

JOHN MACK
A True Story

Harvard Psychiatry Professor and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Dr. John Mack, a celebrated man of science, risks everything when he reluctantly agrees to work with alleged alien abductees and draws a conclusion that completely shatters and transforms his worldview and his life.

“The foolish few who failed to keep their wealth of intuitions in their hearts,
revealed their feelings and their visions to the rabble,
have in all times been crucified and burned.”
— *Goethe, 1865*

John Mack is raised as an atheist in an intellectual Manhattan home by his professor father and British nanny after the death of his mother when he is 9 months old.

He earns his Psychiatry degree with honors at Harvard and gains a place as a highly respected tenured professor – brilliant, skeptical and mainstream – committed to the traditional scientific worldview and Freudian psychoanalysis. Early in his career, he founds the Department of Psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital – a teaching hospital for Harvard Medical School.

John believes in academia and in the practice of psychiatry as a pathway to understanding the world. But his adherence to these traditions did not protect him when he declared that people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens were not only telling the truth, but that what they'd learned from their experiences is crucial to the survival of humankind.

By the end of his life, John Mack was regarded by some as a visionary and modern-day Galileo and by others as a fool who'd made an error of historic proportions.

Handsome and charismatic, John Mack counts the Rockefellers, British aristocracy and the Dali Lama among his friends. Young doctors seek him out. Yet, as a true man of the people, even the janitor merits John's full attention when in his presence.

John Mack is married to a beautiful, traditional woman and they have three sons. Sally Mack, a social worker, doesn't share John's free spirit or intellectualism and her strict adherence to Judaism is in direct conflict to John's more progressive ways. Nevertheless, they enjoy their standing as the “It” couple in Cambridge social circles.

1977: John Mack is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, an in-depth biography and psychoanalysis of Lawrence of Arabia. His research had led him – by camel – to the fabled Gulf of Aqaba, aboard the British rails to Oxford, through the winding, cobbled lanes of Delvin, Ireland and to Tremadoc, Wales, where Lawrence was born.

On the strengths of his insights into Lawrence, Mack begins lecturing on the psychology of war and researching the roots of the adversarial Russian/American relationship. He interviews Edward Teller, the “father of the hydrogen bomb” who calls John a fool for his anti-nuclear beliefs.

John participates in anti-nuclear weapon activism alongside other physicians, academics and educators and is arrested at the Nevada test site. The International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) wins the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 for their activism, and Dr. Mack’s testimony, along with that of his colleagues, is read into the Congressional record.

1987: John attends a meditative workshop held in California on the promise of its relevancy to John’s interest in the Russian/American discord. Attended by Russians and Americans, the intention of the workshop is to help bridge cultural differences by cultivating a profound sense of connection through breathing exercises. Says one participant after the first day’s exercise, “Of course I remain a Communist, but I understand now what people mean by God.” John himself feels similar effects, which surprises him.

After the training, a friend gives John pages of a new book on spiritual emergencies – moments of crisis when people’s sense of self radically transforms. This particular chapter is on the so-called “alien abduction” phenomenon, presented by the authors with a Jungian interpretation, ambiguous on whether the experiences were literally real or not. John is perplexed by the question of whether the experiences are internal – akin to the sensations he experienced during the workshop – or external, as the people who have had the experiences claimed.

Nine months later, John is told about NY painter and sculptor Budd Hopkins, who has had a longstanding interest in alien encounters. Budd has been interviewing “abductees” in his studio for several years and is one of the few people to whom such people can reach out to in their time of crisis. John is told he is overburdened by the emotional appeals and is seeking someone to help him...and them.

With great skepticism, John agrees to meet Hopkins, who, as it turns out, has heard about the Harvard psychiatrist with an interest in expanded states of consciousness. When Mack shows up at his Manhattan apartment, Hopkins hands him a box of unopened letters from people reacting to Hopkins’ 1987 alien-encounter book, *Intruders*. “I think most of these people are perfectly sane with real experiences,” Hopkins says, “But you’re the psychiatrist, decide for yourself”.

His interest piqued, John begins to interview more than 200 “abductees”, a group that includes psychologists, writers, students and business people. The only person willing to help him is a young doctor, a resident in psychiatry.

For many people who claim they had been abducted, John Mack is a lifeline. Most of the “abductees” have never told anyone about their experiences for fear of ridicule from colleagues, friends and family. Here at last is a highly-respected Harvard psychiatrist who is not only prepared to listen – but who takes what they are saying seriously. John utilizes his full psychiatric arsenal to assess them.

The themes John discerns in his interviews with “experiencers” (as he dubs the men and women) reveal recurrent experiences that, although initially terrifying, also touch people deeply, affecting their sense of spiritual and environmental connection to other life and their

very sense of self-identity -- with some believing that they are in some way related to the strange beings who abducted them, some who feel sexually abused by them through the removal of sperm or eggs, some who long for them to return. Where other researchers found only terror, Dr. Mack finds what seems to be moments of transcendence and a message for the world about connection and responsibility for other life. It is this change in the experiencers' understanding of humanity's place in the universe that forces Mack to question who we are in the deepest and broadest sense.

John's initially asserts: "I would never say, yes, there are aliens taking people. But I would say there is a compelling powerful phenomenon here that I can't account for in any other way, that's mysterious. Yet, I can't know what it is, but it seems to me that it invites a deeper, further inquiry. I believe these witnesses are truthful, regardless of the fact that what they are talking about can't be true from the materialist worldview."

John travels the world and corroborates identical abduction stories with African shamans and Australian Aborigines.

In 1991, John accepts an invitation to co-chair a conference at MIT in which researchers convene to discuss what was then known about alien encounters. Although closed to the public, the press learns of it and Dr. Mack's interest is exposed.

John publishes *Abduction*, which becomes a NY Times bestseller and asserts, "These people are not lying. They are not crazy. They need a voice."

High-profile interviews in major press follows swiftly, including the *New York Times* positively engaging the question about whether there may be something real about alien abductions, even as Dr. Mack is careful to say he does not know what "reality" the experiences occur in.

Among the "experiencers" who John interviews is a woman, Donna Bassett, whose recollections of experiences are rather unusual. She speaks of meeting famous politicians aboard spacecraft such as John F. Kennedy and Khrushchev, which sounds absurd. John puts on a carefully composed expression of belief, a technique honed by years of therapeutic practice designed to assure the patient that he believes her and that she can speak freely. He does not include her recollections in his book. Though she may or may not have had alien encounters, he is more interested in sane individuals' reports, since that would establish that alien encounters are not a symptom of mental illness. He asks his assistant to advise her to seek therapy. Unbeknownst to Mack, this suggestion is met with outrage, and an enemy is formed. She begins tape recording her phone calls with him.

An interviewer from *Time* magazine visits John Mack and suggests that there have been allegations that he is "strip-mining" people's stories for profit and not offering them the supportive therapy that may be required. Dr. Mack does not know what to make of this allegation; its meaning becomes clear when the article is published and the disturbed woman who had been advised to seek therapy, Donna Bassett, is described as the source of the allegation. Furthermore, she claims in the article – seemingly unaware of the contradiction – that she did not herself actually need the therapy she claims she was denied, because she was an "undercover reporter". No evidence that she had written anything before is found, but her claim is presented credulously.

Dr. Mack realizes he is in a bind: he cannot state to the public that she is disturbed, because that would violate doctor/patient confidentiality; because he chose not write about her in his book he did not ask her to sign a consent form freeing him from that restriction. John faces increasing ridicule from his colleagues.

Sally Mack initially tries to understand what the work means, but now is mortified by the negative press. Their marriage is strained and their social standing effected. It causes bitter arguments between them.

The Dean of Harvard Medical School has had enough. The department, the entire university in his estimation, is in danger of becoming a laughing stock. He informs John that there will be an ad hoc Faculty Committee appointed to confidentially determine if Dr. Mack has jeopardized his future at Harvard – the first-ever inquiry of its kind of a tenured professor.

The Dean stops John as he is leaving his office. If only, the Dean confides, Mack had said that he had found a new psychiatric syndrome of unknown cause, rather than asking Harvard to change its notions of reality.

The existence of the committee is leaked to the public. John's image is slowly eroding. But still he maintains, "Someone has to champion them".

Enter Alan Dershowitz, Professor of Law at Harvard who counters with: "It appears at this esteemed place of higher learning, angels are OK, but aliens are not. There will not be a confidential committee to determine John Mack's future, there will be a very public lawsuit. This goes right to the heart of all academic freedom."

The committee is chaired by a distinguished Emeritus Professor, Dr. Arnold Relman, a renowned kidney specialist and former editor of the New England Journal of Medicine whose passion for traditional, physical science is matched by his contempt for "alternative" medicine. This was not the first time Dr. Relman and Dr. Mack had been in opposition. A decade earlier, Dr. Relman had condemned the anti-war activism that physicians like Dr. Mack were engaged in (and received the Nobel Peace Prize for), writing that he doubted that physicians had "any special professional competence when it comes to political matters".

Early into the inquiry, Dr. Mack leaves the country. He is already planning a trip to Africa to expand his research to places presumably less contaminated by Western notions of UFOs and aliens when he receives an urgent note. BBC journalist Tim Leach in Harare had been tipped off by an immigration officer that something strange had flown over his house. Zimbabwe airport recorded something in their airspace. That morning, at a school 40 miles northeast of Harare, 60 students reported that a strange craft hovered over the schoolyard and landed, letting out a "strange being" who stared at them. Several of the children said they had received messages in their minds that were particularly upsetting. Dr. Mack is on the ground in Zimbabwe within days to meet with the children.

The questioning, compared to McCarthyism in the press, continues for fourteen more months. At one point, Relman asks "John, what if you're wrong?" John responds, "What if I'm right?"

The position of the committee becomes clear to Dr. Mack and their conclusions preordained: Because aliens do not exist, Dr. Mack cannot be helping his subjects by exploring his subjects' recollections as if they may be true. Any seeming therapeutic benefit they claim to

be receiving from being able to speak about these profound matters is, the committee believes, illusory. Dr. Mack's philosophical considerations of "other dimensions of reality" in which the "alien encounters" may occur is absurd and speculative and not befitting of a scientist. No such speculation should be aired until there is hard evidence proving the reality of other dimensions; and as a psychiatrist with no skills in that domain, Dr. Mack should wait for physicists to establish that reality before presenting his subjects' experiences as evidence. In the committee's view, Dr. Mack has failed as a psychiatrist and failed as a scientist.

In spite of the findings, the Dean decides that nothing in the committee's report merits further action; the inquiry was punishment enough and John's academic freedom and tenure are reaffirmed. The committee head, Relman, is furious and the committee leaks their damning report to the press. Headlines like *Beam Me Up Mack*, and *Wacko Macko is Back* abound. Although cleared, John becomes persona non grata at Harvard.

John Mack shoots back that his colleagues are "consciously impaired and spiritually challenged" and "maybe this is just the outreach program from the cosmos that you need."

John continues to research alleged human abductions. He publishes *Passport to the Cosmos*, and declares it his final treatise on the matter. He believes that what the "experiencers" learned about the sacred connection to other life are lessons everyone must learn, and to share it, he must reach beyond the niche of people interested in alien encounters. The "experiencers" may have been the messengers, but the message is what matters.

His marriage of 30 years fails under the strain and John takes up a more solitary life. He gives a speech at the International Conference for Personal Transformation in Palm Springs. He speaks of the "politics of fear" and how those in power have always used fear to control and manipulate. He maintains that most conventional political and religious leaders don't want to upset the status quo. His message is that we need to go beyond the fears that are stymieing us. He speaks of how he is less interested in the "reality" of the alien abductions as three-dimensional experiences, than in what our fear of the unknown does to us. He says we need to be open and willing to shift our paradigm of reality and expand our awareness.

John's speech is met with exuberant enthusiasm. Afterwards, he is swarmed by people wanting him to lead them in his work and ideas, but this notion is anathema to John; he is surprised and touched, but disturbed by the reaction with which his talk is met. He is not interested in leading anyone. He is shielded from the crowd and led from the auditorium.

2004: John is invited to be the keynote speaker at Oxford University on the anniversary of his Pulitzer. After dinner, he steps off the curb into the street and is killed on impact by a speeding car. It was later determined to be a drunk driving accident.

John Mack... in his own words:

“I have come to realize this alien encounter phenomenon forces us, if we permit ourselves to take it seriously, to re-examine our perception of human identity – to look at who we are from a cosmic perspective.

These phenomena tell us many things about ourselves and the universe that challenge the dominant materialistic paradigm. They reveal that our understanding of reality is extremely limited, the cosmos is more mysterious than we have imagined, there are other intelligences all about (some of which may be able to reach us), consciousness itself may be the primary creative force in the universe, and our knowledge of the properties of the physical world is far from complete. The emerging picture is a cosmos that is an interconnected harmonic web, vibrating with creativity and intelligence, in which separateness is an illusion.

The inadequacy of scientific materialism in guiding our understanding and lives prompts it to be stated that the secular assumptions about reality, dominant during my university training, were in fact a grand illusion, a materialist superstition that had kept Western thought stranded and imprisoned for the last 300 years. How do the keepers of the dying, yet more traditional paradigm respond to these phenomena? Many raise the cry of “pseudoscience”.

The methods of science – hypothesis, testing, rigor, experimentation, control – are valuable and essential for studying phenomena that reside primarily in the material world. But they may be inadequate for exploring matters that straddle the visible and unseen realms. They surely are insufficient for learning about realities beyond the manifest. Here we must rely more upon experience, intuition, non-ordinary states of consciousness, and holistic or heart knowing, thoughtfully and rigorously applied.

So, for me, a journey that began with the investigation of a strange anomaly, has led to a greater appreciation of the gift of being and a deeper commitment to helping to preserve the life of the planet and its infinite possibilities.

Ten days before John’s death he told a colleague, “If anyone asks, tell them I’m not crazy.”

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