

Space Alien Abductions: A Test of Wills, of Credibility

by Michael Jonathan Grinfeld

These words come from Humanity, inhabiting, at this time, one world we call Earth. We are one species, of two sexes and many different races, and all are individual in character. We cooperate on some ideas and activities; on others we compete. Almost all of us believe you are out there. Many of us want to meet you. We are going to outrace this transmission to the stars and listen to it with you.—Charles D. Walker, former shuttle astronaut.

When the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) launched its 10-year, \$100 million project to search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) late last year, *Omni* magazine published Walker's simple, yet poignant message to the stars—one of several proposed ways of introducing ourselves to as yet unknown species. NASA's endeavor is so compelling because it bears the potential for answering the most absorbing question faced by humankind—are we alone in the universe?

But if a growing number of individuals and the small minority of mental health practitioners who treat them are to be believed, NASA's effort to locate signals from space is just another taxpayer-financed boondoggle, because space aliens have already located us.

According to a now infamous poll conducted by the Roper Organization in 1991 during which 5,947 individuals were surveyed, 2 percent of America's population have experienced an array of phenomena consistent with space alien abduction experiences—awakening paralyzed with the sense of a strange figure or presence in the room; short-term memory losses; flying through the air without knowing why or how; seeing unusual lights or balls of light; and discovering puzzling body scars without remembering how they were acquired. If true, it would mean that an astounding 3.7 million Americans have had contact with aliens.

What was once a curious, light-hearted fascination spurred by supermarket tabloids, however, has now become a significant mental health issue, pitting practitioners against each other in an ethical tussle to determine the appropriate type of care for patients who have either survived a wondrous event, or whose delusions have been aggravated and fanned by misdiagnosis and mistreatment. Like recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse and satanic ritual abuse reported in the previous parts of this series, some clinicians and experts claim that the accounts of thousands of abductees are nothing more than mass hysteria, fanned by pop culture and by less-than-ethical therapists using inappropriate "memory enhancement techniques."

But John E. Mack, M.D., a Cambridge Hospital psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, who has emerged as one of the staunchest—and perhaps most prestigiously credentialed—proponents of the space alien abduction phenomenon, disagrees.

In an interview with *Psychiatric Times*, he argued passionately for a transformation of psychiatry's worldview so that it could encompass acceptance of those who have experienced extraterrestrial contacts.

"A culture will determine mental illness according to what it will or will not accept as reality," Mack went on to say. "A reality that would involve an intelligence from some other source would not be acceptable within our worldview, never mind that every culture of the past 300 years has had the experience of an ensouled and spirited universe with which it has a relationship."

Since 1989, when Mack first became involved with extraterrestrial experiencers, he has evaluated about 100 individuals, 70 of whom have satisfied his "quite strict" criteria for being genuine space alien abductees. They must recount with affect appropriate to the experience in the absence of mental illness, consciously or with hypnosis, seeing aliens while being taken against their will to a ship and subjected to medical procedures.

Initially skeptical, Mack gradually began to believe his patients when he clinically found them to be credible and he could not explain their accounts in any other way. Ultimately, he arrived at five factors that swayed his belief: the highly detailed consistency of experiences recalled by thousands of people

throughout the United States and other countries; the absence of any psychiatric disease or psychological condition; reports of the phenomenon by children as young as two years of age (which discounts any personality theory); the physical manifestations, including burned earth near UFO sightings, unexplained cuts, scoop marks and scars on people's bodies, removed fetuses, and nasal implants; and UFO sightings at or near the time people report experiences.

Mack's treatment of abductees includes an initial evaluation interview, and then the possibility of hypnotic regressions when indicated in later sessions. He also refers confirmed cases to a support group and encourages

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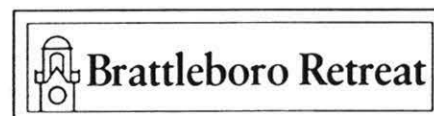
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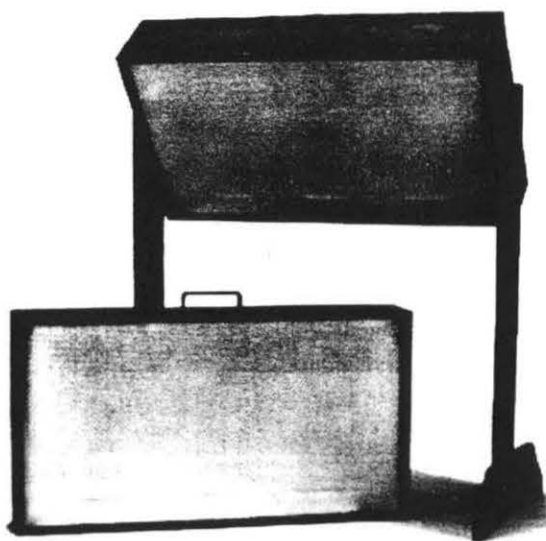
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development of a self-help support structure within the abductee community itself.

Mack is aware of concerns that memories retrieved under hypnosis can be questioned. "I make my clinical judgments. When people relive with tremendous emotion, vividness and distress something that was done to them and then that memory under hypnosis, for example, is an amplification of something that they knew they were conscious of to a certain degree without hypnosis, then I don't think it's a question of whether it did or didn't happen just that way," he said. "What test do we have other than the experience that is powerful for that person?"

Major Critics

Although declining to say that practitioners like Mack commit malpractice in the treatment of patients, George K. Ganaway, M.D., director of the Ridgeview Center for Dissociative Disorders and clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, has been one of Mack's major critics, refusing to accept the truth of abduction stories.

"What I have concern about is whether people are doing good psychotherapy and maintaining the public trust and the credibility of the mental health profession at all levels," Ganaway said, later adding, "I think the therapist is feeding into a mutual deception if the therapist is indeed encouraging the patient to accept such memories as truths rather than looking at all the different possibilities that may be contributing to why the person is conceptualizing his experience this way."

According to Ganaway, individuals with abduction memories are more likely sufferers of schizophrenia; delusions; hysterical symptomatology; or borderline, narcissistic or other various personality disorders.

"I think we are looking at people who are in about a 5 to 15 percent end of a bell-shaped curve of the population who are highly hypnotizable; who are prone to enter spontaneous trance states and have spontaneous dissociative symptoms; and who are going through some major life stress that makes them psychologically vulnerable to suggestion."

One of Ganaway's main concerns is the use of hypnosis to retrieve memories, an unreliable method that represents, as he puts it, an "evolutionary U-turn" in our understanding of psychological processes and problems and of the techniques used to treat them. There is a simplistic trauma theory that has come to the forefront again after 100 years "that psychiatric symptoms are caused by repressed or dissociated memories," he said. Even Freud ultimately stopped using suggestive techniques and hypnosis once he realized that patients did not get any better, he added.

Pamela Freyd, Ph.D., executive director of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF), is also critical of practitioners who treat space alien abductions as real, saying there is no evidence that such phenomena have occurred. The FMSF is concerned about the growing number of individuals recovering what it claims are false memories.

Some support for this view came from the American Medical Association in June when the House of Delegates passed a resolution essentially condemning the misuse of hypnosis and other techniques of memory enhancement and creation in the area of childhood sexual abuse, calling them "fraught with problems of potential misapplication." It nevertheless referred the issue to the AMA Council on Scientific Affairs to evaluate the "validity of techniques to help patients recall child-

hood experiences."

R. Leo Sprinkle, Ph.D., a private practice counseling psychologist in Laramie, Wyo., and professor emeritus of counseling services at the University of Wyoming is one of the earliest clinicians to accept the recollections of his patients as true, his involvement in the field dating back to the early 1960s. Every year since 1980, he has sponsored the Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation, a forum for experiencers and those interested in them to share information and ideas.

In his 31 years of UFO investigation, he has faced the skepticism and rejection of his colleagues, saying "it was a lonely business in the '60s." Today, however, Sprinkle views with approval the increasing numbers of mental health professionals willing to work with individuals claiming abduction, and taking on his detractors with self-assured bravado.

"I encourage skeptics to take three steps. One is to read 1,000 reports; next, I encourage people to talk to a hundred individuals who have had these experiences themselves; and the third step is I encourage people to have this kind of experience themselves, and then let's talk," Sprinkle went on to say. "I realize that's a little bit of sarcasm, but it's really difficult to respond to a person who is more than skeptical."

Over the years, he has worked with 400 to 500 patients and has spoken to countless others. Despite the continuing cynicism, he is confident that the polarization that surrounds this issue will some day abate.

"I'm sanguine about the possibility that the mental health community will recognize that the status and position of the practitioner is important, but not as important as the welfare of the client," Sprinkle said. "When that happens, we start being more humble, and we start listening to people describe their experiences."

Middle Ground

Just such a middle ground may be evolving. James S. Gordon, M.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown Medical School, and director of the Center for Mind-Body Studies in Washington, became interested in space alien abductions in 1990, and then wrote an oft-cited article on the subject in the August 1991 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* after attending one of Sprinkle's conferences.

"We don't have any idea whether these are extraterrestrial experiences," he said. The confusing aspect, Gordon added, is that in many ways space alien memories resemble a psychotic experience, except that the individuals themselves are not psychotic. Gordon suggested that patients should seek therapists who are open to all possibilities.

"I would rather see people who are not committed to finding either false memories or true memories," he said. "If you're looking for false memories, you're more likely to find false memories, and if you're looking to say these are absolutely true, then that's what you're going to find as well. I think what's needed is a much larger approach—curious but skeptical."

But while a curious and skeptical Ganaway agrees that there needs to be synthesis of all data and an evaluation that is culturally sensitive, he expresses doubt that "in the long run the explanation will turn out to be what it seems to be on the surface."

"The problem is that each theorist accuses the other theorist of being too narrow-minded, so there's a tendency to stay in their own provinces and not look at the data coming from elsewhere."

But while some claim that data come from extraterrestrial sources, the answers to cosmic questions remain as elusive as the memories retrieved from an obscure past. □

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