

Harvard prof lends credence to UFO reports

By LEE KRENIS MORE
Gannett News Service

Dr. John Mack, who wrote "Abduction" (Scribner's, \$22) is a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He is founding director of the Center for Psychology and Social Change. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1977 for "A Prince of Our Disorder," a biography of T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia).

Mack believes that extra-terrestrials are abducting earthlings for a breeding program to save the planet from destruction.

Like therapists who help patients to recover repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse, he uses hypnosis to bring back memories of abduction.

These recollections are strikingly similar: An abductee is taken, usually in sleep, to a brightly lighted spacecraft. Small,

wrinkled, gray or white aliens with large heads and huge, slanting black eyes put him on a table. With clinical detachment, they poke at him and insert needles and probes.

They often harvest sperm or eggs, or insert fertilized eggs. Then they dump the terrified abductee, who may or may not remember what happened but can't account for the missing hours.

Obviously our framework of reality is too limited to explain this, Mack writes. "It is for us to embrace the reality of the phenomenon and to take a step toward appreciating that we live in a universe

different from the one in which we have been taught to believe."

So Mack doesn't bother to give his patients a "full battery of psychometric tests," which, he notes, are "time-consuming and expensive."

Paul Kurtz, chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and a skeptic, is floored by this.

"Even UFO-ologists considered abductions on the fringe only a few years ago," he says.

"Now, to have someone with Mack's credentials saying this 'My golly, what does that say?'"

"Because a Harvard professor says it doesn't mean it's true."

Mack's department chairman at Harvard is less generous. "Nobody believes it," she told The New York Times Magazine recently. "I wish he were doing something else."

"This is so off-base."



Frank Pompa, GNS

New Agers reach for hope in fear of apocalypse now

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Talk about harmonic convergence: Like comets that whooshed in from nowhere, two New Age books are aligned on the nation's best seller lists.

Betty J. Eadie's "Embraced by the Light," a personal account of a visionary near-death experience, is perched near the top of non-fiction lists.

And among the top 10 on fiction lists is James Redfield's "The Celestine Prophecy," a thinly veiled adventure story about a "renaissance in consciousness" that's about to transform the world.

Such volumes used to inhabit a twilight zone of dingy little bookshops with incense and crystals. But now New Age is mainstream — or, perhaps, the mainstream is entering a New Age.

What an odd new world it is. Both best sellers are slight and lamely written — no literary sophistication, no sex scenes. Both are by first-time authors who are not professional writers.

But like "The Bridges of Madison County," another out-of-nowhere phenomenon, they're intensely sincere. They never smirk; they're not cool, ironic or jaded. They seem to have bubbled up from some underground river of feeling, of longing, of seeking.

Their common theme: that another reality exists, more real than the one we know. But we can enter it only through an altered state of consciousness.

This is by no means a new idea. It flourished in the 1960s, often with the aid of hallucinogenic drugs. Its roots in the United States go back to Ralph Waldo Emerson and the transcendentalists, who imported Eastern mysticism to 19th-century New England.

But why, in the high-tech 1990s, is the interest in alternate spiritual realms — everything we lump together as "New Age" — stronger than ever? Is it just pre-millennium nuttiness, or something more profound?

Believers and skeptics

"Go into the bookstores. You hardly can find the science section. But there's a huge section for the paranormal, occult and New Age," complains Paul Kurtz, chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

Reached by phone in Buffalo, N.Y., where the group of skeptics is based, Kurtz insists that without scientific evidence, the paranormal is nothing but wishful thinking.

"What's the alternative? That anything's true? That would be chaos," says the former philosophy professor.

Mysticism, magic, angels, aliens, witches, goddesses, shamans, spiritual healing, astrology, prophecy, past lives, crop circles, women who run with the wolves — this bizarre New Age avalanche is "puzzling in a great

scientific culture," he says.

It's not so puzzling, though, in popular culture.

Most of us laugh at supermarket tabloids like the Weekly World News, which runs "world exclusive photos" of aliens shaking hands with President Clinton, Ross Perot and Rush Limbaugh. (The aliens recently urged Limbaugh to run for president in '96.) Yet a 1987 Gallup poll found that a majority of Americans believes UFOs are real. Even more of us — 69 percent — believe in angels, said a recent Time survey.

A Gallup poll in the early '80s indicated that as many as 8 million U.S. residents may have had a near-death experience. And 3.7 million may have been abducted by space aliens, if we believe the results of a 1991 Roper survey.

Still, there always have been more believers than skeptics. Why are the ranks of the believers swelling now?

The great escape

In the spring issue of Creation Spirituality, one of the many New Age magazines that have sprouted in recent years, there's a revealing interview with Howard Rheingold, author of the 1991 book Virtual Reality.

Rheingold writes about the cutting edge of technology, but he's ambivalent about its consequences. What "the great secular religion of technology" does not offer, he says, "is a coherent way of finding meaning in the universe." As a result, "We're in danger of losing our souls."

Meanwhile, "Technology plus capitalism equals this kind of self-devouring machine that's threatening the planet."

UConn UFO expert cites the mystic in the majority of us

By LEE KRENIS MORE
Gannett News Service

As many studies have found, "experiencers" of UFO abductions and near-death visions are not crazy. Nor, it seems, are they fantasy-prone. Nor can they be pigeonholed by age or gender.

But they do seem to have a "distinctive psychological profile," wrote University of Connecticut psychologist Kenneth Ring in his 1992 study "The Omega Project."

Ring described an "encounter personality": sensitive, vulnerable, more likely to have been abused or traumatized early in life, and often able to dissociate (mentally "go someplace else") as a psychological defense.

They're also more sensitive physically. Many report that watches and electrical appliances stop in their presence. Many are abnormally sensitive to bright lights and approaching thunderstorms.

What could cause this? Ring opted for the view of Canadian psychologist and neu-

ropsychologist Michael Persinger: Most UFO phenomena are natural occurrences, "direct products of the stresses and strains of the Earth's crust."

This geological energy has electromagnetic properties that can generate, in the temporal lobe of the brain, hallucinations that seem real.

There is evidence, wrote Ring, that people who are encounter-prone have "greater than average temporal lobe sensitivity." Perhaps UFO and near-death experiences are similar because "there is a common neurological mechanism that underlies them both."

Thus far, skeptics might be nodding in approval. But Ring is no skeptic. These physical and mental changes, he wrote, may "permit a higher level of human nature to manifest."

The experiencers may be tapping into some higher intelligence, a "global mind." If so, all this activity portends an evolution of consciousness, the "shamanizing of modern humanity."

These are the twin pillars of the New Age.

It's religious, but with a small "r." Think of writer-therapist Thomas Moore, whose book Soul Mates (HarperCollins, \$25) is also on most non-fiction lists.

It's Green with a capital "G." Unless we embark on a spiritual mission to save the Earth, we face extinction — apocalypse now.

Some of this, undoubtedly, is aging baby boomer angst about the big questions: Why did I march down a career path, dress for success, make this money? What's the point? Who am I? Who was I before I put on a false face, years ago, to deal with the "real" world? Is this all there is?

So the New Ager goes on a spiritual quest — not on the information highway, which promises to make our mundane preoccupations worse, but on the road not taken, the path to regions beneath and beyond.

Beneath is the world of death.

Dr. Sherwin B. Nuland's "How We Die" (Knopf, \$24) is also on non-fiction lists, reflecting our fascination, thanks in part to AIDS, with death and dying.

But the unsparing realism of "How We Die" is anything but comforting. The highway to beyond, however strange or scary, holds more promise.

Read "Abduction," a new book by psychiatrist John E. Mack (Scribner's, \$22), and the Weekly World News may not seem so far out. Mack describes patients who think they've been abducted by aliens. The twist: He believes their stories are true.

Absurd? Maybe, but no more absurd than Howard Stern running for governor of New York and being taken seriously.

Stories of UFOs and near-death experiences have been told for years. They have a remarkable consistency. What's new, in the '90s, is the palpable hunger for them. We want a feeling of oneness and connection. We want reassurance that we are not alone, that there's something more, that death is not the end but a journey, painless and fulfilling and fun.

Healthy or unhealthy?

Much of the New Age avalanche is, indeed, uncritical. The eagerness to believe anything, no matter how far-fetched, looks more like superstition than faith at best, faith lite.

This disturbs those who regard their interest in the paranormal as scientific. The notion that 3.7 million Americans may have been abducted by space aliens is "posterously absurd," writes D. Stacy, editor of MUFON-UFO, in a letter published in a recent issue of Connecting Link, a New Age magazine.

Although MUFON-UFO, the journal of the Mutual UFO Network, is full of abduction accounts, Stacy insists on some basic math: Multiply 3.7 million by 22 to extrapolate worldwide. Assuming five or 10 visits per abductee over

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a lifetime, that's at least half a billion visits, or a "sanity-staggering" 5,000 per hour, every day.

"One would have thought that whatever the aliens were after, they would have had a bellyful by now," Stacy concludes.

Even worse, New Age has become a commercial fad. It's all the rage with Marla Trump and her pals on the Upper East Side, reports the April 11 New York magazine.

Marla had an aromatherapy massage before giving birth to little Tiffany Trump, who arrived to the strains of the relaxation tapes "Angel Love" and "Ocean Dreams."

"It's easy to get caught up in celebrity and materialism," Marla says.

If New Age can survive a Trump, it may well be a miracle.

Still, not all that's dismissed as New Age is faddish, frivolous or

even new. Eastern mysticism, for example, is many centuries old. And human consciousness remains a mystery even to those who reduce it to brain chemicals.

As the great psychiatrist Carl Jung once wrote, "We should not pretend to understand the world only by the intellect.

"There is a trail of noisy, tin-can foolishness behind many valuable ideas.

The trick is to separate the tin from the gold.

The new best sellers may not al-

ways do this, but they've undeniably hit a popular nerve.

Look at our lives: As the poet William Wordsworth put it long ago, "getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

Look at the world around us, which seems more violent, ugly and trivial every day.

No wonder so many of us seek a new and better age — if not in this world, in another.