



Tribune photo by David Klobucar

Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack wasn't prepared for what he found when he began to talk with people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens.

Are aliens already here?

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By Lynn Van Matre
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Five years ago, when a colleague asked Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack if he wanted to meet Budd Hopkins, Mack replied, "Who's he?" Told that Hopkins was a New York artist known for his work with people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens and hustled aboard UFOs, Mack swiftly came to a professional conclusion.

"I assumed that either there must be something the matter with Budd Hopkins or that Hopkins was encountering a new form of mental illness," Mack recalls. "I wasn't prepared for what I found."

What Mack found when he finally met Hopkins was something so personally compelling that the veteran psychiatrist plunged into the field of abduction research himself. Over the next three years, as word of his interest in the abduction phenomenon spread, nearly 100 self-proclaimed abductees (or "experiencers") would contact Mack at his office at Harvard

University's Cambridge Hospital.

The stories varied, but many abductees told of being taken from their homes by big-eyed extraterrestrials and borne aboard space ships; there, sperm or ova samples were extracted from their bodies as part of an ongoing earthling-alien hybrid breeding program.

After taking what he describes as thorough psychiatric histories of the subjects, Mack concluded that they were "solid people, of sound mind" and told several colleagues that he believed "something important" was going on.

It wasn't the first time the psychiatrist had flirted with what some might consider fringe fields or taken an alternative approach. The Center for Psychology and Social Change, the nonprofit research organization Mack founded in 1983, often funds projects that combine psychology with ecological or ethnic issues outside the psychiatric mainstream.

"He's never been afraid to take a stand or follow his intu-

ition, even if it might subject him to criticism," says Douglas Jacobs, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard who has known and admired Mack professionally since 1975. "His whole career has been about blazing trails."

But for many of Mack's fellow psychiatrists, the abducted-by-aliens study was just too bizarre. Dismissing abductees' claims as preposterous, colleagues respectfully cautioned him about pursuing the project.

"The difference between courage and foolhardiness is often subtle," Mack admits. "After a while, though, I reached the point where there seemed to be more to lose in terms of my own sense of integrity by keeping my mouth shut than I could lose by describing what I was finding."

Last month, Scribners published Mack's "Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens," featuring 13 in-depth case histories drawn from his research. And now a lot of people assume there must be

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Harvard's controversial John Mack thinks he may have the answer

Aliens

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something the matter with John Mack—or at least something seriously awry with the 64-year-old professor's professional judgment when it comes to alien activities.

"There are people who think he's an embarrassment to Harvard, that he's gone off the deep end," Jacobs acknowledges. "Many of my colleagues have rejected John Mack's research outright."

George Vaillant, a Harvard Medical School psychiatry professor who has known Mack for 25 years, provided a book jacket blurb for "Abduction" comparing it favorably to Frazer's "The Golden Bough." But he refuses to discuss his personal views on the validity of Mack's research or the professional risks Mack is taking.

Accepting a reporter's phone call "out of loyalty to John Mack," Vaillant would comment only, "Let me say this. [Abduction] is a very idealistic book that asks us to imagine a world or worlds better than the ones we have, and people who are idealistic take risks. The book is probably best understood as a metaphor."

Mack is hardly the first to write about alien abductions. A number of authors have chronicled the case of Betty and Barney Hill, an apparently stable New Hampshire couple who claimed to have been taken aboard a craft in the early 1960s by small, gray humanoid and subjected to sexual examinations. (The Hills' experiences later became the subject of a 1975 TV movie, "The UFO Incident.")

Budd Hopkins' "Missing Time," published in 1981, chronicled abduction claims involving missing time, body scars resulting from in-



Visitors from outer space have captured the imagination of people for decades. The 1951 film "The Day The Earth Stood Still" is a classic.

vasive alien medical procedures and small metallic implants purportedly inserted in victims' bodies as tracking devices; the follow-up, 1987's "Intruders," focused on sexual and reproduction-related episodes that have come to be associated with the abduction phenomenon. Whitley Strieber's "Communion" was a best-seller in 1987; and in 1992, Temple University historian and abduction researcher David Jacobs presented his findings in "Secret Life: First-hand Accounts of UFO Abductions."

Impeccable credentials

But whatever his colleagues may think, Mack's credentials—in addition to being a Harvard psychiatrist professor, he is the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of T.E. Lawrence—set him apart from the pack and lend a stamp of respectability to a topic generally relegated to tabloids. As a result, he has received mainstream news media coverage seldom accorded to just anybody who announces his belief in alien abductions, though Mack isn't crazy about invariably being described as a *believer*. He's even less crazy about an anonymous quote from a "friend" in a New York Times Magazine article that suggested Mack's UFO abduction "obsession" led to his recent separation from his wife after 34 years of marriage.

"Untrue, and a cheap shot," says Mack, in Chicago recently on a book promotion tour. "Our separation has nothing to do with this.

"You can make anyone look foolish, if that's your purpose, and I'm no exception," he adds. "But I guess what gets me most upset is getting pushed off in a category as a rigid believer. It's [presented as] 'This doctor believes in alien abductions.' That really isn't fair. I'm opening up an area that has some power to teach us something, an area that seems to have some implications for all of us, even though I don't know what

it's about and where it's going. It's a mystery, and I want to stress my agnosticism.

"Yes, I take these peoples' stories seriously. Yes, I think that they are telling the truth. Now, does that mean that the whole thing is literally of our physical world and is going to conform to the requirements of proof of our classic western scientific methodology? Probably not. We need a more complicated ontology to grasp it."

The extraterrestrials, Mack theorizes, may be coming from some other dimension of reality—possibly a parallel universe.

"I'm not convinced that when the abductees are brought aboard ships to see hybrid beings, however real that may be to them experientially, this is really occurring in physical reality as we know it," he says. "But does that mean that it's not really happening? I don't think you can conclude that. I think it might simply be inviting us to open up our way of knowing to other kinds of evidence. I want people to look at this and ask questions."

Philip J. Klass, publisher of the Washington, D.C.-based publication Skeptics UFO Newsletter and a longtime UFO debunker, can come up with plenty of them.

"If you assume that we do have extraterrestrial visitors who are engaging in crossbreeding and that they are very advanced, why don't they abduct Olympic athletes?" Klass asks. "And why is it that not one person who claims to have been aboard a flying saucer has ever brought back a paper clip or cigarette lighter or some other souvenir?"

Just attention seekers?

Klass, a contributing editor for Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine, has spent 28 years investigating UFO cases. He maintains that he has yet to find what he considers "a single, credible case that cannot be explained in prosaic terms."

As Klass sees it, most abductees simply crave attention.

"Certainly, 99 percent of them are not, underline *not*, crazy," he says. "When one is dealing with human behavior there is never just one explanation for anything, but in my opinion, a number of the people who report these tales seek attention. I have appeared with these people on a variety of TV talk shows, including Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer, and these are people who would never otherwise be invited to appear on a talk show. Their only reason for being there is that they can tell this story of UFO abduction."

But don't they risk being branded as wacky? "They are not ridiculed on the shows," says Klass, who observes that 'abductees' are often invited to appear as paid speakers at UFO conferences.

"There may be a few who are reluctant to go public, but many are not," adds Klass, who believes that the publicity accorded the phenomenon will cause countless suggestible people to believe that they, too, have been abducted. According to a highly controversial 1991 Roper poll, anywhere from several hundred thousand to several million Americans may have had abduction-related experiences.

"I think the abduction cult is a very dangerous one," Klass says. "I am suggesting that many, many more people will suffer. They will be afraid to go to sleep at night [lest they be abducted], and these fears will be passed on to their children."

The lack of physical evidence associated with alien abductions also arouses skepticism among some members of the UFO community.

Longtime UFO investigators Kevin D. Randle and Donald R. Schmitt, authors of the recently published "The Truth About the UFO Crash at Roswell" (Evans), are convinced that an extraterrestrial craft crashed near Roswell, N.M., in 1947; their book includes

testimony from doctors, law enforcement officials and military personnel who claim they saw five alien bodies amid the wreckage. (Klass dismisses the Roswell crash, considered for decades to be the most famous and well-documented of all UFO episodes, as "a myth perpetuated by the media, mainly television.")

"If we are right, we have leaped the first hurdle for John Mack," says Randle. "We have proved that [extraterrestrials] can get here." But Schmitt and Randle have yet to be convinced that aliens are abducting earthlings for any reason whatsoever.

"The problem with abductions is that you are dealing in most cases with something that relies solely on the mind—recall of the subconscious through hypnotic regression, which is highly unreliable," says Schmitt, co-director of the Evanston-based Center for UFO Studies.

"With Roswell, we were able to prove the nuts and bolts to our satisfaction, because at least at one time there was something tangible and physical. The main problem with abductions is that there is nothing tangible. We need some good physical evidence. And through suggestibility and support group influence you perpetuate the idea that people have been abducted by aliens when that is not the case."

Lacking a smoking gun

Mack readily admits that he would love to have a smoking gun.

"If someone did bring back an artifact, though, the debunkers would just argue over its pedigree," he says. "I'm not trying to prove this with physical evidence. I take the whole package. These abduction accounts are so congruent among healthy people, from all over the United States—people who are not in touch with each other, who have nothing to gain and everything to lose by telling their stories. The only thing I know that behaves like that is real experience, and I am going to continue to try to deepen my understanding."

Mack is pushing on with two new research projects, one comparing abductees with victims of traumatic psychological experiences and the other a study of UFO abductions worldwide.

"Obviously this isn't the best way to get ahead [professionally]," he muses. "But it's such a short time in this culture between when something is regarded as taboo and career-threatening and when it becomes acceptable.

"I worked on a study in the late 1970s and early 1980s about children's fears about nuclear war," Mack adds. "It was considered odd at first, but a few years later there were Ph.D. theses all over the place about children's reactions to the nuclear threat. My guess is that within three or four years there will be all kinds of Ph.D. theses about people who have abduction experiences."