

"We've All Studied Lifton"

by Martin Kottmeyer

"Don't be afraid to believe. This is the most significant development in the history of man." The words are those of a visionary, the newest defender of the reality of alien abductions. He is a psychiatrist addressing a group of colleagues. They aren't buying it.

"With all due respect, doctor. Everyone knows there are people who gravitate to this kind of thing. They read about it, see it on TV, in the movies. This is the pathology of a space-age psychosis. People don't see the Virgin Mary anymore -- now they see alien baby snatchers."

The psychiatrist is prepared. "Robert Lifton's work on survivors -- we've all studied Lifton -- the people that he writes about -- the survivors of Hiroshima, the Holocaust, Vietnam -- they all have the exact same symptoms as the people I've told you about; fear, anxiety, nightmares, suspicion -- suspicion especially of the mental health community who consistently misdiagnose them. These are reactions to real trauma. There's no fantasy here."

The exchange is from the 1992 mini-series *Intruders*. The visionary and skeptic are fictional, but the argument is familiar enough. John Mack, the Harvard psychiatry professor who authored the controversial book *Abduction* was not the inspiration for the Richard Creena character, but the writer admitted it "ends up being more like John Mack than anybody." Mack said it was kind of spooky how things in it happened to him, notably the credibility questions. People in the production had sat in on his therapy groups. One can find Lifton's name in the acknowledgments of Mack's book.

This was not the first time that Lifton's name had been invoked by defenders of the abduction phenomenon. Editorializing in the January/February 1987 *International UFO Reporter* Jerome Clark observed, "A milestone of sorts may have been reached on April 10, 1987, when Dr. Robert J. Lifton, one of this country's most prominent psychiatrists, acknowledged on NBC's *Today Show* that the UFO abduction phenomenon has yet to be explained and merits serious investigation." In the October 1988 *Fate*, he regarded Lifton's statement as emblematic evidence of "a quiet revolution" that had taken place as scientific, medical-health professionals displayed a growing involvement, believing the evidence pointed toward "an extraordinary cause" and "a potentially explosive payoff." Elsewhere, he also thought it indicated abductions constituted now "a subject that could be discussed seriously outside the pages of tabloids." (J. Gordon Melton's *New Age Encyclopedia*, Gale Research, 1990, p. 473.)

An instructor at Yale, Lifton has unambiguously high status. He authored *Death in Life*, an often cited study of the psychological aftermath of Hiroshima. It won the National Book Award in the Sciences and has had enduring respect among people in the social sciences. Even his most derisive critic, Adam Garfinkel, who lumps Lifton with Mack as *Psycholeftists* for their anti-nuclear politics, grants he is a serious writer whose "views, unlike Mack's, haven't departed from prevailing notions of reality, at least not yet." Maybe not the highest praise, but you should have seen the rest of the article. ("Psychobabble and Its Discontents" *Heterodoxy*.)

I missed Lifton's appearance on the *Today Show* and have to admit I didn't quite know what to make of this purported milestone. There were no direct quotes and no details. It might have been tact or deferring to the Slater study based on a casual reading. How deeply into the subject he was could only be termed unknown. I was curious about it in an idle way since I had read *Death in Life* and knew he once regarded alien invasion films as a reaction to the radical impairment of life-death balance and helplessness spawned by the threat of nuclear annihilation. Japan had made a number of such films in the Fifties. So, too, did America. Why he should think any differently about the persecution fantasies of UFO believers didn't quite make sense. I guessed it would only be a matter of time before he wrote a paper or book on the matter. Time passed; nothing appeared. I forgot about it.

Excerpt from *The Protean Self*

Editor's note: The following is full text of the paragraph that Kottmeyer referred in Lifton's latest book:

Historical forces may also be contributing to a dissociative constellation that includes: multiple personality and borderline states as clinical syndromes; a general increase in child abuse, especially sexual, and particularly by parents and other relatives; and a very different social manifestation, the dramatic expansion of the UFO (unidentified flying object) phenomenon in the form of sightings and descriptions of "missing time" attributed to "abductions" by extraterrestrial creatures. There is at least the possibility that these three elements are interrelated. Nicholas Humphrey and Daniel Dennett raise the possibility that much of the UFO experience, particularly its component of medical or surgical procedures ostensibly performed on abductees by humanoid creatures, could be a "mythic version" of actual child abuse. There is some evidence of increased incidence of child abuse in people reporting such abductions; but even if this correlation is uncertain, all of these states and our ways of talking about them could be greatly influenced by the vast dissociative trend in our time. Also related to the dissociative constellation could be the massive expansion of cult formation and of contemporary fundamentalism; and the increasing evidence of a "false memory syndrome," in which accusations of early parental abuse are made by adult children on the basis of claimed recovery of memories that had ostensibly been repressed for decades, the memories sometimes including satanic rituals -- the entire sequence considerably influenced by therapists and support groups focused on such repressed memories.

- Robert J. Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. New York: BasicBooks, pp. 210-11.

Then, recently, I learned there was a sequel of sorts. Lifton had written a book six years later called *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (BasicBooks, 1993). The book is a descriptive enterprise which details the psychological adaptations that part of humanity has created to deal with the amazing cultural transformations of the 20th century. It's a good, solid work which strikes a fair balance with regard to the implications of these adaptations. Neither utopian or dystopian, it's a refreshing change of pace from the general run of psychological tomes one encounters. Quietly waiting to be found is half a paragraph devoted to the alien abduction phenomenon.

It's in a section titled "The Deracinated Self." Lifton essentially considers alien abduction experiences part of the dissociative constellation of psychological byproducts of our rapidly changing times. The current era is "an age of numbing" that has left the Self detached and disaffiliated from the outside world. It displays impaired symbolization with a marked separation of thought from feeling. He cites a paper on multiple personality disorder that considers the abduction experience a "mythic version of childhood abuse."

This is not exactly the same as calling it a "space-age psychosis," but there a radical presumption here of pathology that mirrors the skeptic in *Intruders*. Both share the suspicion that this is fallout of the times we are living in; for Lifton, however, the dissociation started decades before Sputnik and Apollo. Curiously, Lifton is proposing a pathology that seems more disturbing than the explanations proposed by most of the debunkers and psychosocial adherents on record. Ironic indeed, when you consider Lifton was being pointed to as an authority demonstrating how wrong-headed the skeptics were in thinking abductees shouldn't be believed. Turnabout being fair play, shouldn't we now wonder if Lifton's stance represents a milestone in a heretofore silent counter-revolution pointing to ordinary causes and a potentially boring outcome of this program of investigation?

I'd counsel against it. Frankly, Lifton's stance shows no deep acquaintance with the abduction phenomenon. It is rooted entirely in a paper by Nicholas Humphrey and Daniel C. Dennett titled "Speaking for Our Selves: An Assessment of Multiple Personality Disorder" (Occasional Paper # 8, Center on Violence and Human Survival, John Jay College of Criminal Justice: The City University of New York). The paper is a philosophical meditation on the multiple personality problem rooted in interviews with multiples and their therapists. The authors deal with the abduction myth in only one paragraph in a section explicitly admitted to be random speculation. Here it is in its entirety:

In contemporary America, many hundreds of people claim to have been abducted by aliens from UFO's. The abduction experience is not recognized as such at first, and is described instead as "missing time" for which the person has no memories. Under hypnosis, however, the subject typically recalls having been kidnapped by humanoid creatures who did harmful things -- typically involving some kind of sex-related surgical operation (for example, sharp objects

being thrust into the vagina). Are these people recounting a mythic version of an actual childhood experience? During the period described as missing time, was another personality in charge -- a personality for whom the experience of abuse was all too real?

No interviews with abductees are cited and their knowledge of abduction lore can only be termed as hearsay in form. They are asking questions, not arguing positions. As it happens there are known cases of abductees with multiple personality disorder, but if anyone has come forward to reveal an alien-ascribed missing time was confused with a personality shift in which the person was doing things with other people, it hasn't been mentioned. The involvement of childhood abuse was noted by several workers, notably Kenneth Ring and Susan Marie Powers, but the linking of specific motifs to documented episodes of abuse has yet to be demonstrated. There are good reasons to be cautious in accepting this as a blanket explanation. Dreams and fantasies tend to be more closely related to ongoing mental conflicts in the individual rather than his early life. Some of D. Scott Rogo's work is more supportive of this life crisis view of abductions. Early abuse may only predispose the person to paranoid styles of expectation and interpretation in a vague way. The specific motifs may be borrowed from a variety of sources; lore about other abductees, distorted memory residues from earlier in the day, movies, TV, creative imagining, and the vast pool of transpersonal imagery we ascribe to the human unconscious. Recall the material Stanislav Grof described in his LSD studies.

What is amusing here is not so much that Lifton was wrong, but that he didn't care enough about the abduction phenomenon to give it more than a few seconds thought. Lifton, after all, was truly into bigger business. Protean adaptations are something all of us encounter in people we know, perhaps even in ourselves. Abductees are a fringe phenomenon which matter to a tiny percentage of people. Contrary to the visionary in *Intruders*, he blatantly doesn't consider them the most significant development in man's history. They rate half a paragraph, which sounds about right for a Yale man. I can certainly respect that.

I wonder though whether ufologists will appreciate what it means.

[Writer Martin Kottmeyer writes frequently for The REALL News.]

The Foxes of Skepticism

by David Bloomberg

Book Review:

The Running Dogs of Loyalty:

Honest Reflections on a Magical Zoo,

by Gale Richard Walker

The front cover of the pre-release copy Dr. Walker sent me says, "for those over 30 only," but I went ahead and read it anyway. I'm quite glad that I didn't heed the "warning" and read through this extremely well-written satire.

As you may know (or as you will know if you look at the back page of this newsletter), Dr. Walker and company will be presenting a dramatic reading of this book at REALL's next meeting. As such, I don't want to give away too much about the book. I also don't want you to get the idea that this review is nothing more than an advertisement for the meeting, but, frankly, I just don't have anything but praise for Walker's work.

This story is an allegory set in Zooland, a place run in a way which is probably all too familiar to anybody who has worked in a large company or, dare I say it, government. Most of the book deals with two wise, old Foxes explaining the true workings of Zooland to a Young Pup. Baboons, Barking Seals, and, of course, Running Dogs of Loyalty are all explained to the Young Pup as he gains insight and loses his naivete.

"But what does this have to do with skepticism?" I hear you ask. Well, most of the book is somewhat tangential to the subjects we would normally cover in this newsletter. However, I like to emphasize critical thinking in all aspects of our lives, and this book does hit on the areas we are used to seeing in these pages.

For example, as one of the Foxes is explaining things to the Pup, he says something REALL could almost use as a

motto: "The best medicine for misery is neither myth nor miracle, but naked truth." Indeed, I have often tried to explain this to those who claim that certain types of therapy, like past-life or other memory inducing therapy, help the patient, so we shouldn't care if the "memories" they find are true or not. To me, the truth is always the ultimate goal.

However, Walker also points out how many others feel about the truth: "Most creatures prefer a warm lie to a cold truth. If you make them feel good, the masses will love you. If you make them think, they will hate you. I warn you: He who dares disturb the sleepwalk of masses, prepares for nightmare." I sometimes feel this way when discussing REALL with non-skeptics. While I have only met a few who have actually "hated" me for pointing out a lack of evidence for one of their cherished pseudo-scientific beliefs (Dorothy Allison, the shoving psychic, comes to mind), I have certainly encountered a number who have been less than happy with me.

Politics, bureaucracy, True Believers, and other similar non-free thinkers all come under Walker's scrutiny. "The mystified mystify. The petrified petrify. Those who cannot grasp social force -- the whole -- in reality as reality, abstract, mystify, and petrify it. They make it supernatural, mystical, holy." It seems to me that some parts of humanity have not advanced very far from the older civilizations when any phenomenon which was not understood was given a supernatural reason. The sun, the moon, the stars -- all were worshipped and mystified at one time, but are now understood. Today we have psychics, UFOs, and weeping statues, and people who still make the illogical leap that if they cannot figure out why something is happening, there must be a mystical reason for it.

In fact, the more I read Walker's book, the more I find which relates directly to my own experiences. I am sure that most REALL members will feel the same way.

[This book may be ordered for \$9.95 + \$4.50 shipping & handling by sending a check or money order to:

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From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

When I first saw Martin Kottmeyer's article on noted author Robert J. Lifton, I was delighted to see that other critical thinkers share in my long-time appreciation of his analyses and ideas on symbolic immortality, the protean self and psychohistorical processes. On an even more personal note, I have been friends over the years with Chuck Strozier, former Sangamon State University professor and author of books on Lincoln and about fundamentalism, who moved to New York to work with Lifton, including serving as executive director of the Center on Violence and Human Survival. Their works on human behavior in face of death and destruction are very moving and influential on my own thinking.

In his cover article, Kottmeyer demonstrates that pro-paranormal supporters may be misstating Lifton's position on certain matters that may or may not be subtle ways of bolstering arguments to support a particular viewpoint. His article, at the very least, is a reminder that realizing the truth is no easy task -- that one has to be ever vigilant about generalizations, misstatements and other errors of thought.

/s/ Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

Well, once again I find myself writing this column at the last minute. My life has gotten busier lately (the worst part is that I'm not really sure why), so you may notice a few less articles from me in upcoming issues than you've seen in the past. Personally, I think this is good -- not because it means I have less to write, but because it means more of you are writing articles for the newsletter! I'd like to see as many people getting involved and writing articles (or even short blurbs) as possible.

Speaking of getting involved, I was glad to see a pretty good turnout at our lunch meeting last month. In fact, that was the best turnout we've ever had at a meeting which also featured elections. I guess my disclaimer in the last flyer, about not volunteering anybody for anything, worked. As for the results of that election, well, you may notice on the inside front page that nobody changed positions. I'd like to thank all of the officers and Board members for continuing to serve REALL and its membership.

Even if you aren't an officer in REALL, we are always looking for more help. Like I said above, we want to see articles here by as many people as possible. In addition, if you have the time, we can always find something to do. As we printed a few issues back, we've been asked (along with all the local skeptics groups) by the Rocky Mountain Skeptics to look at Therapeutic Touch (TT), a pseudo-science medical "treatment" being taught to nurses around the country. With several large hospitals and a school of medicine locally, I'd like to see if anybody is using or teaching TT around here. If you'd like to volunteer for something like this, just let me know!

Another area in which we're looking for volunteers, as I mentioned in the previous two issues, is at the Illinois Science Teachers Association annual convention, which will be held here in Springfield this year. This convention occupied a large portion of our discussion at the lunch meeting, mostly pertaining to what we should feature and how we should do it. The consensus was to make sure to hit creationism hard, but also to emphasize other areas of science and critical thinking in general. We'd like to have some hand-outs for the teachers (for example, a generic horoscope they can take to their classes, copy off, and show how it applies to everybody, yet that everybody would think it applied specifically to them) and the like, but I need some help to get it all together. Calling all volunteers!

/s/ David Bloomberg

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The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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