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Alien thinking  
By Angela Hind  
Pier Productions

Not many scientists are prepared to take tales of alien abduction seriously, but John Mack, a Harvard professor who was killed in a road accident in north London last year, did. Ten years on from a row which nearly lost him his job, hundreds of people who claim they were abducted still revere him.



Object of fascination: a model of an alien at a Roswell museum

Professor John E Mack was an eminent Harvard psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and Pulitzer Prize winner whose clinical work had focused on explorations of dreams, nightmares and adolescent suicide.

Then, in 1990, he turned the academic community upside down because he wanted to publish his research in which he said that people who claimed they had been abducted by aliens, were not crazy at all. Their experiences, he said, were genuine.

They were not mentally ill or delusional, he said, and it was the responsibility of academicians and psychiatrists not only to take what they said seriously, but to try to understand exactly what that experience was. And if reality as we know it was unable to take these experiences into serious consideration then what was needed was a change in our perception of reality.

"What are the other possibilities?" said Mack. "Dreams, for instance, do not behave like that. They are highly individual depending on what's going on in your sub-conscious at the time.



"I would never say, yes, there are aliens taking people. [But] I would say there is a compelling powerful phenomenon here that I can't account for in any other way, that's mysterious. Yet I can't know what it is but it seems to me that it invites a deeper, further inquiry."

Professor John E Mack: Turned academic community upside down

**Lifeline**

For many people who claimed they had been abducted, John Mack was a lifeline. He worked with more than 200 of them, including professionals, psychologists, writers, students and business people.

Many had never told anyone else of their experiences apart from Mack for fear of ridicule from colleagues, friends and family. Here at last was a highly respected psychiatrist who was not only prepared to listen - but also take what they were saying seriously.

**“ I would never say, yes, there are aliens taking people...] I would say there is a compelling powerful phenomenon here that I can't account for in any other way ”**

An abductee - or "experiencer" as they prefer to be known - says that alien encounters begin most commonly in their homes and at night. It can however

John Mack

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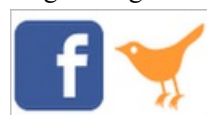
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happen anytime, anywhere. They say they are unable to move; they become extremely hot and then appear to float through solid objects, which their logical mind tells them can't be happening.

Usually the experiencer says they are accompanied by one or two or more humanoid beings who guide them to a ship. They are then subjected to procedures in which instruments are used to penetrate virtually every part of their bodies, including the nose, sinuses, eyes, arms - abdomen and genitalia. Sperm samples are taken and women have fertilised eggs implanted or removed.

### Hybrid offspring

"Have I questioned my own sanity"? says Peter Faust an experiencer and close friend of John Mack's. "Absolutely, every day to a certain degree because the majority of the world says you're crazy for having these experiences. But if it was just me who had contact with aliens, who had intimate experience with female aliens and producing hybrid offspring, I would say I'm certifiable, put me away, I'm crazy.

"And that's how I felt when I initially had these experiences. My wife thought I'd lost it. But then I began to look at the experience outside myself and realised that hundreds if not thousands of people reported that exact same experience. And that gave me sanity. That gave me hope. I knew I couldn't be fantasising this."

The whole experience is often accompanied by a change in the experiencer's understanding of humanity's place in the universe. And it was this that forced Mack to question who we are in the deepest and broadest sense.

"I have come to realise this abduction phenomenon forces us, if we permit ourselves to take it seriously, to re-examine our perception of human identity - to look at who we are from a cosmic perspective," he said.

### Extraordinary work

In 1990 John Mack's book *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* was published. It shot to the top of the best sellers list and John Mack appeared on radio and television programmes. Harvard decided enough was enough.

Mack was sent a letter informing him that there was to be an inquiry into his research on alien abductions. It was the first time in Harvard's history that a tenured professor was subjected to such an investigation. John Mack decided to fight back and hired a lawyer, Eric MacLeish.

"It was appalling that John had to go through this," says MacLeish now. "And we made it clear that if we were to have a full blown trial here, then we were going to have a very public trial and call on everyone who worked with John - all of whom had nothing but praise for his extraordinary work and dedication to his patients - and I don't think that's what Harvard had in mind at all."

There followed 14 months of stressful and bitter negotiations. "They tried to criticise me, silence me - by saying that by supporting the truth of what these people were experiencing, possibly I was confirming them in a distortion, or a delusion. So instead of being a good psychiatrist and curing them, I was by taking them seriously, confirming them in a delusion and harming them," said Mack.

**“ We made it clear that if we were to have a full blown trial here, then we were going to have a very public trial and call on everyone who worked with John ”**  
Eric MacLeish

The inquiry made front page headlines all over the world and eventually Harvard dropped the case and a statement was issued reaffirming Mack's academic freedom to study what he wished and concluding that he "remains a member in good standing of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine".

He continued to work and write. But Mack was killed in a car collision last year in north London after leaving a Tube station. He was visiting the city to deliver a lecture on the subject which had won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1977, *The Lawrence*.

But Mack's work lives on with an institute which now bears his name; the hundreds of people who count themselves in "the experiencer community" still hold him in particular affection.

His search for an expanded notion of reality, which allows for experiences that might not fit traditional perceptions and worldviews, is one they, at least, will

be hoping continues.

**Abduction, Alienation and Reason, a programme about John Mack, was broadcast on Wednesday night on BBC Radio 4 at 2100BST.**

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The bottom line is that we really just don't know, do we?

**Jeannette, Miami Lakes, FL**

John Mack is a nutcase just like all the other alien abductees.

**Prea Gayo, London**

John Mack may have dressed his theories up in academic terms, he may even have been highly intelligent, when it comes down to it however, he was a loony, as is anyone that really believes they were abducted. The so-called abductees of this world fall into two distinct categories, mentally ill and fraudulent. It does no-one any good to encourage them as Mack did.

**James, UK London**

What a fascinating story. I cannot believe he was criticised for trying to broaden academic opinions on the matter. Who are we to say such happenings do not occur. It shows a very narrow minded approach we have as a society on topics that if proven to be true, against popular belief, that we really do know very little about the bigger picture. This would scare many people. Is it naive to not believe in such phenomenon or is it just good crowd control!?

**Anon, Exeter**

I'd long forgotten that I had read his book back in 1990, but I do remember that it gave a lot of credibility to a subject that has never really been taken seriously before. He showed that this can't simply be a bunch of nutcases. Many many normal everyday people all over the world believe that they have experienced this, and he did the right thing with his investigations. It's pretty outrageous that Harvard battled with him on it, many ideas appear ridiculous at first, and something like this is far beyond our scope of comprehension, but does that mean we shouldn't look into it...of course not. Quite sad to hear he had been killed, I wasn't aware of that.

**R Devanney, Peterborough**

What an uncritical account! There are many explanations for these phenomena which fall within the realm of science - sleep paralysis is a prime example, which has been posited as a major cause for belief in all sorts of bizarre experiences throughout the ages. All that has really changed is that people now have experiences of aliens instead of demons because their hallucinations are influenced by their surrounding culture. I've had a few episodes in the past, but didn't attribute it to anything more than my own mind playing tricks.

**Paul, Luton, UK**

I've never really thought that Abductions by aliens was true, preferring to believe that it's a type of seizure overlaid with modern mythologies, and that people have suffered from this for thousands of years, depending on the era and location they see goblins, fairies, vampires etc. then a thought struck me. When human scientists go into the field to do studies on the local fauna, they tend to trap specimens, examine them, tag them and return them to their natural environment as though nothing has happened. Sounds kind of familiar doesn't it!

**Paul, Birmingham**

One piece of evidence which points to alien abductions being a type of dream is the fact that the first encounters did not occur until War of the Worlds was written. Also, in the fifties before computers, 'experiencers' claimed spaceship displays were made of dials and levers, using spaceships made from steel, and now 'experiencers' claim that spaceships are white or silver, and that computers are holographic. Clearly these people are not crazy; the event occurs to many. However, many dreams are common to people such as having an exam or forgetting to get dressed, and being experimented upon is just a common dream, which varies only slightly from person to person.

**S Murray, Chester, UK**

Interesting story. I don't know if Mack got anything published, but peer review would have asked the Occam's Razor question - was there anything else that could account for the phenomenon? This is why he had trouble getting it published - there were too many other possible explanations. No amount of correlation between experiencers would be good enough, unless they were all totally isolated from each other. In fact the story confirms that

they were not. Ideas propagate across populations. Mack was practising bad science, but lots of professors do that and Harvard was either ill-advised to take him on, or too weak to push for a conclusion.

**Les Rose, Salisbury, UK**

I am a person who has extremely powerful experiences during sleep that I find difficult to explain away as just vivid dreams. While I've never had an experience of being abducted, I do seem to experience another complete world in incredible detail. I doubt I have the imagination to make it all up, so I keep an open mind.

**David, Milton Keynes, UK**

It's time people accept that other dimensions of reality exist. We can detect through science many things now, that were imperceptable previously, did they not exist before we could detect them? Nobody can disprove this phenomena. It doesn't mean that space aliens really are the culprit, but an extraordinary phenomenon demands extraordinary investigation and serious investigation at that.

**Ken Hall, Barrow UK**

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