

HUMAN ENCOUNTERS WITH ALIENS Part 1: ABDUCTIONS AND THE WESTERN PARADIGM with JOHN MACK, M.D.



JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today we will be exploring "Human Encounters with Aliens." This is Part 1 of a two-part series with Dr. John Mack, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University's Cambridge Hospital. Dr. Mack is a Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of a book titled *A Prince of Our Disorder*, which is a biography of T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia; and he is also the author of *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*. Welcome, John.

JOHN MACK, M.D.: It's good to be here, Jeff.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to be with you. You know, traditionally in psychiatry, if a patient were to come to you and report that they'd had contact with alien creatures, it would be almost automatically assumed, I think, that this person is likely to be psychotic.

MACK: That was my initial reaction when I first heard about this type of case. A colleague of mine, a woman psychologist, asked me would I like to meet with Budd Hopkins. This was the fall of 1989, and I said, "Who's he?" which showed how little I knew about this subject at that time, and she said, "Oh, he's an artist in New York who works with people who report being taken by alien beings into spacecraft." And I said, "Oh, he must be mad if he takes that seriously. This must be some new form of mental illness." She said, "No, no, it's very serious. Do you want to meet him?" So rather reluctantly, I agreed to meet with him one day in New York -- January 10, 1990, a day that kind of changed my life in certain ways -- and what struck me about what Budd Hopkins had to say, aside from the fact that he was not mad at all but a very intelligent, thoughtful, discriminating, and caring person, was he told me accounts of, at that point, more than a hundred, toward two hundred people, that had had very similar experiences. These people were, as far as I could tell, of sound mind, and they described in great detail that they had been taken, on beams of light generally, by alien beings -- out of their homes, cars, in the case of one woman from a snowmobile, children from schoolyards -- by three-and-a-half to four-foot alien beings of the most commonly described variety, into spacecraft, and subjected to a whole variety of intrusive procedures. These people did not know each other. They reported this very reluctantly to him; he had written an article about an abduction case that drew them to him. They didn't want to believe it themselves. And as far as I could tell -- and this has become clearly established, having now worked with ninety such people -- there was no apparent psychiatric illness that could account for this. And the details, in spite of what people say -- that there was a lot about this in the media and they may have picked it up -- these are not people that had been particularly exposed to media accounts, and in any case they were reporting many, many details that were not in the media but were consistent among the people that I've worked with.

MISHLOVE: Now, what you've just said obviously raises many, many questions, and I'm bubbling with questions to ask you. But the first one that I want to come back to, you use the word spacecraft. How would they or you know that what they saw was actually a spacecraft?

MACK: Often the person has not actually seen the spacecraft, but often they have. A number of these cases, when they're floated through the wall of their home, through the window, through the door -- again, so many of the details of these experiences make no sense in our -- what? -- Newtonian, Cartesian, Western, whatever you want to call it, notions of reality. And yet the stories are consistently described, with again the self-critical attitude that the people have. And they may see a typical unidentified flying object, a saucer-shaped or cigar-shaped vehicle on the ground of their home, emanating bright lights, or they may be taken by a small craft up into the sky to a kind of mother ship which they see very clearly. So many of them actually see the UFOs, and the insides are so uniformly described as rounded, curved walls with complicated instrument panels, that it's become clear that this is some kind of craft in the sky, which they would naturally call a spacecraft.

MISHLOVE: I think people would naturally draw that inference, but to me it's still an inference. I think you might agree. We don't really know exactly what these things are.

MACK: Fair enough. I mean, you could have, as we do -- this gets really into the way of how we know anything, or our use of language -- but we call something which is seen in the sky and which seems to be moving from one place to another, we call it a spacecraft. Now again, this has to do with where our own technology has come to. It could be created as a virtual reality and appear similar to what we already know as an airplane or a certain type of aerospace vehicle, so we call it a spacecraft. But again, you know, if you want to get down to the very core of the way language structures reality for us, you could even question whether they're spacecraft.

MISHLOVE: Isn't it the case that you've described in your book cases that were reported, let's say, a hundred years ago, back in the nineteenth century, of people who talked about airships?

MACK: Well, the article is there by Jerome Clark, who's been a student of the UFO phenomena for many years, and he went back and looked into the newspaper accounts of the airship craze of the last decade of the nineteenth century, and many of those vehicles looked kind of like balloons, or looked like the technology of the time. But he went further than that. He actually did an exhaustive search of all of the photographs he could find and the descriptions, and lo and behold, many of them did appear very much like the current, modern-day UFO, but the people of the time did not have in our culture the technological knowledge to actually see them as what they were. So he's concluded that these were probably UFOs not so different from what we're seeing now, but our perceptual development hadn't reached the point where they could be perceived the way we now can see things in the sky, more or less as we at least think they are. Again, you're raising the question whether even that's actual or constructed reality.

MISHLOVE: We could take this in so many different directions, but let's go back further into the past, because the accounts don't just begin even in the nineteenth century, do they?

MACK: Well, again, if you go back into the early times -- you know, Ezekiel's wheel, which now many ufologists think was a UFO; or chariots seen in the sky; or you go back to the fairies that kidnapped people in Ireland and other countries -- there are some similarities. But you're dealing there with oral traditions, and it's an easy leap of mind to say, "Well, we've had this going on all through the centuries and through the millennia even." The problem with that is the methods of knowing then were so different. To compare a phenomenon you have to use more or less the same investigative method, and our method now, as well as, of course, our perceptual capabilities, are so different. For example, just take the matter of clinical studies. The people that were reporting those experiences weren't being studied clinically. Now we have a tradition of when somebody's had an unusual experience, or something that doesn't fit, or you want to investigate, you talk to that person in great detail, you get other witnesses, what they've seen. So we have a kind of body of investigative tradition now that can document what's going on. So from that point of view this appears to have some distinct features. It also appears -- now I'm getting more into my own kind of sense of this -- that this thing is entering into our reality in a more hard-edged way. In other words, the first case that we have is the Betty and Barney Hill case, this interracial couple that was coming back from their vacation in Montreal, and they saw a craft that emanated this bright light. They actually saw the creatures in the craft. They were confronted by these creatures. They were terrified. They were taken in. Each reports various experiments that were done on their bodies -- skin scrapings, probings -- and the accounts compare. And since that time more and more cases are being reported, and it appears that the phenomenon is occurring with greater frequency now than in the past. But again, we don't know that. There are reasons, if that's so, why it might be so, but we're still trying to establish how distinct is this from earlier reports.

MISHLOVE: The Betty and Barney Hill case was made into a motion picture and a very popular book back in the 1960s.

MACK: That's right, and the movie came out in the mid-seventies, with James Earl Jones playing the black Barney Hill.

MISHLOVE: You're a Harvard-trained psychiatrist -- or a professor of psychiatry at Harvard, to be exact; we haven't gone over where your training was -- but you mention that when you first heard about Budd Hopkins, who was an amateur researcher into that phenomenon, you wondered whether he was crazy. And now you're doing clinical work yourself. How do your colleagues accept this?

MACK: Well, again, there's no generic response here. The range is extraordinary, as I have, on the one hand, a very prominent astrophysicist at Harvard who has become a kind of comrade-in-arms colleague about this, and he's actually gone on record saying that he believes that the work of people like Ken Ring, who works with the near-death experience, and myself in this area, will teach us more about the nature of the cosmos than anything scientists will discover in the next twenty years using telescopes to explore the heavens. It goes from on that end all the way to the acting chair of my department who says, "I wish John weren't doing this." So in between are all kinds of people who array themselves, from letters of support from psychiatrists that "I've seen these cases," or, "Continue it; this is good work," to people that think I've gone off some kind of deep end.

MISHLOVE: Well, the obvious counter-hypothesis would seem to me to be sort of a sociological one, that this is a myth in the making -- that there's a belief system that is somehow being engendered in the subconscious mind within the culture itself, perhaps like a new religion, or some other sort of social movement.

MACK: That's really not a counter-hypothesis. That's quite consistent with what I'm finding, because increasingly folklorists like Peter Rojcewicz, Thomas Bullard, Eddie Bullard, are looking back now into myth-making, and seeing, what was the experiential reality that was the kernel of truth in the physical world -- that is, what did people actually see and experience from which myths came? We have this notion in the West that a myth is a kind of invented imagination which comes out of the psyche in some way, which is a very kind of culture-centered notion of myth -- culture-centered in terms of that's what our culture would tend to see. But actually what they're finding is that there may actually have been some kind of visitations, or that there are actual physical bases for myth-making. So in that sense this may be indeed a myth; a religion could evolve from this. But that doesn't go against the fact that something physical, something actual, is occurring in our material universe.

MISHLOVE: So what you're saying now is, if we're going to look at this, we have to be willing to approach it with a certain subtlety of mind -- not to jump to conclusions one way or the other, but to be able to entertain simultaneously perhaps several hypothesis, and maybe many different levels of phenomena are interacting with each other at once, so there isn't going to be any kind of clear-cut this or that way of looking at it.

MACK: Exactly, and I often get asked questions that say, "Well, is this real? Is it not real?" or "Is this really going on?" or "Do you believe these people, or you don't? Are they telling the truth, or are they not?" -- all that kind of binary, linear thinking. And the subtlety you're talking about is very to the point. In other words, we're not great on ambiguity, paradox, subtlety, and embracing that and learning from it, sort of embracing the mystery. I think this is an authentic mystery, and I think we learn from saying, "I don't know," and having what the Buddhists call the sort of cleared zero mind, and then let's take a look at it. So I agree with you; I think it is subtle. It may be that, for example, this may originate in some subtle dimension, some other dimension -- the etheric world, whatever you want to call that other dimension -- and then cross over, manifest in the physical world, and be real in this world. But we're not used to thinking that way, so I think one of the purposes of the book, in a sense, is to open us to those widening notions of consciousness and reality.

MISHLOVE: You wrote a very eloquent passage about your communications and contacts over much of your life with Thomas Kuhn, the great historian of science who wrote the book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Could you talk about your discussions with him?

MACK: Well, I was lucky to have known Tom Kuhn since I was a child. His parents and mine were friends, and I used to spend time with him in New York at Christmastime, and so it was a natural thing to look him up in Cambridge; he has been at MIT. We have had some really interesting conversations. When I started with him, I said, "Tom" -- he's the person that originated this term paradigm, or paradigm change, which has become sort of a cliché, but it's sort of indispensable in a way for looking at how ideas grow and develop and shift -- and I said, "Tom, I think I've got one here." In other words, there's something I don't think I can understand within the framework of reality in which I personally was raised. This doesn't fit. I was raised in a very materialist -- materialist not in the sense of property acquisition, but in the sense of all that's really true, all that's real, is the physical world, and everything else belongs to the subjective, the

spiritual, what you study in departments of anthropology or psychology of religion or abnormal psychology. But here is something which seems to cross over from where it ought to be in the subjective world, and seems to show up in the objective world, and I didn't know what to do with that. So I told him about this, and he gave me two pieces of advice. He said, "Don't worry about science, because science has become a new religion in this culture, and what science means is a religion that restricts reality to that which can be measured and observed with the senses. And if you're going to talk about knowing beyond that, you need to have an expanded way of knowing." That's one piece of advice. The other piece of advice was, "Watch out for language, because language will trap you in structures of reality. So look out for certain dualisms, like 'exists-doesn't exist,' 'real-unreal,' 'inside-outside,' 'happened-didn't happen,' because they will immediately polarize the debate." So what he suggested was, "Just collect raw information and put aside your language categories as much as you can." Now, we can't do that completely, and we're all creatures of the culture in which we're raised, but I try as best I can to suspend all those categories and stay with what we were talking about earlier, which is the ambiguity, the paradox, the uncertainty, and that's what I've done. In other words, the book is filled with paradox, filled with uncertainty, filled with "on the one hand/on the other hand." But that isn't necessarily getting received that way. So I can't say yes, this is in our reality, or it's in this other reality. I don't know where it is. Something is powerful here; something extraordinary is happening to these people, and they are of sound mind, and they don't believe it; it shatters their notions of reality, and yet it is occurring to them in ways that I can't account for as a psychiatrist any other way now but what they say is occurring. Something like that is happening. And in fact, you know, with all the sort of alternative hypotheses that have been thrown at me, usually by people who have never really sat down and worked with this population, neither I nor anyone in the field -- and I always say this because I want to hear it; it still hasn't happened -- not a single abduction case has revealed behind it any other explanation. In other words, the people are examined, try to break down their stories, cross-examine them, look into child abuse, look into some kind of other trauma. Never has a case revealed anything other than what it is. The reverse is true. Many people have come to therapists, including myself, with the idea that this must be -- because there is a strong reproductive, sexual traumatic element in the stories -- have come to people like me saying, "Well, maybe this is incest, or maybe I was abused as a child." And then we look into that, and nothing happens; I mean, it doesn't work. I haven't done this, but some therapists will actually bring in the families and cross-examine them and cause terrible trouble to families by exploring that, and nothing has ever panned out. But at some point in several cases, the person will remember, with or without a relaxation or hypnosis approach, they will actually see a UFO in memory, or the little beings coming out of the UFO -- thinking of one particular case -- and then they will become for the first time deeply affected, and the emotions will return. So we have those kind of cases, where something that is explored as something familiar, traditional -- sexual abuse, rape, whatever -- reveals the abduction story behind it, but not the other way around.

MISHLOVE: The issue of memory itself has become increasingly controversial. When these people are reporting their memories to you, what tools do you have to know how much weight you can give to a memory being an actual memory, as opposed to being some sort of a fantasy?

MACK: Well, the argument around so-called false memory, or doubting memories, is applied to situations which are not of core significance to the individual. There's a study at Harvard going on now where people have been deeply traumatized, as the abductees have, in many cases -- have distortions of memory, but not for the traumatic events. The memory around the traumatic events is highly accurate, highly reliable. It's all the rest of their lives that becomes distorted and confused. So there is no evidence that you get false memory when you have very powerful traumatic events that are described with great conviction and great detail by people who are of otherwise sound mind and reliable observers. So that doesn't mean I know what the memory was, but it's not a false memory; it's not something concocted.

MISHLOVE: Well, it sounds as if what you're saying is you're inclined to take these reports at face value.

MACK: Face value I wouldn't say. I take them seriously. I don't have a way to account for them. I hear the people. They describe experiences in great detail that are so similar, one to another, and the only thing I know that acts like that is real experience. Now, face value is another matter, because then you're saying, well, that implies that this is occurring literally in this physical world, just as you and I are talking here. So that would have no place for something which came from some other realm, crossed over into our reality, entered our reality in this complex way we've been talking about. So I take it seriously. It's powerfully real for these people. It's mysterious. It affects them like any other trauma might; but there are many elements, of course, about it that are not simply traumatic, that can create really extraordinary human growth and transformational directions for these individuals.

MISHLOVE: In other words, in many cases the encounter with aliens seems to be a very beneficial one.

MACK: Yes, again, this gets back into -- there are so many pitfalls and subtleties, as you were saying earlier, one has to look at. Beneficial implies that it's like for us, it's good for us, or it's not good for us. I don't look at it in those terms. I think one has to step back and sort of look at a larger framework. It may be that whatever the intelligence at work here is -- and again, these are all language words. As soon as you say the word intelligence you are already saying something. You know, whatever the principle at work here --

MISHLOVE: Well, I know in some of the cases you've reported, the patients regarded the aliens as mentors to them.

MACK: That can happen, but it may be whatever the principle at work here, it's not particularly mainly interested in us. It may, for example -- and this is consistent with a lot of the data -- regard us as a kind of cancer on the planet, sort of a search-and-destroy species, which mows down with bulldozers everything it comes -- and tears the earth apart for resources and markets, and is a blight. That's possible; it may be looking at us that way, and saying, "Well, what are we going to do about this species?" And it's not particularly good or bad for us; it's just trying to intervene in some way to arrest us. I'm not saying that's true, but there are ways you can look at it that have very little to do with us, but more to do with some larger principle which has to intervene because we're so out of harmony with our own world.

MISHLOVE: Well, obviously we're dealing with something of enormous complexity, and probably not just one phenomenon but several different phenomena that sometimes get lumped together. But you seem to be saying that a case in which a patient might seem to be having a beneficial experience might not be quite what it seems.

MACK: Yes, you have to distinguish what may be the personal journey of the individual -- first traumatic, then they acknowledge the experience, and then they grow and they experience a wider sense of identity and reality, because they see that we're not alone, they

see that there are other beings, other entities, intelligences, whatever you want to call it, that exist, that they have a relationship with, which may be a very profound, even spiritual connection. That may be their personal journey, but that may not be what this is about, if one is to look at it, step back and say, what is this all about from a -- I don't know if it's possible to have a cosmic perspective, really; we're not very good at that. But we don't know what it's about. We only know what the aliens may say to people, and how they grow, or are traumatized by the experience. But that doesn't tell you what it is about necessarily.

MISHLOVE: Well, I know in the fiction of writers like Kurt Vonnegut you get some interesting cases where humans feel very touched by alien intervention. It seems very personal. And later on you learn in the story the object of the aliens was something totally removed from anything that was suspected by the human.

MACK: It could be that all of this about "We don't mean to harm you, and we're trying to help your planet survive, and we're connecting with you for a higher purpose" -- that could all be deception. I mean, then I get suspicious of that interpretation, because that's such an American way of thinking; you know, "I'm not going to get conned by these guys." So I almost trust the face-value look at the thing more than I trust an American interpretation of it. A face-value look at it would be it is some kind of complex process of evolution of species that is going on here, and of consciousness; whereas deception is more what we watch out for.

MISHLOVE: Well, Dr. John Mack, we've raised more questions than we've been able to answer, but fortunately this is Part 1 of a two-part series, so for those listeners and viewers who are enjoying our discussion, I hope that they watch for the second part of it, where we can go into greater depth on some of the subtleties -- dream experiences, potential past-life encounters with aliens, many of the other things that you've written about, including both the beneficial and the detrimental aspects of these contacts. Dr. Mack, thank you so much for being with me.

MACK: Thank you for having me, Jeff.