

Commentary on Stuart W. Twemlow's "Misidentified Flying Objects?"

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D.
University of Connecticut

ABSTRACT: Stuart Twemlow's article has made an important dual contribution to our thinking about anomalous experiences: first, in offering a heuristic psychodynamic model in terms of which to view them, and second, in suggesting a definite link between near-death experiences (NDEs) and unidentified flying object (UFO) abductions. I consider his argument largely from the standpoint of my own recent research, which also brings out the similarities between precisely these same two types of encounters. My empirical findings support many of Twemlow's observations, but important differences are noted between his more psychoanalytic perspective and my imaginal one. My comments conclude with a strong endorsement of Twemlow's therapeutic stance toward anomalous experiences.

In his paper, "Misidentified Flying Objects?", Stuart Twemlow has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of what we still in deference to the language of scientific diplomacy call "anomalous experiences" (I prefer the term "extraordinary encounters"). His contribution is two-fold: first, he offered what he characterized as an "integrated psychodynamic perspective" in terms of which to conceptualize the transactional nature of these experiences; and second, he postulated a definite link between two apparently disparate types of extraordinary encounter, near-death experiences (NDEs) and unidentified flying object (UFO) abductions (and, by implication, other varieties of unusual experience, such as out-of-body experiences).

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at the University of Connecticut. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Ring at the Department of Psychology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-1020.

Since I have recently published a book, *The Omega Project* (1992), that explores the empirical basis for exactly the same linkage, this aspect of Twemlow's paper interested me exceedingly, and I will comment on it first from the standpoint of my own research findings. But I also have some views on his theoretical ideas and his therapeutic approach to persons who have had NDEs or abduction episodes, and will consider these matters as well toward the end of my own remarks.

My research for *The Omega Project* was guided by precisely the same hunch that underlies Twemlow's paper: namely, despite the surface differences in the affective tone and content of NDEs and UFO encounters (including, but not limited to, abductions), the *persons* who report them are likely to share many similarities with respect to demographic background, childhood history, and mode of psychological functioning. And, in fact, this turned out to be the case. Furthermore, the specifics of my findings coincide, or are at least compatible, with many of the suppositions Twemlow made in his paper.

For example, my results also suggest that, whereas there were no distinctive demographic correlates of these encounters or any particular indication that persons claiming them suffer from psychopathological disorders, there was strong evidence that both NDErs and UFO experiencers were, as children, more susceptible to alternate realities and paranormal experiences than were my control group. Though my extraordinary experiencers did not prove more fantasy-prone than my controls, they did show elevated dissociative tendencies and were more likely to state that they had suffered various forms of childhood trauma, including sexual abuse.

The gist of my findings here points unmistakably to the conclusion that, as Twemlow appeared to propose, NDErs and UFO experiencers have a *distinctive psychological profile* that serves to predispose them, even as children, to extraordinary encounters. I can also affirm from my own study another of Twemlow's assertions: namely, that these experiences are usually highly subjectively "real" to those who undergo them, even when they shatter the experiencer's previous ontological categories.

As a result of the developmental and psychological commonalities I found between NDErs and UFO experiencers, I argued that we should adopt the construct of what I called "an encounter-prone personality" (Ring, 1992), in order to encompass all those persons who have enhanced susceptibility to extraordinary encounters of many kinds, including psychic experiences, channeling, out-of-body experiences, lucid dreams, and shamanic experiences. Again, this train of thought seems to merge neatly with Twemlow's position, as when he pointed out that

his own study of out-of-body experiencers showed that they were much more likely to claim to have sighted UFOs than were normal controls, a correlation that would be expected from the model I outlined in my book.

When it comes to the aftereffects of these encounters, Twemlow gave more attention to the reactions of UFO abductees than NDErs, but since this was again a focus of *The Omega Project*, I would like to comment on his discussion here, too. I have no disagreement with the various *categories* of reaction he considered, such as repression and post-traumatic stress disorder, but my own findings incline me most decidedly to a more positive valuation of the longterm changes following UFO encounters, including abductions, than Twemlow's observations would suggest. His view, perhaps not surprisingly since he is a therapist, led him to focus on the traumatic aspect of these encounters. Mine, as a researcher who has previously concentrated on the after-effects of NDEs, served as a filter for the transformational shifts that I have emphasized in my writing on the subject. Both of these perspectives, of course, square nicely with that portion of Twemlow's model concerned with the state of mind of the observer; but that is another story.

Twemlow was probably also guided not only by his own therapeutic experience in working with abductees, but by the prevailing tone in American abduction research today, which is dominated by literalists such as Budd Hopkins (1981, 1987) and David Jacobs (1992), and which stresses and certainly helps to reinforce the horrific tone of these encounters and the sense of victimization and shame that may follow. There are those features, to be sure, yet what is less well known but is now beginning to be heard is that there is also an "upside" to these episodes, inasmuch as the longterm effects may not only be positive, but often point to profound transformations of a psychophysical and spiritual nature. In some instances, these changes may reflect the functional effects of a kind of UFO "Outward Bound" program, apropos of the famous aphorism, attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche, that that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

But the data from *The Omega Project* suggest that in many cases these life shattering experiences open up the psyche to its own inherent spiritual treasures, and in turn lead persons who have had them to act in the world with greater compassion, increased love, and a vastly heightened ecological sensitivity. These effects are not just obvious from my own findings, but are now being reported by other investigators as well, including the distinguished Harvard psychiatrist John Mack (1992a, 1992b). Thus, when it comes to aftereffects, there are

again surprising commonalities, more than Twemlow's own consideration may imply, between UFO experiencers and NDErs.

Turning now to Twemlow's theoretical position on extraordinary encounters, once more I find that I have considerable sympathy for his approach—though we have our differences, too, as I will try briefly to bring out. Like Twemlow, I am very far from being a literalist when it comes to the mystery of the UFO phenomenon, and I prefer to seek out solutions to it nearer to home. Twemlow's own personal conclusions were echoed in the closing words of one of my articles, cited in Twemlow's paper: "In the end the search for the alien somewhere out in the galaxy must be abandoned, anyway, for he is not there. You will find him instead in the multidimensional richness of human experience on this planet" (Ring, 1989, p. 23).

Twemlow's eclectic and inclusive psychodynamic model, with its nonjudgmental openness to novel experience, its freedom from scientific reductionism, and even its touches of Buddhist psychology, make it an appealing framework within which to conceive and theorize about extraordinary encounters. Its very use will certainly promote a greater self-reflectiveness on the part of investigators and therapists, and just as surely will serve the needs of many clients who come to the latter hoping to find an informed tolerance for experiences that defy all conventional understanding and sanctioned diagnostic categories.

All that said, there are still some definite nuances of difference between Twemlow and me with respect to how to think about these extraordinary encounters. True to his training and background and to his psychodynamic model, he is much more disposed than I to psychoanalytic views, and especially to examining extraordinary encounters from the standpoint of the defenses they represent and the reactions they stimulate to repair those defenses. Of course, I take no issue with this approach as such; it's just that it obscures other equally valid perspectives.

My stance, as Twemlow noted, is oriented toward the "imaginal" aspect of these encounters, that is, those features that stem from a domain of transcendental and visionary experiences that confounds consensual reality and that has its own undeniable "imaginal" reality that experiencers tend to regard as "more real than this world." I don't know if it is "really real," but it is so astonishingly real, vivid, and meaningful to those who venture into these realms, and has effects that are often so radically transforming on those who return to the consensual world, that it seems to me that it must be acknowledged as having a tremendous significance for our understanding of extraordinary encounters in the first place.

There is, unfortunately from my point of view, very definitely something in Twemlow's attitude, as indicated in his concluding comments, that devalues this approach and seems inconsistent with the open-minded spirit of the model he offered. There are many others besides myself, such as Dennis Stillings (1989), Michael Talbot (1991), Fred Alan Wolf (1991, 1992), Michael Grosso (1992), and Paul Devereux (1992), who have been drawn to this imaginal perspective on extraordinary encounters and who are beginning to develop a more rigorous framework for its use. Time will tell how useful it will be in illuminating the many mysteries of these experiences, and by then we shall have a better idea whether Twemlow's parting strictures were well taken or merely premature.

Regardless of the merits of the foregoing debate, there can be no doubt about the salutary effect of Twemlow's advice for therapists dealing with those who are struggling to come to terms with these experiences of unspeakable strangeness, and are searching, often desperately, for persons of compassionate and informed understanding with whom to sort these matters out. Twemlow's sage counsel here adds another influential voice to a growing chorus within the therapeutic community that has been urging other therapists to inform themselves about the varieties of extraordinary experience that their clients may be concerned with, and to treat such experiences with the openminded respect and nonjudgmentalism that are still too rare within the mental health field. To have someone of Stuart Twemlow's stature explicitly join the ranks of progressive therapists such as Rima Laibow (1989), Robert Sollod (1992), David Lukoff, Francis Lu, and Robert Turner (1992), John Mack (1992b), and David Gotlib (in press) will serve the interests of everyone who values an enlightened approach to a realm of experience still too much encumbered with prejudice, both ancient and modern.

References

- Devereux, P. (1992). *Symbolic landscapes*. Glastonbury, England: Gothic Image.
- Gotlib, D. (In press). Code of ethics for abduction investigation and treatment. *Journal of UFO Studies*.
- Grosso, M. (1992). *Frontiers of the soul: Exploring psychic evolution*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.
- Hopkins, B. (1981). *Missing time*. New York, NY: Berkeley.
- Hopkins, B. (1987). *Intruders*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Jacobs, D. (1992). *Secret life: First-hand accounts of UFO abductions*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

- Laibow, R. (1989). Dual victims: The abused and the abducted. *International UFO Reporter*, 14(3), 4-9.
- Lukoff, D., Lu, F., and Turner, R. (1992). Toward a more culturally sensitive DSM-IV: Psychoreligious and psychospiritual problems. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 180, 673-682.
- Mack, J. (1992a). Other realities: The alien abduction phenomenon. *Noetic Sciences Review*, Autumn, pp. 5-11.
- Mack, J. (1992b). Helping abductees. *International UFO Reporter*, 17(4), 10-15, 20.
- Ring, K. (1989). Toward an imaginal interpretation of "UFO abductions." *ReVision*, 11, 17-24.
- Ring, K. (1992). *The omega project: Near-death experiences, UFO encounters, and mind at large*. New York, NY: Morrow.
- Sollod, R. (1992). Psychotherapy with anomalous experiences. In R. Laibow, R. Sollod, and J. Wilson (Eds.), *Anomalous experiences and trauma* (pp. 247-260). Dobbs Ferry, NY: Center for Treatment and Research of Experienced Anomalous Trauma.
- Stillings, D. (Ed.). (1989). *Cyberbiological studies of the imaginal component in the UFO contactee experience*. St. Paul, MN: Archaeus Project.
- Talbot, M. (1991). *The holographic universe*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Wolf, F.A. (1991). *The eagle's quest: A physicist finds the scientific truth at the heart of the shamanic world*. New York, NY: Summit.
- Wolf, F.A. (1992). The dreaming universe. *Gnosis*, No. 24, 30-35.