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Abduction Tales As Metaphors

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At the outset of their target article, Newman and Baumeister state that they find the “extraterrestrial hypothesis” difficult to believe because it defies logic, runs in the face of modern science, and generates stories that contain many internal contradictions. If the abduction stories are difficult to believe as reports of real-time adventure, perhaps they can be better understood as metaphors for an ongoing cultural crisis. The quiet desperation that Thoreau suspected lay hidden in the life of the average 19th-century citizen seems to be surfacing more and more frequently in current accounts of the cultural and political scene (Cushman, 1991; Langer, 1994; Lasch, 1978). As the modern individual, for a wide variety of reasons, feels less empowered, more alienated, and less able to predict the course of the next 2, 5, or 10 weeks (much less years), he or she might become aware of feelings that no one can reasonably explain or acknowledge. Some of these concerns might become transformed into stories of imaginary aliens.

I make this suggestion because the abduction stories, as Newman and Baumeister make clear, are dominated by feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and alienation. “In the typical account,” they write, “the person is a helpless pawn of powerful, superior beings who inflict degrading and painful experiences on him or her.” What is more, as noted in the article, the stories are dominated by the loss of self. In any number of stories, the individual feels that, after being abducted, he or she has lost a sense of individuality or uniqueness—a “sense of destiny and of individual achievement.” What better metaphor to describe our current condition? As established structures such as family and church are losing their influence, the nature of present life and future existence becomes increasingly unpredictable. As new diseases emerge or threaten to emerge, and as established drugs and other medical procedures seem to lose their effectiveness, our sense of mortality is significantly affected. As warfare changes its pattern from the traditional clash by night of massive armies into unpredictable outbursts in the middle of commuter

trains and shopping malls, our vulnerability necessarily increases. Could it be that many of these fears are encapsulated in the standard unidentified flying object (UFO) abduction and return?

One reason to suspect that these reports might be an outgrowth of our present sense of vulnerability and alienation is the notable difference between current stories and what was being claimed in the 1950s and 1960s. As Newman and Baumeister make clear, the earlier reports were more benevolent, all-knowing, and supportive: “None of these early contactees was kidnapped or assaulted, as today’s abductees claim to have been, and the aliens the earlier contactees met have even been characterized as ‘jolly fellows.’” Even if many of these early “victims” were deliberate hoaxers, as Newman and Baumeister assert, their stories can still be read as projections of the cultural and political conditions obtaining at the time. The Eisenhower and early Kennedy years were marked by a strong sense of certainty about the future and the reassuring feeling that America was still the strongest nation on Earth. The dollar was still dominant; inflation had been kept in check; the population was still relatively small; and the established structures of church and family were still intact. As the political and cultural climates have changed in the intervening years, the abduction stories have become more ominous and more focused on helplessness and loss of identity.

Both sets of stories, then and now, can be seen as metaphors for the current condition. At the same time, the stories seem to have a surprising stability and degree of uniformity that make them reassuring in their own right.¹ After people identify themselves as survivors,

¹It would make an interesting study to carry out a detailed and systematic linguistic analysis of a sample of abduction reports to establish just how much repetition and stereotyping actually occur. There might be more sameness in the range of stories than meets the eye. Even though details tend to dominate the accounts, as noted by Newman and Baumeister, they might tend to be more similar than different.

they gain membership in a growing body of people with similar experiences, and this new identity becomes reassuring in its own right and helps to defeat the original feelings of powerlessness and alienation. The newfound benefits of this cult membership might help explain the zealous efforts made by survivors to insist on the actuality of the UFO experience and to fight off attempts to diminish it or somehow explain it away.

This line of reasoning would suggest that the abduction reports serve a double function. First, they encapsulate (and thus bind) a set of free-floating concerns (stemming from our current political and cultural condition) that have no ready audience or answer; second, they provide a shared identity for the believers and, in this way, reduce the believers' sense of alienation and powerlessness. To be accepted as truthful by a fellow survivor or trusting therapist might significantly increase the person's sense of self. Thus, it could be argued that therapists like Dr. John Mack, who meet with survivors and believe their reports, are providing survivors a necessary public service—a service not available anywhere else.

What is left unexplained by my thesis is why there are relatively so few reports. It seems safe to say that the vast majority of our citizens feel that modern times have become increasingly unpredictable, dangerous, and alienating, but only a few make claims about abduction. For many, of course, the background assumption (that there are visitors from outer space) is too incredible (or dangerous) to be believed, and, as a result, they are in no position to take the second step and board a UFO themselves. Others might be more skilled at linking their background fears with manifest features of our current economic and political crisis; they might actually be taking steps to minimize the effects of the crisis. Others might be averse to joining any group with a membership larger than one, and the fact that others might claim an experience similar to theirs makes them look elsewhere for support. More research is needed to identify the general characteristics of the target population that predisposes them to disconnect fear from cause and go on to transform their distress into the standard story of abduction. Sociological and economic data are particularly needed.

One clue might lie in the fact that modern living carries with it a significant decrease in the ability to make successful do-it-yourself repairs. Not only is the average car, computer, or dishwasher no longer fixable, but the consumer is increasingly alienated from a human repairman and placed at the mercy of a menu-driven telephone help line that rapidly exceeds the short-term memory of anyone over age 45. The sense of helplessness extends to domains such as interest rates, health care, and vacation planning; increasingly, modern life presents the consumer with a moving target. It is not entirely surprising that the UFO reports are dominated by a loss of choices; a sense of

powerlessness, immobility, and indoctrination; and by a sense of inevitability and loss of control. If free will has become too much of a burden in modern life, it might be a relief to be turned into a prisoner (or a child) and reduced to obeying orders. A close study of the population that believes in UFO abductions might reveal an unusually low tolerance for modern-day hassles and a predominant sense that the support system is often just out of reach.

By this way of thinking, the UFO world might provide the kind of escape from freedom that Fromm (1941) identified in the Germany of the 1930s, and many features of Fromm's analysis of democracy and authoritarianism can be fitted to the current situation. Fromm began by arguing (at a time when World War II had already begun) that "the crisis of democracy is not a peculiarly Italian or German problem, but one confronting every modern state" (p. 5). Is there, Fromm wondered, "an instinctive wish for submission?" (p. 6). Fromm was one of the first social thinkers to identify the oppressive burden of freedom that often leads to what he called the "first mechanism of escape ... the tendency to give up the independence of one's own individual self and to fuse one's self with somebody or something outside" (p. 141). Fromm identified the unbearable feelings of aloneness and insignificance that could overpower the contemporary individual and argued that these could be overcome by an annihilation of the individual self in the course of becoming part of an external power (e.g., an institution or nation). According to Fromm,

one surrenders one's own self and renounces all strength and pride connected with it, one loses one's integrity as an individual and surrenders freedom; but one gains a new security and a new pride in the participation of the power in which one submerges. (p. 156)

The growth of UFO abduction beliefs suggests that they might offer a new way to solve the feelings of helplessness and alienation that have only increased since Fromm's time. I agree with Newman and Baumeister that masochism and loss of self are two key ingredients in the stereotypical abduction story, but both features might be secondary to a primary cause—the modern sense of powerlessness, helplessness, and anomie that has increased in direct proportion to our modern fascination with technology.

Against these growing feelings of alienation and uncertainty, it is not surprising that the abduction reports tend to emphasize specific features of the adventure—uncertainty and ambiguity have been replaced with hard facts. In the quotations from Bullard's (1987) catalogue of cases, we find details such as "a diaper-like cloth," "a planetarium projector," "a needle-like device," "a warm beam of light," "a needle into her navel," and similar, hard-edge referents (pp. 39–40,

69). The tone of the stories tends to be uncritical and unforgivingly serious, almost totally lacking in words such as *maybe* or *perhaps*, and it is tempting to believe that here at last the survivor has found the kind of certainty and lack of ambiguity that are so noticeably absent in life on Earth.

Not only are the stories couched in a no-nonsense, “only the facts, Ma’am” language, they are also, by definition, impossible to argue with, because the abductions have no witnesses. If you doubt any of the details of my claim, reasons the survivor, so much the worse for you, because I was there, and you were not. Thus, the structure of the abduction report makes it certain that the survivor’s authority can never be challenged; as a witness of some extraterrestrial event, he or she gains an authority and a power of persuasion (if only in certain restricted circles) that are simply not present in civilian life. It might be this feature in particular that makes the stories so inviting for those who feel they are never listened to or believed in; as UFO survivors, they have replaced their day-to-day anonymity with a kind of out-of-this-world “fame.” And, we can now see more clearly why reason and argument have so little impact on the details, because one of the main reasons for telling an abduction story is to become an authority and, in so doing, to become immune to revision, emendation, and second-guessing. The high density of detail noted by Newman and Baumeister might be just as much an attempt to establish the authority of the teller as to make the account seem real.

When the abduction story becomes a badge of identity and a protection against anonymity and anomie, it stands to reason that the teller will stubbornly resist any attempt to explain it away. To give up the story not only reduces the narrator’s newfound authority but brings back the ambiguity and uncertainty contained in experiences such as “waking up paralyzed with a sense of a strange person ... in the room,” “experiencing a period of time of an hour or more in which you were apparently lost, but you could not remember why or where you had been,” “finding puzzling scars on your body and neither you nor anyone else remembering how you received them or where you got them,” and similar existential

puzzles (survey questions reported by Hopkins, Jacobs, & Westrum, 1992). It seems likely that experiencing the raw uncertainty contained in these accounts is much worse, for the average abductee, than believing in UFOs and aliens from outer space.

The current upsurge of abduction stories not only suggests that our high-tech world might come at too high a price for many of our citizens; it also tells us something about the relative standing of rationality versus a sense of well-being. For many of the UFO survivors, it seems more important to find an explanation that fits the facts, even if it strains credibility, than to continue to be perplexed by anomalous experiences just because the standard explanations are no longer sufficient. We begin to realize that feelings are, in many ways, more important than reasons and that the teachings of the Enlightenment might be less secure than we once thought. As we move into the 21st century, we find that escape from freedom has been followed by escape from reason and that a continuing, systematic analysis of the UFO abduction stories might be one of the best ways to understand and (eventually) counteract this new movement.

Note

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