

For psychiatrist John Mack, 'Abduction' is an alien matter

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In a way, John Mack is lucky he didn't live 400 years ago.

Then, he would have been burned at the stake. Now, he is merely regarded as misguided.

Mack for the past four years has devoted most of his clinical psychiatric practice in Cambridge, Mass., to patients who are normal in every way but one. They all think they have been abducted by aliens.

He has about 90 such patients. Some have been sexually manipulated; others experimented upon; inculcated with ideas; physically and emotionally scarred or otherwise traumatized; but they have all been abducted.

Mack's heresy is not in treating them. It is in believing them.

"I went on for a long time trying to find other explanations, looking at other hypotheses, at displacement from sexual abuse, picking up some things from the media, but none of them fit," Mack said

yesterday.

"None of these possible explanations came close to accounting for this and so I was left with a dilemma. What do I do?"

What Mack has done is write a book, "Abduction," and set off around the country promoting it, trying in the process to persuade people not that these 90 people have been snatched by aliens, but that they might have been and there is for the moment no better explanation of what they have to say.

"In short," he writes, "it is what it is, although the ultimate source of these experiences remains a mystery."

Mack is a professor of psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital, a part of the Harvard Medical School. He is 63 years old and has been a psychiatrist for almost 40 years. He founded the psychiatry department at Cambridge and, when it merged with Harvard, became its chairman. He wears professorially frumpy clothes and peers over the top of professorially



MIKE SIEGEL / SEATTLE TIMES

John Mack's new book, "Abduction," tells stories of people who believe they've had close encounters with visitors from outer space.

PLEASE SEE 'Abduction' ON E 2

Pulitzer Prize-winner puts his name on the line by believing patients' stories

'Abduction'

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perched half-glasses. He is the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of T.E. Lawrence and of a classic text on dreams.

He was regarded as a mainstream psychiatrist whose only mild deviation from the middle of the road was a flirtation with Werner Erhard's est, a consciousness-raising regime.

Hanging out with aliens

All of this went by the boards when he began hanging out with people who say they have been hanging out with aliens, people like Dave Jones. Jones is a 43-year-old marketing executive with a health-maintenance organization in Indiana. He is traveling with Mack as a sort of live Exhibit A for the defense.

He's good-looking and wears navy blazers. He doesn't drool or rant and rave. He doesn't have to. Every word out of his mouth seems guaranteed to send someone like Mack scurrying for Freudian cover.

"That happened at Christmas time, this incident when my daughter and I had the encounter," Jones says. "The encounter that I had was at a time when my daughter was dying and these little aliens came back and I had an encounter right in the hospital at 4 a.m. in the morning. They were showing me that this energy that I had received through them could help my daughter. And actually it all started through prayer. When I thought I was connecting with a higher being, it turned out to be I had connected with these aliens. And they showed me that by connecting with my own daughter's energy, and her energy was a part of my energy, I was able to communicate with her to get well."

Jones says this as if he were giving yesterday's weather report. He talks in a flat, matter-of-fact tone about previous lives he has lived (and in one case lost to musket fire), about being abducted as a 6-year-old farm boy, about seeing alien silhouettes on walls for decades thereafter, about sexual experimentation done to him aboard a spacecraft and finally about being diagnosed by his church as possessed by demons.

He believed the church.

"It was a dark side of my life that I accepted as evil," he said.

Then he began seeing a therapist who in 1992 referred him to Mack. By then Mack had begun writing about abductions and had become active in the UFO intellectual underground. People like Jones were being referred to him.

Abduction stories vary

There are great differences among them. They are from all sections of the country, of all ages and ethnicities. None knew the others before they started seeing Mack.

Their stories vary in many instances — some describe gray aliens, others white; some of the aliens are said to be hairless, others hirsute; some are male, some female — but Mack says it is the similarities among the stories that makes them more compelling.

Those similarities include being floated through walls in a semi-conscious state, being taken onto alien spacecraft and examined with prods and probes, being relieved of sperm and embryos, and most of all being unable to consciously remember any of it. These corroborations, as Mack refers to them, helped lead the psychiatrist to the dangerous conclusion that these people were

telling the truth.

Jones and most of Mack's other patients undergo regression therapy, a method that employs hypnosis to recover repressed memories. This sort of therapy has been highly controversial of late for its use to support accusations of sexual abuse.

Elizabeth Loftus, a University of Washington psychiatrist who has been critical of regression therapy, said Mack has ignored or dismissed the most obvious explanation of his patients recovered memories. They never occurred.

"Confabulation and false belief construction is an explanation in and of itself," she said.

She said Mack wouldn't be "the first gullible psychiatrist with good credentials." The credentials do not make the case, she said, but added, "If there's some non-zero-possibility that this occurred, then I guess you could say somebody has to be first."

Even this small measure of professional charity is not widely in evidence among Mack's critics. Mack said he has been shocked at "the vehemence with which the faith" of mainstream scientific belief is being guarded. He is working in a realm with few guideposts and his profession demands he provide a roadmap.

He says his critics want what he cannot conceivably provide. He writes about the power of the persuasive power of the emotional distress his patients feel and says his critics respond by saying, "I'm not satisfied. I want a dinner plate off of a UFO to see what they feed on."

"I talked to my colleagues about this. I think I've got something here I can't explain. What do I do? Do I say, I don't want to talk about this. They said, 'Don't admit you take this seriously because people will ridicule you.'"

What is really at issue here are not dinner plates, but methods of knowing. Western science demands physical proof. Mack offers mainly subjective belief. To one side the truth in all of this is unknowable without proof. To the other it is unprovable without knowing.