people will be able to buy more groceries and warehousemen will keep working. The three Teamsters in the room, whose jobs at the warehouse are not guaranteed past 1995, nodded without conviction. Between the outreach center's long-term plans for reindustrialization and the Teamsters' short-term anxiety, there's a huge gap of almost separate realities.

The scramble for jobs resembles a desperate game of musical chairs, continually undermining the possibility of human community. Yet the project can't secede from the world its members live in. When Galdston brought up "democratic economic development strategies" at the training session, only a professional woman from Andover seemed to know what the phrase meant, and it didn't come up again. To the people who approach him for help and training, the issues are more specific and dire—threatened jobs, crime-ridden streets, unlivable housing. So the project looks for winnable fights and tries to create a community that can hold out amid all the opposing forces: the decay of cities, the emptiness of government coffers, the cynicism of politicians who don't see the point of dealing with an organization that doesn't deliver votes, the globalization of the economy. The mere fact that eighty churchgoers, workers and professionals from across the valley came to an organizational meeting to hear about one another's campaigns, as one of them later said, "on a weekday night in the middle of January, with the kind of winter we've had, in Lawrence, which is not a place where people go for fun," is an achievement of sorts in 1994 America.

"There is great success in developing individuals," Ken Galdston says. "But it can be evanescent, and you're always wrestling with the question of proportionality." Most members labor under the strain of families and jobs and constant worry about money. Mike Ferguson, the warehouseman, attends up to ten meetings a month, a pace that has burned out others, like Bill Middlemiss, a firefighter who worries that the life-span of other groups he's seen is about the five years of the project's existence. Some members seem to fall away when their particular campaign ends; some become frustrated with the difficulty of getting people around them to act on even the narrowest self-interest. Dennis Walsh, an electronics worker at A.T.&T., who joined because "the idea of the community coming together, meeting in a church, struck me as something lacking lately," wonders whether people he's trying to help are trying to help themselves.

Which brings us to the conundrum of quid pro quo—the project's "dynamic," according to Galdston. In theory, though they seem to have little in common, Lois Valentin helps Mary Georgoulis and then Mary Georgoulis helps Lois Valentin. Self-interest, not altruism, is the basis for community. But what if Andover, or even Lowell, doesn't really need Lawrence? What if reciprocity breaks down? Dennis Walsh said, "I can see that being the end of an organization." If, on the other hand, the project's "ethos," as Paul Dettman, a retired regional planner, put it, is "the idea that to some extent you are your brother's keeper," then there have to be enough people of decency and vision, like those I've described, to keep it going. Mutual support is no more inevitable than the war of all against all. Even most nice people find it hard to care, hard to act.

And yet this time the middle-class Protestant congregations from the suburbs, historic do-gooders from abolition to Nicaragua, are taking the risk of joining with poor people who live next door. The women at Hancock Courts are taking the risk of joining with suburban liberals who may abandon them in an instant. It's difficult to imagine a better organization or better people emerging from the battered Merrimack Valley. The project has already won some battles and prevented total loss in others; if it doesn't arrest a decay that's almost as old as the century, it will have done no worse than anyone could expect. And it will leave behind fifty or a hundred or 300 people who at least share an idea that their destinies in the valley are somehow connected. □

GULLIBLE TRAVELERS

# Spaced Out—and Other Delusions

ANNE BERNAYS

Some years ago, at the height of the antinuclear movement, John Mack, a psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School, chained himself to a fence surrounding the testing grounds in Nevada. This gesture was altogether in character. Dr. Mack is a binary sort of fellow, an enthusiast searching for inspiring answers to big questions. The Harvard-affiliated department of psychiatry at Cambridge City Hospital is his creation; he's also the founder of the Center for Psychology and Social Change. Over time Mack has made some of his more conventional colleagues uncomfortable by endorsing Werner Erhardt's EST and, more recently, "breathworks," a method of breathing under supervision meant to help a patient recollect nasty things long kept under wraps. It's hard to imagine how he found the time, but in 1978 he published a biography of agitated iconoclast T.E. Lawrence; it won him a Pulitzer Prize. John Mack has magnetic eyes and a reassuring presence.

These days psychiatrist Mack has moved on to other worlds, spending a good deal of time interviewing, hypnotizing and "treating" men and women who claim to be victims of alien abduction. They say that during their several hours of captivity inside hovering space vehicles they are physically invaded in various ways, including sperm and egg removal and implantation of odd matter, usually in an arm or leg muscle. When their space odysseys are over, the abductees are returned to earth, thoroughly *fartootst*. This is where Dr. Mack takes over, assuring them that it's O.K. to be temporarily upset but not to worry: Their small gray kidnappers mean well and have come from outer space only in order to keep our planet from self-destructing.

I saw Dr. Mack on *Oprah*. He said that while he's aware all this sounds farfetched, the abductees he's talked to are nei-

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ther psychotic nor neurotic in any conventional way. Their stories sound authentic and are amazingly similar to one another, even when related by people who have had no chance to meet and compare notes. While unwilling to go all the way and say they are telling the truth, Mack is far more convinced by tales of extraterrestrial abduction than he is skeptical.

If John Mack were the local chiropractor or small-town dentist, few would pay much attention to him or the ideas contained in his book, just published and now orbiting its author on the nation's airwaves. But this man is a Harvard professor; surely a man on the faculty of the Big H knows what he's talking about. His credentials alone give his narrative the wings it needs to fly; as a result, thousands, perhaps millions, believe it.

It seems we'll believe almost anything, and the more of us there are, the more likely we are to embrace total nonsense, a phenomenon known as mass hysteria. You're ashamed to admit that you saw Elvis twiddling the knobs on the gas grill, but as soon as a couple of the neighbors say they too saw him in their backyards, you figure it's O.K. to go ahead and call the folks at *The National Enquirer.* I see nothing to distinguish alien abduction—in its high moonshine content—from such other foolishness as astrology, Silva Mind Control (we once had a babysitter who swore she could find a parking place in Harvard Square by focusing her mind), pyramid power, numerology, the orgone box, phlogiston, Scientology, alchemy and the presence of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts—all of them wacko responses to the normal anxieties of everyday life.

Moreover, John Mack and his fellow believers want it both ways. On the one hand they charge us to open our closed, "Western," "rationalist" sensibilities to other systems of "knowing" and accept the "unacceptable." On the other hand, they claim to have "scientific" (that is, physical) evidence that scores of abductions have taken place—although they have yet to produce a single convincing item. But one either buys the whole ball of wax through absolute faith, as a Christian does the Resurrection, or, as in the case of fluoridation, through concrete proof that children who brush with Crest have fewer cavities than those who don't. Are we supposed to believe in aliens in our midst because we need to believe *or* because space cadets have left behind a pair of peculiar footgear or half-eaten metal-filing sandwiches? One way or the other, please.

An analogy to the belief in extraterrestrial kidnapping is the conviction that the Holocaust never happened. When confronted by hard evidence—documentation, mass graves, camps and ovens, the number of disappearances corresponding to the shrinkage of Europe's Jewish population, and the word of eyewitnesses—the deniers persist: The Holocaust didn't happen. *Punkt.*

And so we have a phenomenon with two heads. Defying—or, at the very least, ignoring—reason, common sense and logic, the one head believes without evidence, while the other believes *in spite of* evidence. Not that our age is unique: Historians of religion call this kind of superstitious thinking-by-the-gut "animism," and it's been around since the first caveperson bored a hole through a mammoth's tooth and wore it around his, or her, neck on a length of bull's intestine.

The specious and irrational, a huge slavering dog with fangs, has pushed the sweet purring pussycat of sanity and reason off her bed, taken her place at the hearth. Impatient with rational thought, we'd far rather "feel" or "believe in" or "relate to."

No one appreciates the imagination more than a novelist, a person who spends at least half her waking life making up stories and writing them down. And that's why she's aware of the risks of letting fact and fiction blur into each other. John Mack is a man of undeniable talent and energy, so I'm baffled by his eagerness to groom and breed gullibility. But I guess he's not out of step with the animism parade. The next thing we'll be told is that Richard Nixon has made yet another spectacular comeback. How many will not believe it? ☐

NOW, FINANCIAL MELTDOWN?

# T.V.A.'s Blighted Nuclear Romance

DANIELLE DROITSCH

Some sixty years ago, Franklin D. Roosevelt gave the country what one writer would call "the greatest single American invention of this century"—the Tennessee Valley Authority. At the time, the region was plagued by floods, widespread soil erosion and poverty that was grim even by Depression measurements. The arrival of T.V.A., with its shock therapy of electric power, spurred industry, created thousands of jobs and helped restore much of the ravaged land throughout the Southeast. By the early 1970s, the area's income had increased twenty times and stood at 75 percent of the national per capita average, up from 45 percent in the 1930s. Today, the authority serves 80,000 square miles, employs more than 19,000 citizens, manages the country's fifth-largest river system and produces 128 billion kilowatt hours of electricity a year, enough to run three cities the size of New York. It is also $25 billion in debt.

This financial crater is largely the result of T.V.A.'s romance with atomic power, an affair that shows little sign of waning despite years of mismanagement and the cautionary message of the industry's meltdown nationwide. In the 1960s, when the country first embraced atomic power as an energy panacea "too cheap to meter," T.V.A. ordered seventeen reactors to meet its projected demand. To pay for their construction, the authority persuaded Congress to allow it to borrow on the public bond market. But building delays and cost overruns plagued the reactors from the start, and the promise of cheap nuclear power quickly dimmed. Of the seventeen reactors originally planned, eight have been canceled. Five have received operating licenses, but only three of these are produc-

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