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Hannah Bonner

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# alien

## TERRITORY

JOHN MACK, A HARVARD PSYCHIATRIST AT THE FRONT LINES OF UFO ABDUCTION RESEARCH, IS CONVINCED THAT ABDUCTEES ARE NOT MAKING UP THEIR STORIES: "I ENCOUNTERED SOMETHING HERE THAT DID NOT FIT ANYTHING I HAD EVER COME ACROSS IN 40 YEARS OF PSYCHIATRY."

BY SARATERRY

**J**ohn Mack still remembers the conversation he had with Carl Sagan, back in the 1960s. Mack, a Harvard psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, was intrigued by talk of UFOs and wanted to hear Sagan's thoughts on the subject, which had been the focus of a recent, well-publicized government inquiry.

"Sagan had had something to do with the Condon Committee, which had reviewed the whole question of UFOs," recalls Mack, "and he said, with great authority, 'There's nothing to it. There's no substance to it.' Well,

Carl was an authority figure to me, a prominent scientist and a friend, so I let it go."

And that was that, as far as Mack was concerned, until some 20 years later, when a friend invited him to meet Bud Hopkins. Hopkins, a New York artist and sculptor, is one of the leading investigators of reports by individuals who claim to have been abducted by UFOs. "I said, 'Who's he?' – which shows you how familiar I was with the phenomenon," says Mack. When the friend explained Hopkins' work, Mack responded, "What? There must be something wrong with him and the people he meets with." But on January 10, 1990 – Mack re-

*Sara Terry is a free-lance writer who lives in Boston. Her profile of Gregory Hines appeared in the May 31 Globe Magazine.*

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members the date as if it were a birthday or an anniversary – the two men met and spent a few hours discussing the cases Hopkins had researched. The studies were compelling and unlike anything Mack had come across in nearly 40 years of clinical psychiatric work; he knew immediately that the final word on UFOs no longer rested with Sagan and the Condon Committee. “I came away somewhat shaken and fascinated,” he says of the meeting with Hopkins. “It was a mystery. I’d never taken abductions seriously at all. I realized at this point that this was something I had no way to explain.”

**I**N THE NEARLY THREE YEARS since his meeting with Hopkins, Mack has joined the front lines of abductee research. He has investigated almost 70 cases of abductions and conducted hundreds of hours of interviews and treatment. He has been the subject of a network docudrama. He has been criticized by the press and lashed out at by scientists. He has organized support groups and professional conferences. He has also become convinced that abductees are not making up their stories – and that their experiences may present a shock as great and transforming to the foundations of science as did Copernicus’ proof that the Earth is not the center of the universe.

“I encountered something here, very early on, which I saw did not fit anything I had ever come across in 40 years of psychiatry,” says the 63-year-old Mack, founder of the psychiatric department at Cambridge Hospital (which is affiliated with Harvard Medical School) and winner of a 1977 Pulitzer Prize for his psychoanalytic biography of Lawrence of Arabia. “The deeper I went into it,” he continues, “the more and more information I got that doesn’t fit anything else. This has all kinds of implications for our scientific world view, for our identity as a species on this planet.”

Typically, Mack says, abductions are highly traumatic experiences, often repressed and usually called forward only with great psychic pain and stress. Almost always, individuals report seeing small, gray beings with huge, dark eyes who transport their immobilized subjects to some sort of spacecraft, where the captives are probed in a battery of tests that appear to relate to sexual and reproductive experiments. Many abductees, or “experiencers,” report a long history of abductions. Mack has found that parents who have had many experiences often find that their children become abductees as well. In almost

every case he has investigated, he says, people are reluctant to face what has happened.

“One of the most powerfully consistent aspects of this for me has been the tremulousness with which these people come to see me,” says Mack, who has a contract with Scribner to write a book on his findings. “They come to me very fearful that either they will be found crazy, because what they’ve experienced doesn’t fit ordinary reality, or that they’ll be found not to be crazy, and then they’re faced with the fact that these are real experiences, and what does that mean for their world view, for their future, for their lives?”

Of the several dozen cases he has investigated, Mack says, only two or three individuals suffer from some form of mental illness. There is no particular type of person who experiences abductions and no apparent reason why some people are selected as abductees. Among the people Mack has interviewed are a musician, a prison guard, housewives, secretaries, a psychiatrist, college students, a retired firefighter, and a restaurant owner.

Fundamental to Mack’s convictions about these experiences is the fact that, over and over, abductees – who come from all over the country and who do not know one another – tell remarkably consistent stories. Details may vary, but the narrative thread is so similar from case to case that Mack is convinced that the experiences are not imagined. If they were simply made up or were the psychic byproduct of some other traumatic event, he says, the accounts would vary more widely, because of the individuality of each human psyche.

“What struck me almost immediately,” he says, “was my inability, as a psychiatrist, to explain how people who seemed otherwise quite normal, quite unremarkable, could be telling the same, disturbing story, in great detail: of being taken from their rooms, their cars, in fields, into these craft and subjected to highly intrusive procedures that have a unique quality.”

“There’s a whole medical-like scenario, which is not known to us on Earth,” he says, “and yet it’s told by people all over the country, in great detail, details which were not available in the media at the time and are still not in the media in the kind of detail these people reported. And these stories were consistent, one to the other.”

“The thing I’ve spent most of my professional life in,” says Mack, “is learning to make clinical psychologi-

cal discriminations, like, 'Is this projection? Is this hallucination? Is this real experience? Is this a dream?' And this [abduction phenomenon] behaves like real experience.

"I have never had a sense, and I trust myself in this, clinically," he says, "that this phenomenon represents some kind of psychological contagion, that people are influencing each other, or that these experiences are derivative of something they've read or heard from someone else, or that they're reflecting off the consciousness of another person's experience. I've never had a suggestion of that."

Although Mack's earliest cases were referred to him by Hopkins, increasingly he is contacted by people who have read his comments in stories about UFOs or have seen him interviewed on television. (Mack tends to turn down interview requests, because he believes too many reporters trivialize or sensationalize abductee cases.) After a recent conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on the abduction phenomenon, cosponsored by Mack and MIT physicist David Pritchard, Mack was contacted by a woman who had read a story about the meeting and wanted to see him.

Unlike many experiencers, the woman could recall — without hypnosis — a variety of alien contacts, going back to early childhood. She could also recount more current experiences of being visited in her home by aliens, who came into her bedroom, floated her into the living room, and performed a series of intensely painful explorations into her spine with sharp instruments.

More commonly, abductees report what Mack calls a "margin of consciousness," where memory recalls an experience to a certain point and then blanks out, leaving individuals with chunks of unaccounted-for time. Under hypnosis, a practice criticized by disbelievers but defended by Mack as an important tool for uncovering repressed information, experiencers are taken back to the last moment they consciously remember, such as the appearance of a small being in their bedroom or the presence of a blue light.

As details surface, an anguished mental struggle often occurs. Mack cites the case of a 38-year-old Pennsylvania man with a long history of abduction-related experiences. All the man could recall of one recent experience, which began as he was trying to fall asleep, was the presence of a female alien in the room. (Abductees, says Mack, can almost always identify the sex of aliens, despite the lack of

obvious sexual characteristics.)

Like many who undergo hypnosis, the man resisted recalling the experience, asserting that the aliens had told him not to remember what had happened. The man's story, says Mack, unfolded with "tremendous distress, sweating, and pain and anguish." There was also, he says, a great sense of shame and a fear of being vulnerable, which Mack worked to dispel, trying to reassure the man that his experience was not a reflection of weakness but something over which he had no control.

"And, at a certain point, there was a breakthrough," says Mack. "He began to sob. It was so touching, because he'd been fighting with himself and with his unconsciousness, and at that point, he crossed a line and just let go. It was just this tremendous release."

What unfolded during the narrative was a story common among abductees, one Mack had suspected in this particular case because of the shame and vulnerability the man had expressed. Like many male abductees, the man recalled that he had been taken onto a craft, where he was sexually probed and a sperm sample was forcibly taken from him.

Mack says that another emotion surfaced, common among experiencers. "I've seen it so many times now," he says. "It's a sobbing that goes along with a sense of awe. Have you ever been moved by something in nature or something in art or music? It's like you're humbled before God, you're just so moved by the spectacle, by the awesomeness of what's before you. It was that quality [in the man's sobbing], a combination of relief and awe. And the awe had to do with, Oh, my god, what an extraordinary thing it is that has happened to me."

"Again, it's a question of clinical judgment," he says. "When memories come back like that, I never have any question that these people are describing something that has authentically happened to them. If I do get a case, as I occasionally do, where I feel somebody is looking to convince themselves or me that they were abducted, I don't count those cases. I don't include them among the authentic ones."

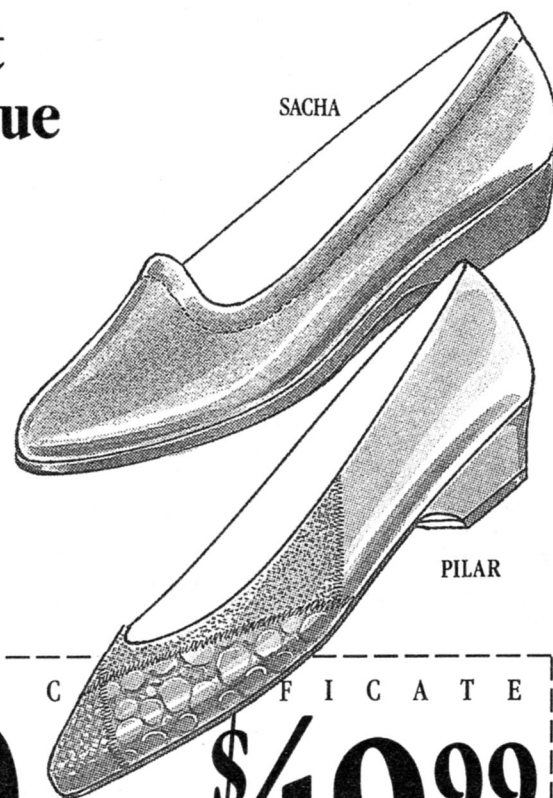
Since beginning his research nearly three years ago, Mack has established a support group that meets at his Brookline home once a month. In the quiet of his wood-paneled, book-lined living room, 20 to 30 people share their stories, often expressing great relief at being able to talk to others who have been through the same thing. Their stories coincide on

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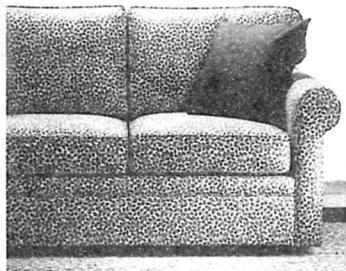


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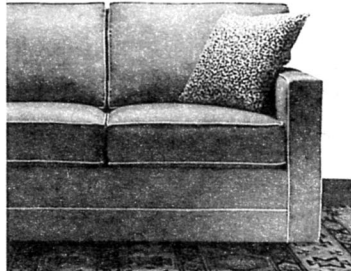
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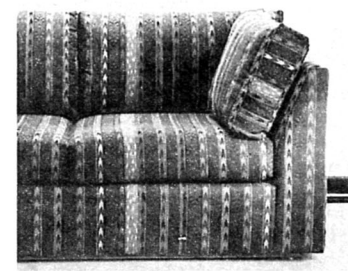
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many levels: They talk about the presence of light and the ability of the aliens to transmute into a sheer light force. Often the light is connected with healing; abductees say that fevers and other illnesses disappear as a result of an abduction. Many say that a vibrating energy courses through their bodies when aliens take them from their homes. Physical marks are often left on experiencers' bodies: small incisions or scoop marks, which appear to be the remnants of surgical procedures.

Overwhelmingly, women and men recall sexual encounters and experiments. A wide variety of reproductive stories abound, with many women claiming to have been impregnated by aliens, who then remove the embryo immediately or on a subsequent abduction. Some women say their captors have taken them to nurseries where hybrid babies are being raised.

Mack is well aware that the stories stretch the bounds of credibility. And he knows that, like Hydra, every theory about abduction leads to a dozen new questions. Yet he is undeterred in his conviction that the abduction phenomenon cannot be dismissed.

"No one has been able to come up with a counter-formulation that explains what's going on," he says. "But if people can't be convinced [that this is real], that's okay. All I want is for people to be convinced that there's something going on here that is not explainable. That something is entering these people's lives that we don't understand.

"If we can be in that place of not knowing," he adds, "we're likely to learn more than if we try to stick this here, or stick it there, or if we close our minds and try to keep this under control."

**T**HE OUTRAGEOUS headlines are familiar to anyone who has ever stood in line at a supermarket checkout lane. Claims such as "Aliens Endorse Clinton" - recently trumpeted on the front page of one

popular tabloid – crop up as regularly as Elvis sightings and appearances by the Abominable Snowman.

Mack is somewhat resigned to it all. He knows, thanks to the highly dramatic nature of aliens and abductions, that there will always be an insatiable appetite for alien stories in the tabloid press and on tabloid-type television shows. Lately, though, he's begun to see signs that the media and a growing number of academics and scientists are starting to pay slightly more serious attention to the abduction phenomenon.

In the past few months, he says, he has been interviewed for a lengthy upcoming *New Yorker* story and has participated in a Canadian Broadcasting Corp. program – a Canadian equivalent of *Nova* – that will air this fall. Mack has also been contacted by philosophers, theologians, young psychologists who want to work with him, a molecular chemist, and a graduate student in educational psychology who wants to do her thesis on the abduction phenomenon. (“That’s a very good indicator, when people in academic degree programs want to do their thesis on something,” notes Mack. “Then you know it’s reached a level of legitimacy.”) He has also met with a “quite prominent” Harvard physics professor, who was “very interested and very open” but said he couldn’t talk about the abductions “around here” – meaning the building on campus where the professor teaches.

“Little by little, people are coming into this thing,” says Mack, whose work with abductees is partially supported by small grants from private foundations. “It’s still not the way a young person can make a career in mainstream academic institutions, but it’s a very exciting field. I have a kind of faith that if you really are truthful about what you see, and you do your work with integrity, that people will eventually come around. If they don’t come to the point of agreeing

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with it, at least they'll begin to notice it."

Mack, however, is well aware of the fact that many physical scientists dismiss his work out of hand. Those critics, he contends, simply haven't explored the evidence or are too bound by the conventions of science

to consider information that is not strictly measurable by machines or the physical senses. When doubting colleagues listen to the tapes of sessions with abductees and spend time with him, discussing his research, Mack says, "they tend to be staggered by the phenomenon." And

while those colleagues may not become believers, he continues, "Some of them say, 'I've gone from atheist to agnostic on this.'"

Dr. Edward J. Khantzian is one of those colleagues who have heard Mack present his data and calls it "very, very compelling stuff."

Khantzian, an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School at the Cambridge Hospital, says that Mack "has taken a lot of disbelievers and had us scratching our heads, wondering what is this that he's studying. He's at least made a lot of us stop and think again, which is what he's always done.

"I don't know what to make of it ultimately, and I'm basically somewhere between being a disbeliever and an agnostic," says Khantzian, who has worked with Mack for nearly 30 years. "But, as far as I can tell, he's operating as a careful clinician in these studies, and that's what I respect. I don't understand it, I'm still dubious, but I respect his right to search it out to the fullest."

Mack takes most comments from doubters and skeptics in stride. But the generally soft-spoken psychiatrist does become incensed by the flat dismissal of abductees' stories by disbelievers, a rejection that Mack says only helps add to a sense of isolation already felt by traumatized abductees. "It's demeaning to those people to think that they are somehow subject to some kind of perceptual distortion or make-believe," says Mack.

"People know what they see, they know what their perceptions are," he insists. "That what they saw or what they experienced requires some explanation which we don't now have, that's another story."

As far as Mack is concerned, the search for answers has to include the possibility of a reality not yet perceived by science. At its most radical, notes Mack, the practice of modern science has led to such things as the SETI project, a \$100 million National Aeronautics and Space Administration mission formally known as the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. Scheduled to begin tomorrow, the project relies on radio telescopes to search the universe for signs of intelligent life beyond planet Earth.

Mack argues that abductees' reports point to an intelligence that can obviously elude man-made machines, no matter how sophisticated - and to a world that exists not somewhere out there in the physical universe, but in an entirely different dimension.

"In the experience of the abductees," he says, "the aliens seem to come from another dimension. They seem to break through our sense of the reality of this space-time physicalist world, to come from some other place. Abductees will de-

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scribe the sense of space and time collapsing, or of coexistent multiple time dimensions.

"They have the feeling that they have been introduced to another universe which is just as real as this one, but which is other-dimensional," he says. "It's as if it's a dimension that seems to enter our physical world but is not necessarily of our physical world."

Although he admits that such possibilities have yet to be proven by the physical sciences, Mack laments what he calls "the unwillingness of the official intellectual community to be open-minded about a reality that doesn't fit their world view." As he sees it, the abduction phenomenon could ultimately present mankind with a "fourth blow" to its collective ego. The first, he says, was the Copernican blow, which proved that man and Earth were not the center of the universe; the second blow was administered by Darwin, whose findings on evolution proved that man did not spring from "some higher level of spiritual biology"; and the third blow was delivered by Freud, whose explorations of the unconscious revealed that man's conscious mind was not all that was in control of his life.

Mack says he still has no answers about what the abductions mean or why they happen. Although some researchers in the field believe that the primary purpose of the kidnappings is to carry out some form of breeding program, Mack sees a more transformational element to the abductions: an attempt to alert humans to the need for change in their lives.

Abductees frequently report that during their time on alien spacecraft, they are shown powerful visual images of environmental destruction on Earth. Many return with a passionate commitment to protect the planet. Mack interprets the warnings, and the increased awareness among individual abductees, as an attempt to reconnect humans with a heightened sense of spirituality. It's a quest, he says, best summed up by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote:

*That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter. That mankind has in this sense been cowardly has done life endless harm; the experiences that are called "visions," the whole so-called "spirit world," death and all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that*

*the senses by which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God.*

Other civilizations, including Eastern and native cultures, have been far more fluent than the West in communing with experiences that defy understanding in terms of

physical reality, says Mack. He argues that the Western world of the past few hundred years may have reached a dead end of sorts — and that the abductee experience may be part of a move away from the strict confines of materialism.

"It may be that we're on the

brink of some kind of major opening to our proper place in the universe," muses Mack. "I think, in this society, we're involved in a major epochal shift. I don't know what the purpose of all this is, but it certainly is some kind of profound connecting of us beyond ourselves." □

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