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HEADLINE: HARVARD PROFESSOR JOHN MACK DISCUSSES HIS NEW BOOK,  
"PASSPORT TO THE COSMOS"

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MATT LAUER, co-host: John Mack has been a psychiatrist at Harvard University for more than 30 years now. He won a Pulitzer Prize two decades ago for writing a psychological biography on Lawrence of Arabia. But these days his writings have placed him on the academic fringe. "Passport to the Cosmos" is Dr. Mack's newest book. Quite simply, it's about people who claim they've been abducted by aliens.

Dr. Mack, good morning. Nice to have you here.

Dr. JOHN MACK ("Passport to the Cosmos"): Good morning, Matt. Nice to be here.

LAUER: By the way, I should mention, not the first book you've written about this subject. You wrote "Abductions" back in 1994. Why the need to go further on this subject?

Dr. MACK: The first book was mapping the territory, establishing clinically that these were people that were sincere, that, as far as I could tell, they were not suffering from any mental illness and there was something that I thought we ought to take seriously. But what I have tried to do in this book is to show what this means, what the implications of it are, what happens to the people who have had these experiences. Also, to see that it happens in other cultures, in other societies.

LAUER: Quite, I guess, important right off the bat is to ask you, do you believe these people?

Dr. MACK: Well, that's my job as a clinician, is to assess when people are talking about something, are they lying? Are they having some kind of delusion? Are they dreaming? And as far as one can tell, these people are talking about something the way a normal person talks about something that has happened to them, except for one problem, that, according to our world view, it's not possible.

LAUER: But to say that they are sincere and that they're talking about it in a way that it sounds like it happened to them, does not take it a step further to say you actually think it did happen to them.

Dr. MACK: I think that they're describing truly and honestly with--with appropriate feeling, with intensity, something that happened to them. In other words, whether it happened exactly in our physical reality the way we think or has to do with some kind of energies or beings from another dimension, that--that--those are questions to be explored. But that something occurred by the definitions we have, or I have, of something happening to somebody. Something has occurred.

LAUER: Some of your peers look at you and they say, wait a second, this guy is off the wall. They've had--they--they go as far to say you're almost a patsy for these people. That they seek you out because they know you have a sympathetic ear and they can tell you these stories. And if you've proven in the past that you'll believe some of these stories, well, why wouldn't you believe their stories?

Dr. MACK: Well, actually, in the last five years since "Abductions," science says--many scientists of considerable repute have begun to see that the universe contains these possibilities, that there are other dimensions, that it is possible for beings, entities, to cross over, seemingly, from another dimension and to reach us. It's not as far out as it seemed years ago.

LAUER: What's the most striking common factor in all the stories you hear? You've interviewed more than 200 people about these experiences. What's the one thing that almost all of them say to you that makes you a believer, that they're telling something they believe in?

Dr. MACK: That something extraordinarily powerful has happened to their bodies, physically, that they vibrate differently. There is some intensity, a powerful, emotional element, and that they perceive some sort of beings that are there that move their bodies. Now, whether they've literally been taken physically into space or not, that we don't know.

LAUER: Some of them go further, doctor, some of them talk about having some sort of sexual contact with these other beings, almost a reproductive type experience with these aliens.

Dr. MACK: Initially, the experiences are often very frightening to people. But as they push through this, it moves to another dimension. They may feel--experience information about the fate of the earth going on, or they may form some powerful bond, as you suggest, with one or more of these beings, some connection which often has an intense transcendent spiritual, even sometimes erotic element in it.

LAUER: And you don't think after talking to these people that there is some rational, explainable, mental condition or mental illness that they're suffering some trend toward paranoia, toward fantasy, toward delusions?

Dr. MACK: That's right, there is not any evidence for that. In fact, we've done a study at our program, PEER, the Program for Extraordinary Experience Research, where we compared 40 experiences with 40 matched controls, and there was nothing in the experiences that suggested mental illness, that they were disturbed in some way or that there was something that could explain this phenomenon. It's an authentic mystery. We don't know.

LAUER: But one woman did admit to Time magazine that she faked it with you. That she basically used method acting and fooled you.

Dr. MACK: We don't know she really did that. This is a person that's kind of on the lam, retreated from the public scene when she was under scrutiny and pressure. And it's not at all clear that she really did do that. We--we don't know that she faked these experiences. She claims that, but if he's already lied once, she could have lied again.

LAUER: Whether I choose to believe or not, why would it benefit me to read their stories in this book?

Dr. MACK: The purpose of doing this work is to open us more to the idea that the universe may be vastly more interesting, containing entities, energies, beings, that we did not know existed. And when we open that consciousness--the reason I call this "Passport to the Cosmos" is that then we open to a larger reality. We're not simply sort of earth-bound in our consciousness, as if we were the top intelligence in the cosmos. We've come more modestly to realize we're in connection with energies, beings, whatever it may be, that is beyond ourselves. And that's--that would be a very healthy development for this species, it seems to me.

LAUER: To get us to stop dismissing what can we can't explain.

Dr. MACK: Exactly.

LAUER: Dr. John Mack, the book is called "Passport to the Cosmos." Good to have you here.

Dr. MACK: Thanks for having me here.

LAUER: We're back in a moment. This is TODAY on NBC.