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## Hey, what's that!?

### True believers mingle with scientists at annual UFO convention

By Heidi Walters



Harvard professor John Mack signs copies of his new book, *Passport to the Cosmos*, at the 12th annual UFO convention in Laughlin. Photo by HEIDI WALTERS

LAUGHLIN--Last week, hundreds of people descended into Laughlin for the week-long 12th annual UFO Congress Convention & Film Festival at the Flamingo. I parachuted in for a day of it--and found myself to be the alien, not at all conversant in the common language of this crowd. New World Order. Abductions. Grays. Budd Hopkins. Star people (identifiable, among other traits, by their "compelling eyes" and "personal charisma"). Re-ensoulment.

But that didn't matter. I came away with an understanding that could have come from any modern-day human gathering in this time of pending war, environmental disaster and planet overload: a sense, that is, of the hopeful, sad and troubled depths within the human psyche, and of the emotional, mental and physical creativity with which humans attempt to clamber from those depths.

Inside one colorful room filled with booths--crystals, kitschy big-eyed knickknacks, emu oil lotions (the latest alternative beauty trend, it seems), books, documentaries--a woman at one booth was telling a man about "a kind of fog" and what it's like to emerge from it at last, and the guy responded, "Mother's gonna take care of it, one way or another. Either nuclear war or... And if it's gonna happen, it's gonna come down this year--Pow!"

At another booth, Conrad DeFlon was setting up guru Budd Hopkins' books and tapes. DeFlon, a soft-spoken, been-through-the-wringer-of-depression man of about 40, had the semi-wild aspect of a coyote and the sweetness of the humbly saved. He said he remembered reading Hopkins' book *Intruders* and how he flashbaked to when he was 17 and on a fishing trip with buddies in the Eastern Sierra. There, apparently, he stepped out of the cabin one night "to take a whiz," stepped back inside, and his buddies told him he'd been gone for more than an hour. It was a case of missing time--something other abductees, he said, have reported. Eventually, dogged by anxiety for years, he called up Hopkins and said, "Either I'm flipping out, or I was abducted by aliens." When Hopkins hypnotized him, DeFlon described a time when he was 3 years old and a frog-like being came to him. And then he described what he saw on that fishing trip: "It was half a dozen of these 'Grays' [the quintessential alien with the two-globed big head and odd eyes, described by many abductees across the world], and they told me their species could no longer reproduce. And then I had an orgasm--the leader said, 'I did that to you.' They were taking my sperm."

It's a common theme among abductees, DeFlon said.

Then I met David Liebehart, a portrait artist who works at La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. When he was in high school, he said, in 1968, he was taken aboard a UFO. "They took hair and skin samples. I was raised in a Christian Science Church--and you can put that in your article. I still have an implant in my arm, but because of Christian Science I haven't had it removed. ... I'm related to the Wright brothers on my dad's side. My grandmother told me the Wrights got the idea [to build an airplane] from aliens. The government used to throw aliens in with the slaves and American Indians."

Talking to people, looking about this room, reading titles--it was easy to feel overwhelmed by craziness and conspiracy theories: *Electricity, the Coming Revolution in Medicine. The Secrets of the Federal Reserve. A Writ for Martyrs. Wisdom of the Rays. Mind Stalking: UFOs, Implants & the Psychotronic Agenda of the New World Order. The Crystal People. "Astro-carto-graphy relocation map--\$205--Map your future. Do not relocate without it!" "A channeling event: What really happened to space shuttle Columbia?" "The Government's Cosmic Cover-up."*

Inside a more serious room, the reknowned Dr. John Mack was speaking. Mack is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School. He founded the Department of Psychiatry at the Cambridge Hospital, and in 1983 founded the Center for Psychology & Social Change. But when he started taking alien abductees seriously, he was nudged out of the main academic arena. Mack said they were missing the point, which has nothing to do with literal truth but everything to do with philosophy. It's important to "legitimize experience," he said. We are, he said, in an anomolous age in which, unlike in past cultures and present-day aboriginal societies, we have adopted a purely materialistic world view that is "soulless and unconscious."

He talked about the need for a "re-ensoulment of the universe."

"The abductees, they get this--that we all will become one with nature," he said. "It's only in the past 200-300 years that the gods have been so totally banished."

If the world regained its "soul," he said, "we would be unable to treat the earth the way we do, because it would violate some sacred relationship."

He said great changes could come to human cultures "if we come to see UFO phenomena as having a relationship to other anomalies [such as] crop circles, near-death experiences, precognition, spiritual healing, apparitions of the Blessed Virgin--or whoever that woman is that so many people see--and organ transplants, when a person experiences personality traits of a person from whom the organ was taken."

The mental health field would change, he said. "Many of the conditions that are now diagnosed and given pathological labels will be honored, will be considered part of the human condition."

Plus, studies of parapsychology and such would finally get some funding, he said. The problem now, he said, is the experiences that abductees and others have related to such phenomena cannot be proved. And the problem with that is the assumption that we need proof in order for an experience to have real meaning. "In the emerging world view, fact and metaphor can be one. The inner world, the subjective world, would become as much if not a greater subject for us to take on and understand."

The speaker after Mack had much less comforting news for the attendees. An expert in "non-lethal weaponry"--a discipline that got him ridiculed in a Scientific American article--John Alexander cautioned those with "very emotional views" that they wouldn't like what he had to say.

Alexander, a longtime military man, at one time had the opportunity to interview "all the heads of the [federal] letter agencies" and he concluded that, institutionally, the government just doesn't care enough about UFO-related phenomena to pursue it. This, even though some had actually had UFO-like experiences. "The good news is, the government's been telling the truth about UFOs," he said. That's also the bad news, he added. "The reality is, nobody cares."

But 7 percent of the population says it's seen UFOs, he said.

"My view has been, there is a very substantial amount of evidence that says these phenomena are real," Alexander said. "I have personally seen a number of phenomena. These are white crows--it only takes one white crow to prove that not all crows are black. If you find one anomaly, there must be exceptions to the rule. We definitely have exceptions, so we study it--because it will lead to a deeper understanding of the universe."

While he takes a purely scientific, curiosity approach to the study, he says about 98 percent of the people at the conference are true believers. "For them it's like coming home," he said. "These people take it a whole step further. It becomes a whole cosmology. It's very like religion, and that's why it's very emotional."

For Philip and Kay Hart, from a town in England "not far from Stonehenge," that's okay. They're not into the crystals and kitsch, but they do believe there's something out there.

"I think everybody's just looking for something beyond this life," Kay said. "And we hope it's positive."

And maybe it can even come to our rescue. "Everyone's afraid [the U.S.-Iraq situation] is going to escalate, that it's the beginning of Armageddon. I think it's a possibility. I think there's some hope there's an intelligence beyond us that can stop the war."