

**THE UFO PHENOMENON AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO
PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

Dr. George and Iris Owen

We ourselves are parapsychologists and for quite a time we did not consider that Ufology belonged in our area of research at all. Consequently, for some time we paid little or no attention to the reports of UFO sightings, mentally dismissing the more lurid accounts as hoaxes, or the fantasies of disordered minds, and labelling the reports of mysterious lights, etc. as natural phenomena, mistakenly reported as unidentified - clearly if one knew the situation, and the heavens, most of these would become identifiable. Then, in the early 1970's we met up with Prof. Allen Hynek, and had an opportunity for conversation with him about these mysterious objects.

It became clear to us that a good deal of time and effort had been spent on research of this phenomenon, and that while it was certainly true that a large percentage of reported sightings fell into the category of natural phenomena, seen in unusual circumstances, there was indeed a 'rump' so to speak, which would not go away.

Completely reputable people - people whom Allen Hynek was fond of saying would be completely believed if giving evidence in a court of law - were reporting sightings, and encounters, which were very hard to explain away. It was this small percentage that was beginning to fascinate an increasing number of investigators and scientists like ourselves. Following these conversations with Allen Hynek, we decided to 'test the water' so to speak, and set up a Centre to receive and endeavor to help solve some of the mysteries. We were prompted to do this by the fact that we were becoming increasingly aware that there was indeed an overlap in the areas of our parapsychological research and that of certain types of UFO reports. We had noticed that many of the people reporting, for instance, poltergeist experiences, would also report, quite nonchalantly, that they had also seen a UFO, or had an encounter with people from a UFO, sometimes frequently, sometimes only once. We felt that it would be a worthwhile project to investigate in depth the circumstances surrounding some of these sightings - tackling the report as one would a report of a parapsychological nature. Having decided to set up a Centre to receive UFO reports, and indulged in a fair amount of local publicity, we got the expected result. For the first two weeks the phone hardly stopped ringing, day or night. We received reports of sightings going back for twenty years or more, and we also received a lot of current reports. We

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They came from England 12 years ago, where George had taught at Cambridge University and first became interested in parapsychological research, particularly poltergeist phenomena. His classic book on the subject, Can We Explain The Poltergeist? won the William McDougal Award given by the Department of Parapsychology, Duke University. He is also the author of a biography of J.M. Charcot, Hysteria, Hypnosis and Healing, and two books on ghosts and hauntings. Iris is the co-author of Conjuring Up Philip, the record of a successful group attempt to fabricate a "ghost" out of whole cloth.

Their interest in UFO phenomena grew when they discovered that some of their poltergeist percipients had also reported sightings and close encounters of UFOs. They then established the Centre for UFO Research alongside the existing Psychical Research Centre in Toronto.

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found, as everyone else who has worked in this field has found, I expect, that people frequently waited until the 'trail' was cold before phoning. How can one investigate a light in the sky that a person saw two nights ago, with only a vague idea of direction, height, etc., but about which the person asserts, quite positively, that "it had to be a UFO, it could not have been a plane, and it certainly was not a star or planet"!? We had reported mistaken sightings of natural phenomena, hoaxes, and all the other known explanations for UFOs. But we also got the expected percentage of reported sightings from people who fell into our category of people who experience parapsychological phenomena.

I think it is important here to emphasize a few points. Over the years we have discovered that many people who experience parapsychological phenomena, and especially those who experience poltergeist phenomena, do so at times when they are undergoing some form of extreme emotional upheaval. They are not mentally sick, they are certainly not crazy, they are completely normal people - certainly people whose word would be believed in a court of law. But emotional trauma can happen to any one of us - bereavement, separation from loved ones, loss of a job, serious illness in a loved one. Most of us have experienced such emotional trauma at some time or other, and most of us will certainly do so again. We have discovered in our research into poltergeist phenomena that in some people this emotional trauma produces strange effects - objects in their vicinity can move without anyone touching them, strange noises are heard, raps, footfalls, and so on, and if the trauma persists, apparitions are frequently seen. The rationale of the apparition is as follows - the person concerned finds it difficult to accept or believe that his own subconscious mind is able to produce the phenomena of its own accord. There has to be 'someone' responsible, and the usual explanation put forward, especially by spiritualists, is that it is the spirit of a dead person. So the 'victim' of the outbreak finds a 'scapegoat' to hold responsible for the happenings. Great Aunt Fanny has come back to haunt him, because he did not carry out her wishes properly after her death - and so, Lo and Behold in due course Aunt Fanny appears, as a fully fledged ghost, to haunt him. But suppose you don't really believe in ghosts and the spirits of the dead, how do you resolve the problem of the responsibility for the poltergeist phenomena? Some people appear to have resolved this by ascribing the effects to UFO's and the people whom they carry. They 'see' a landing craft, they meet the people within it, sometimes they are taken aboard, sometimes the people come out of the craft - they communicate telepathically - in spite of language difficulties they always know what the people in the UFO are telling them. It has to be emphasized at this point that these experiences are very real to the people to whom they are happening. They are not deliberately or consciously telling lies, or cheating - the experience of seeing a ghost is a very real one to the person concerned, and sometimes, on account of telepathic ability in a group situation, more than one person may see the same apparition. It is then very difficult for the people concerned to believe other than that it is a real object. This is a situation with which we are very familiar in psychic research. Given the right circumstances, anyone may experience an hallucination, and probably most people have had such an experience at some time or other during their lives. Hallucinations due



to drugs are known and accepted as fact by most people who have read about the subject. Hallucinations during a febrile illness are well recognised and generally referred to as delirium. But one can also experience hallucinations at times of emotional upset or stress, if one is elated, depressed, worried, overjoyed, etc. In a state of disturbed emotions, one frequently sees what one expects to see, for instance, seriously ill people and those in danger of death, frequently 'see' those loved ones who have already died. It seems to us that some reported UFO sightings are a form of modern ghost.

The hallucination takes the form that is expected by the person seeing it. Throughout history people have seen the ghosts of the culture in which they live - primitive man 'saw' the spirits of the trees and rivers; the ancient Greeks and Romans walked and talked with their 'gods'. When Christianity made its appearance, believers saw the spirits of the prophets, apostles, the Virgin Mary. At historical shrines the ghosts of the people who created the history appear. Ann Bolyen naturally appears with "her head tucked underneath her arm", as the song goes, because everyone expects to see her that way when they visit the Tower of London.

When Spiritualism became the vogue, we became accustomed to the idea of seeing the ghosts or spirits of our departed loved ones; but with the wane of belief in conventional religion, and the coming of the space age, the time is ripe for a new type of cultural ghost to become manifest, and what better than a being from outer space! As we have already said, a ghost experience is often the culminating event in a poltergeist situation, and generally speaking these phenomena center around someone who is in the midst of an emotional disturbance. There are obvious parallels with some reports of UFO phenomena. If the person undergoing stress is in a situation where unexplained happenings are taking place around him, and he is then out in his car, and suddenly the lights go off, or the engine stops for no apparent reason, and if he is familiar with the idea, and believes in the possibility that UFO's are real craft from outer space, and contain strange beings - humanoids - then this is what he may very well see! They will appear as completely real to him, as does any other type of ghost appear real to the beholder. Incidentally, one has only to recollect the reality of a figure conjured up by a stage hypnotist for fun, to realize how very real these figures are to the person reporting the experience. And of course their reality is confirmed in the witness' view by the actual reality of the car malfunction, or perhaps by the broken branches of trees, or even, possibly, by landing rings. (When one is aware of the wide variety of physical phenomena that occur in a poltergeist outbreak, the possibility of landing rings falling into this category is not as fanciful as it may seem).

The above is not just an hypothesis. We have found that in many cases this is just exactly what happens. In those 'close encounter' type cases which we have been able to follow up thoroughly, we have found that this has been the case. A typical example was a story told me by a man I happen to know reasonably well. He is a completely honest person, and firmly believes in what he told me. He started a con-



versation by asking if we had had any reports of UFO sightings the previous night, and I said "No - Why?". He then said that on the previous evening at around 10 p.m. he and a friend had seen a very bright light, low down in the sky, which remained stationary for about half an hour while they watched it, and then it suddenly went very fast, straight up into the sky, and vanished. This is a very typical type of story, and one difficult to evaluate after the event. No known natural objects behave in this manner. His companion was an elderly man who lives in his home, and is dependent on him. We chatted about the experience, and of his life in general. I was a little puzzled as to why he and the old man were out taking a walk at night. I had a feeling there might have been a family upset. During the conversation, he mentioned that he often sees 'crosses' in the sky, and they mean something good for him. He is a religious man. We continued to talk in a conversational way and he told me of his childhood, and of how his father used to beat him, and he would be afraid, and run out of the house and wander the countryside until his father had cooled down. He told me about one such occasion when he was standing at the edge of a field of uncut hay, and he saw a path appearing in the tall grass, as if someone were walking there, but nobody was visible, the grass just bent, and stayed down. The unseen walker came towards him, and then the path turned towards the bush, where it stopped on the edge of the trees. The path remained quite visible! This reminded me of the UFO 'landing rings'. My witness continued by saying that this made him feel very good, and he felt that he had been given a 'guardian angel', and that whenever he needed help this angel would appear and give him a sign. So whenever he feels in need of help he goes outside, and he usually gets a 'sign' - often he sees 'crosses' but on this night he saw the light, which he took to be a UFO. The good feeling, nevertheless, was there just as if it had been a cross. (Incidentally, this witness has very little background knowledge of this type of phenomena. He reads very little indeed, and takes little interest in this subject). Of course the old man, his companion, supported his story, as so many dependent witnesses do, and again it is interesting that in most cases we have investigated of multiple witness sightings, the back-up witness is in some way 'dependent' on the original observer. This is also something we have observed in people reporting parapsychological phenomena - the rest of the family will often 'go along with' the person reporting the event.

We have been studying the answers to a questionnaire which we sent out, and to which we received some 20,000 answers, detailing various types of psychic experience. We deliberately did not include a specific question about UFO sightings, but put a general question asking for details of any other unusual experience the writer might have had. A very large number of people who reported poltergeist or ghost experiences answered this question with detailed reports of UFO sightings, many of these being multiple experiences. We also found that a few people on certain medications, some people taking drugs, and some people suffering from certain medical conditions, report hallucinatory experiences, and these include seeing UFOs. When these people report UFO sightings, we have found that unless specifically questioned, they may not mention the other hallucinations. This is possibly why many UFO



investigators without parapsychological experience have not discovered this fact. We have found it is more important to investigate the witness' general background in relation to other experiences than to spend time going into a lot of specific detail about the UFO itself.

A further example of this type was a man who telephoned and said he was returning home in the early hours of the morning, and stopped at a coffee shop. While drinking his coffee, he looked out of the window and saw a very large bright light stationary in the sky outside. When he got into his car the light came down low, over the top of his car, and followed him for the 20 miles or so home, and then when he drove into his garage, the light shot straight up into the sky and vanished. This was all he told us in the initial report, and one was tempted to leave it as another example of an unexplained light. But he was invited to call, and offered coffee, and a long conversation ensued. The interviewer did not refer to the sighting, or ask any questions about it, but merely made general conversation. During this conversation, the young man volunteered the information that he has a medical condition which necessitated him taking maintenance doses of a certain medication daily. However, he lived with his mother, (a widow) and they had a lot of 'rows'. When they were quarrelling he would deliberately omit to take his medication to annoy her. This, in turn, would lead to him becoming restless, and he would get in his car, and drive for hours, sometimes all night. When asked if this was the case 'the other night when you saw the UFO' he replied that it was so. He further volunteered the information that in this emotional state and without his medication, he habitually saw hallucinations of people he had known. He said he saw the face of a former girl-friend in every fire hydrant that he passed. When the suggestion was made that the light he saw could have been a form of hallucination, his initial response was that it could not have been -- 'it was definitely a UFO'. However, on thinking it over, he changed his mind, and clearly accepted that this was the possible explanation. Perhaps one should mention that a ball of bright light is often seen during a poltergeist experience, and although these are often seen indoors, there is no reason why they should not appear outside as well. In recent months such lights have been photographed in poltergeist situations, and in these cases the ball of light is a real phenomenon, in the sense that it is seen by everyone present, and can be photographed. We do not, as yet, know what these balls of light are, whether they are a form of the energy that is operative in the poltergeist situation, or a created artifact, but they happen more frequently than has previously been supposed. Sometimes instead of a ball of light, flashes or pinpoints of light are seen. Frequently the ball of light takes on a distinctive shape after having been seen, such as the form of the supposed 'ghost' responsible for the events, thus leading one to believe that it is under the control of the mind of the poltergeist person at the centre of the outbreak. However, there is another parapsychological phenomenon which involves lights. I am referring to the phenomenon known as psychic photography. Some people appear to have the ability to 'put' an image on a photographic plate or film. Most of you will have heard of Ted Serios and his ability to project an image of a building or vehicle on an unused film, often without triggering the shutter. We have found subjects



able to do this, and one in particular who has done quite a lot of work with us, under very strict conditions, seems able to project balls of light, or other objects on to film. These pictures look very like the pictures that have been taken of balls of light in poltergeist situations, and the pictures of lights that appear in some UFO reports. There was one on the cover of CUFOS for February of this year that could just as easily be a photograph of light in a poltergeist situation, or be done by a 'psychic photographer'. In psychic photography, as in the case of the picture in CUFOS, the person operating the camera, nor the onlookers, see the light; it just appears on the film after it is developed. In a poltergeist situation the light is a visible, real, phenomenon, that all can see. So here is a very interesting overlap between parapsychological phenomena and UFOs.

Because UFO sightings are reported in a situation where under other circumstances the person might report seeing a ghost of a departed spirit, a spiritualist-type 'cult' has grown up around the phenomenon. The basic beliefs of members of the cult are much the same as those of some spiritualist groups, but with a 'twist'. Essentially the belief is that UFOs are craft from some other galaxy, operated by beings superior to ourselves. They are watching the progress of life here (some say the UFO people actually 'planted' mankind on earth). The space people are finding and training certain chosen humans who will be rescued from an impending holocaust, due at the end of the current millennium. Certain spiritualists have broken away, also, from conventional spiritualism, and are now proclaiming that the souls of those who have passed over from this life have been taken up into the UFOs and are 'stored' in the space computers. They say that certain 'chosen' souls are still able to communicate through the chosen ones on earth, and they are sending us information about life on the far away stars, and in the space ships themselves. Some of these ideas have been around for many years, and were even put forward in the literature of the '30s. They have become a mishmash of science fiction, spiritualism, and psychic readings, with a flavoring of pyramid lore, stories of the Bermuda Triangle, and lost Atlantis. However, this kind of literature is reaching a wide public, and the ideas attract many people. When investigating a reported sighting of a close encounter type, it is necessary to ascertain if the person reporting has been exposed to any of these ideas. We have found that a number of people reporting this type of experience very firmly believe in these theories. They may believe that they themselves are among the chosen ones, that they have been given a message for mankind, and they often believe that their own dead loved ones are awaiting them aboard the UFOs. Their reported sighting becomes more in the nature of a religious vision or apparition, and the 'shining people' of the space craft bear a striking resemblance to the 'angels' of Christianity.

We ourselves have had examples of this type of reported sighting. On one very cold, snowy, February evening an immigrant lady appeared at our door in great distress. While driving along the freeway she saw a huge UFO, with lights blazing, land in a field beside the freeway. She was certain she had seen it, despite the fact that there was a blinding snowstorm raging. When we questioned her, she admitted that



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other traffic on the road was proceeding as if nothing had happened. She was in desperation, and asked us to help her find the craft again. It turned out that she had lost her husband some 3 months previously, and was convinced that his 'soul' was in the computer banks of the UFO she had seen, and if only she could re-locate it, she would be able to get in touch with him again. She had, of course, received the above mentioned literature, and being a stranger in a strange land here in Canada, had seized whatever comfort she could find. It was impossible to convince her that the UFO she had 'seen' did not exist. As we have discovered when doing parapsychological investigations, at the border line between faith and reality, a person sees what they want to see, and believes what they need to believe.