

EDITORIAL

Theme and Variations: The Life and Work of Ian Stevenson

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Shortly after Ian Stevenson died on February 8, 2007, Henry Bauer asked us to guest-edit an issue of this *Journal* to be devoted to him – our mentor, colleague, and friend. Most readers of the *Journal* will probably agree that no one deserves such an honor more than Ian. He was a founding member of the Society for Scientific Exploration, but more importantly he exemplified the kind of scientist that the SSE was founded to encourage. For example, in 1957 he challenged a central tenet of psychoanalysis, then the predominant ideology in psychiatry, by publishing a paper in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* entitled “Is the Human Personality More Plastic in Infancy and Childhood?” He later said that, after this paper came out, a colleague in psychiatry asked him whether he could walk the streets unarmed (Stevenson, 1990, p. 8). Throughout his career he similarly challenged entrenched assumptions, not only in his extraordinarily well-reasoned and well-written publications but also in his painstaking investigations of empirical phenomena suggesting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of personality and consciousness, particularly the spontaneous phenomena of psychical research and, more specifically, phenomena related to the question of survival after death.

We are not at all certain that Ian himself would have welcomed the suggestion that an issue of this *Journal* be devoted to him. When he retired as Carlson Professor of Psychiatry and Director of the Division of Personality (now Perceptual) Studies at the University of Virginia, some of us told him that we wanted to hold a party to honor his nearly 50 years at the University. Ian’s reply: “Well, you can have a party if you’d like, but I won’t be there.”

Regardless of whether Ian would have approved of an entire issue devoted to him – even in a journal that he helped found – we went ahead and gathered contributions from among his many students, colleagues, and friends. We begin with some longer pieces that focus on some (although by no means all) of the many aspects of Ian’s life and work. Among these is a piece by Kerr White, Ian’s older brother. The brothers clearly came from a remarkable family because, like Ian, Dr. White is a physician and prolific writer who tackled important issues that few others had the courage to take on – in his case, health services research, or the objective evaluation of medical treatments, a field that he was

instrumental in establishing. These longer pieces are followed by shorter reminiscences and comments from many people who worked with Ian during various periods of his career. At the end, we have reprinted an essay that Ian published 50 years ago in *Harper's Magazine* entitled "Scientists with Half-Closed Minds." Probably not many readers of this *Journal* will have encountered this essay before, but they will surely find it of great interest because – regrettably – it is as pertinent today as it was 50 years ago.

Readers will see that the contributions to this issue are all variations on a theme – that an extraordinary human being put all his immense capacities and energies to work on the most important question a person can ask: Who and what are we? We hope that, just as Ian personally inspired so many of us, this tribute to him might also inspire others to study his work and continue where he had to leave off. Because the number of his publications is so enormous, we have not included his bibliography here, but much of it is available at <http://www.pflyceum.org/167.html>

Reference

- Stevenson, I. (1990). *Some of My Journeys in Medicine*. The 1989 Flora Levy Lecture in the Humanities. Lafayette: The University of Southwestern Louisiana. (Available online at <http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/personalitystudies/publicationslinks/some-of-my-journeys-in-medicine.pdf>)