

Flying Saucers at Harvard!

While everybody else was worrying about balanced budgets and mad bombers, some people had their eyes on the important stuff. Last weekend the Washington area was host to a convention of UFO watchers, and though no UFOs showed up to be watched, the attendees had little doubt about the significance of what they were doing.

"I think this is the hottest question on the planet right now," one guest from Finland told *The Washington Times*' Sean Piccoli, and presumably the planet she was talking about was the one we're on at the moment, even if it wasn't too clear what the question was. But not all the attendees at the conference sponsored by the Human Potential Foundation in Falls Church had always been on this planet. Not a few, it seems, were a relatively new breed of UFO enthusiasts who say they've been abducted by the ETs amongst us.

The planet's foremost authority on the abductees is Dr. John Mack of Harvard Medical School, author of the best-selling "Abduction," which recounts his examinations of people who say the chariots have swung low and taken them for a ride. Dr. Mack, who also attended the Falls Church conference, is of the opinion that these people are not just full of hot air, that a good many of them (if not all of them) are telling the truth about their abduction experiences.

It turns out, however, that Dr. Mack's colleagues and supervisors at Harvard don't necessarily share his opinion, and he is now the subject of an investigation by the administration. That in itself is controversial, since it seems to some people that an investigation of a faculty member who has published unorthodox ideas jeopardizes academic freedom. Maybe so, but the skeptics may have good reason to wonder about some of the good doctor's claims.

One reason Dr. Mack says he takes abductees' stories seriously is that he can't find anything psychiatrically wrong with them other than traumas produced by the abductions. That seems a bit like saying there's nothing wrong with a particular patient except that he thinks he's Napoleon. But as

one reads some of Dr. Mack's case histories, it becomes fairly clear that there is something wrong with at least some of those who say they've been up in the clouds.

In the first place, not a few of them seem to harbor sexual problems — frigidity, sexual abuse, incest, sexual fantasies, marital problems. Their claims about their abductions and the aliens who took them are closely related to these problems, and they often describe the aliens and what they supposedly did to the abductees in transparently sexual terms. The aliens push things into the abductees' sex organs and take sperm or ovary samples, and the abductees often report that they feel they were "raped" or "violated."

Then too it turns out that many of the abductees report that the aliens have a message for humans — namely, that we're making a mess out of the earthly environment through industry, technology and especially nuclear power. By a curious coincidence it turns out that Dr. Mack himself (and indeed some of the abductees) are anti-nuclear activists and ardent environmentalists.

Nothing wrong with that, of course, but when you realize that many of the abductees' claims were not conscious until Dr. Mack hypnotized them and began eliciting their repressed memories, you have to wonder: Could it be that Dr. Mack, perhaps unconsciously, imposed his own beliefs on his patients, that these people were simply mentally or emotionally troubled and under his therapy started fantasizing the whole experience?

The conference this weekend didn't think so, and as the alien visitor from Finland, who claims to be a frequent visitor to alien spaceships, said, "I haven't heard any debunking or skeptics here. This crowd is so sure, they moved beyond that a long time ago." No doubt they are sure, but others aren't, and for all the scientists on hand, gatherings like these look more like cults of true believers than serious scientific inquiries. It will take more than enthusiasts and more than Dr. Mack's hypnotic trances to persuade either scientists or a skeptical public that somebody out there is catching us.