

A black, saucer-shaped UFO is positioned in the upper center of the frame, set against a dark blue and black night sky filled with numerous small, bright white stars. The UFO is slightly tilted, and its surface appears smooth and reflective.

ALIEN ENCOUNTERS, HARD SCIENCE,  
AND THE PASSION OF JOHN MACK

# THE BELIEVER

RALPH BLUMENTHAL

A large, dark, parabolic satellite dish is mounted on a complex metal structure. It is situated on a dark, silhouetted hillside in the foreground. The dish is pointed towards the upper left, following the trajectory of a faint, thin white line that stretches across the sky from the bottom left towards the top right. The background is the same starry night sky seen in the top half of the image.



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## “THEY ARE TELLING THE TRUTH”

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology sprawls along the southern coast of Cambridge, facing patrician Back Bay Boston across a wide spot of the Charles River. On its northwest shoulder, around a bend in the river, hunkers Harvard University. But MIT alone “never really had an outdoors, not one that anyone uses,” writes architecture critic Robert Campbell of the *Boston Globe*. Its 166 acres are pocketed with quadrangles of greenery and classical courts carved with the names of Newton, Aristotle, and Copernicus, but they seem superfluous. “The nearest thing to a public space, a place of social and cultural gathering, is the so-called Infinite Corridor indoors.” Here MIT’s scientists labor on their studies, which, to date, have been honored with ninety-five Nobel Prizes.

In this inquiring spirit, on an unseasonably hot Saturday in June 1992, an unlikely assembly convened for five days of secretive conferencing. Filling the steeply banked seats of lecture hall 6-120 in the Eastman Laboratories—where a lobby plaque pays homage to the storied MIT benefactor, Kodak photo pioneer George Eastman—were dozens of doctors, psychologists, therapists, physicists, folklorists, historians, theologians, and other specialists; a handful of trusted journalists; and sixteen otherwise seemingly ordinary folk with extraordinary experiences. All had signed nondisclosure agreements for the event that would remain under wraps for two more years—until the publication of a thick, oversize volume called *Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference*.<sup>1</sup>

The conference was a professional forum about humans who believed they were, at a minimum, (1) taken against their will by nonhuman beings, (2) brought to an apparent spacecraft or other enclosed space, (3) examined or subjected to telepathic communication, and (4) could recall the experience consciously or under hypnosis. Some further recounted astral

travels, ecstatic bonding with a deity or Source, apocalyptic warnings of planetary doom, and the forcible harvesting of their eggs or sperm for human-alien hybrid reproduction.

It was hardly MIT's regular fare (although the school's fabled Science Fiction Society hosted the world's largest open-shelf library of more than sixty thousand science-fiction and fantasy books and magazines), and, to be sure, MIT was not a sponsor. Rather, in the spirit of academic freedom, it only granted use of its facilities after a distinguished MIT atomic physicist, David E. Pritchard, pointed out how bad censorship would look. Renowned for his pioneering research in the wavelike properties of beams of atoms and forces of light on atoms, Pritchard, a prize-winning mentor of Nobelists, had long been intrigued by the abduction narratives, which he saw as more amenable to scientific investigation than sightings of what were long called flying saucers or, more accurately, unidentified flying objects—UFOs. He had been reading up on the subject and used his travels in physics to consult with leading investigators of the phenomenon.

At first, Pritchard thought of writing a book, but he later decided that a critical analysis of all the possibilities really demanded a conference. With a sabbatical at hand, Pritchard devoted the semester to planning it, ignoring the hostility of MIT administrators and enlisting as his partner a noted Harvard psychiatrist named John E. Mack, who had begun his own abduction investigations. Given the evident psychological dimensions of the phenomenon, Pritchard said, "I would not have had the courage to run this without a prominent psychiatrist."

Mack was a Harvard star, a heralded founder of community mental-health services in once-downtrodden Cambridge, and the author of a groundbreaking psychological biography of Lawrence of Arabia that had won a Pulitzer Prize. Commandingly tall at sixty-two years of age and with crystalline-blue eyes and a face stretched tight over his skull like the leathery mask of some totemic figure, he packed lecture halls and seminars, attracted disciples (particularly women), published prolifically, mobilized colleagues against nuclear weapons, and traveled the world on missions of peace. He had met with Yasir Arafat and been arrested at a nuclear test site in Nevada. And he was just back from the Himalayas, where he had joined a select group of professionals discussing aliens with His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Now Mack told the conferees at MIT why he thought the abduction phenomenon was not a psychiatric phenomenon, although that was most people's snap assumption, including, at first, his own. But any explanation, he said, had to account for five elements: (1) consistency of the reports, (2) physical signs like scars and witness-backed reports of actual absence for a time, (3) accounts from children too young for delusional psychiatric syndromes, (4) an association with witnessed UFOs, and (5) the lack of any consistent psychopathology among abductees.

To the uninformed it appeared like mass hysteria fed by the culture, Mack said. Except this didn't act like a collective disorder. The experiences were too personal, involving isolated individuals not caught up in any mass movement. And they were risking ostracism and ridicule. "There is no evidence that anything other than what abductees are telling us has happened to them," Mack said. "The people with whom I have been working, as far as I can tell, are telling the truth, and this has been the impression of other abduction researchers." It was indeed a profound mystery. "Some sort of intelligence seems to have entered our world, as if from another dimension of reality."

As for the beings themselves, they were commonly described at the conference as hairless and without ears or noses, although apertures were visible. The cranium was large and bulbous, set on a thin neck like a ball on a stick. The eyes were the most striking feature—huge, opaque, and inky black with no eyebrows, lashes, or lids. The mouth was a lipless, toothless slit, not used for speaking or, apparently, eating or drinking. The chin was pointed, the jaw unhinged with no sign of musculature. The faces bore no lines or wrinkles or other signs of aging. The body, too, was devoid of muscular development, with no sign of skeletal structure, no shoulder blades or ribs. There were no visible breasts or nipples, no bulge of a stomach, no waistline, no hips, no buttocks, and no apparent genitals, just a smooth, rounded area. Nor were there any signs of male-female differentiation. Arms and legs were spindly, without joints, the limbs just bending where a knee or elbow would be. The hands had three or four fingers and an opposable thumb. The feet were covered. The skin was widely described as gray and rubbery, with no visible pores. Were they even biological creatures? Or robots? But if they were robots, they could communicate and think at least as well as humans. They could make decisions and deal with crises.

Word of the conference had leaked out, and many of Mack's Harvard colleagues were incredulous or appalled. He was lending his professional eminence to *this*?

Some were less surprised, knowing Mack as a maverick who had taken to heart the lines of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: "Traveler, there is no path; you make the path by walking." Years of the psychoanalysis that his profession demanded of practitioners had excavated the childhood trauma that Mack himself believed lay behind his lifelong questing and openness to the anomalous. He had lost his mother at a tender age, leaving him wounded by abandonment. And so he came to tell a Brazilian therapist in a flash of insight that may have come out a little too pat, "The abduction story is a welcoming story because it means that—Ooooo, I'm getting goose pimples as I think of this—I'm not alone. There is life in the universe!"<sup>2</sup>