

Barbara Graham

### Birth of *What Jonah Knew*

In the 1990's when I was a contributing writer for *Self* magazine, I was assigned to write an article on past-life regression therapy. To research the phenomenon—then growing in popularity—I signed up for a weekend workshop with Jungian psychologist Roger Woolger, an expert on the subject. I felt both curious and skeptical as I lay on a mat on the chilly floor of a church basement in New York being led through a series of hypnotic exercises, awaiting the arrival of my former selves. Alas, not one showed up. And though many of my fellow participants seemed to have big aha! moments—a few sobbing their hearts out as they witnessed their own gruesome deaths—I concluded I was a flop at the whole enterprise.

But since I still had to write the story, I decided to have a private session with Dr. Woolger. This experience turned out to be completely different from the workshop. Almost as soon as he began guiding me in an exercise, I saw myself in Europe during the Holocaust and, before long, suffered my own gruesome death at the hands of the Nazis. It was like watching a horrific flip book unfold—and this time I was the one crying my eyes out.

Afterward I was less skeptical, but still curious. How could any of this be proved? Yes, from a very young age I'd been obsessed with the Nazis and had read every book on the Holocaust I could find, but that was hardly proof. What's more, as a journalist who wrote about health and psychology, I relied on facts—hard evidence—to support my articles.

I was puzzling this out a few days later when—in one of those remarkable coincidences that seem like more than mere coincidence—a friend handed me a copy of Dr. Ian Stevenson's book, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. At the time, Dr. Stevenson was a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, and for decades had been researching children who experience spontaneous recall of a previous life. Not only had I found the evidence I'd been searching for, Dr. Stevenson's impressive work blew open doors in my mind.

Even more doors opened when, at around the same time, I was drawn to talks and retreats given by Tibetan Buddhist teachers who spoke of past and future lives as if they were as routine as last Christmas or next Valentine's Day. And on one very special occasion, I attended an inspiring small private audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama—a man widely acknowledged to be the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama before him.

All these experiences added up to something of a stew in my mind. And while it's true that the evidence for other lives is compelling, our past and future incarnations will likely never be demonstrable in a lab. Still, the possibility that we live more than once inspired profound questions in me—not just about the future, but about how we live now. As the mother of a son, the questions became pressing.

And then one day while walking down the street in New York not long after the meeting with the Dalai Lama, the story of *What Jonah Knew* suddenly came to me and I knew I had to write it.