

Accounting for Stories of Alien Abductions

Psychiatrist John Mack shares his convictions that these reports are 'authentic and disturbing mysteries'

By Deane W. Lord
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From Ancient Greece to the present, humankind has asked, Is there life beyond planet Earth? And, if so, what form does it take?

Last month some 100 researchers and mental health professionals gathered in Cambridge to explore the possibility of extraterrestrial life and to examine and compare the experiences of abductees—men and women who claim to have been kidnapped by alien beings, taken aboard spacecraft, and eventually released.

The four-day closed meeting drew some of the most ardent and long-term researchers who presented short papers on their work. Chief among them was conference co-organizer Medical School Psychiatry Professor John Mack, who became involved with the UFO question two and a half years ago. Although he began as a total skeptic, he admitted, he now believes that the experiences of abductees "are an extremely important phenomenon" and that "we can't begin to understand them without a shift in our world view."

He believes that mental dualism in the West—"we're here, you're there"—will prevent many from being open minded about the possibility of alien abductions. "These experiences are shattering our world view [by suggesting] that we may be connected with other beings beyond ourselves. . . . The proposition attacks the arrogance of our ideas and makes a mockery of our technology."

Estimates vary as to how many individuals have had abduction experiences. According to a Roper Organization poll, one out of every 50 American adults—some 3.7 million people—indicate that they have had an encounter with an unidentified flying object or an alien being.

"It is possible that hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of people in this country alone have undergone abduction experiences," said Mack.

Because of the stigma attached to revealing such experiences, he believes many people remain underground, too ashamed or alarmed to admit the experience.

"The more prominent the person, the more likely he or she will be reluctant to come forward as they have more to lose," he said. "Often, once they seek help, abductees prefer to be diagnosed as crazy."

A well-known psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Mack reports that of the 60 cases he has worked on he has found, to his surprise, that after a battery of psychological tests, "no psychiatric or psychosocial explanation for these reports is evident. These people are not mentally ill." He has spent countless therapeutic hours with these individuals only to find that what struck him was the "ordinariness" of the population, including a restaurant owner, several secretaries, a prison guard, college students, a university administrator, and several homemakers.

"The majority of abductees do not appear to be deluded, confabulating, lying, self-dramatizing, or suffering from a clear mental illness," he maintained. He has encountered only one person who showed psychotic features.

The central finding of most researchers, including Mack, is that there is one archetypal abduction experience and that most abduction memories contain very limited variations on a standard scenario. A typical encounter would begin with uneasy feelings of foreboding, a fear-inducing appearance of small alien beings, transport to a spacecraft, examination and other proce-



Photo by Laura Wulf

Medical School Psychiatry Professor John Mack: "These [abduction] experiences are shattering our world view [by suggesting] that we may be connected with other beings beyond ourselves. . . ."

dures performed on a special table, various tests and tasks given, the introduction of more favorable feelings toward the aliens, and finally a return to pre-abduction activities and states of consciousness.

For most of the abductees, the experience is fearful and many repress the details. Often, hypnosis brings back the traumatic episode and helps the abductee recover memories of the entire event, Mack and others have found.

"Particularly impressive to me has been the intense resistance and disturbing affect, especially fear, as memories of traumatic abduction experiences begin to emerge under hypnosis or through conscious recall," said Mack. He and others find it

hard to explain the marks left on some bodies—from red triangles on the chest to incisions on arms and legs. Several have had implants in their ears and noses but, upon study, physicists and biochemists find no unearthly material.

"Any adequate theory of alien abductions, even a useful hypothesis, must account for a broad range of puzzling phenomena," said Mack.

In his inventory of occurrences, he includes narrative consistency. "The stories that abductees tell vary in their details, but they have a hard edge of narrative consistency," he found. He dismisses the argument that abductees influence one another and believes that "what more often hap-

pens is that when abductees communicate with each other about their abductions or watch television or film versions of abductions, they fill in details of what they have already experienced and are trying to clarify."

Even though many abductions occur independent of UFO sightings, a close association between UFO encounters and abduction experiences has been consistently observed, noted Mack.

Mack believes a convincing theory must be found for the bizarre physical effects, such as termination of pregnancy, sexual liaisons, incisions, and implants that abductees report.

A way also must be found to account for the abduction reports of children as young as 2. These are, Mack said, "emotionally intense and seemingly authentic, detailed experiences [from young people] whose exposure to outside sources of information has been limited."

The abduction phenomenon, said Mack, "confronts us with an authentic and disturbing mystery. There is no way, I believe, that we can even make sense, let alone provide a convincing explanation, of this matter within the framework of our existing views of what is real or possible. Our psychological theories do not include a way of accounting for the simultaneous occurrence among thousands of people, unacquainted with each other, including small children, of complex, elaborate, and sometimes overwhelmingly powerful experiences that resemble one another in minute detail, accompanied by equally peculiar physical phenomena."

Mack also thinks that the current understanding of physical reality "whereby a population of beings from some other space/time realm can enter our world with such limited detection and affect so many people" defies our accepted notions of scientific reality.

Like others, Mack believes the phenomenon is worthy of more inquiry. "The phenomenon may deliver to us a kind of fourth blow to our collective egoism, following those of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud. We may be led to realize that we are not physically at the center of the universe, . . . we are not even the preeminent or dominant intelligence in the cosmos in control of our psychological and physical existences.

"It appears that we can be 'invaded' or taken over, if not literally by other creatures, then by some other form of being or consciousness that seems able to do with us what it will for a purpose we cannot yet fathom."

Research on human lives, with purpose and idealism

About three years ago, a colleague asked John Mack to meet writer Budd Hopkins, the author of *Intruders*, a book recently made into a television movie on the experiences of abductees.

Mack was highly skeptical; "there was no way I could understand the phenomena," he recalled.

But Mack did meet with Hopkins, and became fascinated by the stories he heard. The conversation ultimately led Mack into abductee research; from 1990 to January of this year, he interviewed 34 adults and children who claim to have encountered aliens, and will write a book about the phenomenon.

His work with abductees impressed him "with the powerful dimension of personal growth that accompanies the traumatic experiences. An intense concern for the planet's survival and a powerful ecological consciousness seem to develop for many abductees. For me and other investigators, abduction research has had a shattering impact on our views of the nature of the cosmos."

He is most proud of his work at Cambridge Hospital's psychiatry department, which he founded in 1962. He won a 1977

Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Lawrence of Arabia, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence* (Little, Brown and Co.). He has also published extensively in the areas of psychobiography and the psychosocial effects of the nuclear arms race.

As an investigator of the psychology of the nuclear arms race, Mack, 62, founded the Center for Psychology and Social Change, a Cambridge-based research organization devoted to the psychosocial study of human violence, conflict, and images of the enemy. The center has recently enlarged its focus to include the preservation of the environment.

Mack received his M.D. from Harvard in 1955, and graduated from the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute in 1967 and was certified as a child analyst in 1969. He graduated from Oberlin College, *phi beta kappa*.

He has been a professor of psychiatry at the Cambridge Hospital, an affiliate of the the Medical School, since 1972 and was head of the Department of Psychiatry there from 1973 to 1977. A faculty member of the Boston Psychoanalytic Society, he is also currently president of the International Society for Political Psychology.