

Getting the 'E.T.'s: UFO sighters urge 'be prepared'

This story was written after the reporter saw the movie "E.T." with a group of people who say they really have met extraterrestrial beings.

By Michael London
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Near the end of the movie "E.T., the Extra Terrestrial," there is a scene that neatly distills director Steven Spielberg's mix of the mundane and the fantastic

Ten-year-old Elliott is introducing his visitor from another planet to his schoolmates. "He's a man from outer space," he says. "We're taking him back to his spaceship."

The boys are dumbfounded. "Why doesn't he just beam up?" one of them asks.

Elliott's reply: "Are you kidding? This is reality."

For eight Los Angeles-area people who attended a recent screening of "E.T.," the movie embodies a reality of a special kind. All have had what they call "the UFO experience." To them, Spielberg's fantasy is in many ways fact.

Frank Reed, 39, his wife, Phyllis and their three sons claim to have sighted six extraterrestrial crafts hovering over a freeway. The Rev. Harrison E. Bailey, 55, says that alien beings visited his apartment repeatedly two years ago. Two participants requested anonymity — a photo-research technician, 40, who says his family was visited by aliens at a desert campsite outside San Diego, and a computer programmer, 29, who says extraterrestrials took her aboard a spaceship in a field behind her apartment.

In addition, Anita Furdek, 36, a psychic who says she observed the creatures in Bailey's apartment and helped root them out, attended the screening.

"This is a true movie, not a romance," said the photo-research technician. "It's part of a conditioning process to prepare us for the arrival of alien beings."

Furdek, who is employed as a marketing-research analyst at an insurance company, said, "The movie is a vehicle. A lot of it is hokey but it also invites the audience to be less afraid of the so-called paranormal. And what better place to start than with the children?"

Said Reed, a prosperous manufacturer's representative: "If you listen very carefully to the statements made in this film, little seeds of information are being planted in people's minds."

"We're going to be part of a whole system of beings one day. They're going to arrive over the course of time until we feel more comfortable with them. And the human race has to prepare for it or the effects will be devastating."

According to these fervent "witnesses," the lovable space creature in "E.T." bears only vague resemblance to real-life visitors — he's more of a gussied-up alien-gone-Hollywood. The aliens in their reports range from blobs to floating ectoplasm to emotionless dwarfs radiating a blinding white light.

But the witnesses are quick to add that physical authenticity isn't the point of "E.T." What's at stake in this gentle film fable, they say, is an urgent lesson for earthlings: The extraterrestrials are coming.

The eight witnesses all say that their experiences have prepared them to accept the reality of extraterrestrials. Now it's time to start on the rest of mankind — and that's where Steven Spielberg comes in.

Initially, each participant was reluctant to be interviewed for fear of being lumped in with the charlatans and professional crackpots who frequent the UFO field. But they eventually agreed to attend a screening of "E.T." and then meet as a group to discuss the film.

They came across in person as earnest, thoughtful and articulate people — down to earth, so to speak. "These are all rational witnesses," said Ann Druffel of the Center for UFO Studies, a researcher and author on UFO phenomena who helped select the screening group from her file of "verified" cases. "They're the best of the lot. Many people are so damaged by the experience that they just can't cope."

The witnesses recount their experiences with a quiet intensity

and richness of detail that would give pause to any skeptic.

There was a similar intensity in their reactions to "E.T." Several acknowledged powerful responses.

Bailey, pastor of a Baptist church, was moved by the film's theological overtones. "I don't want to get into a religious discussion," he said, "but at one point E.T. tells the boy, 'I'll be with you.' That's just what Christ said to the disciples when he sent them out into the world."

With obvious joy at the memory, the computer programmer said, "When I saw the ship at the beginning of the film, I felt a sudden rush of emotion. I thought, 'Wow, there it is again.' When the aliens appeared, the same thing happened. That surprised me. I hadn't expected those feelings."

But it was the subject matter, not the content, that provoked her response. In fact, she said, the physical features of E.T. and its

spacecraft were closer to Walt Disney creations than to her real-life encounter.

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"I can see all kinds of E.T. dolls, toys and T-shirts," added Bailey. "It's very clever commercially."

That line of criticism found its most extreme advocate in researcher Ann Druffel. "It was charming," she said, "but it wasn't about UFOs."

Druffel's remark drew strong protests from several of the witnesses, who insisted that the heart of "E.T." has everything to do with UFOs.

"The spiritual essence of the film is fright on," said the photo-research technician, who was 13 when his reported encounter occurred. "From a child's point of view, that's exactly how it happens."

The other participants agreed

that the film was primarily aimed at children — but that's all part of the plan, they said.

"As far as I'm concerned, this film is for my children and my children's children," said Reed. "They're the ones who are going to have to deal with extraterrestrial visitation on a much greater scale."

The Reed sons were entertained but, for the most part, nonplussed. They found the movie a little shallow after their own real-life experience. Frank Jr., 14, may not have been bowled over, but the witnesses believe that "E.T." will provide a valuable lesson for other children — and adults — whose previous experience is limited to science-fiction movies depicting extraterrestrials as savage monsters bent on enslaving Earth.

None described the aliens they had encountered as hostile. "That's the last thing they are," said Reed. "With their technology, they could devastate the world. They don't have to play games."

"E.T.'s" emotional key, they agreed, is the empathy created for the creature from outer space. "Usually we're all concerned about what's going to happen when 'they' come," said Furdek. "But here I was thinking about the poor little alien trapped in the woods, and how he doesn't know where he is."

Much of the empathy for "E.T." arose from the relentless manner in which the creature was hunted down by government scientists. "That's just how the government acts in an important case," said Bailey.

For Reed and the photo-research technician, the aftermath of their encounters was far more harrowing than the actual experiences. "I can tell you in a word what effect it had on me," said the technician.

Reed experienced a similar sense of panic. "I was shaken to the very foundation," he said. "I had a certain concept of the world, and suddenly I was confronted with something that didn't fit into my belief structure."

Both Reed and the technician delved into the UFO literature. Examining the evidence, they became convinced that it is only a matter of time before Earth is visited publicly by aliens.

"Now imagine what would happen if there was an overt landing on this planet," Reed said.

"We'd be confronted with a reality so far beyond us that we'd be stripped of everything we've learned over the ages. Our humanity would be cut to the core."

He said he believed that such an event would touch off economic, political and theological upheavals amounting to "absolute chaos." He and the other witnesses see "E.T." — though it's only a movie, and a sugar-coated one at that — as a vital step toward warding off such a calamity.

The photo-researcher suggested that Spielberg simply had soaked up a growing popular awareness of UFOs.

The computer programmer believes that the entire UFO phenomenon is a collective process of the human imagination. She regards extraterrestrials as a

physical manifestation of man's mental image of himself in a highly evolved state.

The photo-researcher said that he, too, had considered the psychological component of the UFO experience. "(Swiss psychiatrist Carl) Jung said the UFO is just a symbol for world unification, and the circle represents the universe," he said.

Reed hypothesized that an intelligence greater than man's might well be involved. How else, he asked, could there be so many echoes of ultimate truth in "E.T."?

For Reed, the whole mystery — and its solution — is contained in the last line of the film. As E.T. leaves for home, 3 million light years away, he taps Elliott on the forehead and says, "I'll be right here."