

Witnessing: Abductees as Sacred Truth-Tellers

By John E. Mack, M.D.

Editor's Note

The following article by the late John E. Mack, MD entitled "Witnessing" is a favorite of both Trish Corbett and Michael Mannion. Dr. Mack was prompted to write the essay to explore difficulties in communicating clearly about research findings outside the dominant worldview. He wrote, "...the problem I was facing was not simply a matter of evidence but the persistence of a narrow worldview and of the ways of knowing that sustain it."

In this piece, Dr. Mack defined witnessing in the following manner: "I have used the ancient term 'Witnessing' to refer to testimony or accounts that contain within them or are conveyed to us in such a manner that we have reason to accept them in their own right. An authentic Witness is by definition a teller of truth, a kind of sacred communicator."

We are proud to be able to make this article available on The Journal of the Mindshift Institute. The article was written in May 2001 and was originally presented on Dr. Mack's website, and also appeared in the MUFON 2001 International UFO Symposium Proceedings.

Abstract

The scientific method has been highly successful in giving us reliable ways of knowing about the material world as we know it. But we have yet to develop methodologies that are as reliable with respect to matters that are not clearly in the objective or the subjective realms but seem to partake of both. In this paper I will consider the elements of an expanded epistemology which might help to legitimize experiences that are giving us vital information about the cosmos but which cannot be substantiated by the ways of knowing now considered reliable in Western culture.

Witnessing

For nearly twelve years I have been working with people in this and other cultures who have reported profound, life changing experiences, through encounters with human-like beings, reaching them apparently from other dimensions. In speaking and writing about these people, I have come to appreciate the problems that readers and audiences have in thinking about matters that seem so far outside of the bounds of reality that have been defined by their education and upbringing.

Although there was in some instances physical evidence that something had happened to my clients—UFOs seen in the vicinity, corroborating observation by others of at least a part

of the encounters, unexplained marks on their bodies, etc.—the evidence that I had was largely experiential, i.e. the reports themselves. I could not prove, for example, that my clients had been literally taken by alien beings into space craft. I came to realize that the problem I was facing was not simply a matter of evidence but the persistence of a narrow worldview and of the ways of knowing that sustain it.

The worldview that continues to be more or less dominant in Western society, and those cultures we have influenced, is called variously Newtonian/ Cartesianism, scientific materialism or anthropocentric humanism. It radically separates the objective from the subjective domains. The objective world, matter and energy, is treated as virtually synonymous with reality, and knowledge of it is gained by the scientific method, viz. hypothesis, controlled experiment, measurement and replication. Unless the presence of beings, or any other intelligence including God Himself, can be proven to exist by this method, reports of such encounters can be dismissed out of hand or relegated to the purgatory of the subjective.

Ludwig Wittgenstein probably tried harder than anyone to rescue philosophy from the positivistic stranglehold that science or scientism had placed upon it in the early years of the twentieth century. But at the same time he came increasingly to despair that what mattered most to human beings—moral questions, the worlds of feeling and meaning, the so-called “subjective world”—could ever be usefully submitted to rigorous examination. Yet beginning with the development of depth psychology in the middle of the last century, we have begun to see that it may be possible to study human experience itself, as both a way of knowing and a domain to be known, as rigorously as we have been able to examine the physical world. But methods must be used that are appropriate to the realms being considered.

This brings us to the heart of the problem. The physical sciences have given us fairly reliable methods of knowing about the material world. But how then are we to determine the truthfulness of reports of things even when there is a limited amount of physical evidence, that are known mainly by the instrument of consciousness, realms that are neither purely inner nor outer but both, existing in a relationship that may be quite difficult to disentangle? It is the messiness of this question, I believe, that accounts, in part, for the tendency of science to avoid the study of the range of human experiences, like the UFO abduction phenomenon, that tell us of realities that are perhaps far more vast, mysterious and vital to our well being than what can be known by empirical study of the physical world alone.

The elements of a science of human experience, its “methodology” (in quotes because the term seems somehow out of place here, borrowed from the physical sciences), might consist of the following:

1. I would begin with a certain attitude of mind, a thorough self scrutiny that leads to disciplined openness. This self exploration is akin to what a psychoanalyst, or depth psychologist must undertake to be able to do his or her work without imposing personal conflicts or biases upon clients. But something further is required, an

inner process that can access and question the assumptions that underlie the worldview that each of us has internalized in growing up within a particular culture. Examples might include the assumption that phenomena which emanate from the unseen realm cannot manifest in the material world, or that subjective experience cannot itself be studied rigorously. Duke University biology professor Matt Cantwell in an article devoted to challenging the notion that animals do not possess consciousness, attacks the second notion. "The intrinsic subjectivity of consciousness," he writes, "makes scientists uneasy. Being conscious is the same thing as having private experiences; and the scientific method is fundamentally committed to the assumption that private experiences don't count as evidence" (2000).

2. Following from this would come a renewed respect for the power of consciousness, of self awareness or the total self as an instrument of knowing. This "holistic epistemology" would place emphasis not only on the powers of sensory observation and rationality, but also upon intuition and the knowing of the heart. Vibrational connection or resonance between the knower and the object of study, even when we cannot physically measure this kind of relationship, is an essential aspect of this way of knowing. Writer/humorist Robert Anton Wilson suggests that we may even need a new language, which he calls English Prime or E-Prime, to collapse the false separation, "the glass wall" between the observer and the observed. Standard English, he notes, relies heavily on declarative assertions about reality (for example that such and such or so and so is a certain way), whereas E-Prime places the knowing in the experience of the knower through language that says that something seemed or appeared to a particular person to be a certain way (1993).
3. The appreciation of non-locality, the fact that human beings can affect one another at a distance (Dossey, 1992, 1993a, 1993b), or that objects in nature at both the micro and macro levels can be shown to be already connected (Mitchell, 1996, Sheldrake, 1995, 1998, Jahn and Dunne, 1987) is a kind of starting point.
4. Replicability remains a cornerstone of this way of knowing as in the standard scientific method. But it is different in the sense that we are not talking about the repetition of a phenomenon or pattern under laboratory conditions, for the events that interest us seem to occur as if at random; we have little or no control over when they will happen. Rather, we are referring here to the repetitive occurrence of reports of observations and experiences by more than one reliable informant, with or without physical evidence, and even when the data reported may be outside of many peoples' experience, i.e. is anomalous or inconsistent with a prevailing set of assumptions or worldview.

There remains an important missing piece that is, I believe, an essential part of the "science of human experience." In the absence of strong physical evidence or the possibility of replication under controlled conditions, i.e. in circumstances in which we must rely on reports of experience itself, how are we to decide what is true, not simply for that person in a particular instance, but in a larger or meaningful sense? The contemporary psychospiritual landscape is filled with accounts, some so powerful or transcendent that

many people will be moved by them without being concerned about criteria by which to evaluate such testimony, especially if they resonate with something of the hearers' experience or inner world. There is no interest on my part in denying the value of this learning in its own right. But in some cases the stakes are so high (as in the case, for example, of reports of UFOs or abductions that radically challenge what science has led us to believe to be true, or that tell of other worlds we did not know existed) that a way of evaluating such testimony must be developed. I have used the ancient term "Witnessing" to refer to testimony or accounts that contain within them or are conveyed to us in such a manner that we have reason to accept them in their own right. An authentic Witness is by definition a teller of truth, a kind of sacred communicator.

We need to remember that knowledge and the act of knowing are themselves sacred pursuits (Nasr, 1989), and that the purpose of all knowledge, as was once understood, is to enable us to discover the sacred core of reality and reconnect with the divine or what Huxley called "the ground of being" (1970). In Buddhist traditions, for example, attention is given to clarity of mind, absence of other agendas and an apparent "intimacy of knowing" (Bowman, 2001) which leaves no doubt in a hearer's mind that he is in the presence of an authentic Witness. Psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton, has suggested the term "Professional Witness" to refer to a person who, by virtue of status, integrity, depth of knowledge, perceived social responsibility, or close-up experience, calls attention to events or matters in a culture which, if ignored, would imperil that society's vitality, or even its moral and physical survival.

Philosopher C.A.J. Coady has taken on the task of establishing criteria for evaluating the credibility of witnesses of “astonishing reports” (the title of his essay) (1992). Even if the testimony is strange indeed, it is more likely to be taken seriously if the hearer can identify with the way the witness’s mind works, “where I can determine that a witness’s mind is ‘a cosmos like my own and subject to the same laws,’” and an “identification of consciousness’ can be established” (p. 183). But some people, Coady points out, will reject out of hand any report that violates the laws of nature as they understand them. “At one extreme,” he notes, “is that strident ‘scientism’ which cannot see truth or value in anything other than such sciences” (p. 189). Such an attitude is dangerous, he argues, because the listener is immunized against taking in anything anomalous or new. Additional criteria that Coady cites for determining the credibility of witnesses include evaluation of sanity, psychological stability and integrity, the capacities of the observer – “the observational conditions at the time, his interests and beliefs insofar as they are relevant to the issue, whether there were other witnesses, and so on” (pp. 185-186).

In our appreciation of experiencers of the extraordinary, like abductees, or Witnesses of other anomalous events, there is something more involved in determining their truthfulness. This has to do, I believe, with the selflessness of the Witness, selfless in the sense of self lost to, or in some way taken over, by the experience being reported. When I have brought psychiatrists or other clinicians into the office with me when I am interviewing an abduction experiencer, unless their skepticism takes the form of a predetermined framework into which everything “non-analogous” must fit, they readily acknowledge that something real and powerful has happened to the person. It is not just

the intensity or genuineness of the feelings expressed, but the awareness that the experiencers have been so deeply affected by what they have undergone that they are transformed in some important way. Furthermore, however strange or unfamiliar the experience, in these settings my colleagues are enabled to identify with the Witness, to be brought into the experience as it is being relived. The experiencer has brought us "there" too, so that the experience becomes to some degree our own.

There are several levels, or circles, of Witnessing. At the first circle are the people who were present at the event. At the second circle are those who hear directly from the first circle Witnesses and may facilitate the telling of their stories. At the third circle are audiences who are open to learning about what has occurred. The fourth circle is the society as a whole, which is affected most slowly by the reports, especially if they challenge the dominant worldview. Lisa Oakman, an experiencer with whom I have worked for several years, says that "Witnessing is held in the body. One cannot report as a Witness unless one has been changed by the experience. Experiences that involve initiation, sacrifice and terror lead to absolute change," she says. "If I am a good Witness, the fire in me should reach the fourth circle audience."

Psychoanalyst Warren Poland has observed that there is something different when an analyst is functioning not just as a listener but as a witness. Witnessing, he writes, refers to the analyst's "getting" what the patient is saying "without doing anything more active about it." Witnessing refers to the analyst as "beholder, grasping and respecting both the patient's meanings and the meaningfulness of those meanings from a position of separated

otherness" (2000, p.21).

The Witness and the act of Witnessing seem to have a sacred character. Elisa Amidan and Elizabeth Roberts refer to their spiritual/political practice among diverse peoples afflicted by unjust wars as "bearing witness." They describe the elements of this practice--observing ones feelings, letting go of judgment, asking "the caring question," offering testimony and "standing in the truth" (Amidan and Roberts, 2000). Poland, whose language is on the whole starkly secular, writes of the analyst as a "beholder," a term that connotes an attitude of humility, even reverence, in the presence of something sacred. Witnessing, Lisa said to me, "brings the receiver closer to the Divine;" it can be so powerful that it "tastes of God."

In April 1999 I was privileged to hear a lecture in San Marino on the subject of UFOs and encounters with their "occupants" by Monsignor Corrado Balducci. Father Balducci was retired from his post as the senior Vatican "demonologist," but he was still wearing a black cassock. He helped me to understand the profound moral aspect of Witnessing. Witnessing, he pointed out, provides the foundation of everyday life, and there are terrible social and religious consequences associated with rejecting the testimony of authentic Witnesses. Our everyday lives are based on implicit witnessing. The trust of children in their parents or teachers depends on a faith in their reliability as witnesses. Oakman also stresses the moral dimension of Witnessing. "People who are good at Witnessing," she observed, "have a presence of personality. The effective Witness is someone who would rather die than not function morally or ethically," and "ethical and moral principles come from the Divine." Father Balducci, Lisa Oakman and others have enabled me to see the immorality,

sometimes unintended, of the way we treat abductees and other Witnesses of extraordinary experience. If, indeed, these Witnesses are bringing us closer to the Divine, rejection of their testimony or unjustified skepticism have profound moral as well as clinical and scientific implications. We are denying or rejecting their sacred truth.

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About the Author

John E. Mack, M.D. (Oct 4, 1929 - Sep 27, 2004), a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, explored the ways in which perceptions and beliefs about reality shape the human condition. He authored a diverse range of books including the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of British officer T.E. Lawrence, *A Prince of Our Disorder* (1976), and *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters* (1999) which is both the culmination of twelve years of research into the affects of alien encounters upon people's lives and a philosophical treatise connecting the themes of spirituality and modern worldviews. More information: [The John E Mack Institute](#) in Cambridge, MA.