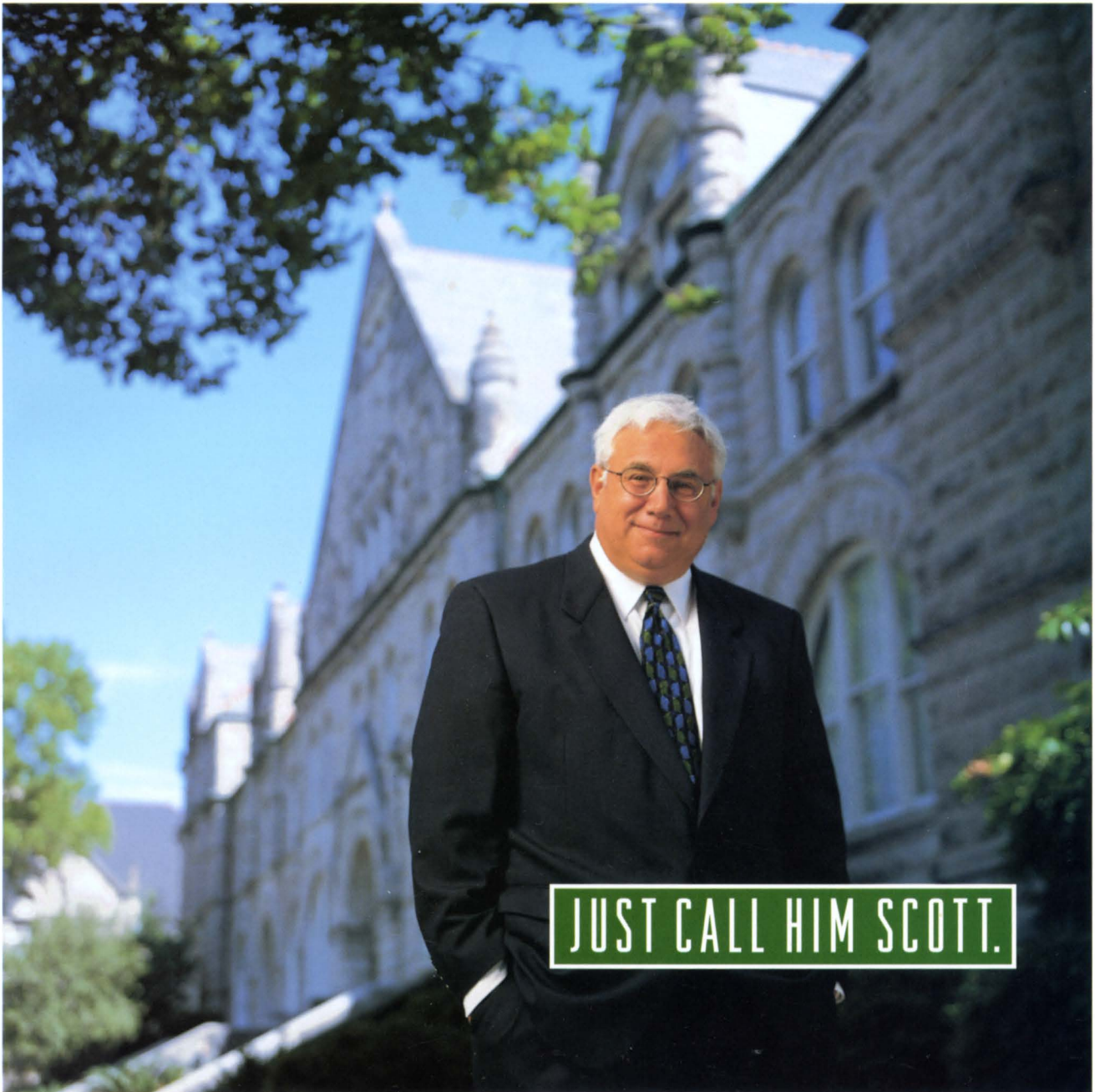


SUMMER 1998

TULANIAN



JUST CALL HIM SCOTT.

INSIDE:

RENAISSANCE MAN:
PRESIDENT SCOTT COWEN

THE 'Z' FILES:
ALIEN NATION

HOLLY CLEGG VS.
BETTY CROCKER

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On the front cover: Jason Jones' photograph of President Scott S. Cowen in front of Gibson Hall. Inside cover: Photographer Michael DeMocker risks life and limb to capture an aerial view of Tulane's uptown campus. Back cover: Artist Mark Dillon paints the new athletics logo on the floor of Fogelman Arena; photograph by Michael DeMocker.



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TULANIAN

T H E F I L E S

Otherwise perfectly normal people talk haltingly of visits by aliens—thin, gray, spectral beings with huge, black, hollow eyes. Appearing most often during the night, in bedrooms or on lonely stretches of highway, these ephemeral apparitions harvest ova, steal time and implant transistorized tracking devices in those they encounter.

Reports of alien abductions are a sign of our time, the mark of the millennium—a weird and disturbing phenomenon, by some accounts experienced by thousands upon thousands of Americans.

What should we make of this?

Michael Zimmerman, professor of philosophy at Tulane, says he's not quite sure what's happening or what it means, but he asks, "What if there's more to this than fantasy?"

"The X-Files," a hugely popular television series and now a movie, has captured the American public's fascination with alien abductions, unidentified flying objects and other assorted conspiracies. The "X-Files" motto, "Trust no one," follows on the heels of its catch phrase, "The truth is out there."

Zimmerman couldn't agree more.



BY MARY ANN TRAVIS

Illustrations by Mark Andresen

Photographs by Jackson Hill



highly respected teacher and scholar who has written two well-regarded books on the

German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Michael Zimmerman first became intrigued with the alien abduction phenomenon in 1988.

At a bookshop in New York's JFK airport, on his way to present a philosophy paper in Turkey, Zimmerman picked up *Communion*, Whitley Strieber's supposedly firsthand account of alien contact.

"I was totally amazed and shocked," Zimmerman says. But the affable and articulate professor didn't take aliens too seriously, having little time to ponder the meaning of these bizarre events. He put the phenomenon into a compartment of his mind that said "weird, but who knows what to make of it?"

Four years later, Zimmerman read another book about alien abduction, *Secret Life*, by Temple University historian David Jacobs. This book claims that aliens are flesh-and-blood beings from outer space. What gave Zimmerman a "sinking feeling that there is something to all of this" is that the book was introduced by John Mack, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard psychiatrist. Mack's research into alien abduction, which he does not take literally in the way that Jacobs does, convinced Zimmerman that "experiencers are not crazy."

"Experiencers," rather than abductees, is what Mack prefers calling people who contend that they have encountered aliens. In his 1994 book, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, Mack recounts the stories of a dozen experiencers. He has now interviewed more than 120 people who say they've encountered aliens. And he has matched from 40 to 50 experiencers in terms of age, race, gender and economic status with a control group of the same number who have never met an alien, finding little difference in the psychological profiles of the two groups.

This work so astounded Zimmerman that he has signed on as a program adviser to Mack's Program for Extraordinary Experience Research at Harvard.

"I'm trying to help make sense of the phenomenon, trying to give some constructive

interpretation," says Zimmerman. "I see my role as trying to make the study of this phenomenon academically respectable."

LACK OF RESPECT is what any academician or scientist might be worried about when delving into a subject as controversial and scientifically taboo as UFOs and aliens. Yet, going where angels fear to tread doesn't intimidate Zimmerman.

As he talks, sitting in his Newcomb Hall office surrounded by sagging bookshelves filled with probably 10,000 books—all of them probably read, too—Zimmerman sips ginseng tea, comfortable in his role as philosopher, seeker of truth.

The motivating factor, the pull into the vortex leading Zimmerman toward trying to figure out the alien abduction phenomenon, seems to be his compassion for the experiencers' suffering. And his compassion for their suffering may be linked to his

understanding of Buddhist philosophy, partly achieved through long hours of sitting in meditation with his knees screaming. At its simplest, Buddhism says that life is characterized by suffering. And suffering is caused by desire, delusion and anger. But there is a cure for suffering. It is knowledge, compassion and letting things be.

What Mack has found in his research—and what touches and distresses Zimmerman—is that the experiencers are truly suffering. They are terrified. They usually want the alien visitations to stop. Experiencers often can't talk about the incidents with family members, and they are afraid of losing their jobs if they discuss their experiences with co-workers.

"Their suffering occurs in part because they can't talk about this," Zimmerman says.

Our civilization doesn't leave much room for comprehending off-the-wall, out-of-this-world occurrences.





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MICHAEL ZIMMERMAN

"In our society, we have only two options to explain what these people are experiencing," Zimmerman says. "One is that it's some kind of hallucinatory event, strictly a mental, private phenomenon that is a pathology, which is fixable, but doesn't mean anything. It's all delusion."

The other possibility is that there are "real" aliens coming in on spacecraft and abducting people, intervening in their lives, doing genetic engineering, taking over the planet and turning humans into hybrids.

"That is hard to believe," says Zimmerman. "That is a real stretch for me to accept."

Yet, from Mack's research, Zimmerman has concluded that the first option is implausible, too. "There are too many similarities in accounts," Zimmerman says. "There's just too much richness and robustness of detail.

"Mack says the effect, the emotions associated with people telling their stories to him, is so powerful—the terror is so real to them—they can't be making it up."

SO, WHERE DOES this outlandish phenomenon leave a serious, open-minded scholar? If two hypotheses don't hold up, another conjecture must be tried.

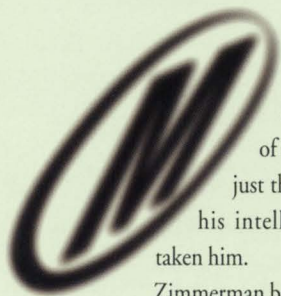
"If we don't accept the literal hypothesis and we don't accept the private hallucination interpretation, then what's another option?" Zimmerman asks.

The third option would be that "these people are encountering a different dimension of reality."

Different dimension of reality? This is *really* out there.

But Zimmerman says a different

WISE GUY



Michael Zimmerman's journey into the alien abduction landscape of intrigue and fantasy is just the latest trip on which his intellectual curiosity has taken him.

Zimmerman began his career writing about the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). In *Eclipse of the Self* (1981, 1986), Zimmerman acknowledges Heidegger as his spiritual guide. The Heideggerian notion of the necessity of owning up to one's mortality in order to live an authentic life appealed to Zimmerman, who says Heidegger's themes of courage and resoluteness attracted him as well as the idea that "doing philosophy as Heidegger was doing it involved transforming one's own life."

"Heidegger said that philosophy wasn't merely an intellectual enterprise to be left on the shelf or in your study, but it really involved personal risk and change and growth," Zimmerman says. "That was an unbeatable combination to me."

However, when information about the extent of Heidegger's close involvement with Hitler's National Socialist Party during the 1930s and throughout World War II surfaced in the late 1980s, Zimmerman had to re-think his appreciation of Heidegger. "I had to figure out what's good and not so good about Heidegger," says Zimmerman. "The main problem comes down to this: he basically is an anti-progressive thinker." So Zimmerman says he had to write *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity* (1990) as a kind of intellectual patricide. "I had to kill the father figure."

No longer a disciple of Heidegger's, Zimmerman had to find his own way, or at least other ways, to look at things. He had to grow up and come to his own understanding of the world.

An environmentalist, Zimmerman has written *Contesting Earth's Future* (1994) and edited two editions of *Environmental Philosophy* (1993, 1998). His views on the environment's dire predicament has changed over time. "In the 1960s, I was convinced that the whole planet would be dead by 1998," he says. "But it didn't happen. We are cleaning up the air and the water. Many species are preserved. I think people underestimated the

ability of market economies and governments to respond to problems when pressure is put on them by the public and when there is a general recognition that there's a problem. There are real problems still, but the sky is not black with pollution so that the sun is blotted out."

Philosophy for Zimmerman is about the search for wisdom, and the philosopher's role is that of ironic critic of his or her culture. "The way to achieve wisdom is to know that you don't know anything," he says. "You start by acknowledging your real ignorance, then through study and learning, you achieve wisdom. And wisdom brings happiness or peace that is genuine."

A student and teacher of Buddhism as well as Western philosophy, Zimmerman has encountered Asian philosophers who are skeptical of Western philosophers as persons. "Because of the tremendous emphasis on rationality in Western philosophy, they see us as lacking a spiritual practice. In other words, if you don't undergo a personal transformation, you're not really in a position to make philosophical pronouncements, they say."

Zimmerman has undergone his share of transformations, including becoming a first-time father this February at the age of 51 when he and his wife, English associate professor Teresa Toulouse, adopted a newborn girl. With an infant in the house, Zimmerman is acquiring an even

deeper understanding of the feminist perspective. He says he first awakened to feminism after coming across problems with women he dated after the breakup of his first marriage in the late 1970s, when he started reading all he could get his hands on about gender issues.

"Yeah, I'm an academic," he laughs. "I'm having trouble with male-female relationships, so what do I do? I read a lot of books." After seeing the feminist perspective about the nature of social reality, Zimmerman says, "I can't forget about it. I always have this realization of the structure of patriarchal attitudes. And, also, I'm always aware of the complexity of male-female relationships."

Zimmerman has taught at Tulane since 1975 after earning his doctorate here the previous year. A popular teacher whose classes fill up fast, Zimmerman says he particularly likes working with Newcomb students, watching them become autonomous and independent. "I like helping them gain a sense of their own intelligence and their ability to shape the world and be active in it," he says.

For Zimmerman, the quest continues. He says, "We are always in the process of redefining ourselves in light of fresh insights which reveal the limitations of our previous self-understanding."

The dramatic enterprise goes on.

—Mary Ann Travis



dimension of reality might be not so much “out there” as right here, “in the soul realm.”

“One way to interpret it would be that these people are encountering entities from the soul realm,” Zimmerman says.

In all societies—in virtually all of human history—people have believed in three different realms. First is the physical, material realm, which includes our bodies and everything that can be discerned with our normal senses—all that can be tasted, felt, seen and measured. “This is the realm we normally inhabit,” says Zimmerman.

Then there’s the realm of the spirit, the God realm. “The spirit realm is beyond form,” says Zimmerman.

The third realm that Zimmerman says many Americans have forgotten about is the soul realm. The soul realm is an intermediary dimension, between the spirit and material realms. It’s inhabited by all kinds of denizens: demigods, angels, devils, elves, gnomes and fairies—“all these weird beings that people have always reported seeing,” says Zimmerman.

“ARE YOU THE first visitor?” The David Bowie character is asked that question in the early 1980s movie *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

“No, there have always been visitors,” the alien Bowie replies.

This idea of visitors from other realms shocks most Americans, at least when taken out of the context of science fiction. It doesn’t compute. But in other cultures—such as Native American, Buddhist and Hindu—the cosmology “is flexible enough to make sense of this,” says Zimmerman. He quotes the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism today, who, when asked about alien abduction, said, “Well, no problem. Who knows? The universe is inhabited by billions of different beings.”

The reason other cultures do not have such a difficult time addressing the possibility of entities in the soul or astral plane—entities with refined and angelic bodies that can materialize and then vanish—is that “these cultures are not as materialistic as our American culture,” says Zimmerman. “They have a place to keep this, and over many centuries, there are sophisticated accounts about

different levels of reality.”

Of course, says Zimmerman, the attitude of enlightened Western thinkers since the 18th century is that this is just nonsense.

With the Enlightenment, there was a reaction against religion and the magical soul plane. “Angels and such couldn’t be understood in terms of a mechanistic view of society,” Zimmerman says.

“The world view became that all there is, is matter and energy. Period.

“There’s no realm of the soul. And there’s no realm of the spirit. They’ve just vanished. We are just matter and energy. The only acceptable way to account for what these people are seeing is that it’s some hallucinatory state, a malfunction of the brain. The brain is matter, and some material, physical event happens that produces these experiences. But that’s it.”

But Zimmerman can’t buy that interpretation any more. He says, “I think that the universe is a multi-dimensional place.”

He doesn’t discount the enormous material, economic and political gains achieved from scientific knowledge, but says science needs to be open-minded. “We need to grow a richer type of science that can learn to accommodate this phenomenon. It’s not magic. It’s not unexplainable. It has cause

The third realm that Zimmerman says many Americans have forgotten about is the soul realm, an intermediary dimension between the spiritual and material realms.



Zimmerman considers the possibilities: “[Alien experiences are] not understandable in terms that our current scientific, material reality allows.”



and effect, but what is it? It's not understandable in terms that our current scientific, material reality allows.”

Zimmerman is forever an academic, taking a reasoned, rational approach, trying to make sense and understand. “My best hypothesis is that these people are encountering some kind of other-

erness, which is intruding upon us, which is coming to us from somewhere else. I suspect that these beings are not flesh and blood in the ordinary sense, but that we need to make a cultural response to them.

“In other words, we, as a culture, have to integrate this phenomenon,” he says. “We have to say, what's happening here? What is taking place? Why is it happening? What ought we to be doing about it? What's missing from our world view?”

MICHAEL ZIMMERMAN wants to bring the alien phenomenon into the light, where it can be studied within the context of social-cultural legitimacy, by people from different academic backgrounds, from poets and philosophers to neurophysiologists and physicists.

Understandably, many people steeped in American culture and a Western science-

reductionist-materialistic world view either freak out or scoff at the notion of alien beings. “The idea is,” says Zimmerman, “if it can't be, it isn't.”

“Our culture is so physicalistic and materialistic—and we are so afraid of this—that we can't make a proper response to what's going on.”

We're afraid, Zimmerman says, because we can't control the phenomenon with our technology. Nobody has videotaped these beings—or shot them with a gun.

The very uncontrollable nature of it, the fact that it's not quantifiable or observable in the usual way, is the reason Zimmerman thinks that the government has been non-responsive. “The government tends to intentionally debunk and ridicule reports of these things or just ignore them, because were it to acknowledge that it's ‘really’ happening, one can imagine it would provoke some anxiety on the part of the populace.”

So Zimmerman suspects the government's “studied response is, let's not have a response.”

The reaction to that non-response has been predictable: paranoia and conspiracy theories that are pushed to the margins of society, Zimmerman says. Explanations are left to the ripe and fertile imaginations of people on the fringes—the lunatic fringes. “That's where fanaticism, superstition, the dark side of all this gets mixed in and makes it really threatening,” he says.

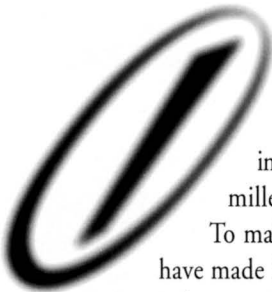
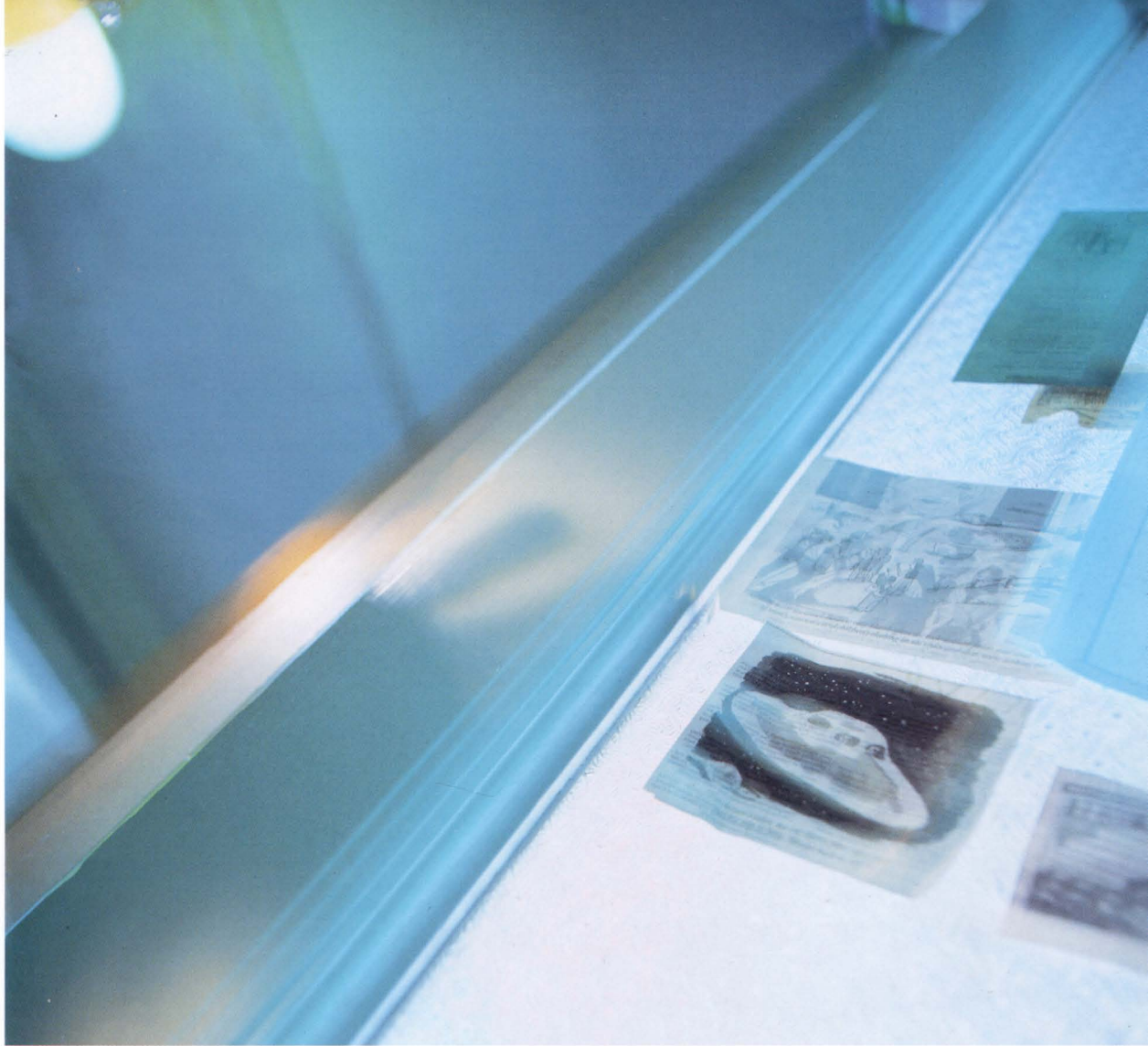
What our culture needs is a shift in our perspective, says Zimmerman. We need to make it possible for people to suffer less by allowing them to come forth with their stories, without being condemned or ostracized.

“Let's throw the doors open,” says Zimmerman. “Let's not keep this in some dark basement where it can fester and feed paranoid delusions about government collusion and plots. Knowledge about this should no longer be forbidden.”

Zimmerman recognizes that the National Science Foundation isn't likely—yet—to award a grant to look at alien abductions. “There are so many other competing requests for money,” he says. “And, moreover, what peer-review committee is going to pass it?”

However, curiosity grows.

Visitors to Zimmerman's Newcomb Hall office encounter his door plastered with alien-humor cartoons from several magazines.



In the meantime, Zimmerman sees a growth of interest in the soul realm as the millenium approaches.

To make the progress we have made in standards of living, in human rights and in instant communication during the past few centuries, maybe we had to keep a narrow, constrictive world view, says Zimmerman.

"To make the passage from a world of superstition and dogmatic religion and despotism to something like democratic freedom and rational practices, maybe we had to shut down the soul realm," he says.

But now as we approach the end of the 20th century, there is an outbreak of paranormal phenomenon—and it's not just aliens.

What about angels? Sightings of the

Virgin Mary at Medjugorje and other places? Crosses showing up mysteriously in church windows? And Hindus seeing their elephant god drinking milk.

"Is this just an outbreak of irrationalism?" Zimmerman asks. "Or is it, instead, a manifestation of the soul realm, a compensatory movement by the universe's cosmic forces demanding that we acknowledge or re-acknowledge that the world is multi-layered?"

Zimmerman's own point of view is that integrating the domains of reality—the ones we have chopped off in our quest for material progress—doesn't mean going backward to the Dark Ages.

"We can keep the bright side of modernity and, at the same time, acknowledge the reality and interrelations among the planes of spirit, soul and matter," says Zimmerman. Even animals and plants, oceans and

mountains are not "just matter," he says. "Because, ultimately, if you stick with that attitude then we—human beings—just become stuff. We're just mere matter. And where does that leave us?"

Nowhere. Alone in the universe.

A dismal thought. So, perhaps, the basic message of the alien phenomenon can be understood as this: We are not alone.

We can move forward into the light, developing a higher form of consciousness, recognizing that all phenomena are divine manifestations of God. As Zimmerman says, "We can re-enchant the world in a constructive way."

It's not out of our realm. ♡

Mary Ann Travis is managing editor of Tulanian and a senior editor in Tulane's publications office.