

In snubbing professor John Mack's memorial, 'official Harvard' testifies to the power of his brilliant unconventionality

Mack, the life

BY HARVEY A. SILVERGLATE

UNSURPRISINGLY, nobody from "official Harvard" — the administration of Harvard University or of its Medical School — took the podium in Memorial Church last Saturday to give Dr. John Mack the kind of sendoff that this remarkable human being deserved. Oh, plenty of people eulogized the man for his path-breaking work as psychoanalyst, community psychiatrist, humanitarian, medical and political activist, anti-nuke and anti-war organizer, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author (for his remarkable 1976 psychoanalytic biography of T.E. Lawrence, a/k/a Lawrence of Arabia). Some even mentioned the adventurer-clinician's controversial research into mysterious phenomena such as alien abductions and communications with the dead. But other than the Reverend Peter Gomes, who presided over the service and thus indicated the esteem in which Dr. Mack was held by Harvard's head clergyman, no one formally represented the university Mack had served with distinction for four decades.

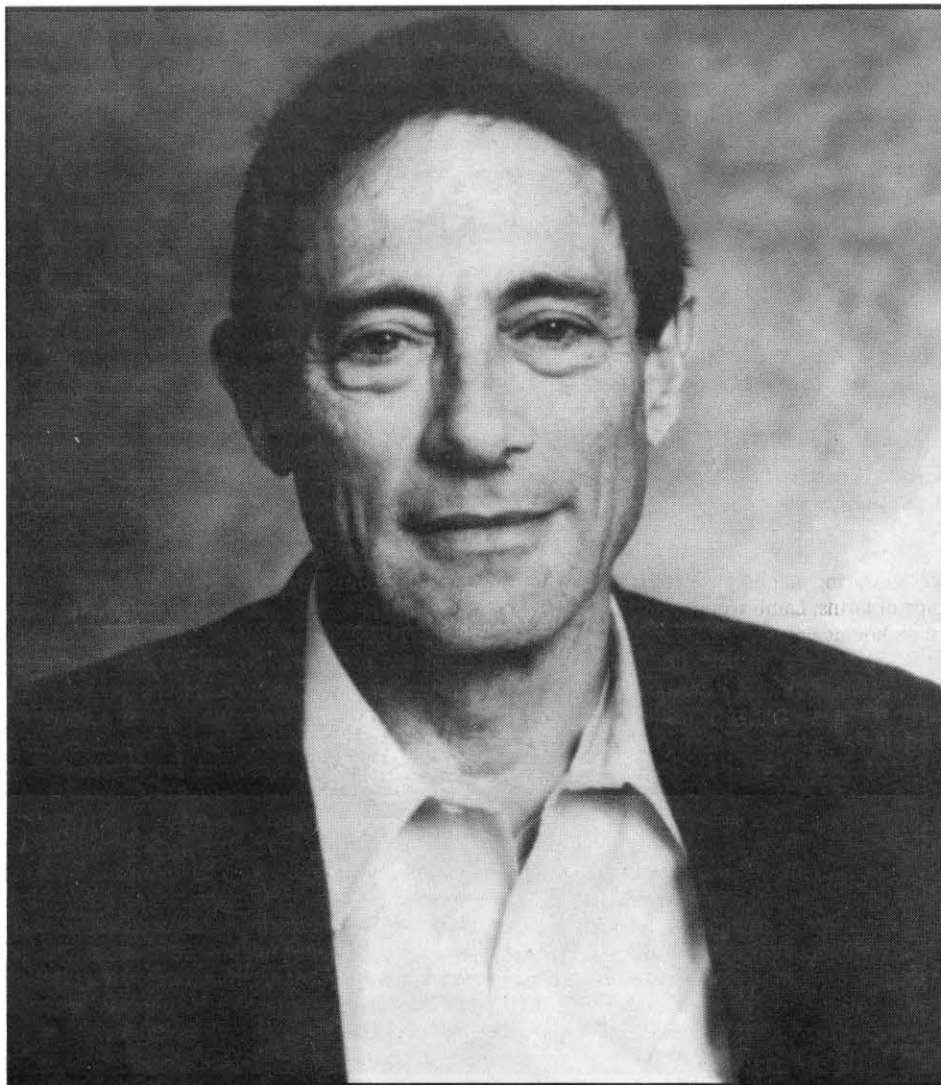
It's no wonder official Harvard absented itself from Mack's leave-taking, given what it had put him through in the mid '90s. At that time, Harvard Medical School convened a committee to review Dr. Mack's work, stacked it with his detractors, and tried to withdraw his tenure — something unprecedented in the university's 368-year history. The university ultimately retreated in defeat in 1995, but the ugly incident hovered in the background of the memorial service for this very un-Harvard sort of genius, who died after being hit by a drunk driver in London in late September, at age 74.

DR. MACK HAD an extraordinary career marked by outside-the-box thinking even before he became interested, in 1990, in the growing body of reports by seemingly sane people who claimed they'd had encounters with alien beings. In the 1960s, he started the modern psychiatry department at Cambridge City Hospital, which became one of the nation's most respected facilities for treating troubled children. In 1983, at Harvard, he founded the Center for Psychology and Social Change, which was recently renamed the Mack Center. Much of his pioneering research was done under the umbrella of the John E. Mack Institute, funded largely by Laurance Rockefeller, grandson of the great oil tycoon. Mack became deeply involved in the movement to rid humanity of nuclear arms, making numerous visits to the world's nuclear powers. Because of his substantial role in the work of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, he was invited to Oslo in 1985, when the organization won the Nobel Peace Prize. His was a full and useful life well-lived.

The sheer range of Dr. Mack's intellectual interests and accomplishments may have played a big part in his trouble with Harvard. It started in June 1994, when Medical School dean Daniel Tosteson appointed emeritus professor Arnold Relman, known for his conservative — indeed, rigid — views on medicine and medical research, to head an administrative committee to investigate Dr. Mack's research. This came shortly after Mack published *Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens* (Scribner's, 1994), in which he analyzed case studies of people who reported experiences with apparent extraterrestrials. Rather than assume the subjects — called "experiencers" — were hallucinating or otherwise insane, Mack concluded that the reports were so widespread

and had such a profound impact on the lives of the experiencers that possibly they were reporting a phenomenon that deserved credence. In order to take it seriously, he pointed out in his introduction to the book, one has to try to "participate in a universe or universes that are filled with intelligences from which we have cut ourselves off, having lost the senses by which we might know them." He called for a new paradigm to replace, or at least supple-

ously stacked against him. The committee's report was scathing in its critique of Mack, ignoring virtually everything that he and his lead lawyer, Boston litigator Roderick MacLeish Jr., had produced not only to support his work and his successful clinical results, but to highlight his right, under principles of academic freedom, to continue his research unhindered by the university. (Disclosure: I served as an informal legal adviser to Mack at the time.)



OUT OF THIS WORLD: Mack's research into alien abductions of humans brought him into conflict with Harvard's narrower thinkers.

ment, the narrow "materialist" scientific method by which Western scientists try to understand the physical world and universe. He suggested, in other words, a new way of looking at reality and of understanding not only the physical but also the spiritual world. In this sense, Mack worked very much in the tradition

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of one of Harvard's greatest psychologist-philosophers, William James.

But Harvard's narrower — and narrow-minded — thinkers looked at Mack's approach as violating the medical school's professional-research standards (although in fact it was their world-view that he challenged). Given the opportunity either to renounce his views or to resign from the faculty, Mack instead fought a bitter battle with a committee that was obvi-

Several months after the investigative committee commenced its work, which would ultimately take 15 months, word of this extraordinary inquisition leaked out and spread like wildfire on the then-fledgling medium of the Internet. In some academic and legal circles, Harvard's investigation was viewed not as an effort to uphold intellectual standards of excellence and accuracy, but as something rooted in fear, ignorance, or jealousy of Mack's pursuit of questions that more rigid minds could not or would not comprehend.

The tug-of-war ended not with a bang but a whimper in July 1995, when Dean Tosteson called Mack into his office, had a friendly chat, and handed him a letter urging him to use care in his research but reaffirming Mack's right, under academic freedom, to pursue whatever subjects he wished. What began as an effort to quietly strip Dr. Mack of his tenure and dismiss him from the medical-school faculty (although Harvard denied that was its intent) ended with a highly public victory for the intended victim.

MACK'S BATTLE with Harvard came up repeatedly but obliquely at the memorial service. Mu Soeng, a Buddhist scholar and practitioner who led the assembly in a Buddhist chant, called his friend "a very remarkable human being" who was "part of the Harvard establishment" but who had the ability to "step outside of it." Mack's son, Daniel John Mack, praised his father's openness to new world-views and modalities of treatment, "even at risk to his reputation." The famed psychiatrist (now on the Harvard Medical School faculty) and writer Robert Jay Lifton, a Mack comrade from the anti-nuclear movement, hailed his friend's "arcane explorations of consciousness." Poet, lawyer, and essayist Michael Blumenthal, who was a close friend, noted that "some sought to mock and persecute John Mack for his goodness." Harvard faculty colleague and friend Edward Khantzian referred to the "controversial directions" in which Mack's interests had taken him, and reported, to the knowing laughter of the audience, that 10 days before Mack died he told Khantzian: "If anybody asks, tell them I'm not crazy." A Mack in-law, Jon Ingbar, quipped that "if John had been more careful, he would have allowed his day job [at Harvard Medical School] to act as a cover for his real interests." Raymond Mayo-Smith, educator and board member of the John E. Mack Institute, noted that Mack approached "with an open mind" those who reported alien abductions or communications with the dead — phenomena, he added pointedly, that "took courage" to explore. "How did he come through the stress of those times?" asked Mayo-Smith rhetorically. "He came through it stronger." Those in the audience who knew Mack's history with the Tosteson/Relman Committee understood full well it took real courage for him to fight rather than quietly accept a deal to renounce his controversial work.

People had come to the event to praise John Mack, not to bury Harvard University. But it was noteworthy that nobody from official Harvard offered a eulogy for this remarkable, accomplished, long-time member of the faculty. "Harvard" is quite capable of snubbing even the greatest minds if they don't play the Harvard academic game. In Mack's case, the enlistment of that ignoble tradition was compounded by Harvard's own embarrassing defeat by this man, who challenged its narrow thinking about the nature of knowledge itself.

Then again, Harvard's snub might have a much simpler explanation — one that also accounts for its decision to go after Mack's tenure in the first place — namely, professional jealousy. Most members of the Harvard Medical School, while renowned as medical researchers and practitioners, in the end make a rather modest splash in the ocean of life. This is especially true of psychoanalysts who, like Mack, came out of the conservative Freudian movement and the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute. They do not start community psychiatric centers for disturbed kids, and distinguished research institutes that explore fields of knowledge others fear to tread. They do not write Pulitzer Prize-winning books and help start Nobel Prize-winning organizations seeking to save the planet from nuclear holocaust. They do not, in other words, shake up their world. Official Harvard, with its \$22 billion endowment, looked pretty small last Saturday amid the large crowd of admirers who came to pay their respects to a great and large man.

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