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UFO Abduction Tales Not Quite So Alien

Mainstream Society Finds Space for Supernatural Storytellers

By Karl Vick 5-9-85
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The first time anyone reported that a spacecraft stopped his car on the interstate between Frederick and Baltimore, took him aboard and fiddled with his manhood, there were no alien abduction support groups waiting back on the ground. It was the early 1970s, and whatever may have actually happened to Michael Bershad late one night on Interstate 70, he knew of no one else who claimed to have experienced anything like it.

But that was 20 years ago.

Today, even tabloid TV shows find his story of

alien abduction passé. "Now," Bershad said, "you have to have alien babies."

What changed was not Bershad's bizarre account, always a source of wonder even to him. What changed was how people looked at him when he spoke of it. Lately, Bershad has the eeriest feeling that his story has crept into the realm of the accepted.

The scientific establishment considers alien abduction no such thing, of course, and really would rather not consider it at all. UCLA researcher Ronald K. Siegel has explained everything about the abduction phenomenon—including the impressive anguish of self-described abductees—as a consequence of "normal

See ABDUCTIONS, A16, Col. 1

Supernatural Stories Not So Odd Anymore

ABDUCTIONS, From A1

hallucinatory powers of the brain." But last year, he declined an invitation to say so on national television, thinking at the time that alien abduction was a fad that had already passed.

"Apparently, it's not," Siegel said. From supermarket tabloids to TV talk shows to network prime time, the notion of alien abduction moved from oddball subculture to a unique place in American culture—neither quite believed nor dismissed out of hand, but treasured as a mystery.

"I get a lot of people who, I don't know if they believe me or not, but it sure seems like they want to believe me," Bershad said. "There's obviously something going on that people respond to."

The marketplace agrees. The centerpiece of Walt Disney World's revamped Tomorrowland exhibit will be the ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter. To promote it, Disney invited reporters and self-described abductees to Orlando this spring. In March, the company's television arm nationally syndicated a one-hour special that set out "to show that these alien encounters do take place," in the words of Disney publicist Barbara Warren.

A Harvard psychiatrist swallows the idea whole in a controversial book. Kellogg toys with the premise in a Rice Krispies commercial. And at the close of an episode of the hit sitcom "Frasier," the title character, a psychologist, gazes into the night sky. "Anything's possible," he says.

Longtime alien abduction believers are understandably elated. To the extent that popular culture reflects what they call "consensus reality," the possible now appears to encompass small gray beings with big eyes borrowing millions of ordinary Americans, harvesting their reproductive cells, then returning them to Earth to tell their stories to therapists.

"This once lightly regarded phenomenon has slowly but inexorably moved toward the mainstream of public awareness," Budd Hopkins, father of the abduction "movement," boasted last year. "This is the war we've finally begun to win."

Victory carries a price, however. After 100 television interviews, Bershad knows he feels better by talking about what he calls "my experience," a therapeutic benefit others find at the roughly 20 alien abduction support groups that have sprung up across the country, including in Washington.

Still, said the actor-turned-producer, he feels uneasy about a society in which a person can be introduced at a party—as he recently was in Los Angeles—as an alien abductee.

"It was blasé," Bershad said of the reaction.

His memory of the abduction, he said, began with a vague sense of discomfort on the drive between his home in Baltimore and his girlfriend's in Frederick. He had a feeling that something had happened there but didn't know what.

At the time, Bershad was an amateur expert on the legendary Bigfoot creature, and Hopkins was known best as an artist (he has paintings in the Hirshhorn Museum and a collage in the Corcoran Gallery). After meeting through a conference on unexplained phenomena, Bershad mentioned his I-70 unease to Hopkins, who arranged in 1978 to have Bershad hypnotized.

In the trance, Bershad recalled the night in 1973 when he says he

pulled his car over after seeing a spacecraft in the rearview mirror. The aliens were about four feet tall, had big black eyes and gray complexions and wore black, he said. They guided him on board and took a sperm sample that left him feeling "raped," he said.

Hopkins was thunderstruck by the fact Bershad had not remembered any of it before. "How many other abduction experiences lay buried and ticking within how many other unconscious minds?" Hopkins asked in his first book on the abduction phenomenon, "Missing Time."

One answer came from Michael Shea, a federal government lawyer in Washington who ran across the book in 1985. "I started to read it, and my whole soul was being exposed," said Shea, who now lives in the Midwest.

Shea claimed to have seen a spacecraft on I-70 on a night in 1973 or 1974, near the westbound exit to Olney. But that was all he could recall, he said, until he met Hopkins and the details of his own terrifying journey—being taken aboard the craft and having sperm extracted—emerged under hypnosis.

About the same time, one exit down I-70, reports of something called the Sykesville Monster surfaced after a claimed UFO sighting above a reservoir was followed by a splash. A group called Center Force soon was staking out nearby Patapsco Valley State Park, on the Howard-Carroll county line, setting out live rabbits as bait and firing live ammo at what members called red-eyed aliens.

The abduction reports quickly reached beyond Maryland. Hopkins said two new reports come to his New York City home each day. During an interview, he paused to answer his other line.

"New case," he said when he came back. "Interesting. Australia."

To get a handle on things, abduction enthusiasts in 1992 commissioned a Roper poll. From it, the sponsors concluded that 2 percent of Americans—about 5 million people—reported the kind of unusual experiences that could mean they had been abducted.

That profile also accommodates the most likely scientific explanation for abduction accounts. Every self-described abductee reports feeling paralyzed during the experience, which often occurs at night in bed. "Sleep paralysis" is a condition medical research suggests may afflict 4 percent of people during their lifetimes. It comes between sleep and wakefulness, "during that twilight zone when the brain doesn't switch very cleanly from dreams to waking," said Siegel, a research psychopharmacologist at the UCLA School of Medicine.

The sensation is vivid and often terrifying. It's a dream experience within a mind sufficiently awake to be chronicled by all five senses and is even logged as memory, Siegel said. Under this theory, the sexual activities that many self-described abductees report could be explained by reduced blood flow to the brain.

Researchers trace the sleep paralysis phenomenon to antiquity. Male Babylonians swore of being seduced by the female demon of the wind. "In old Germany," Siegel said, "she was known as the Mare, this old ugly woman who sat on the chest of the dreamer and produced nightmares. That's where the word comes from."

Siegel's own experience with sleep paralysis, recounted in the book "Fire in the Brain," seemed so

real to him that he bolted out of bed to search his home.

"What people do is they mistake the vividness for truthfulness," he said.

And what about reported abductions on the road? Siegel agreed with University of Kentucky psychologist Robert Baker that drivers often see a bright light before they pull over and nod off, a syndrome known as the Isakower phenomenon.

But the UFO establishment, as it's known, is not about to back off. It has had conferences on the grounds of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Temple University. It has sent copies of the Roper poll to 95,000 therapists and sponsored workshops urging recognition of alien abduction as a valid experience.

"I think there's a good possibility there's something going on here," said Gael McPherson Post, a Baltimore psychotherapist who has treated self-described abductees. "I don't think sleep paralysis goes far enough."

Sleep paralysis does not explain why people seem to disappear for a while, advocates say, or account for marks on flesh said to be made by alien tools. Hopkins, emboldened by the growing acceptance, is writing his next book on what he calls the most prominent case, which he says was reported by eight witnesses in addition to the abductee.

Hopkins said it happened at 3 a.m. on Nov. 30, 1989: A New York woman accompanied by three aliens floated out of her 12th-floor apartment into a spacecraft hovering over the East River.

"One of the witnesses was a very important political figure," Hopkins said, "and it was as if the UFO figures were trying to show off."

Hopkins refuses to "out" this mystery witness, but if the man ever

chooses to come forward, Hopkins says, the movement can expect its biggest boost yet—bigger than Look magazine's 1966 article on Betty and Barney Hill, the first self-described abductees; bigger than Fox TV's "X-Files" and the movie "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" (during which Bershad remembers telling his wife, "They got the faces wrong"); even bigger than the arrival on 1987 best-seller lists of two abduction books, Hopkins's "Intruders" and Whitley Strieber's first-person "Communion."

A major political figure might even let enthusiasts move beyond John Mack. He is the Harvard psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer whose publicity tour last year for his book, "Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens," set the high-water mark in the subculture's mainstreaming. To the embarrassment of the nuts-and-bolts crowd, however, Mack embraced their stories as evidence neither of sleep paralysis nor of extraterrestrial invasion, but, rather, of another consciousness.

"The question really to ask is, what is there in us, what worldview, if you will, are we enclosed in that requires that we reduce this to some kind of brain physiology?" Mack said. A student of Eastern religions, he argues for "layered notions of reality."

"Layered notions of reality" is a theory that tends to be reinforced by interviews with people who believe they've been abducted by aliens. As society has grown more accepting of their claims, they speak more and more freely about stranger things.

"Most of the time it's being in the craft, your typical abduction," a woman named Kerry said of abduction experiences she has come to regard as routine. Her breakthrough, she said, came when Hopkins helped her realize that what she saw late



The sun rises over the stretch of Interstate 70 where Michael Shea, a lawyer, says he saw a UFO and was abducted by aliens in the early '70s.

one 1987 night in Northeast Washington was not a six-car pileup, but a spacecraft. Today her parents remain reticent about alien abduction (so no last name).

Some of her best friends are abductees, she said, which is why she would like to find a support group in

Cleveland with the same bonhomie of the 40 or 50 people she used to gather with in Washington.

"I enjoy it," Kerry said. "You just mingle and talk to people who have similar exper- . . ." and stopped, not quite saying "experiences."

"Interests," she said.