether reincarnation occurs becomes weaker. First, he emphasizes the importance for the patient of fully releasing previously repressed emotion. Even assuming that this release of emotion is beneficial in conventional psychotherapy dealing with this life (something far from established and, in my view, unlikely), the same benefit cannot be claimed for the release of emotion based on fantasy. One of numerous reasons for the decline of psychoanalysis is Sigmund Freud's insistence that the difference between having been raped and imagining you had been raped is unimportant.

Second, Woolger forgets his stated doubts and, in later chapters of the book, he slips into accepting the past life fantasies at face value. In these sections words like *karma* and *samskara* occur repeatedly as Woolger claims to see, in case after case, causal connections between events evoked in the patient's past life memories (or fantasies) and his or her current symptoms or behavioral weaknesses. Woolger would like to have it both ways, but he has not convinced me that he can.

As a psychiatrist, I found Woolger's indifference to the question of the reality of reincarnation less troublesome than his failure to understand the common ingredients in all successful psychotherapy. For benefit to ensue in psychotherapy, the patient must want relief from his or her symptoms and must believe that the therapist can help; equally essential is the therapist's ability to communicate to the patient a sense of optimism and a conviction that he or she can be helpful. To use Fuller Torrey's metaphor, these universal ingredients of all successful psychotherapy are the horse in a horse and canary pie (Torrey, 1986).

The canary in the pie is the therapist's special technique or theory, whether it be body massage, free association, systematic desensitization, or seeming to remember fantasied past lives. However, therapists need to believe in the efficacy of their special techniques. They would not succeed if they simply read the Manhattan telephone book to their patients (or clients), because they would not believe that this could be helpful. Such disbelief would sap confidence in their ability to help patients and doubts would soon spread to the patients. There is no place for skepticism about methods during the practice of psychotherapy.

I have no doubt that Woolger is a good psychotherapist. I am also sure that he helps patients whom other therapists have not been able to help, just as, I think, other therapists may help some of those who do

not benefit from consulting him. However, being a good psychotherapist does not vindicate one's favored technique of psychotherapy.

In conclusion, I have to express my disappointment that Woolger did not grapple more effectively with some of the issues that his claims are bound to raise in the minds of intelligent readers. After all, he is not just another half-educated "New Age" counsellor of the kind that abounds in Southern California (and in Virginia too). He is a graduate of two of the best universities in the world, and I think we had a right to expect a better book from him.

### References

- Torrey, E.F. (1986). *Witchdoctors and psychiatrists: The common roots of psychotherapy and its future*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.