

UFO question tough to answer

Hynek remembered for giving respectability to phenomenon

THIS YEAR, WE LOST THE man who brought the subject of unidentified flying objects into the realm of science. Dr. J. Allen Hynek (1918-84). In recent months, every year, UFO activity seems to have been at a low level, and the public has not been very conscious of the phenomenon.

Everyone who works in the field of astronomy or at a planetarium, frequently is asked, "Do you believe in UFOs?" It is a very difficult question to answer because those words can mean so many things.

"Believe in" can suggest that a person may have faith in the great goodness of UFOs, that they are vehicles for creatures who have come here with a message that will save the inhabitants of Earth. Several people who claim to have had contact with UFOs have said that they are responsible for conveying that message. Although this is an aspect of the UFO story, it is not usually what is meant by that question.

The answer to the literal meaning of the question, "Do you believe in unidentified flying objects?" is "Yes, of course." It is a fact that lots of people are seeing flying objects that cannot be explained. This does not mean that anything strange is happening here, simply that some of the sightings are unidentified. This answer usually annoys the questioner because that was not the intent of the question.

The real question that was intended goes something like this, "Do you believe that the UFO sightings mean that we are being visited by alien space craft from another world?" The only answer that I can give is that I do not know. The problem is that, for the majority of sightings, all that people see are lights in the sky, for which no good explanation can be found. These sightings are well documented, and often corroborated by several witnesses. This is interesting, but not evidence of extra-terrestrial visitation.

Metallic objects

There are many stories of people sighting flying disks and other metallic objects, and a fair number of situations where we hear of contact between humans and aliens. There are problems with these interesting stories.

The evidence is slim. Usually only one person has the experience, and there is a lack of good recorded data such as pictures. Because of the dearth of supporting evidence, it would be easy to scientifically reject all of this. Unfortunately, it becomes difficult to do this because the people involved are often very credible.

It is amazing how often someone I recently met will discover that I have an interest in the subject and they will confide some UFO experience that happened long ago. It had been kept a secret because they were afraid to tell anyone. This is hardly a publicity-seeking booster.

The dilemma is that, when faced with a credible story, I have the choice of deciding that the person is a liar, or that they really had an interesting experience. Hynek taught that to see UFOs as evidence only of extra-terrestrial visitation was to limit our thinking. He liked to call everything that was associated with the sightings the "UFO phenomenon." This meant it was possible that, by collecting data on UFOs, we may be documenting several different kinds of happenings, and only one, or none, may be the result of aliens coming to Earth.

The term that he used for UFO sighting was "new empirical observations." Surely there are things going on in this universe of which we know nothing, or almost nothing. For example, early in the last century no one knew about radio waves. Right now those waves are all around us, passing through our bodies, and carrying television and radio information. And we can sense some of



Sky Watch

Robert
Balakirnyo

Light waves

Actually there is some of this that we can sense; we sense light with our eyes, and infrared can be felt as heat with the skin. Light waves, and infrared waves are part of the electromagnetic spectrum. So are radio waves, infra-red in lower frequency (longer waves) than light, and radio waves are simply much lower again.

The light which we perceive is actually the tip of a big iceberg, the whole electromagnetic spectrum. The question that all of this raises is, what other things that we observe every day are tips of other icebergs? Could the UFO phenomenon be the tip of one, or more than one?

Hynek thought so. He was an astronomer and a scientist. The Center For UFO Studies was an attempt to make the subject suitable for real scientific investigation.

The subject of UFOs has never been the focus of intensive scientific investigation. For a long time, the United States treated it as a national security problem, and left the matter in the hands of the Air Force. The military were not known for sharing their information, and many people suspect that they have facts which they are hiding from the public.

In order to get out of the UFO business, the U.S. assembled some scientists under the leadership of Dr. E. Condon to study the matter and report. The result was the often debated, but seldom read, *Condon Report*, published in 1968. It concluded that UFOs were not a suitable subject for scientific research. That ended official U.S. involvement in recording people's UFO experiences.

The process of science requires some way for real data to be collected, and theories proposed and tested. In this sense, the comments of the *Condon Report* were valid. The data on the subject usually consists of the accounts of the UFO sighting, along with any comments and evidence which can be collected by investigators who arrive on the scene later. There is a mountain of this, but it leaves little room for real science.

Hynek thought that as a phenomenon, the UFO incidents involved the effects of the experience on the subjects (or victims), the behavior of other people in the community, and the reaction of society at large. All of this merited study. If any kind of pattern was to emerge from all of this, the information had to be collected in one place. To provide a place for the information, and to encourage research using the files, Hynek established the Center For UFO Studies.

Hynek was an astronomer and a teacher. He will be best remembered for his work with the UFO phenomenon. This subject brought him to Winnipeg on several occasions, including once in 1975 to participate in the development of the Planetarium show, *Unidentified Flying Objects*. Those of us who know him will miss his enthusiasm and insights into this strange subject.

The Planetarium operates the Manitoba Centre For UFO Studies, and is affiliated with Hynek's center. If you have had a UFO experience, it should be reported. The reports are all confidential.

