

'WE ARE NOT ALONE'

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Space-alien believers share stories, vulnerability

The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel.

— Ezekiel 1:16

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Those round, metallic objects that descend from the sky from time to time have always been hard to describe.

Explaining them is a real challenge.

Eddie Middleton, a 50-year-old junior college philosophy instructor, believes "the most

compelling hypothesis" is that they bear intelligent life from outer space that is exploring our planet.

"I'm not a true believer fanatic about it," Middleton says. "I think I have an open mind. But I think there's evidence to warrant this kind of speculation. I think it's a reasonable kind of hypothesis — that there might be a more intelligent life in the universe than us, and they might be messing with us right now for their own agenda, whatever it is."

Middleton's single sighting of a UFO — a bright light that flashed across the sky, turned from white to orange, then slowed down, stopped, and hovered just above the treetops in the shape of a saucer — is not the most vivid UFO sighting ever reported.

But he is among a small but committed group of people willing to declare their acceptance of an extraterrestrial explanation despite the risk of ridicule, professional setbacks and whatever damage to personal relationships might occur.

He and other members of a local UFO discussion group financed and promoted a Memphis appearance in June by a Columbus, Miss., woman named Leah Haley who says she has been abducted by aliens.

"I think it's developing toward some crescendo," Middleton says. "Something's going to come out of this. I don't know what. Maybe this is how a new religion starts. Someone gets hit by the light, like St. Paul, and a new religion comes out of it."

A fair percentage of the American public agrees that there might be some explanation for the phenomenon that goes beyond the imagination.

A 1985 poll by the Roper Organization found that 25 percent of the respondents believed in "unidentified flying objects from somewhere else in the universe."

In another Roper Organization poll, conducted in 1991, 7 percent of the respondents said they had seen a UFO.

A Roper Organization poll commissioned by the Fund for UFO Research in 1991 found 2 percent of the respondents believed they might have had an abduction experience with an unidentified flying object.

A 1990 Gallup poll found that 47 percent of the American public believed unidentified flying objects were real. Thirty-one percent of the respondents believed they were the product of the imagination.

People who have seen with their own eyes something that can be interpreted as an alien visit and who have had a great deal of exposure to other people's accounts of UFOs and

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other strange phenomena seem best equipped to make the leap of faith that pulls extraterrestrial beings into the picture.

The theories of UFO believers are often combined with the cattle mutilation mystery — hundreds of cases in which dead, bloodless cattle have been found in fields with their reproductive organs and other parts removed with surgical precision, often corresponding to strange lights in the sky during the night.

The strange “crop circles” phenomenon — unexplained, artistic designs in bent grain stalks that appear overnight in farmers’ fields all over the world — are often part of the UFO scenario.

Believers also are often avid readers who focus on metaphysical subjects, the occult, the supernatural, the paranormal and other subjects that are beyond the direct experience most of us have with the physical world.

The UFO community’s biggest catch in recent years — Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack — discussed “transpersonal psychology,” “frontiers of consciousness,” and “consciousness that goes beyond one’s biography” at a UFO conference in Eureka Springs, Ark., a few years ago.

These were subjects he was researching before he was convinced by New York artist, hypnotist and UFOlogist Budd Hopkins that he ought to take a look at alien abduction.

The phenomenon is adding fuel to the argument that visions that have been described by humans for centuries regarding metallic objects coming down from the sky can be explained by the notion that *we are obviously not alone and it’s egocentric to think so.*

Randy Kjelland, a 42-year-old Collierville salesman who serves as Tennessee director of MUFON, the Mutual Unidentified Flying Object Network, said the abduction phenomenon is stirring new interest in UFOs in general.

“A lady in Memphis was at my house a week or two ago who thinks she was abducted,” he said. “This is my first exper-

ience with it. . . . Why would these people make this up? I just can’t imagine.”

Kjelland maintains that “there’s something definitely going on” up there.

“It’s wide open as far as I’m concerned,” he said. “Ninety percent of what you hear is probably bogus, but too many people have had too many experiences and too much data has been collected.”

MUFON claims 4,000 members in the United States, about 5,000 members worldwide, and a conservative, scientific orientation.

Kjelland, who collects UFO sightings in Tennessee and passes them on to the national headquarters in Texas, has been state director of the group since February. He says UFO reports filter to him about once every six weeks or so, primarily from East Tennessee.

He refused to discuss his own sighting, except to say that “I don’t think I’d be as involved as I am without it.”

He believes in the importance of accepting people’s accounts of alien encounters at face value.

“Whether it’s from another world or from within, it’s important for people to have a place to express their emotions,” he said. “That’s what these organizations ought to be all about. Some people have been traumatized and they want to know what’s going on in their lives.”

A similar theme is sounded by Mack, the model for the fictional psychiatrist in *Intruders*, a 1992 alien abduction drama aired by CBS, and the author of *Abduction!*, a recently published book based on his own case studies of the phenomenon.

In Cambridge, he runs an “abduction support facility” to help ease the trauma among abductees and stresses the importance of providing people who believe they have been abducted with the kind of therapy that doesn’t challenge the facts of their case.

To reveal experiences with aliens publicly is “like you’re putting a ‘kick me’ sign on your back, which is, I think, why groups like ours are in demand,” said Cindy McMullin, a 37-year old Memphis paralegal who belongs to the Memphis UFO discussion group.

“It’s a safe place to talk about these kinds of things in a sup-

portive environment,” McMullin said. “You really make yourself vulnerable when you start revealing your experiences.”

Abductees, when they decide to tell their stories, often say they were fearful during the early stages, but later felt a sense of calm descending. The experience is often described as interdimensional, the subject drifting into a sort of fourth dimension in which the spacecraft may appear to be small from the outside but cavernous within.

Basic groups of aliens described by the abductees include a sort of Nordic type that looks human, but with eyes more like a cat’s. There are the so-called “greys,” with the lightbulb-shaped heads and big black eyes, a tiny slit for a mouth, two holes for a nose and no ears. A variation on the “greys” has a long hawk-like nose. The list goes on.

Types of spacecraft seen during the encounters include the classic flying saucer, of course, with several variations. There are also huge wedge-shaped craft and others that are like flying cylinders. Debunkers of the UFO phenomenon point to the wide variety of descriptions as proof that aliens are imaginary. UFOlogists counter that it shows that not only are we not alone, but they’re not alone, either.

Alien abductions usually include procedures in which the abductees are used by aliens for the collection of sperm and eggs or as human surrogate mothers for the production of hybrid beings — a sexual component that has led to speculation that childhood sexual abuse could be resurfacing in another form.

UFO theory usually incorporates a government coverup in the scenario. No self-respecting documentary on the phenomenon would be complete without a reference to Roswell, N.M., where an alien spacecraft reportedly crashed in 1947 and was hauled off by government workers for the quietest research and development project west of Oak Ridge.

It all sounds too impossible for most people, but “If you ever see any of these things,” Middleton says, “it will wipe skepticism out real quickly.”

But he also clearly enjoys discussing the subject with ag-

nostics and nonbelievers, and begins many of his anecdotes with the phrase "This skeptic friend of mine."

He often falls back on Sophocles, Aristotle, Descartes, James and the other masters to seek answers to such questions as why people believe in the existence of something — God, for instance — that may not be a part of the individual's direct personal experience.

Middleton took his first philosophy class in about 1966 and wound up minoring in philosophy at Christian Brothers, then received a master's degree in the subject at Memphis State, now University of Memphis.

"To say that I'm gullible, I won't say that," he said. "I think my mind is a lot more open than a lot of people. We know in the history of science how many great discoveries came about that at first were ridiculed."

He doesn't have a real problem with agnosticism — religious or UFOious.

"Often it's the only rational position you can take if you don't have enough evidence to really form a conclusion."

He has encountered anger and hostility from those who "don't buy into that," as they say, but his interests haven't held him back in his career or his personal relationships.

"It hasn't ruined any real good relationships," he says. "As long as someone is willing to at least look at the evidence,

that's all I ask. This may be the most important thing that's happening on the planet right now."

During his life, Middleton has been on a series of quests that go beyond everyday experience, including an advanced EST course on a California mountaintop.

In one of his classes recently, he mentions his trip to the mountaintop.

"Why'd you go there in the first place?" a student asks.

"I was curious," he replies. "I'm curious about a lot of things that can get me in trouble."

"The mind, the psyche, is a fragile kind of thing," he adds a few minutes later. "You've got to be careful what you let in there."