



Photo by Karen Ballard/The Washington Times

John Mack, Harvard psychiatrist and author of "Abduction," listens to a speaker yesterday.

UFO buffs meet

Earthlings called unprepared for alien arrival

By Sean Piccoli
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In the 1951 sci-fi movie classic "The Day the Earth Stood Still," a wayfaring space creature named Klaatu lands his flying saucer on the Ellipse — practically in the president's back yard — and gets shot and chased all over town for his trouble.

All of which could explain Washington as the choice of settings for "When Cosmic Cultures Meet," a conference that concluded yesterday after a long weekend of a soul-searching, star-gazing inquiry into the biggest appointment humankind — or a segment of humankind, anyway — is still waiting to keep.

The conference, held by the Falls Church-based Human Potential Foundation, brought together a group of true believers looking for ways to cushion the inevitable global shock when worlds collide and to make for a warmer welcome than the one Klaatu got.

"It's a start," Harvard University psychiatrist John E. Mack said of the gathering, which included scientists, historians, journalists and several people claiming to have regular contact with alien beings.

But the wiry, dark-haired Dr. Mack — author of the recent best seller "Abduction," chronicling his work with some of those people — seemed to capture the mood of the conferees by suggesting that earthlings have light years to go before they're ready to handle neighbors from beyond.

As one presenter put it in the title of his paper, "If We Can't Even Talk to Each Other, How Can We Talk to Them?"

To outsiders, it might have looked like a conspiracy buff's bazaar or a Trekkie convention for the reality-impaired. Scholars steeped in the mysteries of UFO sightings and alien-abduction accounts delivered papers on the social, legal, technological and religious implications of extraterrestrial contact.

One guest, a middle-aged man in a striped shirt and bolo tie, sat on a couch eagerly sharing a UFO scrapbook stuffed with clippings and pictures of spacecraft. "Now we get to the weird stuff," he said with a smile.

Other guests found nothing "weird" — or even debatable — about alien visitation and instead chirped about the good tidings that such contacts are bound to bring.

"I think it's a very positive time," said Kay Allison, a bookstore owner from Charlottesville who busied herself at a table selling titles like "Preparing for Contact," "Visitors from Within" and "The Alien Book of Truth."

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Still others spoke grimly of powerful people withholding crucial information about the existence of otherworldly life. At one point, a visitor found himself being pulled aside for a "background" briefing on the subject of possible government cover-ups.

"Don't get sucked in," he was warned.

"Like all dialogue, there's bound to be some nuts involved," said Scott Jones, the retired Navy officer and ex-Capitol Hill staffer who created the Human Potential Foundation to tackle such issues. "But any perceptive ear can tell the difference."

Participants also insisted they had pressing business to discuss.

"I think this is the hottest question on the planet right now," said Rauni-Leena Luukanen-Kilde, a physician and UFO expert from Helsinki who has written several books on the topic.

The conference's timing did seem inspired, given the rush of best-selling books, movies and TV programs that has signaled the '90s as a decade of resurgence for UFO spotters and alien-abduction buffs.

"Interest is way up," Ms. Allison said, basing her appraisal on her book sales.

Extraterrestrialists have a multitude of conferences to attend these days: Even the respected Massachusetts Institute of Technology held one in 1992. They also have something of a guru in Dr. Mack, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer who could become a martyr to the alienists' cause if the internal inquiry Harvard is conducting into his abduction research goes badly for him.

As one observer put it yesterday, "He's the hero of this conference."

Some guests professed more than just academic interest in bug-eyed beings. Dr. Luukanen-Kilde, dressed festively in beachy stripes and big earrings, identified herself as a "contactee," a frequent guest aboard alien spacecraft.

Nobody here was questioning the claim.

"I haven't heard any debunking or skeptics here," she said in a pleasantly accented voice. "This crowd is so sure [that aliens exist], they moved beyond that a long time ago. We have our evidence — the military also has its evidence, which it doesn't share — and we're here to explore."