

TGIF

ALEX BEAM

Harvard's Mack talks back

HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S CURIOUS Star Chamber "investigation" of Medical School professor John Mack is currently hanging fire. The school's Special Faculty Committee will soon deliver its final report to dean Daniel Tosteson. The dean may or may not start disciplinary proceedings against Mack, a psychiatrist who has gained national renown for lending perhaps too sympathetic an ear to people claiming to have been abducted by aliens.

The morning line is that Harvard will back off. No aggrieved patient or financial donor — according to Mack, there are none — has appeared before the committee, which has listened exclusively to caviling from several of Mack's medical school colleagues. For the first time, in an interview in his cramped Cambridge Hospital office, the 65-year-old Mack agreed to address the issues surrounding the yearlong inquiry:

On Harvard's reaction to his work: Although he has been investigating aliens-ate-my-homework stories since 1990, Mack believes it was the March 1994 publication of his best-selling book "Abduction," and his subsequent appearances on talk shows, that prompted Harvard to launch its inquiry two

months later. Mack, who projects a mesmerizing presence not unlike T. E. Lawrence, the subject of his 1977 biography "A Prince of Our Disorder," sees himself as a modern-day Galileo, a man of science pilloried for offering a "new paradigm" for understanding the human experience.

In recording dozens of remarkably similar abduction tales, Mack says, "I found myself dealing with a genuine mystery that I couldn't dismiss as self-generated. I'm a professor who says there's another reality at play here, and I can see how that would be quite upsetting to the Harvard Medical School. I have committed a kind of crime, a violation of a certain view of reality."

On money: The faculty committee has questioned Mack closely on his sources of financing, which are plentiful (and covetable) in an era when budget cutbacks are being felt elsewhere in the Harvard psychiatric establishment. Mack is alternately assertive — "This is important work. It could be changing the way people see reality" — and defensive about the \$300,000 a year that pours into his Cambridge-based Center for Psychology and Social Change, a huge portion of it from various Rockefeller family members.

Laurance Rockefeller gives \$250,000 annually, on top of a \$194,000 grant he made to start up Mack's Program for Extraordinary Experience Research; Laura Rockefeller Chasin, Alida Rockefeller and Cambridge's own Abby Rockefeller have donated tens of thousands of dollars to Mack over the years, not including \$86,000 in reported gifts from the Rockefeller Family Fund — gifts a fund staffer says were never made.

When presented with a list of major donors on file at the state's Office of Charities, Mack simply says, "This is all wrong," and declines to elaborate. He also refuses to discuss almost \$200,000 in donations from a family member, large portions of it distributed through the Closter, N.J.-based Nara Fund Inc.

On his colleagues: "Some people support me, and some people think I'm outrageous. I won't deny that this whole process has been painful to me. It's been very expensive in all senses of the word. I just want it to be over."

