

Physician criticized for his work on aliens

Until 1990, John E. Mack was your average overachiever: professor of psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School; on staff at the Cambridge, Mass., Hospital; founding director of the Center for Psychology and Social Change, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of a biography on T.E. Lawrence.

Then, in a sense, Dr. Mack was kidnapped by aliens.

For him, it was an indirect experience, a vicarious journey through the lives of his patients. What they told him resulted in such a radical shift of consciousness that today, although the framework of his life is little changed, the man living it is permanently altered.

What Dr. Mack did was believe stories his private patients were telling him, stories of contacts, kidnapping, and physical examinations by beings from some other realm. These tales were so radical, so inexplicable they defied medical models, challenging the fundamental beliefs of western science.

It was a major transformation for him. "When I began this work in 1990, the possibility of extraterrestrials reaching in and abducting people was not possible in my worldview," he said during a national teleconference last week. He has since worked with more than 100 people, a project he continues to pursue avidly.

The results of his research and counseling were published in 1994, a provocative book, *Abduction, Human Encounters with Aliens*. It moved to the bestseller lists and, this spring, came out in paperback. Dr. Mack says he revised the new edition to further emphasize his objectivity and authority in the wake of heavy criticism from scientists and scholars.

Decried by critics as "anti-rational and anti-science," as "subversive," as breaching the distance between church and state, the book continues to stir the mainstream. Talk of UFOs, alien contacts, alternative realms, and out-

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side intelligences generates knee jerk rebuttals by those who prefer to hear no more about the subject.

If abductees' reports spark serious questions about their sanity, Dr. Mack's research and book have stirred a small scale academic inquisition.

This spring, a committee of Harvard faculty met to reconsider Dr. Mack's work — and of course question his academic credentials. Highly critical, their report denies the validity of the psychiatrist's work, because its basis is "not real."

Yet to those patients who came to talk to him, the events not only are real, they have been deeply troubling.

The "typical" alien abduction experience goes something like this: An individual ranging in age from infancy to elderly, is removed from home or yard by small humanoid beings. The abductee is taken aboard an aircraft, subjected to experiments, perhaps hypnotized, and even implanted with information. The individual then is returned home — never the same again.

Trouble begins for an abductee — as it has for Dr. Mack — when, shaken to the core by such an invasion of privacy, she or he tries

to talk about the trauma. "Forget about it!" they're advised by family, friends, and professionals — even when physical marks remain on their bodies as evidence of the contact.

If they persist in trying to discuss what has happened, their credibility is challenged. They may be identified as "troubled," exhibiting symptoms of underlying psychological problems.

But when he began listening to these patients, Dr. Mack found some very different indicators. "None of them seemed disturbed except in a secondary sense; that is, they were troubled as a consequence of something that had apparently happened to them."

Tests showed his patients to be healthy and normal, he said. Nor could these experiences be pegged to childhood sexual abuse or written off as recurring dreams. "There was nothing to suggest their stories were delusional," he adds.

Abductees often repeated prophecy-like warnings of impending dangers, even disasters, for the planet. Julia, with whom Dr. Mack has worked for years, recalled a

vision of herself working in a food distribution program, an emergency response to a major breakdown in communications shown as occurring in the near future.

As he listened to his clients' accounts, the psychiatrist couldn't miss the apocalyptic quality of the information they were repeating from their encounters. Nor could he ignore the similarity in affect between abductions and near-death or out-of-body experiences, two phenomena which have achieved far greater public acceptance today than UFO contacts.

Can Americans come to grips with the phenomenon of alien abductions? Dr. Mack says we have little choice. "This work has cost me time, money, and some criticism, but it is important to help people," he said. He sees a far deeper meaning in the inexplicable yet very real experiences he has heard from so many.

Next week, we will explore this emerging topic further.

Sally and Fred Vallongo's New Age column appears each Sunday.

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