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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Abduction - The Issue Of Reality

From: Greg Sandow <ggsandow@prodigy.net>
Date: Mon, 8 Feb 1999 20:11:21 -0500
Fwd Date: Tue, 09 Feb 1999 09:53:56 -0500
Subject: Re: Abduction - The Issue Of Reality

Work like you don't need the money.
Love like you've never been hurt.
Dance like nobody's watching.

<http://www.gregsandow.com>

>Date: Sun, 7 Feb 1999 14:58:03 -0600 (CST)
>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <updates@globalserve.net>
>From: Dennis Stacy <dstacy@texas.net>
>Subject: Re: Abduction - The Issue Of Reality

>Greg,

>I find it somewhat ironic that elsewhere on this list, if not in
>this particular thread, you've also referred to Hopkins's
>mailbag, which you've also been allowed to dip into and read at
>random.

>Let's call it the Case of the Two Mail Bags. Clearly, you
>believe that one mailbag (abductions) is worth pursuing in much
>greater depth than the other mail bag (Elvis sightings). You
>also seem to think that the Hopkins mailbag is relatively free
>of media (and perhaps cultural) influence, whereas the contents
>of the Elvis bag are attributable (seemingly) to nothing but
>media influence.

Well, actually three mailbags. At the Weekly World News, I was
also able to root around in the mailbag full of letters from
people who'd seen Batboy, a creature the News made up -- half
bat, half human, and very dangerous -- which had escaped from a
federal facility. These letters divided into two obvious
categories. Some were clearly from the News's college-age
readers, who know the paper makes up its stories, and love to
play along. These letters were usually typed, took the whole
thing to a higher level of nonsense -- by claiming, for
instance, that Batboy only ate pomegranates -- and included
delicious faked photos.

The other letters were from the News's, um, general readership,
who believe every word. Most of these letters were written in
pencil, and recounted fleeting alleged sightings (out in the
woods while hunting, for example).

But I digress. I'm very lucky to have had a chance to read both
the Elvis and the abduction letters, and I wish more people with
strong opinions on abduction research could do the same. The two
mailbags were very different. People writing about Elvis, for
one thing, were certain they had seen him. Beyond that, their
letters had little in common. What Elvis was doing, how he
looked, what he said (if he said anything), what he said he'd

been doing all these years -- all those things varied from letter to letter.

The abduction writers, on the other hand, overwhelmingly do not say they thought they'd been abducted. They're quite explicit about this. They say, in letter after letter, that they have no idea whether they've been abducted, but that they hope Budd can tell them whether abduction might explain things they say have been happening to them all their lives. They also don't describe alien beings of any kind (beyond shadowy presences near their beds). The experiences they do mention are consistent from letter to letter -- lights in their room that they couldn't explain, presences by the bed, UFO sightings, cases of missing time serious enough to cause a family uproar, prolonged searches, and calls to police. Many of the letters sound distressed, while, by contrast, the Elvis letters were mostly very calm.

These are facts. How the facts should be interpreted is another story. In my view (factual part of message ends, interpretive part begins), it's notable that the people writing to Budd don't describe the most vivid parts of the standard abduction narrative. Nobody's taking them anywhere, they aren't floating in the air, they don't see big-eyed aliens, they aren't subject to medical procedures, they don't have disappearing pregnancies.

It's true, of course, that they're all writing because they've read Budd's books, or seen him speak at a conference, or seen him on TV. So clearly he's inspired them to communicate, and it's not unreasonable to wonder whether he somehow planted the abduction story in their minds as well. But anyone who thinks he did that -- or that they're catching the abduction story from the media at large -- needs to explain why they don't regurgitate that story in their letters, why they almost uniformly relate only these muted, relatively non-compelling, peripheral parts of it.

>So let's assume you get your wish and the entire social science >department of a major university descends on these two sacks of >mail. What would happen? I suspect both subjects would be >approached from the same discipline, ie., some (perhaps >particularized) form of phenomenology. Both reports (sightings >of alien abductors and Elvis) would no doubt be treated as >sociological facts, by definition. But I doubt that any >sociologist worth his salt would even begin to approach the >assumption that what was being seen, experienced and reported in >one mailbag was indeed the original, real Elvis. Some could have >been impersonators on their way to work, for example. For that >matter, I have a cousin who is a pretty good ringer for Elvis, >or at least the Thin Elvis.

>Similarly, they wouldn't regard it as their brief or province to >establish the reality of UFO visitations, simply because it >wouldn't ultimately make any difference to them, just as it >wouldn't make any ultimate difference, sociologically speaking, >if, by some miracle, Elvis were still alive. For one reason, >they would quickly come to the conclusion that if A saw Elvis in >San Francisco at a certain time and date, B couldn't have seen >the real Elvis in New Jersey at the same time, unless the >sociologists want to dip into the phenomenon referred to as >bilocation, typically (but not always) associated with Saints >and other religious figures. In other words, all the letters are >real (as sociological facts), even if none of them are real >physical facts. (That is, they couldn't all have seen Elvis.)

Dennis, I'm not quite sure what you're getting at here. As far as I know, when social scientists study any phenomenon, they absolutely need to know whether it has any obvious cause. Take, for instance, the psychologists (well, not quite a social science, but close enough) who've looked at abductions. Their very first move is to explain why they don't think the abductions are really happening, or else to make it clear, without explanation, that they take that view. Why? Because there's no point in finding a psychological explanation if abductions are real.

Sociologists tend to look at real social phenomena. Suicide, for instance -- Durkheim's study of that in the 19th century was the beginning of modern sociology. The first thing they normally do is gather data. Who commits suicide? What ethnic, religious, social, economic groups do they belong to? At what point in

their lives do they kill themselves?

An approach to abduction letters or Elvis letters would be similar. A psychologist might look at content, but a sociologist would first look at who sent them, and only then try to correlate content with the various categories of people who were writing. Social scientists might also be interested in how the stories spread. What gave people the idea that Elvis was out there to be seen, or that they'd be believed if they wrote a letter saying they'd seen him?

Eventually, any social scientist is likely to theorize -- to come up with an overall explanation for what's happening. But if you're trying to explain Elvis letters, you have to know whether it's reasonable to say that Elvis is really alive. People seeing someone generally known to be dead represent a rather different social phenomenon from people who claim to see an elusive celebrity, or bigfoot, or a serial killer on the ten most wanted list. Sociologists examining abduction letters would clearly have to make up their minds whether abductions might be real, just as psychologists who study abductions do. Yes, it's possible to examine the letters for what they tell us of the social ramifications of abduction belief -- that's possible and interesting whether abductions are real or not. But one's opinion of the letter-writers is obviously going to be affected by whether you think abductions are real, and good social scientists know that.

Cultural theorists might be the one kind of social scientist who'll theorize without bothering to gather quantifiable data. But even they are likely to express some opinion on the reality of something like abductions. There's an abduction book by Jodi Dean, a political scientist who uses a cultural theory approach. She's very sympathetic to abductees, and was attacked by Frederick Crews in the New York Review of Books because she refused to say that abductions were not real. As she told me, and recounts in a paper, she first became interested in abductions by reading Phil Klass's attack on them. She found him so excessive that his excesses became a phenomenon worth studying, in her view. What cultural interests does a believe in abduction reality threaten? That was the question that led to her book. And while it's theoretically possible to write about this without asking whether abductions are real, it's not humanly likely.

Greg Sandow

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