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Ian Stevenson: A Recollection and Tribute

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I had the pleasure of debating the issues concerning survival with Ian Stevenson over many years, both in person and in print. And there were quite a few issues on which we didn't see eye to eye. But what made those disagreements possible, and what allowed them to be as focused and substantive as they were, was the indispensable and monumental body of work that Ian had already produced and continued to produce.

Our debates tended to center around the interpretation of the survival evidence. The vast majority of modern cases were investigated and discussed either by Ian or by those who adopted his protocols, his terminology, and many of his philosophical and methodological assumptions. As in any area of empirical inquiry, all those matters are open to scrutiny and possible revision or abandonment. Ian understood that, and in our discussions he always displayed a commendable willingness to reflect critically on his own approach (and of course on mine as well, about which he had plenty of thoughtful things to say).

Quite apart from our disagreements about how best to interpret the survival data, we were in complete accord over the importance to parapsychology of spontaneous cases. Indeed, Ian's clear-headed and sensible advocacy of non-experimental evidence impressed and influenced me greatly during my early years in parapsychology. In fact, I found his 1968 essay "The Substantiality of Spontaneous Cases" (Stevenson, 1971) to be especially helpful. Moreover, since Ian and I were both members of an academic establishment in which intellectual freedom is often trumpeted but seldom practiced, I understood first-hand the sorts of pressures and criticisms that Ian had been confronting for many years. And I have no doubt that he handled them, not simply tenaciously, but with more grace and dignity than I'd ever been able to muster.

I should add that my talks with Ian were not confined to the topic of survival, or even to parapsychology. I first met Ian when he and Jule Eisenbud came to hear me give a piano recital at the 1978 PA conference in St. Louis, and in our conversations thereafter we usually found time to discuss some mutual interests about music and the arts. On those matters, incidentally, our opinions were likely to converge. And I was usually glad we could end our discussions by setting

aside our differences over the survival evidence to share our similar assessments of, say, Schubert and Brahms.

With Ian's passing, parapsychology has lost one of its most important and inspiring figures. Fortunately, he has left behind a formidable legacy of theoretical and empirical studies whose riches, although already appreciated, are far from exhausted. In fact, just as the work of F. W. H. Myers (whom Ian admired greatly) is appreciated more now than during Myers's life, I expect that Ian's research will also grow in stature for many years. And I sincerely hope that it will eventually be recognized as essential reading not simply in parapsychology, but in an increasingly mature and well-rounded behavioral science.

Reference

- Stevenson, I. (1971). The substantiality of spontaneous cases [1968 Presidential Address]. *Proceedings of the Parapsychological Association*, 5, 91–128.