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### Article from Emory University Web Site

From: [skywatch@wic.net](mailto:skywatch@wic.net) (SKYWATCH)  
Date: Tue, 21 Jan 1997 16:31:11 -0700  
Fwd Date: Thu, 23 Jan 1997 19:27:40 -0500  
Subject: Article from Emory University Web Site

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To: [skywatch@wic.net](mailto:skywatch@wic.net)  
Subject: Article from Emory University Web Site

Posted by TRUTH on January 21, 1997 at 11:59:22:

The Courtney Brown affair and academic freedom

Academic freedom -- the right of faculty members to pursue and discuss whatever interests they wish, no matter how outlandish or repugnant others might find them -- is a cornerstone of institutions of higher learning. Without it, the very rationale undergirding that remarkable democratic organization we call a university crumbles. Nevertheless, there are inevitably times when academic freedom conflicts with a university's best interests. When this occurs, vexing pragmatic and ethical questions arise.

The most recent example of this conflict at Emory involves Dr. Courtney Brown, an associate professor in the political science department. Brown's actions and words have, to put it mildly, aroused considerable ridicule and controversy at Emory and in the broader academic community. In his new book, *Cosmic Voyages: A Scientific Discovery of Extraterrestrials Visiting Earth*, Brown claims to use powers of "remote viewing" (an alleged psychic ability permitting individuals to "see" objects at enormous distances) to visit Mars and observe the actions of aliens. He purports to have uncovered indisputable evidence that two races of extraterrestrials, Martians and Greys, left the red planet centuries ago and have taken up residence in the dark recesses of Earth.

But Brown does not stop there. His remote viewing methods, which are "as rigorously controlled as those used in any solid social science text," have revealed that Adam and Eve were architects of a genetic engineering project and that numerous Star Trek episodes were written with the assistance of aliens. In one of the book's more remarkable chapters, "The Grey Mind," Brown claims to have "entered the mind" of an extraterrestrial and investigated its psychological make-up. Brown, who directs the "Farsight Institute" in Atlanta, offers seminars--at a cost of \$3,000 per head--that promise to provide attendees with the psychic abilities he has mastered.

One hardly knows where to begin. Brown's book is remarkable for its virtually complete absence of any data that would qualify as scientific by even the most liberal evidential standards. His "findings" consist entirely of unverified subjective experiences, and the reader searches in vain for anything vaguely resembling a controlled experiment. Brown neglects to mention either the results of a recent government-appointed

scientific panel on remote viewing, which concluded that "evidence for the operational value of remote viewing is not available, even after a decade of attempts," or the critiques of Ray Hyman, a psychologist at the University of Oregon, who has shown that the scientific evidence in support of remote viewing is seriously flawed. Philosopher David Hume maintained that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence; Brown's evidence is, to be charitable, singularly unimpressive.

In light of Brown's claims, I recently challenged him to a test of his alleged psychic abilities. I proposed that he appear at a meeting of my undergraduate seminar on Science and Pseudoscience in Psychology, where my students and I would subject him to a simple controlled experiment examining his capacity to remotely view stimuli in an adjacent room. I assured him that he would have considerable input regarding the selection of stimulus materials, and agreed to publicize the results of this test in both Emory newspapers regardless of its outcome.

But Brown categorically refused. His reasoning was curious: In his e-mail response to me, he asserted that "tests of the type you have talked about are very old hat" and that the current status of remote viewing "goes light years beyond that which your letter suggests." But if Brown's psychic powers are as advanced as he claims, shouldn't he be able to pass an elementary test of these powers with flying colors?

Brown also declined my offer on the grounds that he did "not want to drag Emory into my other activities" and that he is "rigorous about not mixing what I do elsewhere with what I do at Emory." This rationale seems disingenuous at best. If Brown did not wish to involve Emory in his exploits, why did he list his academic affiliation with Emory in his book and on his web site? Brown apparently wants to have it both ways: He publicizes his association with Emory when it might afford him the imprimatur of academic legitimacy, but refuses to submit to scientific tests by Emory colleagues on the grounds that he does not wish to "drag Emory" into a firestorm of controversy. But it is too late: Emory's reputation has already been besmirched. As George Armelagos of the Department of Anthropology notes, "Brown is naive if he believes his fantasies do not affect the image of the University."

Why should we at Emory care about Brown? Many of his Emory colleagues will surely suggest that he is best ignored. But such an attitude would be misguided. As Carl Sagan argues in his recent book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, the public's inability to think critically about scientific issues is an unappreciated source of our educational and social woes. By remaining silent on Brown's shenanigans, we do our students, who desperately need role models of clear reasoning, a serious disservice. Moreover, we leave ourselves open to criticisms such as those of Robert Baker of the University of Kentucky, who suggested that the Brown affair "bring(s) into question whether Emory has any high scientific standards."

So how should Emory respond to Brown? I would argue that Brown's academic freedom be protected unconditionally, and that we defend his right to pursue his interests without threat of official sanction or penalty. Nevertheless, academic freedom also gives Brown's colleagues license to criticize him openly. It is incumbent on qualified Emory faculty to inform the public that Brown's assertions are scientifically irresponsible, and that his money-making ventures and refusal to submit himself to independent tests of his paranormal claims are ethically reprehensible. Academic freedom, like all freedoms (e.g., the right to vote), becomes meaningless when not exercised. Let us not forfeit it at a time when Emory's reputation as a serious institution of higher learning is being challenged.

Scott O. Lilienfeld is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology.

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