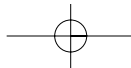
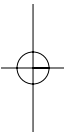
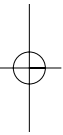


PART 2

BELIEVING THAT ONE HAS BEEN KIDNAPPED BY EXTRATERRESTRIALS



BEING ABDUCTED BY ALIENS AS A DEVIANT BELIEF

An Introduction

A married man claims to have two children with an alien being. “I know they’re out there, and they know who I am.” His wife is “confused, angry, and alienated.” All of a sudden, she says, her husband “goes from being a normal guy . . . to being . . . well . . . kind of nutty, I guess. I don’t believe him, but I don’t disbelieve him either. . . . Would things have been different if we’d been able to have kids?” she asks herself. “Basically, I deal with it by trying not to think about it too much” (Clancy, 2005, p. 2).

The first widely publicized account of an extraterrestrial kidnapping was reported in the 1960s by Betty and Barney Hill. By the 1990s, a public opinion poll, conducted by the Roper organization, indicated that 3.7 million Americans believe that they have been abducted by space aliens (Hopkins, Jacobs, & Westrum, 1991). In the 1990s, Harvard psychiatrist John Mack (1995) lent academic respectability to such reports by arguing that he believed these claims to be true. The accounts, ranging from the look of the creatures to what they do with abductees, have by now become so standardized as to be eerily predictable.

What makes the claim of having been kidnapped by aliens a form of deviance? Mack’s (1995) support of such claims produced stunned incredulity in his colleagues. Clearly, his endorsement of extraterrestrial kidnappings was deviant in the academic and psychiatric fraternity. The Harvard Medical School formed a committee, which spent over a year investigating Mack’s research on abductees, eventually concluding that Mack had the right to reach his own conclusions on the matter. Still, academically respectable topics do not attract such skepticism; his colleagues wondered why a Harvard psychiatrist, a Pulitzer Prize winner, a physician at the pinnacle of his career would make such an unbelievable claim. Indeed, most people who believe they have experienced an abduction are reluctant to come forward and make what is clearly a deviant assertion. They know that it will be greeted by ridicule and stigma. And yet, in spite of the ridicule and the stigma, the skepticism and the incredulity, such claims are made and believed—and in abundance. What’s behind them? What leads people to believe and make such an assertion?

At first glance, the claim of alien abductions does not seem outlandish. Most scientists—the late Carl Sagan perhaps most well-known among them—believe that extraterrestrial life exists *somewhere* in the universe. With billions of galaxies, says Sagan, each of which contains billions of stars, it is practically a certainty that at least one planet out there harbors some



Photo 2.1 Roswell UFO Enigma Museum. Many Americans believe that a space ship with extraterrestrials aboard crashed in 1947 in the desert near Roswell, New Mexico. Actually, the available evidence indicates an Earthly origin for the debris, but the unofficial myth is more appealing—and more plausible—to much of the public.

SOURCE: Reprinted with permission from Douglas Curran.

form of intelligent life. Polls indicate that nearly half of the American public believes that alien space ships have visited the Earth (see Photo 2.1). Why, then, is the claim of alien abduction so strange?

Scientists are suspicious, skeptical, or dismissive of alien abduction tales because the evidence supporting such assertions is entirely anecdotal. What scientists refer to as “hard” data—physical evidence of any kind, artifacts, documents, anything that investigators can lay their hands on and analyze—is entirely lacking. In fact, according to Dr. Mack (1995), to insist on such evidence represents a bias in favor of “the physical laws set forth by Western science” (p. 17). The people he interviewed claimed that the extraterrestrials (ETs) they observed and interacted with were able to transcend the laws of nature: They passed through solid objects, used beams of light as energy sources, and performed mind-to-mind telepathic communication. Moreover, these aliens caused bodily transformations (such as scars and pregnancy and birth) that they then caused to disappear altogether (pp. 14–36). Clearly, given such assumptions, to call for physical evidence under such circumstances is futile. The fact is, claims of

extraterrestrial kidnappings lie well outside the mainstream, as the reception to Dr. Mack's support of them indicates. And while scientists say they are dismissive of claims of first-hand ET contact because such assertions lack systematic, physical evidence, supporters of these claims argue that their assertions are dismissed out of hand because of social and cultural biases. Such assertions mark someone off as odd, eccentric, strange, even bizarre, a person who is likely to draw ridicule and stigma—someone whose stories are not to be trusted.

All available studies of abduction claimants indicate that these people are not mentally disordered. They are, in fact, as psychologically “normal” as you and I. And yet, they make claims that, in the absence of material evidence, are almost certainly false. How do perfectly normal people come to believe they were kidnapped by aliens? And how do they construct their stories? Why are these stories so invariant, so remarkably consistent with one another? What are the basic elements of such claims, the common themes, the justifications, the arguments? And what constitutes evidence to back up such claims? What satisfies these claimants that their stories are true? How do they come to accept as true what is almost certainly false?

In her book *Abducted*, Harvard psychologist Susan Clancy (2005) has interviewed and studied hundreds of people who believe they were abducted by extraterrestrials. They are aware of, and dismiss, explanations that attribute their beliefs to sleep paralysis, hypnosis, and suggestibility from science fiction films and television programs. They *know* their abduction beliefs are true because they *experienced* them as real. And how else, they ask, could so many others have had the same experiences? The many accounts from many and varied sources tell the same story: Intelligent creatures from another planet snatched them up, examined them, probed and poked at them, even subjected some of them to unusual sexual experiences. What's behind such experiences? How can so many people experience something that almost certainly never happened?

In this section, Christopher Bader provides an overview and history of the alien contactee/abductee phenomenon, emphasizing the fact that it has evolved as a subculture with its own vocabulary and beliefs. Stephanie Kelley-Romano examines the contactee/abductee phenomenon from the point of mythology, emphasizing the sources of its appeal to believers. And while not a personal account, Susan Clancy's article asks the basic question every skeptic raises: “How do people come to believe they were abducted by aliens?” As she says, she takes alien abduction accounts seriously, but she does not believe them because they lack physical documentation. Clancy (2005) argues that the belief that one has been abducted results from a combination of a phenomenon called *sleep paralysis* and its accompanying “night terror” and culturally available explanations pointing to alien abduction. “At other times and other places in the world,” says Clancy, “such night terrors have been interpreted as Satan, demons, witches, dragons, vampires, large dogs, and angels and erect gorgons. Today, it's extraterrestrials” (p. 49).

The belief that one has been abducted is likely to be met with derision by most Americans; it is, in other words, a form of deviance. Still, sociology demands an understanding of such a belief. Perhaps, however, nonbelievers will never find satisfying any answer to the question, “How do normal people come to believe that they were abducted by aliens?”

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Alien Attraction

The Subculture of UFO Contactees and Abductees

Christopher D. Bader

In the spring of 1983, a 50-year-old writer named Beth had her first UFO abduction experience. It was 2:25 A.M. Unable to sleep, Beth was tossing and turning in her bed when a bright light shone through a bedroom window. Beth stumbled to the front door and walked outside to see what was causing the glow. She was shocked to find a large, disc-shaped craft hovering above the front yard. After watching the motionless object for what seemed to be a couple of minutes, Beth retreated indoors, only to find her clock reading 5:30 A.M. Somehow, three hours had passed in the brief moments she had viewed the strange object. Beth fears that during this period of “missing time” she was abducted by alien beings who erased her memory of the incident.

After the experience, Beth suffered from severe anxiety attacks, had difficulty concentrating, and became extremely paranoid. Now estranged from her family, she has a short temper and experiences flashbacks of a “strange man” beckoning to her. Beth has come to believe that she is on a “special mission” but has no idea what that mission entails.¹

John is a practicing psychiatrist in New Jersey. He began dating Betty in 1990 and the two quickly became very close. After they had been dating for some time, Betty confided in John about several encounters with what she believed to be alien beings. John was skeptical of her claims.

One evening, John dropped Betty at her house after a dinner date. He arrived at his home around midnight to find the phone ringing. Betty was on the line, hysterical, claiming that “the aliens” were at her home at that very moment. John jokingly suggested to Betty that the aliens should “come on over!” Betty simply replied, “They will.”

John laughed, hung up the phone, and prepared for bed. As he entered his bedroom, he noticed a bright light shining through his bedroom window. Then the walls began to rattle. Objects fell off his shelf. A series of blinding balls of light danced around the room. Suddenly, it was morning. John was still standing in the doorway to his bedroom, clutching the doorknob. He cannot explain what happened during several hours of “missing time.” After the experience, John attended meetings at a UFO encounter support group and has since

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Some sections adapted from Bader (1995).

become convinced that he was abducted by aliens that night.

INVASION FROM OUTER SPACE

Accounts of strange, unidentified objects in the sky have a long history. The Biblical book of Ezekiel contains the sighting of a wheel-like object in the sky. In the late nineteenth century, people across the United States reported sightings of blimp-like airships. During World War II, pilots reported encounters with “Foo Fighters”—small globes of light that chased and circled their planes. In the Bible, strange objects were assumed to be the work of God or angels. The airships sighted in the 1800s were widely assumed to be the work of mysterious, but human, inventors. World War II pilots thought the Foo Fighters were secret weapons of the Germans or Japanese (Bader, 1995).

The first widely publicized claim of extended interaction with aliens was friendly in nature. In 1952, George Adamski collaborated with author Desmond Leslie on *Flying Saucers Have Landed*. The book told Adamski’s “true” story of a series of contacts with men from Venus, Mars, and Jupiter. A short-order cook and self-proclaimed philosopher, Adamski had his first sighting of a UFO in October, 1946. He was peering through his telescope at a meteor shower when he spotted an object “similar in shape to a giant dirigible” (Leslie & Adamski, 1953, p. 172). After a series of progressively more spectacular sightings, Adamski started making trips out to the desert near his home in Valley Center, California. He believed the space ships might choose to land in less populated areas.

On November 20, 1952, Adamski and several friends were picnicking in a barren area near Desert Center, California. The group spent the day exploring and sat down to eat lunch about noon. At that time, a plane passed low over their heads, drawing the group’s attention to a “gigantic cigar-shaped silvery ship without wings or appendages

of any kind” that was hovering nearby. A saucer-shaped craft emerged from the larger object and slowly settled into a cove about half a mile from the group. Adamski asked the others to stay behind, and he carefully approached the landing area. As he busied himself taking pictures of the vicinity, he noticed a man standing near the entrance of a nearby ravine. Upon approaching the man, Adamski realized that he was face-to-face with an extraterrestrial.

“Now for the first time,” Adamski said,

I fully realized that I was in the presence of a man from space—A HUMAN BEING FROM ANOTHER WORLD!. . . The beauty of his form surpassed anything I had ever seen. And the pleasantness of his face freed me of all thought of my personal self. . . He was about five feet, six inches in height and weighed . . . about 135 pounds. . . He was round faced with an extremely high forehead . . . and average size mouth with beautiful white teeth that shone when he smiled or spoke. As nearly as I can describe his skin, the coloring would be an even, medium-colored suntan. And it did not look to me as though he had ever had to shave, for there was no more hair on his face than on a child’s. His hair was sandy in color and hung in beautiful waves to his shoulders, glistening more beautifully than any woman’s I have ever seen. (Leslie & Adamski, 1953, pp. 194–195)

The being could not speak English, forcing him and Adamski to communicate through hand signals and “telepathy.” The alien indicated that he was part of a friendly landing party from Venus that was visiting Earth out of concern about recent nuclear testing. The Earth, he warned, was in danger of destroying itself and surrounding planets. The being soon indicated that he had to leave and returned to his craft, which ascended out of sight.

Unfortunately for Adamski’s tales, space exploration has taught us about the solar system, and so the veracity of his accounts suffered. His “eyewitness” descriptions of outer space did not match the experiences of astronauts: Venus, Mars, and Jupiter

cannot support life. Moreover, photos included in his books proved easy to fake. Adamski's fortunes declined throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. He died of a heart attack in 1974.

ABDUCTION

An equally pivotal, but significantly different, UFO tale appeared in the early 1960s. In September, 1961, Betty Hill, a New Hampshire social worker, and her husband Barney, a postal officer, were returning home from a vacation in Canada. At some point during their drive, Betty noticed a star-like object in the sky that appeared to be following the car. Barney finally stopped the car and got out to look at the object through binoculars. He was able to see a row of lighted windows behind which stood several figures wearing black uniforms and black caps. Panicking, Barney jumped back into his car.

The Hills' next memory is of finding themselves at a point further down the road. Once they reached home, they realized that their journey had taken a couple of hours longer than expected. After suffering nightmares about the experience for months, the couple sought help from Dr. Benjamin Simon, a Boston psychiatrist. Because the Hills were a mixed-race couple in the turbulent 1960s, Simon believed that Betty's nightmares stemmed from societal pressures on their relationship. He placed Betty into a hypnotic trance to probe her anxieties. Much to his surprise, Betty told him a bizarre story of alien beings taking her aboard a landed flying saucer. Once placed under hypnosis, Barney provided a similar account.

According to the Hills' story, the object they witnessed following their car had landed in the road, disgorging several creatures that escorted the Hills onboard. Barney described the creatures for Dr. Simon:

"[T]hey had rather odd-shaped heads, with a large cranium, diminishing in size as it got towards the

chin," said Mr. Hill. "And the eyes continued around to the sides of the head, so it appeared that they could see several degrees beyond the lateral extent of our vision. . . . The texture of the skin . . . was grayish, almost metallic looking. . . . I didn't notice any hair . . . [and] there just seemed to be two slits that represented nostrils." (Fuller, 1966, p. 260)

Once aboard the craft, the Hills were subjected to a humiliating series of physical examinations. The creatures pulled at Barney's false teeth and seemed unable to fathom why Betty's teeth could not be removed. The beings pulled hair from Betty's head, took skin scrapings, and cut her fingernails with strange instruments. During a brief conversation with an alien who appeared to be the leader, Betty was shown a "star map" pinpointing the aliens' home planet. The abductors placed the Hills back into their car after somehow erasing their memories of the event.

Dr. Simon was skeptical of the Hills' story. He believed that the experience was a shared delusion based on Betty's fears that manifested itself under hypnosis. Nevertheless, he collaborated with the Hills and journalist John Fuller on a book about the experience, *The Interrupted Journey: Two Lost Hours Aboard a Flying Saucer*. The book was a bestseller, transforming the Hills into celebrities. The story was serialized in *Look*, a popular national magazine at the time. An NBC television movie aired in 1975. Unfortunately, Barney Hill died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1969 and never saw the film. Betty Hill continued to speak about her experiences and published a book about UFOs in 1995; she died in 2004.

CONTACTEES AND ABDUCTEES

The experiences of George Adamski and the Hills highlight a key distinction within the UFO subculture—contactees vs. abductees. The term *contactee* refers to people, such as Adamski, who report positive, consensual experiences with extraterrestrials. These stories typically mix

sacred and space-age themes. Adamski's books used Christian symbolism extensively. Among other things, the aliens told him that Jesus was an alien "incarnated" on Earth to help humans learn to be peaceful and loving. The Biblical fallen angels are actually the universe's criminals whom the aliens had banished to Earth (Adamski, 1955). Further, contactee experiences usually involve trips on flying saucers to other planets or to mother ships hovering above the Earth. During their visitations, the aliens often impart a message of peace and concern for mankind's warlike ways.

There have been dozens of contactees since Adamski. Howard Menger, a New Jersey sign painter, claimed to have frequent encounters with the crews of flying saucers that landed near his home.

From Outer Space to You (1959) outlines Menger's meetings with a gorgeous space woman and visits to an alien base on the moon. Contactee Gabriel Green ran for president in 1960 on the advice of his "space brothers." Frank Stranges claimed to have attended a meeting at the Pentagon with a Venusian named Val Thor (Stranges, 1991). The Aetherius Society (www.aetherius.org) was formed by a Londoner named George King, who claims to be in contact with a "cosmic master" from Venus. Now based in California, the group holds prayer sessions during which they charge "spiritual batteries" meant to cure societal ills. Unarius (www.unarius.org) is another California group founded by the late Ruth Norman and her late husband, Ernest. The group has purchased land near El Cajon, California in preparation for a mass landing by the "space brothers." Ruth, who also went by the name "Uriel," claimed to be the reincarnation of Confucius, Socrates, Henry VIII, and Benjamin



Photo 2.2 Betty Andreasson's Aliens. A substantial number of Americans have become obsessed with the idea of the presence of extraterrestrials on Earth, to the point where such an obsession has been incorporated into these people's everyday lives.

SOURCE: Reprinted with permission from Douglas Curran.

Franklin. Ernest claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus. After his death, he became "Moderator of the Universe" (Curran, 1985).

The term *abductee* refers to people who claim to have had a negative, nonconsensual encounter with extraterrestrials. Following the prototype set by the Hills' experience, abductees believe they have been kidnapped by extraterrestrial beings and subjected to often humiliating medical procedures. Most abductions occur at night, while the victim is either in bed or driving down a lonely road. Unlike the Hill case, the majority of abductions involve one victim and no witnesses. Upon seeing an object in the sky or strange light outside his or her window, the abductee will then experience a period of *missing time*—a block of time during which the abductee cannot recall his or her actions. It is believed that the aliens erase the abductee's memories of the experience. Curiosity about this missing time, or sometimes strange

nightmares, compel the abductee to seek help. A variety of UFO groups, abduction researchers, and independent therapists use hypnotic regression to recover the memories erased by the aliens. Under hypnosis, the abductee will recall the full details of the experience. As UFO experiences have become more common, a variety of UFO abduction and contactee support groups have appeared in the United States (Bader, 2004).

The contactee/abductee distinction is key within the UFO subculture. Someone who calls himself or herself a "contactee" is signaling an entirely different type of experience, and perspective on that experience, than someone who calls himself or herself an "abductee." Contactees enjoy their experiences and look forward to the next adventure. They feel privileged to have been selected for contact by the aliens. The contactee happily recounts his or her trips to other planets and the messages of peace received from the "space brothers." Although their stories continue to develop (as will be discussed later), abductees generally fear their experiences. They are not contacted, but *captured*. David M. Jacobs (1992), a history professor at Temple University, equates UFO abductions with rape:

No matter how they handle the experience, all abductees have one thing in common: They are victims. Just as surely as women who are raped are victims of sexual abuse or soldiers can be victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, abductees are victims. (p. 257)

NORDICS AND GRAYS

Over the years, UFO witnesses have reported a bewildering variety of creatures piloting the craft, from a "human-sized black figure, headless with webbed feet and wings like a bat" seen in Kent, England (Hough, 1989, p. 112) to a creature wearing a "black coat and wide-brim hat pulled down over a face that looked as if it had been covered with masking tape" witnessed in New Hampshire

(Randle, 1989, p. 140). However, abductees and contactees generally report encounters with two different types of creatures.

Contactees' description of the aliens is similar to Adamski's (1955). Called "Nordics," the aliens are human-like in appearance, of average height, and often have long, flowing hair. Contactees are typically struck by the beauty of the Nordics, as was Howard Menger (1959): "She seemed to radiate and glow," Menger explains,

and I wondered if it were due to the unusual quality of the material she wore, which had a shimmering shiny texture not unlike, but far surpassing, the sheen of nylon. The clothing had no buttons, fasteners, or seams I could discern. She wore no makeup, which would have been unnecessary to the fragile transparency of her Camellia-like skin with pinkish undertones. (p. 26)

Abductees report encounters with creatures similar to those reported by the Hills. Dubbed "the Grays" by the subculture, the creatures are short in stature with white or gray skin; a large, egg-shaped head; enormous, cat-like black eyes; a slit for a mouth; small nostrils; and thin, sometimes clawed limbs. While the Nordics are very communicative and often speak English, the Grays rarely speak. If they do communicate, report abductees, it is typically through the use of short telepathic commands, such as, "Calm down and you will not be harmed." *The Alien Abduction Survival Guide* describes Grays thusly: "Small, thin beings with gray or ash-white skin color and large, almond-shaped eyes. Most are not much taller than three feet or so; others are notably taller and somewhat thinner. 'Greys' are the primary beings most people remember" (LaVigne, 1995, p. 108).

IMPLANTS AND HYBRIDS

Since the mid-1970s, a New York artist and abduction researcher named Budd Hopkins has been a key figure in the UFO subculture. Through his

books, such as *Missing Time* (1981) and *Intruders* (1987), Hopkins has advanced the theory that aliens are conducting a breeding experiment on Earth.

Hopkins' first revelation arose from hypnosis sessions in the 1970s with an abductee named Virginia Horton. Horton, it seemed, claimed two abduction encounters, which indicated that, for some reason, the aliens were following her life. The idea that someone might be abducted twice was entirely new at the time. Betty and Barney Hill, Travis Walton, and most other early abductees each had only one abduction experience. Abductees appeared to be people who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Horton case suggested that the "Grays" purposefully selected certain victims.

Horton's first strange memory was as a six-year-old on her grandparents' farm near Lake Superior in the summer of 1950. She had entered a barn to gather some eggs; suddenly, she found herself standing in the yard with a large cut on her leg. Then, when she was 16, Horton followed a deer into the woods. The next thing she remembered was coming out of those woods with a terrible bloody nose. Under hypnosis, she recovered memories of each incident, which involved examinations by gray-colored beings. During the second incident, the creatures inserted a "probe" into her left nostril that caused Horton's bloody nose.

Based on hypnosis sessions with people like Horton, Hopkins concluded that the majority of abductees showed evidence of having been abducted several times, including when they were small children. Furthermore, many of these cases involved the insertion of some sort of probe into a nostril or under the skin, believed to be a tracking device. The aliens use the device to locate the abductees when they are needed, for whatever mysterious reason. The UFO subculture uses the term "implant" to refer to these devices. Indeed, fear of implants is so prevalent within the subculture that some abductees have tried to locate their implants via x-rays, while others use special helmets in an

attempt to disrupt the implant's signal (see www.stopabductions.com).

In *Intruders* (1987), Hopkins provides the reason behind the tracking of humans. The book centers on the experiences of Kathie Davis, who claimed upwards of a dozen abduction experiences since childhood. During Davis's experiences, the "Grays" performed repeated gynecological examinations. Under hypnosis, Davis eventually recovered memories of the aliens impregnating her and subsequently removing the fetus. In a later encounter, the beings showed her the result of this experiment: a half-human, half-Gray daughter. She described the being as having big, blue eyes; pale skin; a tiny mouth; and a head that was larger than normal (p. 223). Based on Davis's memories, Hopkins concluded that alien abductions are part of a long-term extraterrestrial breeding experiment.

The belief that one has been used to create half-alien, half-human children is common in the UFO contact subculture. In fact, the subculture uses the term "hybrid" to refer to these children. At a conference on alien abductions at M.I.T., Jacobs (1994) provided a detailed description of a hybrid:

The offspring that abductees report look very much like a cross between alien and human. These apparent "hybrids" have hair on their heads, but it is often wispy and thin. They have a nose, but it is too small a nose for most humans. They have ears, albeit very small ones. They have a mouth and thin lips, but once again, they are small for the head. They have a pointed chin. They have very large eyes. (p. 87)

Recent years have witnessed an emerging literature about the hybrids. For example, *Raechel's Eyes: The Strange but True Case of a Human-Alien Hybrid* tells the story of a hybrid child living, and even attending college, in the U.S. while under government protection (Littrell & Bilodeaux, 2005). Meanwhile, *Star Kids: The Emerging Cosmic Generation* argues that the Earth is already home to children of advanced abilities, the result of interbreeding with the "star visitors" (Boylan, 2005).

KINDER, GENTLER ALIENS

The UFO subculture has evolved over time. Understanding its members requires continually monitoring how their beliefs have changed. In recent years, abductees have started to question their relationship to the Grays. While most abductees still believe them to be abusers, a growing subset believe the aliens are misunderstood. Although terrifying at first, the "abduction" has turned into a positive experience. Such benign encounters are similar to the contactee tales and, indeed, some abductees now report experiences with both Nordics and Grays. As the ranks of these "new" abductees have grown, they have created the label "experiencers." Experiencers are people who have come to view as positive what was initially a frightening UFO experience. A quote from a recent therapy manual for experiencers provides a summary of this perspective:

For most of us, the ETs who have contacted us have become interesting acquaintances and, in some cases, friends. After getting over our initial fright and upset, we have come to share a deep respect for them and the messages they have traveled so far to deliver. (Boylan & Boylan, 1994, p. 4)

CONCLUSION

When I lecture about UFO beliefs, I am asked two questions more than any others. First, I am asked, "Are UFO abductions real?" This is soon followed by "Are these people crazy?" Both questions are based upon the same supposition: Unless these experiences really happened, there is something wrong with these people.

As a sociologist, I cannot answer (and frankly, I am not interested in) the question of whether UFO abductions and contacts are real or imaginary. If someone truly believes that he or she has been abducted by aliens and acts in accordance with that belief, does the reality of the event matter, from a sociological perspective? Rather

than taking radiation readings or camping under the stars with a video camera, a sociologist with an interest in UFOs should spend his or her time trying to understand the subculture and its beliefs and examining societal reaction to those beliefs.

Through an anonymous survey of UFO abductees, I learned about the process via which people come to believe they have been abducted. Typically, an abductee has no memory of a UFO experience. He or she may be concerned about periods of missing time, strange nightmares, or bouts with depression or anxiety. Having heard of UFO abductions, either from the media or from a friend or family member, the person begins to contemplate a UFO experience as the possible explanation for his or her problems. Eventually, the abductee finds his or her way to a therapist with an interest in UFOs. The therapist uses hypnosis and encourages the recovery of UFO abduction or contact memories. Once the person believes himself or herself to be an abductee, he or she often seeks contact with like-minded people by joining a support group, browsing chat rooms, and so on. This tightens abductees' connection to the subculture and will help convince them that the vague memories they have are real. One does not have to be "crazy" to be an abductee. Rather, abductees are people with problems who, through sheer chance or through their network of friends and family, have found their way into the UFO subculture (see Photo 2.3). The key point is that once the abductee has entered the subculture, his or her beliefs become normative.

The stigma UFO abductees and contactees receive from wider society leads them to bond tightly to their subculture. Outside the realm of believers, those who report such experiences are considered frauds, deluded, or mentally ill. Abductees sometimes become estranged from their own families, as one discussed in her survey: "All family members with the exception of children feared, labeled, and ridiculed my . . . pickups. Their lack of understanding and fears of the unknown created a complete separation."

Wariness of outsiders has become a strong element in the subculture. Some believe that the U.S. government is in league with alien beings and engaged in a concerted effort to cover up abductions and ridicule UFO witnesses. Those in the UFO subculture who hold such beliefs see the dismissal of UFO contact and abduction tales as a consequence of this alien/government plan. One of the primary difficulties I encountered in researching contactees and abductees was convincing them I could be trusted. They were concerned I would either belittle their stories in the press or, worse, that I was a government agent seeking to infiltrate the group. This tendency of abductees to withdraw from the public reinforces their deviant identity.

With UFO believers, we can see that stigmatization can become a vicious cycle. When groups are stigmatized, they may retreat from the wider culture. This retreat often leads them to develop beliefs about the wider culture that reinforce that separation. As a consequence, they become further stigmatized, thus continuing the cycle.

NOTE

1. Narrative from a survey the author conducted of UFO abductees. See Bader (2004).

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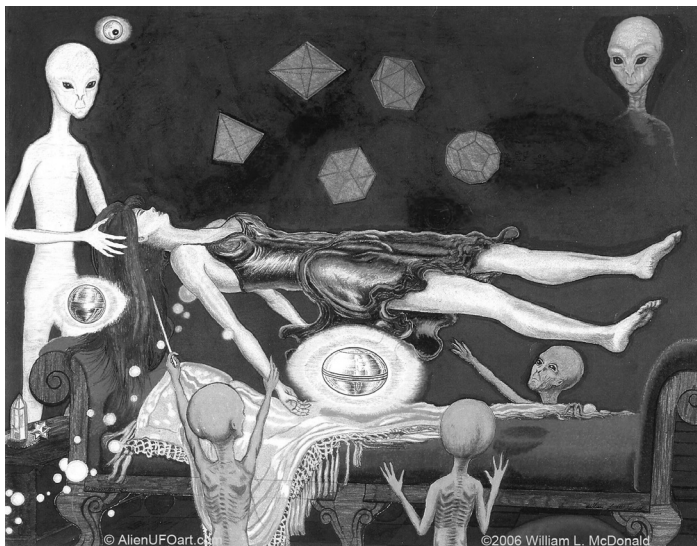


Photo 2.3 Mt. Shasta Nights Dream. A substantial number of Americans believe that they have been kidnapped by extraterrestrials. Their descriptions of the experience usually include physical probing, experimentation, and often sexual assault. Most of the public finds such a belief peculiar, even deviant, but the people who hold it are not usually mentally disordered.

SOURCE: Mt. Shasta Nights Dream, by William L. McDonald © 2006.

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Alien Abductions as Mythmaking

Stephanie Kelley-Romano

It was spring of 1976. I was six or seven months pregnant and had been in bed asleep at night. I heard a hoarse whisper say, "Wake up." I opened my eyes just a crack but the bright light was painful so I closed them again. I tilted my head down before I opened my eyes again. When I did, I saw that I was naked and there was enough light to tell that I was standing outdoors. I raised my head and saw three figures in the bright light. In that instant I remembered having seen them before. I was afraid their abducting me might have an adverse effect on the baby and yelled at them about a doctor's appointment I had the next day, hoping they would fear discovery and let me go.

This story describes the initial stages of an alien abduction. It was told to me by "Emma" (all names here are pseudonyms), a self-professed abductee and, like most of the others I received narratives from, a fully functioning member of society. Although I remain skeptical of the empirical reality of alien abductions, invalidating the claims of these narrators is beyond the scope of my inquiry. Still, after reading Emma's stories and

hundreds like hers, I conclude that these people sincerely *believe* they have been kidnapped by extraterrestrial beings.

According to a poll conducted in the 1990s by Hopkins, Jacobs, and Westrum, 3.7 million Americans claim to have been abducted by aliens. A similar poll, conducted by the Roper organization, puts this figure at three million. More staggeringly, Scott Mandelker (1995) claims there may be as many as 100 million "sleeping" aliens among us, individuals who experience feelings of estrangement because they are "from elsewhere."

The abduction myth was first widely publicized in 1961 by Betty and Barney Hill, a middle-aged couple from New Hampshire. A close look at this phenomenon can inform our understanding of symbolic processes—exploring what it means to believe and how we come to know what we know. And unlike established, codified religious beliefs, the abduction myth is still in the process of developing. Over nearly half a century, believers have produced a body of narratives that continues to increase in complexity of form and function.

Believers and skeptics alike continue to attribute meaning to the abduction phenomenon and to struggle for legitimacy among the general public.

Abduction discourse—assertions about abductions—is a living myth, a body of stories making up a system of beliefs. This discourse is composed of four main story types that function in a progressively transcendent or spiritual fashion. Over time, the mythic system that makes up abduction beliefs builds a functionally more complete reality for adherents. To understand how the abduction myth functions for believers, I will define myth and explain how the formal elements of myth interact with its functions. Next, I'll explain the primary function each abduction narrative type serves and how these four narrative types differ. Finally, I will offer some conclusions about what this myth says to us.

MYTHMAKING IN THE MODERN WORLD

Most of us today equate myth with falsehood. This belief fails to capture the importance and relevance of myth. In fact, myths are essential for productive, worthwhile living. Since ancient times, humans have told stories to explain the how and why of life. Myths are the glue of society that binds us to one another and to our traditions. They help us find significance in our lives. Far from being mere falsehoods, myths are essential truths that anchor members to their societies and the constituent members of the society to one another.

Formal Characteristics of Myth

Mythic stories, like all narratives, have certain formal characteristics. Five basic building blocks construct a myth: narrative form, heroic characters, a special time, a special place, and archetypal language (Rowland, 1990). When these elements are combined, they create something larger than the sum of their parts; they create a myth.

Narrative form, the first of myth's formal characteristics, is simply the story-like quality of myths; that is, they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. As narratives, they provide a means of ordering events in a particular story-like sequence. Second, in myth, the characters are heroic. Typically, heroes undertake a journey into the realm of the supernatural, struggle with a source of power, and return to the world, victorious and changed. The heroic journey must be undertaken because of some fundamental deficiency in the individual or in the larger society; the hero's journey often represents an attempt to save the society, which is on the verge of ruin. In addition, the hero offers a role model to be emulated. The third and fourth components of myth address the setting of the story. The action takes place in a special time and a special place. Since the agents are heroic, they necessarily do battle in a consecrated, or otherwise sacred, place. Myths happen in a place and time of significance, which imparts "force and credibility" to the narrative (Rowland, 1990, p. 104). And finally, the narrator of myth uses archetypal language, a transcendent vocabulary that engages the emotions as well as the mind.

Functional Aspects of Myth

Narratives assume a variety of forms, and many of them partake of the mythic qualities I just discussed: folk tales have heroes, fairy tales take place during a special time, and legends take place in a special place. How are myths different? They differ in two ways.

First, myths are accepted as true in ways that other cultural narratives are not. Myths represent a lived reality. Although empirically false in a number of respects, myths have the appearance of truth because they have widespread social acceptance; they are, above all, *believable*. And because myths are believed to be true, they are life-changing.

Second, myths are all-encompassing and sacred. They provide sacred beginnings, advice

about the present, and hope and direction for the future. Mythic ideologies, when accepted, provide a way of living. The most obvious example of an encompassing, fully articulated, sacred myth is religion. Religious narratives, with their heroes, holy spaces, sacred times, and symbolic language, are myths in their most complete form. They function to provide believers with directions on how to live and justifications for their existence.

Myths offer three basic functions: pedagogical/psychological, sociological, and cosmological.

At their most basic, myths function pedagogically at the psychological level. They teach us skills essential for individual development and survival; how to act, accept, and change aspects of life; how to behave; how to evaluate behavior. They are stories that we use to see how we stack up against other people. They provide options for action by explaining what happens to characters who make certain choices. They also play an integral role in developing the self-concept by guiding listeners from their drab, routine, ordinary, everyday existence to a more spiritual, more transcendent place. Through myths, individuals contemplate their own image and possibilities for the future.

Myths also function sociologically. They allow people to identify with one another, to hive together to form societies. Myths are the sacred history that is passed down from one generation to the next. They establish what is acceptable and how people should act under certain circumstances. Myth promotes values and perceptions that are central to the community.

And last, myths function cosmologically. They explain the individual's place not only within humanity but within the universe as a whole. Myths situate the individual within the universe. The need for individuals to make sense of their place in the world has always been a main component of theological and mythological narratives and theologies. People need to have faith that there is meaning to life. Cosmologically, myth functions to give meaning to the seeming randomness and

absurdity of life. Ultimately, myth functions at the cosmological level as religion. Myths are essentially religious narratives.

We can see these three functions of myth as steps on the ladder to transcendence or spiritual communion. So, myths work to first provide the individual with a sense of self and then an understanding of cultural norms before finally making sense of the cosmological order.

ALIEN ABDUCTION EXPERIENCES AS MYTH

This essay is based on the narrative testimony of 130 alien abduction experiencers (AAEs). An "abductee" is someone who is taken against his or her will, while an "experiencer" is a broader label and includes individuals who have had contact with, but may or may not have been taken by extraterrestrials. The four emergent narrative types are based on the motives of the aliens and illustrate the evolutionary nature of myth: physical salvation, hybridization, betterment of humanity, and cosmic community. Each story type builds on the next in the larger quest for transcendence.

Physical Salvation: The Hero's Quest

Physical salvation narratives tell one of the most widely known stories of contact: Aliens are here to save us. This narrative type is an articulation of the hero's quest. Within narratives of physical salvation, and indeed most abduction experiences, individuals are taken against their will—literally carried away. Paul explains how he was captured:

They [the ETs] were talking about me. The first one said that I had been able to overcome part of the sedative's effect and was now fully awake. He asked the second person if they should abort the operation since it appeared to be compromised. A large face appeared within the outer glow of the light beam.

I think I probably would have lost control of my bladder, had I not already been under the influence of some sedative.

Interestingly, Paul is special in that he is able to overcome part of the alien attempts to control him. Other experiencers, rather than fighting control, explain their complicity in the experience. For example, Mary claims, "I have personally agreed to this interaction. I volunteered to live this lifetime with a portion of my time spent with this civilization." She goes even further to correct my survey instrument, crossing out the word "abduction" and replacing it with "visits." She explains, "I hate the word abduction; it is not indicative of what is happening." Permission, ironically, is an important theme within this category of abduction. This renaming positions the "contactee" or "experiencer" as an agent who defines himself or herself. The discursive struggle that surrounds this fundamental label—abductee vs. experiencer—is one arena in which we can see competing mythic perspectives vying for dominance. Each claims the other has been "duped" by the aliens into thinking incorrectly about his or her abduction experiences. So, according to experiencers, abductees are presently incapable of recognizing the true benevolent aims of the extraterrestrials. Likewise, according to the abductees, extraterrestrials are fooling the experiencers into thinking their abduction is for the greater good of humanity.

The world the hero enters typically is intimate, yet strangely familiar. One way this intimacy is conveyed is through the presence of a "doctor" or "head alien" who is sympathetic to the plight of the abductee. The "head alien" often described by abductees is usually taller and often lighter in color than the typical gray alien. Interestingly, this head alien is usually of the opposite sex to the abductee. Josh regularly interacts with a "tall white" female alien and claims that he was selected for abduction because genetic engineering "has resulted in the ability for the whites to communicate with me and those like me much better." Like the traditional

mythic hero, Josh possesses exceptional gifts that allow him to assume the heroic role.

The abduction itself, most often the physical examination, is the supreme ordeal the abductee must endure. As a result of this, however, a reward is gained and is brought back into the world. The boon brought back by the abductee most often comes in the form of a message for humanity. Abductees are given very specific tasks to perform upon their return or are told the role they will play during the upcoming merging of alien and human worlds. For example, Mary was told she would serve as a liaison between humans and aliens during a period of evacuation. She writes,

I was standing on top of a hill, below me were many people, walking, carrying children and small parcels of personal belongings. They were all walking toward me. When I turned around there was a LARGE ship behind me and I knew the forms inside. We were waiting for these people to arrive.

Many participants are thrust into the role of mythic hero, in that they are taken aboard the ship, given knowledge or abilities, and returned ready to perform a special mission. They are further distinguished because they are the ones with whom the extraterrestrial "doctors" have chosen to develop a relationship. The focus of these narratives on the individual, as well as the specific reasons given for abduction, underscore that the individual is the focus of these stories.

Narratives of physical salvation function on the psychological level for those who believe. The missions these individuals are given lend significance to the life of the experiencer. They are chosen because they either are inherently/genetically better than others who have not been chosen or because they are advanced or intelligent enough to know to volunteer. The act of volunteering functions to give an appearance of personal empowerment. This empowerment, however, only goes so far; the extraterrestrials still exert total control during the abduction. Because of the importance placed on

selection and the imparting of a mission, physical salvation narrators believe they are important within the larger population of people and are also special when compared with the smaller population of abductees. It is they, and not their extraterrestrial captors, who are the means to salvation.

Hybridization: Narratives of Powerlessness

The second major narrative category is hybridization. In these narratives, extraterrestrials are using humans as host bodies to fortify their own species. Generally, these narratives express a fear of an overreliance on technology and a fear that they, as individuals, have no power over the medical advances of contemporary culture. Read at the most literal level, these stories express a fear of the technologization of procreation. Considering the prominence of reproductive issues such as abortion, in vitro fertilization, and stem-cell research, it is no wonder this living myth provides a space in which these issues can be played out and articulated.

In the hybridization narratives, as in narratives of physical salvation, humans are being physically kidnapped by extraterrestrials. Like narratives of physical salvation, these narratives place the abductee in the role of hero—albeit a different type of hero. As evidenced by the sexual and reproductive examinations, it is still the individual who is the focus of the abduction. The mere fact she or he is chosen points to her or his superiority. Despite the implicit superiority, the focus of this narrative category explicitly articulates a rhetoric of powerlessness, in that the focus of the stories told by abductees is their victimization at the hands of the extraterrestrials. These narratives work in opposition to the narratives of physical salvation, in that they express a lack of control and choice. These two story types provide alternative explanations of the motives of the aliens as well as different roles for the abductee/experiencer to occupy. They function similarly, however, in that they keep the focus squarely on the individual.

In these stories, aliens are visiting Earth with their own interests in mind. Christine states that the ETs are “cloning us and making their own breed of human/alien beings.” Although extinction still seems to be central to the story, it is now the extinction of the extraterrestrials that becomes the motivating force. These malicious extraterrestrials have no desire to help humans. Kathleen writes, “I sense that they are here on their own agenda, and really don’t give a SHIT about us.”

A rhetoric of powerlessness is articulated through the theme of control, which is the most dominant theme within narratives of hybridization. Many experiencers explicitly acknowledge their lack of control. For example, Amy writes,

You can be taken against your will, no one knows about it, you are treated like a lab rat, the entities involved don’t care about you at all and you can be taken away at any time. And just about the time you think they won’t do it anymore, it happens again. You feel totally helpless and used and don’t even know why.

Interestingly, the theme of control is highlighted through the inclusion of outright defiance on the part of the abductee. Struggle on the part of the abductee is almost exclusively reported by hybridization participants. Although in most abductions individuals are paralyzed, cannot move, and oftentimes simply observe what happens, this is not the case for some of the narrators of hybridization stories. Mara describes,

I woke up lying on my back on a table. It was cold. I tried to sit up but several hands gently tried to push me back down. I heard voices saying, “It’s OK, just one more test, we have only one more test.” I push them off and sit up, throwing my legs over the side of the table. I yell, “Get the hell off me! Fuck your tests, I want a human doctor!”

In addition to articulating an explicit lack of control, these narratives are also replete with examples in which information is withheld, arguably a more subtle narrative element evoking

control. One particularly gripping account was submitted by Emma:

Once I had come to rest on the table, I became aware of the tall yellow being; it was standing to my right, I could make out its thin torso. I said to it, "Please don't hurt the baby"; then I hear a high pitched voice say, "We won't hurt your baby." I saw a baby right on my chest, wearing a blue outfit, but I couldn't feel it there. As I turned my eyes forward again, I saw a yellow arm holding a tube that looked like it was holding a translucent emerald green liquid or gel. I became afraid as I tried to sit up and reach for it. I said, "What are you doing?" and became aware that I couldn't move anything but my eyes. I heard the high voice say, "You can't know that."

Clearly, in a culture in which knowledge is associated with power, the withholding of information by extraterrestrials is yet another way abductees are able to articulate feelings of powerlessness, particularly when it comes to reproductive technology and procedures.

Despite being thematically opposite—aliens are here to use us, not help us—narratives of hybridization are the rhetorical counterpart to narratives of physical salvation. Both articulate very similar stories and place the experiencer/abductee in the role of hero. Both are very much grounded in the physical description of the experience, as opposed to an exploration of the significance of the experience. These narrative categories both function on the psychological level. The blatant objectification of the human body as host and redefinition of person as resource is a plausible expression of how the individual feels. Articulations of physical control work to make this a disempowering rhetoric of victimization. Like other rhetorics of powerlessness, hybridization narrators fail to identify themselves as agents within these stories. The incorporation of a minimal amount of defiance functions to both allow the abductee to feel as if she or he has tried to exert herself or himself but is simply not able to overcome the aliens'

overwhelming force and to simultaneously reaffirm the absolute power of the extraterrestrials.

Betterment of Humanity: Alien Self-Help

The third emergent narrative category type is betterment of humanity. In these narratives, the aliens act as a positive force in the lives of humans. Narratives of betterment of humanity work to convey social values through individual growth. The aliens described in these stories are concerned with the spiritual and mental evolution of humanity. Helen writes, "I believe that humans are being abducted/visited by aliens so they can teach us to use our hidden talents and to help ourselves in the future." The focus of the extraterrestrials, in this narrative category, has expanded to include all of humanity and has transitioned from the mere physical evacuation focus of earlier narratives to a more holistic focus and improvement of our species. Similarly, the form of these stories has transitioned from a detail-rich descriptive narrative to an explanation of why extraterrestrials are here.

Formally, narratives of betterment of humanity are less likely to be detail-rich. Because they are focused on justifying and explaining, there is often very little narrative description. In fact, the certainty of the level of reality on which these experiences take place is often called into question. Irving reports, "I believe I have experienced encounters with ETs on several occasions; however, it is difficult for me to know if these encounters have all been 'physical' face-to-face meetings, or 'out of body' experiences, or 'programmed' events." These narratives often include qualifying statements. For example, one experiencer writes they are here "to assist in our evolution, somehow." Others begin their explanations with phrases such as "Maybe all this. . ." and "It is possible. . ." and "I'm really not sure, but. . ." Rhetorically, this is significant because the focus shifts from proving the reality of the experience to explaining the significance of contact.

A second significant formal change within betterment of humanity narratives is that the central agent of the narrative changes from the individual to the extraterrestrial. The aliens are here to impart wisdom and are benevolent, omnipotent beings. These narratives seem to serve as a bridge—both functionally and thematically—from the narratives of physical salvation to those of cosmic community. They begin to “float” possible explanations and motivations for abduction within the larger body of the abduction myth.

One of the most interesting developments within this narrative category is the inclusion of more species of beings. Betterment of humanity narrators include more diversity among races and are much more detailed in the characteristics and types of interactions between alien races. As in earlier narrative types, the dominant alien is the typical Gray alien. Ashley reports that these aliens are “tall and thin with large heads, and they had deep, large, oval black eyes.” In addition to the Grays, betterment of humanity participants also report Nordic aliens. These aliens are very humanoid looking. They are commonly characterized as morally and intellectually superior, and more attractive, than the Grays. When describing a Nordic she saw, Nora writes, “He looked human. He had light blonde or white hair and blue eyes.” The final alien species described in these narratives is the Reptilian. Reptilian aliens are emotionless, manipulative, and usually not acting in the best interests of humans. MaryAnne describes one Reptilian who had a “very powerful presence.” She writes, “This being, now it is very hard to describe his face—almost reptilian? Faceted eyes, very deep and intense as he looked at me.”

The relationships among these races are highlighted in betterment of humanity narratives. Gray aliens continue to be associated with menial tasks undertaken during typical abduction events. Their living spaces, as well as their bodies, are gray and featureless. They function to express the fear of what humans may become if they rely too much

on technology and continue to undervalue their emotional/creative natures. In their grayness—the blending of black and white—they also may articulate a fear of the loss of racial purity.

Nordic aliens, on the other hand, are idealized versions of humans. They are often associated with spiritual growth and love and act as protectors for the experiencer. The fact that white extraterrestrials are those that are most revered by (the overwhelmingly white) abductees further underscores the racial quality of the Myth of Communion. Nora’s earlier use of “human” as interchangeable with “white” further speaks to the fact that this narrative assumes whiteness. To use the various species of aliens as a means of articulating racially based fears is consistent with the sociological function of this narrative category.

Finally, the sinister Reptilian aliens personify the fears abductees may have concerning the ability of outside influences to control their lives. The different characteristics of these species speak, in a very transparent way, a discourse on race and the unknown “other.” It is the Caucasian aliens abductees/experiencers should emulate. They are the beings who, bathed in beauty and white light, possess the knowledge and compassion necessary to help the abductee/experiencer evolve mentally and spiritually. The less attractive Gray alien, on the other hand, because of its overreliance on technology and its inability to appreciate the more esoteric aspects of life, has been reduced to a physically weaker, bland being capable only of being directed. The racial markers of the beings, as well as the complexity of the interactions and relationships described in these narratives, indicate the polysemic (containing multiple meanings) nature of the Myth of Communion.

Betterment of humanity narratives play out racial tensions narrators may be reluctant to voice. Furthermore, they use extraterrestrials as the “unknown other” to serve key mythic functions. Although abductees explicitly articulate a narrative of caring and extraterrestrially motivated

self-help, the implicit racial discourse is one of exclusion and hierarchy. Simultaneously, then, narrators are able to feel virtuous about their inclusiveness while continuing to discriminate against certain beings based on race. White/Nordic aliens continue to be morally and physically superior. They are the ones who are in charge of the Galactic Federation that ensures nasty Reptilian and Gray aliens stay in line.

Cosmic Community: Sacred Community

The final narrative category is cosmic community. These narratives, certainly less common than any of the other narrative types, articulate the abduction myth in its most transcendent form. In these narratives, abductees begin to explain the sacred beginnings of the Myth of Communion. The Myth of Communion prescribes a set of virtues, which include humility, tolerance, and peace. In these stories, the tone is awe-filled and sacred. These narratives revolve around the common theme that extraterrestrials are visiting Earth to help integrate humanity into the larger cosmic community. To be allowed into the galactic community, the individual must have achieved some level of spiritual development and harmony. Marty writes, "It seems we truly are being nurtured toward full membership into the intergalactic, interdimensional community—those of us who are willing to make the sacrifices and advances."

Formally, these narratives continue the trend begun by betterment of humanity narratives in that they contain even less description of abduction events and more contemplation of the significance of events. For example, although "return" is a common abduction episode, in which abductees/experiencers describe their return to the location from which they were taken, only one cosmic community narrator includes it in her story. One way narrators are able to simultaneously claim to have been abducted yet not get bogged down in the

details is to make claims of "missing time." Abductees recall a bright light in their bedroom, perhaps become aware of a presence, and then wake with strange bruises on their legs. People who experience missing time do not have to describe awkward physical examinations or seemingly unbelievable reproductive or sexual encounters with extraterrestrials. Instead, they can make ambiguous claims of an anomalous experience, and then, by incorporating a few indicators of abduction, they can focus on the meaning and significance of the experience.

The dominant themes of these narratives are unity and transcendence. Narratives of cosmic community recognize the oneness of life—specifically, narrators report we are the aliens and the aliens are us. Jeff explains it all when he writes, "I am one of them—the human ETs—and they are in fact us, with a large-scale mission of guiding humanity into a new phase of cosmic awareness." Themes of unity and oneness are further reflected in the number of abductees who believe themselves to be part extraterrestrial; 25 out of my 130 interviewees believed this. This "hybrid link" works to further connect aliens and humans and to blur any boundaries that competing narratives of abduction may try to establish.

Thematically, these stories account for the earlier versions and explanations offered by narrators of physical salvation, hybridization, and betterment of humanity stories. As the myth incorporates more benevolent aims and aliens, it still must account for earlier stories of malevolent aliens. One way these narrators do this is to simply dismiss individuals who believe in narratives of hybridization. According to cosmic community narrators, they exist on a "higher vibration" and can see the true intent of the extraterrestrials. Yvette offers some retroactive definition as she describes different beings:

The malevolent Gray is a lower life form than the benevolent Gray. It looks a lot like the benevolent

Gray but the head is bigger, and they are not as refined physically or mentally. They came to the Earth in the 50s through 70s, but then they were barred.

Through this explanation, Yvette is able to account for all the stories of little gray aliens while at the same time advancing her more transcendent interpretation of the Gray aliens. This illustrates the changing nature of the Myth of Communion, in that abductees are able to redefine abduction elements and events to fit with contemporary values and culture.

An even more basic example of how the Myth of Communion adapts to stay alive and vital can be seen in the methods of sample collection. Whereas initially Gray aliens scraped fingernails, took vials of blood, and swabbed the inside of abductees' mouths, in the Myth of Communion, aliens simply snip a lock of the abductees' hair and are able to generate an entire genetic profile. If this myth is to continue to live and function in a vital way for abductees, it is necessary that the aliens reflect our increasing knowledge of technology and science.

Cosmic community narratives function at the level of the transcendent. The aliens could take the place of a traditional "God," and the experiencer fills the role of prophet and apostle. Although they advance the belief that there is a cosmic order that is morally good, these stories still revolve around individuals who are basically powerless over the extraterrestrials. Mythically, these stories work to explain sacred beginnings and instill social values. They also function to take alien abduction discourse to the next level—the cosmological level of myth—on which metaphysical questions of "why?" can be addressed.

CONCLUSION

The Myth of Communion was born of a need to answer the same recurring human problems in a

new way. This myth speaks directly to the human need for transcendence and significance. In a society where technology is a God term, the Myth of Communion emphasizes spiritual growth and emotionality. In a culture that has allegedly fixed the racial wrongs of the past, the Myth of Communion articulates fears through a thinly veiled white supremacist extraterrestrial hierarchy. The Myth of Communion shows us who we are, what we fear, and who we hope to become.

Aliens have infiltrated American culture and are here to stay. Regardless of the reality of what is happening to individuals who believe they have been abducted, mythic analysis of these stories is important and useful. Exploring the ways these extraterrestrial others are described reveals as much about us as it does about any potential visitors from space. The rise of this myth is also a disturbing indication of how quickly people may accept a new reality—even one that has such little evidentiary support.

The social space occupied by those who believe in UFO abductions has continued to move toward the center of mainstream culture. As it does, other realities are displaced or revised to assimilate the newer beliefs. Examination of the communicative practices involved in such a shift exposes the changing needs of the believer society as well as the linguistic strategies employed to gain legitimacy. This analysis only highlights some of the significant components of alien abduction discourse.

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How Do People Come to Believe They Were Abducted by Aliens?

Susan A. Clancy

I once had this terrible nightmare—at least I think it was a nightmare. Something was on top of me. It wasn't human. It was pushing into me. I couldn't move; I couldn't scream; I was being suffocated. It was the worst dream I've ever had. When I told my therapist about it, she basically asked me if anything had happened to me as a kid. She was getting at sexual stuff, like if I had been abused. It took me off guard because I'd never thought about that before. Anyway, she said that sometimes memories that are really traumatic get pushed down by the psyche—it's like a protective mechanism—and that they can kind of "pop up" in dreams. I didn't . . . don't think I was ever abused—actually, sex is an area of my life that I pretty much feel in control of—but she made me think. Had something happened to me? Maybe something did happen. I wondered a lot because it seemed like my life wasn't going the way it should. Relationships were really hard for me. . . . Getting through graduate school seemed tougher for me than for other people. . . . I have a lot of trouble sleeping. It's so weird because I was such a happy kid. It was around the time I hit puberty that everything changed. For some reason, I started to have images of aliens popping into my head. Did you see that movie *Signs*—the one with Mel Gibson? The aliens looked more like those, not like the more typical ones. I'd be walking to school and then POP—an alien would be in my head. Sometimes I'd hit my fist against a wall because then the pain would help me think of something else. I really thought I was going crazy. After a while, I told a friend—Rob. I think you spoke with him; he's a graduate student at the Divinity School. He gave me a book to read. The book was called *Abduction or Abductions* and it was written by a famous psychiatrist at Harvard. It had lots of stories

about people who'd been abducted. I read the book in one sitting. I couldn't put it down—it all clicked with me. I knew what the people were going to say even before they said it. I completely got what they felt—the feelings of terror and helplessness. I couldn't stop thinking about the book. Once I started thinking maybe I'd been abducted, I couldn't stop. Finally, I told my therapist about what was going on, and she said she couldn't help me with this, but she referred me to a psychologist in Somerville, someone who worked with people who believe in things like this. The first time I went to see him, he asked me why I was there. I opened my mouth to talk, but I started crying and couldn't stop. The tears were just pouring out of me. I'm not the kind of person who cries easily—I don't think I'm an emotional person. It was then I understood that there was something going on, that something had happened to me and I didn't know what it was. He said that I shouldn't be afraid, that this was very common, that it was the first stage of coming to realize what happened to me, that in some people the memories get only partially erased, and that those people can access them if they're willing to do the work, to undergo hypnosis and allow themselves to find out.

When I was first recruiting subjects for my study of alien abductees, I assumed that people wouldn't answer my ad unless they had actual memories of being abducted. I mean, the ad read, "Have you been abducted by aliens?" Why would you answer it if you didn't have any such memories? On what other basis would you think you'd been abducted? But as it turned out, most people who answered the ad merely *believed* they'd been

abducted; in fact, they had no detailed personal memories of their abduction experience.

An initial phone screening would reveal that, yes, they thought they'd been abducted by aliens, so we would set up an interview at my office. The first question I'd ask would be, "How old were you when you had your first memory of being abducted by aliens?" "Oh, I don't have memories," they'd say. I was amazed. "You don't have any memories of the experience? Why not?"

Because, I was told, their memories had been rendered inaccessible. Some said the reason was that the aliens "erased my memories" or "the beings programmed the experience to be forgotten." A few believed (like some victims of childhood sexual abuse) that what had happened to them was simply too traumatic to be consciously available: The experience was "too awful for my mind to handle it, so I repressed it." Whatever the mechanism endorsed, the consequence was the same: There were no personal memories of the abduction.

But if they didn't have any memories of being abducted by aliens, then why did they believe they'd been abducted in the first place?

Everybody I spoke with had one thing in common: They'd begun to wonder if they'd been abducted only after they experienced things they felt were anomalous—weird, abnormal, unusual things. The experiences varied from person to person. They ranged from specific events ("I wondered why my pajamas were on the floor when I woke up") to symptoms ("I've been having so many nosebleeds—I never have nosebleeds") to marks on the body ("I wondered where I got the coin-shaped bruises on my back") to more or less fixed personality traits ("I feel different from other people, a loner—like I'm always on the outside looking in"). Sometimes they included all of the above. Though widely varied, the experiences resulted in the same general question: "What could be the cause?" In short, it appears that coming to believe you've been abducted by aliens is part of an attribution process. Alien abduction beliefs reflect

attempts to explain odd, unusual, and perplexing experiences.

This search for causes was well-described by Terry, a 37-year-old elementary school teacher:

I went to dinner with some friends. We finished late and I was tired. But instead of just driving home, I felt compelled to drive south out of the city. I drove for like an hour, down Route 3, and then I turned around and came home. The next morning when I woke up, I turned on the news and found out that an unidentified flying object had been spotted south of the city, in the general vicinity of where I'd been driving.

Jon, a 39-year-old teacher, told this story:

I'd lived in the city my whole life, but moved to a very rural area in New York State for a new job. . . . I started to be afraid of being alone, especially at night. I'd been used to peace and quiet—but not anymore. I got, like, really scared to be by myself. I wondered why.

Here's Martha, a 27-year-old preschool teacher:

About a month ago, I started noticing this bruise on my thighs. I don't know what could be causing it. Every time I think it's going away, it gets dark again. It's really weird, not like a big deal or anything, but I want to know what it is.

And these are the words of a 63-year-old retiree named Renee:

Let me tell you—you're a shrink—I've been in therapy basically my whole life and nothing is helping me. I've tried psychoanalysis, medication, meditation, and I still feel depressed. I've been depressed since as long as I can remember. Something is seriously wrong with me, and I want to know what it is. I want to live a normal life.

For many abductees, the "I wonder why" stage begins after a frightening sleep experience. They wake up suddenly, terrified and paralyzed, sure that

something is in the room with them, or that they're hurtling through the air, or being electrocuted.

Shawna, a 28-year-old bartender and graduate student, told me,

One night I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't move. I was filled with terror and thought there was an intruder in the house. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't get any sound to come out. The whole thing lasted only an instant, but that was enough for me to be afraid to go back to sleep.

Mike, a 44-year-old computer programmer, said,

I woke up around three a.m. and couldn't move. I managed to open my eyes and there were creatures in the room with me. I saw shadowy figures around the bed. Then I felt this pressure like pain in my genitals. I must have fallen asleep again because the next thing I remember it was morning. I woke up in a state of shock.

And this is how James, a 50-year-old dermatologist, described it: "I found myself waking up in the middle of the night, seized with fear. There were beings standing around my bed, but I was totally paralyzed, incapable of moving. I felt surges of electricity shooting through my body."

Scientists have an explanation for these experiences. It's called *sleep paralysis*—a condition that occurs when our sleep cycles become temporarily desynchronized. Instead of moving seamlessly between sleeping and being awake, we find ourselves in a limbo where the two states briefly overlap.

When we sleep, certain neural mechanisms block motor output from the brain to the rest of the body so that we're essentially paralyzed. This is important because otherwise we'd be thrashing around, talking, shouting, and lashing out violently in our dreams.

But when sleep cycles overlap, it's possible to "wake up" before sleep paralysis has waned. If this happens, we'll be unable to move. And if we wake up while we're in the process of dreaming, dream

material might linger into our waking state. We can find ourselves hallucinating sights, sounds, and bodily sensations. They may seem real, but they're actually the product of our dreams.

Despite the bizarre symptoms and effects, sleep paralysis is considered normal, not pathological. About 20% of the population has had at least one episode of this type, accompanied by hallucinations. We are particularly prone to such experiences during periods in which our normal sleep patterns get disrupted. People at risk include night-shift workers, travelers with jet lag, parents with newborns, and academics trying to finish grant applications. Though it takes only about half a minute for things to return to normal—for the perceptual, cognitive, and motor aspects of the sleep cycles to become resynchronized—this can seem an awfully long time to the victims. It is a truly frightening experience.

That sleep paralysis is "normal" might be comforting to those affected if they knew what it was. Almost no one does. There are no public policy programs to raise awareness of its existence, no feature articles in major magazines. Doctors don't mention it during checkups, and it's never been the topic of a talk show or popular book.

That being said, a *lot* of people in the world experience sleep paralysis, feel the urge to take long drives at night, are afraid of being alone in rural areas, find weird bruises on their bodies, have unexplained nosebleeds, or feel out of place in society. All of us, at some point in our lives, have symptoms, feelings, or experiences that we don't understand—but not all of us wonder deeply about them. This might be because we either don't care very much or don't think our experiences have a specific cause. Indeed, some people remain unconcerned in the face of anomalies that would perplex even the most complacent types. ("Yup, I got this rash all over me. Doc said it's something called purpura, pigmented purpura. . . . Nope, don't know how I got it. . . . Nope, not sure when it's going to go away. . . . Contagious? Don't think

so. . . . What is it? I already told you; it's purpura!") But this isn't the case with abductees. For them, what happened *is* meaningful and they want to know the cause.

The search for meaning is the catalyst for alien abduction beliefs, but this quest hardly makes abductees unusual. Thinking about oneself, trying to understand why one has certain disturbing or baffling emotions, is a cultural preoccupation, and finding causes for personal experiences and feelings is a major industry. Open the phonebook and look at the lists of counselors, therapists, homeopaths, psychologists, and psychiatrists. Walk into a bookstore and check out the section on self-help and psychology.

Some people believe that if they understand *why* they feel the way they do, they'll be able to change things for the better. Others are greatly relieved to learn that their problems are caused not by their moral failings but by a psychological syndrome or a little-known disease.

But when there are so many available explanations—from excess carbohydrates to parental neglect, from insufficient Bikram yoga to too much Prozac—why pick alien abductions? What makes abductees unusual is not the perceived strangeness of their experiences, or their desire for explanation, but *the specific explanation they choose*. Why do some people come to believe that their sleep paralysis experiences, or their nighttime urges to take long drives, or the strange marks on their body are caused by extraterrestrials?

The answer is that their symptoms, feelings, and experiences are consistent with what they already know—or “know”—about alien abduction. In America today, few people are unaware of what aliens look like and what they supposedly do to the human beings they kidnap. Since the 1960s, we've been hearing widely publicized stories of alien abductions.

According to the standard script presented in books, TV shows, and movies, aliens come in the night. When they approach you, you cannot move.

You feel terrified and helpless. You levitate, feel vibrations running through your body, see shadowy figures. It's common knowledge that aliens leave strange marks on your body, such as bruises or scoop marks; that UFOs are seen at night from solitary cars on wooded roads; that when you've had an encounter with extraterrestrials, you're unable to account for a period of time; that afterward you feel anxious or depressed, different from other people and from your former self. For better or worse, alien abduction is one of our culturally available explanations for weird experiences like sleep paralysis and gaps of lost time. “I've had an encounter with aliens” went from being a sure sign of insanity to the subject of prime-time TV shows (*Mork and Mindy*, *Third Rock From the Sun*, *Roswell*), bestselling books (*Communion*, *Abduction*), blockbuster movies (*Alien*, *Predator*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Men in Black*, *Signs*), and allegedly serious documentaries.

When you're looking for the cause of an anomalous experience, your search is limited to the set of explanations you've actually heard of. For most of us, the set of possible explanations is far from complete. We're unaware of the prevalence of sleep paralysis, sexual dysfunction, anxiety disorders, perceptual aberrations, chemical imbalances, memory lapses, and psychosomatic pain. But our set of possible explanations does include alien abduction because everyone knows about aliens and their modus operandi (they come in the night, fill you with terror, kidnap you, and erase your memories). “What happened to me is just like what everyone else says happened to them.” “I'm not really into science fiction stuff. Before this happened, I never believed in aliens. But what I saw on that TV show is exactly like what happened to me.”

Look at things from the perspective of 40-year-old Mike, who's had a frightening episode of sleep paralysis. He thought he was going to die. He's never had an easy time sleeping, and now he's absolutely terrified. He *has* to know what happened to him. Some possible explanations occur to him:

He's going crazy; he eats too much before going to bed; there are robbers in the house; he has brain cancer; he saw something supernatural, like ghosts or aliens. He's not sure. Okay, the supernatural explanations are unlikely, but the other ones just don't seem "quite right. . . . They don't fit what happened. . . . It was unlike anything that ever happened to me." Days later, browsing through the remainders in a local bookstore, he sees a book titled *Communion*, by Whitley Strieber. He leafs through it and discovers, on page 27, that the author once had a sleep experience just like his. And just like him, Strieber was freaked out and was afraid to go back to sleep. And just like him, Strieber always had a tough time sleeping, and relating to women, and figuring out what he wanted to do with his life. And it's a published book! A bestseller! Nonfiction! Mike buys it and keeps reading, and then, in a later chapter, he finds out that Strieber was prone to headaches and nightmares as a kid, just like him. All these coincidences are too much. Did what happened to Strieber happen to him? Could he have been abducted by aliens?

Another one of my abductees, 27-year-old Larry, had a weird dream in which he saw shadowy figures standing around his bed. He woke up with a stabbing pain in his genital area. It was a "terrifying experience." Familiar with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and other movies about aliens, he wondered whether he might have encountered extraterrestrials. Upon reflection, however, the shadowy figures seemed to him "too tall—I don't think aliens are that tall." Next, he considered the possibility that the groin pain stemmed from a repressed memory of childhood sexual abuse. He began to review family photo albums in an effort to retrieve memories of what might have happened to him. Because of the groin pain, the feeling that he was "somehow special, different from other people," and the "stealthy nature" of the experience, he briefly wondered whether a bio-tech firm in the area had sent employees into his home

to take sperm samples, but he quickly dismissed this as being "too unlikely." He considered the possibility that the experiences were spiritual in nature, but "I doubt that angels would wear hoods." He tentatively settled on the childhood sexual abuse explanation. Only after undergoing therapy and failing to recover memories of childhood sexual abuse did Larry conclude that he had been abducted by aliens.

Someone else I interviewed, a man named Paul, 41, was working for a resort in the Caribbean when he had two strange experiences. In one, he woke up naked on the couch, but he couldn't remember either lying down there or undressing. In the other, he dreamed he saw a small creature by his bed wearing a silver track suit, and he told the creature, "I hate what you're doing to me." After these experiences, he started to feel "vulnerable" when he went to bed. He stopped sleeping naked. He described himself as a "New-Agey" guy who believed that "Western science is very limited in its understanding of the universe; I'm open to things other people might not accept as being real." He had read widely about "past lives, ESP, spirits, and extraterrestrials." He also told me that he was very interested "in earth spirits that feature in native folk tales." He considered each possible cause, but "the only explanation that seemed to fit" was aliens. "I hear that they come into your bedroom and take you, and when they put you back it's in a different place."

According to Jon, the teacher mentioned above,

Trouble sleeping could have a lot of causes. It could be stress. It could be that I'm not used to the new place yet. It could be something worse, like being contacted by aliens. Yeah, it sounds crazy, but who knows? The world is a weird place. . . . There's a lot we don't know. . . . I've been stressed before, but I haven't had trouble sleeping.

So people choose alien abduction as an explanation because they can. In the words of retiree

Doris, 73, from New Hampshire, “Why else would I wake up flying over my bed?”

“But it’s so unreasonable!” one hardcore skeptic said to me. “There’s no evidence that aliens even exist, never mind that they actually come to our bedrooms at night!” While this is true, it’s not clear that the average person knows just how little evidence exists for extraterrestrial life or just how improbable visits from extraterrestrials are.

For most people, reports by other individuals count as evidence, especially if those others appear sane, attractive, and respectable. Betty and Barney Hill—the mom and pop of abductees—became famous in abduction history in the 1960s because, in the words of Seth Shostak, an astronomer associated with the SETI Institute, “they were more or less Mr. and Mrs. Front Porch.” A number of equally sane, attractive, and respectable people have since produced bestselling books and popular screenplays about their abduction experiences, and many people view this large body of testimony as powerful evidence. But because the scientific community disagrees, abductees gripe that “scientists don’t pay attention to our experiences.”

To a scientist, anecdotes don’t count as evidence. A thousand individual eyewitness reports are no more meaningful than one. This is because humans are fallible, and even with the best of intentions, we have limited knowledge and we all make mistakes. What we “think we saw” may not be what we saw at all. So from a scientific perspective, the only good way to validate a claim is to do so objectively. How do we know that Earth is round? Because the Earth’s shadow on the moon is round, because photographs from outer space show that the Earth is round, because a ship’s topmast is the last thing you see as the ship sails off toward the horizon. We don’t know the Earth is round because your boss’s cousin, who’s a very respectable guy, said so. If anecdotal evidence or the words of attractive authorities could be relied on, we’d have to accept that Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster exist; that Elvis Presley, James Dean, and

Jimi Hendrix are alive; that psychoanalysis cures schizophrenia; and that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq at the time of the 2003 invasion.

It’s interesting that people seem to find anecdotal evidence compelling when the issue is alien abductions but not when the issue is, say, murder. Perhaps this is because there have been so many recent TV crime shows (such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and its offspring, *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York*) that clearly demonstrate what types of evidence are required to convict a suspect. In these shows, people are convicted on the basis of sperm samples, blood spray patterns, body temperature, and the type of bug crawling in the victim’s nasal cavities, not because of what “Bob told my cousin Helen, and she never lies.”

The possibility that aliens exist, and that they visit the Earth, doesn’t seem all that implausible to many people. In fact, it seems quite probable. According to recent polls conducted in the United States, about 94% of respondents said they thought that intelligent aliens exist. In a more recent poll, conducted by CNN, 65% of respondents thought that UFOs had actually visited Earth.

In the words of 83-year-old Joe, a retired construction worker,

I think ETs must exist. There are so many planets. . . . No reason to think it’s just us out there. Hell knows, there’s nothing special about us. Scientists don’t know everything. No one can prove they don’t exist. And it would make sense that something else is out there. Some kind of God, or something above us. . . . I like the idea that there’s something magical out there. I have this buddy, and when he’s had a few beers he talks about what happened to him. He was driving to Vegas one night and he saw something. A light in the sky. It followed him. He blacked out—and when he woke up, the car was in a ditch. He had no memory of what happened. Like I said, he don’t talk about it much, but when he does he thinks something happened to him. He thinks something’s

going on. Why else would all these people be talking about it? Why all the movies and books and all that? Where's there's smoke there's fire, I always said. And all those books written by military people. . . . I'm not saying anything for sure. I'm just saying there's a lot going on out there that people don't know about. What do we think—that we're alone out there? Then where do we come from? The Big Bang they talk about—well, what about before that? And everyone gets worked up about how they're taking people in secret, through walls. Why do we think that ETs, if they exist, would have the same laws of gravity or biology or whatever? Maybe another kind of being or life exists, one we can't even imagine. Anyway, all I'm saying is that anything is possible and that there must be something going on for all these people to be saying the same thing. Attention, the wife says—they're doing it to get attention. But who the fuck (pardon my language, little lady)—who the fuck would want to have that happen to them?

Many people would agree with some or all of what Joe says, but there are a lot of problems with it. For one thing, the “sheer number of planets” argument overlooks the fact that no matter how many planets there may be, they have to be hospitable to life, and, as we know just looking around at our own solar system, the right environment is not easy to come by. Is a certain planet just the right distance from its sun? Does it have the right temperature? Is there any water? Is it dense enough to support an atmosphere? If we consider all the prerequisites for life, this drastically reduces the number of planets available.

But let's say that some other type of life *does* exist somewhere in the universe. What are the odds that it evolved far enough to be intelligent? Evolution is opportunistic and unpredictable, and there's no inexorable path from one-celled organisms to intelligent, self-aware life. In fact, 99 out of every 100 newly arising species become extinct. Earth is a planet hospitable to life, and life did arise here. Since then, more than a billion species of animals have come into existence, yet only one possesses conscious intelligence. Humans *are* a miracle.

But let's say, for the sake of argument, that self-aware intelligent life *did* exist elsewhere in the universe. Why would those beings develop the fantastic technology they would need to get here across interstellar distances? Moreover, why would they want to? Why would such superior beings be interested specifically in us? Why would they be interested in egg harvesting and sperm sampling? Why would they be taking the same bits and pieces of people over and over again? The whole idea of aliens coming to Earth in UFOs and kidnapping humans for medical and genetic experimentation is not only extremely unlikely—it's downright silly. (Especially the part where the aliens wait nervously while you're getting undressed.)

But like many of us, believers don't think in terms of probability and don't habitually look for the simplest explanation. I always asked the abductees I met, “Do you think there's a better explanation for what happened to you?” And in essence, they always answered, “Maybe—but I trust my gut and my gut says aliens.”

Even if people did know how to think probabilistically and parsimoniously, would they? Even if they understood that anecdotal reports don't count as evidence, that the probability of alien life is infinitesimally low (never mind alien life that defies all known laws of physics, biology, and chemistry to abduct you from your bedroom and mate with you), would they think any differently?

I doubt it. Lots of crash courses in scientific thinking might whittle down the number of people who “believe,” but believers would still exist. When people are sorting through possible explanations for their anomalous symptoms and experiences, especially emotionally powerful ones, they rely not on abstract principles of parsimony or probability but on what “seems to fit” or “feels right” or “makes emotional sense.”

Schizophrenia researchers know this. For almost a century, they've been trying to understand how patients form delusions. In psychopathology, the term “delusion” refers to a false

belief that is strongly held despite outside evidence and that is entirely resistant to disconfirmation. Delusions are, along with hallucinations, one of the hallmarks of psychosis (colloquially referred to as “being crazy”). That being said, there is a good deal of disagreement in the field about what, precisely, constitutes the difference between a delusion (“I am the new Messiah”) and a strongly held idea (“I have been abducted by aliens”). Brendan Maher, one of my teachers, used to say that “if the hair stands up on your arm” while a person describes what he believes, then you’re probably dealing with a psychotic. Textbooks suggest that one can distinguish delusions from nonpathological beliefs according to the degree of conviction with which individuals hold to their beliefs despite clear contradictory evidence. One noted researcher on hypochondriasis taught that the distinction could be made on the basis of whether the individual is willing to entertain the notion that he might be wrong about his belief.

Today, “delusions” are generally understood as patients’ best explanations for the odd sensory and perceptual experiences that are part and parcel of their disorders. According to this perspective, delusions reflect not disordered thinking, but normal thought processes that people engaged in to explain their perceived abnormal experiences (i.e., why they feel the way they do). Brendan Maher offered a memorable example in his “Psychopathology of Delusion” course at Harvard. He described the case of a woman who believed she had a hive of bees buzzing and stinging in her head; she complained about the bees for years. After she died, an autopsy revealed a brain tumor. It was the tumor that had almost certainly caused the weird sensations of buzzing and stinging that she’d felt and, quite naturally, tried to explain.

Though I was impressed with this theory of delusions—that they were people’s explanations for their anomalous experiences—one thing bothered me. Why did the explanations have to be so weird? Why did the woman in Maher’s example

speak of a beehive and not “side effects from a neurological condition that is impairing my sensory and perceptual systems”? Why would someone say, “The CIA is after me,” rather than, “I’m losing my hearing”? I remember Brendan Maher looking at me across the room, smiling patiently, and saying, “Because that’s what it felt like to them.”

For a long time, I didn’t really understand what he was talking about. But today, thanks to the alien abductees, I do. (Though I’m far from suggesting that alien abductees tend to be psychotic or otherwise psychiatrically impaired, they do hold false beliefs—ones that appear to be natural byproducts of their attempts to explain the unusual things that have happened to them. So, in that sense, research on the psychopathology of delusions extends nicely to nonpathological beliefs like alien abductions.) It baffled me that most of my abduction subjects had considered and rejected alternative explanations that were more reasonable and more probable than an explanation based on aliens. Why choose the outlandish explanation? Given all the available explanations for sleep problems, depression, and sexual dysfunction, why choose the weird and disturbing one, the one that was likely to stigmatize them and cost them their friends?

My interviewees answered this question for me and confirmed what Brendan Maher told me 10 years ago. Robin, a lovely and intelligent 21-year-old college student, said it best:

I know you think it sounds weird. Everyone does. I do, too. But what you don’t understand is that I know the abduction was real, so it doesn’t matter what you think. What I felt that night was . . . overwhelming . . . terrifying. . . . There was something in the room with me. All I can say is that it happened to me; it didn’t happen to you. . . . I felt them. Aliens.

What emerges again and again from the subjects’ statements is that what happened to them *felt*

alien. It didn't feel as if it could be explained in conventional, ordinary, mundane ways.

As Maher and others have argued, delusions (false beliefs) are people's best attempts to explain their anomalous experiences. And the vividness and immediacy of personal experience cannot be easily refuted. Assuring abductees that what they believe happened is infinitely unlikely, that there is no evidence to support it, is a waste of time. They have a different, more compelling kind of evidence: firsthand experiences are *real*. Any experience is accompanied by and dependent upon neural activity. Although neural activity is normally the *consequence* of external input, it can be created by direct activation of the neural substrate itself. Regardless of the source, instances of neural activity can all feel the same. Hence, the only way to distinguish between a "feeling" that an abduction occurred and its objective reality is through objective corroboration—something that, in the case of alien abductions, just doesn't exist.

So what are the kinds of things that feel so weird to abductees? Let me try to make this argument less abstract. As already described, sleep paralysis is an internally generated experience that is often attributed to something external: aliens. This is because it feels really creepy. Imagine this happening to you: After watching the evening news, you wash your face, brush your teeth, and go to bed. In the middle of the night, you suddenly wake up. You're wide awake. You open your eyes and try to get up, but you can't. You're on your back, completely paralyzed. There is a sinister presence in the room. Then you hear something. Footsteps? Something is padding softly through the room. Your heart is pounding and you try to scream, but you can't. Whatever is in the room moves closer. Then it's on top of you, crushing your chest. You glance to the left and see small shadowy forms in the corner. Your muscles are clenched and you're aware of electric sensations shooting through your body. Then the sensations stop. The experience passes and you can move again. Your heart rate slowly subsides and you begin breathing normally.

What the hell just happened? This is what most people who've had such an experience want to know. It's definitely what I wanted to know the first time it happened to me. And I had just written a paper on the topic! Although the phrase "non-pathological desynchrony in sleep cycles" kept running through my head the whole time, this certainly didn't alleviate the disorientation or the terror or the gasping for breath. The physicality of it was overwhelming.

It was an episode of sleep paralysis, an experience that's been scaring the living daylights out of people for centuries. And for centuries, normal people have been looking for an explanation outside themselves. A sensed presence, a shadowy creature moving about the room, a strange immobility, a crushing pressure, and a painful sensation in various parts of the body have been historically compatible with a host of improbable explanations. The phenomenology of the experience may be the same, but explanations differ depending on what the individuals—and the larger culture they live in—believe, expect, or infer could be possible. At other times and other places in the world, such night terrors have been interpreted as Satan, demons, witches, dragons, vampires, large dogs, and angels and erect gorgons. Today, it's extraterrestrials.

Yet although it's true that—phenomenologically speaking—sleep paralysis and alien abduction experiences have a lot in common, there is one important difference: Sleep paralysis is a fact; alien abduction isn't. So if you wake up in the middle of the night levitating above your bed and spinning like a chicken on a rotisserie, you should understand that the experience is roughly a billion times more likely to have been caused by something normal than by something paranormal. But be careful about telling this to an actual abductee.

Susan: You know, it's interesting. The experiences of sleep paralysis and contact with aliens have a lot

in common. But the thing is that sleep paralysis is a well-documented medical experience, and so far as we know, there's no evidence that aliens exist. Don't you think that your experience is much more likely to have been caused by sleep paralysis?

Abductee:

No!

Cell phone conversation overheard through the door a few minutes later:

I'm totally pissed. Can you believe the nerve of that girl? She comes to me, like, "Oh, I believe you've been abducted! Let me interview you to learn more about the phenomenon!" And then she brings up this sleep paralysis shit. "Oh, what really happened is sleep paralysis." Riiight! How the fuck does she know? Did she have it happen to her? I swear to God, if someone brings up sleep paralysis to me one more time I'm going to puke. There was something in the room that night! I was spinning. I blacked out. Something happened—it was terrifying. It was nothing normal. Do you understand? I wasn't sleeping. I was taken. I was violated, ripped apart—literally, figuratively, metaphorically, whatever you want to call it. Does she know what that's like? Fuck her! I'm out of here!

You can't disprove alien abductions. All you can do is argue that they're improbable and that the evidence adduced by the believer is insufficient to justify the belief. Ultimately, then, the existence of ETs is a matter of opinion, and the believers have their own opinions, based on first-hand experience. They are the ones who had the experiences that require explanation. They are

the only ones who can tell us which explanation seems to fit best.

All of the subjects I interviewed followed the same trajectory: Once they started to suspect they'd been abducted by aliens, there was no going back. (I have no idea what the turning point might be for those who start to believe and then are convinced otherwise. This would be an interesting area of research. Perhaps it would shed light on psychological and cognitive factors that are prophylactic against creating false beliefs.) Once the seed of belief was planted, once alien abduction was even suspected, the abductees began to search for confirmatory evidence. And once the search had begun, the evidence almost always showed up. The confirmation bias—the tendency to seek or interpret evidence favorable to existing belief and to ignore or reinterpret unfavorable evidence—is ubiquitous, even among scientists. Once we've adopted initial premises ("I think I've been abducted by aliens"), we find it very difficult to disabuse ourselves of them; they become resilient, immune to external argument. We seem to be habitual deductivists, rather than inductivists, in our approach to the world. We do not simply gather data and draw conclusions; instead, we use our prior information and theories to guide our data gathering and interpretation. Once abductees have embraced the abduction theory, everything else tends to fall into place. Alien abduction easily accommodates a great variety of unpleasant symptoms and experiences. It can explain anything and everything—"I always had nightmares as a kid"; "I had a troubled adolescence"; "I'm not interested in sex"; "I've been having stomach pains"; "I keep failing rehab." One subject, who was part alien, finally found an answer to a life-long question: "I look at my mother and I think to myself, 'I don't know you. Who are you?'"

Furthermore, once you believe, your belief becomes unfalsifiable. There is no way to prove that aliens *don't* exist. All you can do is argue that there's no evidence they do, that their existence is

improbable. Abduction beliefs fall into Karl Popper's category of unfalsifiable propositions. These may be *scientifically* meaningless, but we don't live in a science lab. We live in the real world. In the real world, people don't ask whether there is enough evidence to justify their beliefs. They ask, What are the costs and benefits? Believing in aliens might cost them some friends. Relinquishing their belief would cost them a lot more. They would have to find another explanation and cast aside a compelling theory for their scary and unpleasant symptoms and experiences.

Nowadays, when skeptics say to me, "People must be really nuts to think they've been abducted," I disagree. First of all, coming to believe one has been abducted by aliens doesn't happen overnight. It's a gradual process. It progresses in fits and starts, through many stages in which the possibility seems more and more believable. Second, very few people are dead sure they've been abducted by aliens until they "get their memories." After that—well, if you had vivid memories of being sucked up into a tube of light, you'd probably be sure, too. Third, all people want to understand why weird and confusing things happen to them;

for better or worse, alien abductions have become one of the explanations culturally available to us. Fourth, very few of us are trained to think probabilistically and parsimoniously—and even if we were, we *still* couldn't refute belief in alien abduction. Finally, abductees generally entertain a number of possible explanations before embracing the theory of alien abduction. The reason they ultimately endorse abduction is actually quite scientific: It is the best fit for their data—their personal experiences. And skeptics can't critique those data because they have no access to them.

Abduction beliefs are natural byproducts of our attempts to explain the unusual things that can happen to us. Given that most of us want to understand our feelings, that very few of us think like scientists in our everyday life, and that alien abduction is a culturally available script, I often wonder why more people don't think they've been abducted. Today, confessing to such a belief doesn't make you "crazy"—it just puts you, in my opinion, a couple of standard deviations from the norm. Ten years from now, believing in aliens and in their presence among us will perhaps become as common as believing in God.

Discussion Questions

1. The fact that abductees are statistically more likely to be better educated than the rest of the population may come as a surprise to some. The narratives told by abductees, however, make perfect sense of that unusual fact. How might education and the process of assigning meanings to one's experiences explain this seemingly unusual event?
2. People who claim to have been visited by extraterrestrial beings are often labeled as mentally unbalanced, but when "normal" people recount odd dreams to one another, very few would consider these dreamers mentally ill. In fact, if you were to recount an odd dream to a psychoanalyst, she or he might treat it as, in some sense, more "real" than your waking experiences. What is the sociological difference between an "abductee" and a "normal" person? Your answer should include a discussion of primary and secondary deviance and "master status."

3. The terms “experiencer” and “abductee” refer to people who claim to have been visited by extraterrestrial beings. Comparing those two groups with similar constructs in the tattoo world (either collectors or modern primitives, as compared with “people who get tattoos”), show how labeling becomes an issue of identity construction. Which labels, when applied to oneself, make a person’s social activities seem more “legitimate,” “real,” or “acceptable”? How might these labels enable members of “deviant” social worlds to counteract the effects of stigma?
4. Good sociology, it is often said, either makes the familiar seem unfamiliar or the unfamiliar familiar. Explain deviance to someone who might find the topic odd, in a way that makes it seem less odd. How is your narrative similar to the narrative strategies employed by those who claim to have been visited by extraterrestrial beings? How is being a college student similar to being an “experiencer”?
5. Extraterrestrials come to visit you this evening. They bring you to their ship where they tell you that your experience in your deviance class has made you well-suited to save the world. What aspects of your course would fit well into your narrative as an “experiencer,” and how will you communicate that information to get nonbelievers to take you seriously?

