

Alien thinking

By Angela Hind
Pier Productions

Not many scientists are prepared to take tales of alien abduction seriously, but John Mack, a Harvard professor who was killed in a road accident in north London last year, did. Ten years on from a row which nearly lost him his job, hundreds of people who claim they were abducted still revere him.

Professor John E Mack was an eminent Harvard psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and Pulitzer Prize winner whose clinical work had focused on explorations of dreams, nightmares and adolescent suicide.

Then, in 1990, he turned the academic community upside down because he wanted to publish his research in which he said that people who claimed they had been abducted by aliens, were not crazy at all. Their experiences, he said, were genuine.

They were not mentally ill or delusional, he said, and it was the responsibility of academicians and psychiatrists not only to take what they said seriously, but to try to understand exactly what that experience was. And if reality as we know it was unable to take these experiences into serious consideration then what was needed was a change in our perception of reality.

"What are the other possibilities?" said Mack. "Dreams, for instance, do not behave like that. They are highly individual depending on what's going on in your sub-conscious at the time.

"I would never say, yes, there are aliens taking people. [But] I would say there is a compelling powerful phenomenon here that I can't account for in any other way, that's mysterious. Yet I can't know what it is but it seems to me that it invites a deeper, further inquiry."

Lifeline

For many people who claimed they had been abducted, John Mack was a lifeline. He worked with more than 200 of them, including professionals, psychologists, writers, students and business people.

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John Mack

Many had never told anyone else of their experiences apart from Mack for fear of ridicule from colleagues, friends and family. Here at last was a highly respected psychiatrist who was not only prepared to listen - but also take what they were saying seriously.

An abductee - or "experiencer" as they prefer to be known - says that alien encounters begin most commonly in their homes and at night. It can however happen anytime, anywhere. They say they are unable to move; they become extremely hot and then appear to float through solid objects, which their logical mind tells them can't be happening.

Usually the experiencer says they are accompanied by one or two or more humanoid beings who guide them to a ship. They are then subjected to procedures in which instruments are used to penetrate virtually every part of their bodies, including the nose, sinuses, eyes, arms - abdomen and genitalia. Sperm samples are taken and women have fertilised eggs implanted or removed.

Hybrid offspring

"Have I questioned my own sanity"? says Peter Faust an experiencer and close friend of John Mack's. "Absolutely, every day to a certain degree because the majority of the world says you're crazy for having these experiences. But if it was just me who had contact with aliens, who had intimate

experience with female aliens and producing hybrid offspring, I would say I'm certifiable, put me away, I'm crazy.

"And that's how I felt when I initially had these experiences. My wife thought I'd lost it. But then I began to look at the experience outside myself and realised that hundreds if not thousands of people reported that exact same experience. And that gave me sanity. That gave me hope. I knew I couldn't be fantasising this."

The whole experience is often accompanied by a change in the experienter's understanding of humanity's place in the universe. And it was this that forced Mack to question who we are in the deepest and broadest sense.

"I have come to realise this abduction phenomenon forces us, if we permit ourselves to take it seriously, to re-examine our perception of human identity - to look at who we are from a cosmic perspective," he said.

Extraordinary work

In 1990 John Mack's book *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* was published. It shot to the top of the best sellers list and John Mack appeared on radio and television programmes. Harvard decided enough was enough.

Mack was sent a letter informing him that there was to be an inquiry into his research on alien abductions. It was the first time in Harvard's history that a tenured professor was subjected to such an investigation. John Mack decided to fight back and hired a lawyer, Eric MacLeish.

"It was appalling that John had to go through this," says MacLeish now. "And we made it clear that if we were to have a full blown trial here, then we were going to have a very public trial and call on everyone who worked with John - all of whom had nothing but praise for his extraordinary work and dedication to his patients - and I don't think that's what Harvard had in mind at all."

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There followed 14 months of stressful and bitter negotiations. "They tried to criticise me, silence me - by saying that by supporting the truth of what these people were experiencing, possibly I was confirming them in a distortion, or a delusion. So instead of being a good psychiatrist and curing them, I was by taking them seriously, confirming them in a delusion and harming them," said Mack.

The inquiry made front page headlines all over the world and eventually Harvard dropped the case and a statement was issued reaffirming Mack's academic freedom to study what he wished and concluding that he "remains a member in good standing of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine".

He continued to work and write. But Mack was killed in a car collision last year in north London after leaving a Tube station. He was visiting the city to deliver a lecture on the subject which had won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1977, T E Lawrence.

But Mack's work lives on with an institute which now bears his name; the hundreds of people who count themselves in "the experienter community" still hold him in particular affection.

His search for an expanded notion of reality, which allows for experiences that might not fit traditional perceptions and worldviews, is one they, at least, will be hoping continues.

Abduction, Alienation and Reason, a programme about John Mack, was broadcast on Wednesday night on BBC Radio 4 at 2100BST.

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http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4071124.stm

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