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# ARE THERE UFOS ON MARS? OR, THE EVIDENCE FOR THE EVIDENCE OF UFOS

By Richard Thieme

It's a matter of common sense, really, this UFO business, that and taking the time to understand all kinds of human activity from spacefaring to counter-intelligence to religion.

Imagine that you live on Mars. One afternoon a large orange ball falls out of the sky, bounces across the landscape and comes to a stop. As you stare with disbelief, it slowly unfolds and a little robot rolls out, sticking up what looks like an artifact of some kind. The robot pokes at rocks and seems to display intelligent behavior, even if you don't know exactly what it is doing.

If your neighbors, practical level-headed upper-Midwest kinds of Martians, listened to your story of that incident, what would be a reasonable conclusion for them to draw? Do UFOs exist on Mars? Did something from another planet land? Were you mistaken or delusional? Above all, would it make a difference if others all over Mars independently told similar stories? And kept telling them for fifty years?

My interest in UFOs began when I first heard of them as a child in the 1950s. Since then I have read a great deal about the phenomena and discussed it at length with others. In addition, like most people who have not been asleep for fifty years, I have been socialized to images of UFOs through movies, television programs and other media. This contagion has made UFO lore ubiquitous, and I doubt that a person could be found who could not draw the bug-eyed head of a "gray" based solely on that exposure.

I have also listened to many people over the past twenty years – fighter pilots, commercial airline pilots, military officers, and just plain folks who went for a walk in the woods one night. The cumulative weight of their reports when cross-referenced with collected reports from the last fifty-five years suggests a phenomena that is global, persistent, uniform, and credible – and that fact in itself constitutes evidence of evidence for UFOs.

Many have explored the UFO domain in greater depth; many are thoughtful, balanced professionals, well-educated and well-credentialled in other fields. The reflections of those people constitute a secondary level of evidence. That's why I interviewed a number of them, hoping to shed light on the core question at the heart of the UFO inquiry: is it possible, as an Air Force officer said in the nineteen fifties, that the least unlikely hypothesis for some UFO reports is the extraterrestrial?

Let's be honest: the UFO inquiry wanders off in many directions, but that's the question that grabs us, not questions about ball lightning, sprites or seismic activity, as interesting as those questions are. Those who wandered into the maze of this quasi-religious domain are often looking for answers to cosmic questions, not merely explanations for lights in the hills or the skies. Above all else we want to know if some UFO reports are caused by encounters with vehicles that manifest intelligent behaviors and technologies beyond those available to us. Take away that question and the UFO inquiry and the entire cottage industry based upon it dissipates like morning fog.

Consensus reality takes a long time to build. Explorers returned to Europe from Africa for years, telling fantastic stories of ape-men until finally they came to a consensus about what we now call gorillas. Are UFO stories analogous to those stories – or more like folktales about elves and fairies?

Until 1978, everything I knew about UFOs came from magazines like *Life* and *Look*, movies like “The Day the Earth Stood Still,” and books like J. Allen Hynek’s “*The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry*.” I absorbed those stories as if I had been raised in one religion and was reading about another, taking in data that conflicted with my worldview but holding it in a compartmentalized way, trying to remain agnostic.

The religious metaphor is intentional. I was an Episcopal parish priest for sixteen years with a great deal of experience in three subcultures listening to all sorts of people. Some of them spoke of UFO encounters. UFO stories like religious stories often cause a radical shift in one's point of view, a recontextualization of how one understands one's life, human history, and our place in the cosmos. Regardless of their objective validity, the stories elicit deep responses because of their archetypal material. The human soul pours forth all sorts of projections onto such material and the intense experience attending that projection is frequently characterized as spiritual, transcendent, or life-changing. It can be a genuine conversion experience. We know the psyche is projecting its contents, Carl Jung suggested, when there is secrecy, fascination, and high energy, all characteristics of the UFO domain. In order to understand the event that elicited such projections, the projections must be withdrawn so we can see what's really there.

For all the progress we have made since the Copernican revolution, human beings are slow learners. We still share an anthropocentric view of the universe and our place in it. We may know intellectually that our solar system is two-thirds of the way out in the arm of a typical spiral galaxy, and we may suspect that wherever life can happen, it will happen – yet we are hopelessly narcissistic, seeing only ourselves everywhere we look, referencing events only to our recent past.

A conversion experience such as the one discussed below by the astronaut Edgar Mitchell calls into question everything we believed about ourselves, and our place in the scheme of things, then reorganizes the data around a different center. We know mostly the same things but know them from a different point of reference. Understanding helps us understand why the UFO field looks as it does. There are groups and subgroups analogous to religions and denominations within religions, believers and followers, gurus and disciples, orthodoxies and heresies. *UFOlogy* is also a cottage industry, which sells products and services, constructions of reality, and life in community, just like religions. Because discussions of UFOs often invoke core beliefs, there is often more – and less – at stake than meets the eye. Maturity, self-knowledge and common sense are essential to understanding this domain, and that's

why I thought it might help to speak with thoughtful people who have been thinking about all this for many years.

The more I learn about UFO experiences, the less I know. The academic establishment generally pooh-poohs the subject and any attempt to investigate it. The most sincere witnesses do not always know what they are seeing and mundane explanations often account for what is reported. The acknowledged manipulation of the phenomena by intelligence agencies means that the field itself—the data, the investigators, the organizations—is awash in disinformation and intentional deception. The UFO cottage industry has no standards of accountability or accreditation and the major criteria for status seems to be the ability to draw a crowd.

Those factors transform an inquiry that would be difficult under the best of circumstances into a journey through a hall of mirrors. I am therefore going to confine this brief sketch to a few bedrock accounts of UFOs and not even venture into the treacherous swamps of “alien abductions” and “the Roswell event,” both of which have acquired mythological dimensions. I will also touch on the relationship of the intelligence community to the phenomena because many of the questions asked in the UFO domain could be answered if we had access to classified material. Access to that material, however, is denied, and in addition, bogus documents and false testimony add a secondary level of confusion and deception to the quest.

There is a door, however, that leads into the intelligence community, and even if we can't get through it, we can observe what happens in front of that door, where the “field of information” is distorted. We can postulate what invisible attractors or gravitational fields inflect the light that we see being bent, and just as we learned to adjust for the errors of defective mirrors on the Hubble telescope to produce images of striking clarity, we can compensate for the skew.

By what authority do I write? Absolutely none. I am merely a middle-aged guy who is curious about what's going on. My educational background and life experience give me some tools for searching for the truth and understanding people. I received a B. A. in English literature at Northwestern University (Phi Beta Kappa, highest honors, departmental honors) and an M. A. in English literature at the University of Chicago where I was an NDEA Title IV Fellow. I taught English literature and writing at the University of Illinois – Chicago and wrote some fiction in my twenties. Then I received a three year M. Div. degree from Seabury Western Theological Seminary (also with honors) and served as an Episcopal priest for sixteen years in parishes in the Salt Lake Valley, the village of Lahaina on the Hawaiian island of Maui, and Milwaukee Wisconsin. My passion for exploring the impact of technology led me to choose in 1993 to make a career change. Now I speak professionally, write and consult on the human dimensions of technology and work.

Because scientists so often refuse even to consider the phenomena, pushing R&D from “UFO studies” where it would otherwise take place into UFOlogy’s various dimensions, conventionally funded areas such as aerospace technology, materials science, advanced propulsion systems, psychology and sociology, media studies, and so on, the cottage industry inevitably attracts some people who invent, distort or sustain interest in UFO phenomena for all the mixed motives that lead people to play with the truth in every domain. So the dynamics of the cottage industry too must be studied to correct for skew.

Mark Rodigher, the volunteer scientific director of CUFOS, the Center for UFO Studies, in Chicago Illinois, has a Ph.D. in sociology and like all serious observers of the field is cautious in his approach. The study of UFOs, he observes, is a proto-science rather than a science; its data is not cumulative. In a way, every investigator starts over. Databases of events exist but are amassed indiscriminately and have never been mined for meaningful patterns. Just as in religion, anybody can say anything and someone will believe it. Rigorous discipline and accountability, therefore, are essential to this inquiry.

This brief article is an overview. It describes my “field of subjectivity” and how it has changed over the years, relating those changes to the reflections of others who have explored UFOs for a long time.

In 1978 I was a parish priest at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Clearfield, Utah, near Hill Air Force Base. St. Peter’s gathered a small number of members from surrounding towns in north Davis County and the base. The Senior Warden of St. Peter’s (senior lay officer) was a major who subsequently retired as a full colonel. He was a fighter pilot, heavily decorated in Viet Nam (although he never spoke of that himself), who evidenced the kind of leadership qualities we call “the right stuff.” He was self-effacing and appropriately closed-mouthed about military matters. He served on the senior staff of some major Air Force Commands and concluded his career in a joint duty billet at the National Security Agency.

We were talking at the church one night after a meeting when the subject of UFOs came up. I said that some of the stories I read in books like Hynek’s “UFO Experience” implied that some UFOs displayed aerodynamic capabilities beyond our technical abilities. The stories imply, I said, that “you guys in your fastest fighters chase these things and can’t catch them.”

I remember his expression because his face usually showed confidence, even cockiness. When he replied, he was frowning, and he turned aside as he said, “You’re right. We chase the damned things and we can’t catch them.”

For the first time, someone I knew well and trusted, someone who knew our technical capabilities, told me that he believed that UFOs were real vehicles manifesting technical abilities that surpassed our own.

He gave the example of a fellow-B47 pilot who around 1963 described an object that approached his aircraft, flew in formation with him for a while, then accelerated at an incredible speed that he could not match. He did not make an official report of the incident because he did not want people to think he was crazy and lose his security clearance. Independently, my friend spoke to the co-pilot who verified details of the incident.

The evidence for the evidence of UFO phenomena begins with first-hand or even second-hand reports like that one that transforms the context in which we hear or read about subsequent reports. Their impact is cumulative. In the aggregate, they suggest that a number of people making reports knew very well what they were seeing – they knew an artificial flying machine when they saw one – and described it accurately. No contemporary “black program” accounts for the aerodynamics, widely reported, of which that account is a single example.

Dr. Peter A. Sturrock, Professor Emeritus of Applied Physics and Emeritus Director of the Center for Space Science and Astrophysics at Stanford University, takes a conservative approach to the subject of UFOs. He wants to chew each bite thoroughly before the next bite is taken. He wants to examine each datum every step of the way. He differs from many colleagues however in that he wants to examine the evidence at all. His book, "The UFO Enigma," discusses a conference at the Pocantico Conference Center in Tarrytown, New York, in 1997 at which a few carefully selected cases were presented to a panel of scientists for objective evaluation. The panel concluded that further evaluation was warranted but it hasn't happened due to lack of funding.

Asked to define his relationship to the phenomena, Sturrock said, "I'm a student. That's about it."

But then, at his academic level, that's a lot. Sturrock expresses frustration at the near-unanimity of his professional colleagues who are unwilling to explore the subject at all, an attitude he characterizes as most unscientific.

Sturrock believes that physical evidence can only be evaluated properly when we assess the chain of evidence that produced that physical evidence, that is, the evidence for the evidence.

Sturrock prefers to examine each individual datum, however, an approach that slight the cumulative weight of the accounts and the patterns that might be found in them. That many reports from all over the world agree with one another in small details is itself part of the evidence that must be examined, even though much of that evidence, as Carl Sagan often said, is anecdotal.

When we observe a phenomenon with psychological, sociological and cultural dimensions, anecdotes are also data.

"Something that's funny in America is not funny everywhere," says an analyst with an intelligence organization who wishes to remain anonymous. "Something that's funny for one year is not funny for fifty. And when over those fifty years, reports from all over the world agree in the small details ... it suggests that it's real."

The phenomena, in other words, meets that analyst's criteria for genuine:

- (1) It is international, which counters the fact that there might be hoaxes or social contagion in a single nation. In addition to grass-roots reports, military and intelligence reports such as the 1976 Iran encounter include testimony from both Iranian and American officials.
- (2) It is long term. New phenomena may be real but there's too much room for distortion without a history or context. The "modern era" of sightings began in 1947 and the database is significant so distortions due to cultural filtering and short-term thinking are removed.
- (3) The small details must be congruent. And they are.

Prior to 1978, I had been immersed in textual and other media accounts of UFOs, but it took that face-to-face conversation with someone I knew to cause a contextual shift. It made the subject real in a

different way, and made the subject less background noise and more of a “real possibility.” Subsequently I used my position as a parish priest to create opportunities for others to report their experience. I listened to them the way parishioners who came for counseling taught me to listen over the years to all experience, deeply, very deeply, paying attention to the echoes as well as the notes.

It is often suggested that people who have UFO experiences want publicity or notoriety, but my experience is the opposite. People who talked to me about a UFO experience were often embarrassed, even ashamed, as if it indicated something wrong with them to have had it. Almost always, someone in an audience would wait until everyone else left to talk about it or insisted on discussing it behind closed doors.

One morning when I was still working in the church, the subject came up casually during a break. When I left to return to my office, an employee waited until the others were out of earshot, then gestured that I should come to her office. She closed the door and said, I saw a UFO.

She described driving along a country road in North Carolina in the mid 1970s with her spouse when she passed a power station over which a UFO was hovering. I asked her to be specific. What did it look like? “Well,” she hesitated, “it looked like … you know, like a flying saucer. Like if you were asked to describe a flying saucer, that’s what it looked like. It was a silvery disc over the power station, tilted toward it li’ e it was feeding on the energy. It had lights around it going real real fast like lights on a movie marquee only faster.

“I know I couldn’t have seen it … but I did. I couldn’t have but … I know what I saw. I saw … well, I saw a flying saucer.”

Reports like that, including her affect, her embarrassment, are common, as is the fact that she had to negotiate with the reality of her own experience. She knew it happened, but because her belief system did not include such things, it could not have happened. Back and forth she bounced between affirmation and denial, trying to come to terms with what she saw.

Another incident reported by a local man shows how an anomaly within an already anomalous experience calls attention to itself. He recalled an event that happened when he was a teen. He and his brother rose before dawn to go fishing on a small Wisconsin lake. They left early so they could be at their favorite fishing spot when the sun came up. They took turns rowing, and above them, the sky was full of stars, occasional shooting stars, and one star that caught his attention when it seemed to grow bigger and brighter. He watched it grow larger until he could see a disc-shaped luminous object descending toward the lake. It slowed as it approached the water, then tilted up and very very slowly entered the water. Once it had submerged, a diffused glowing shone in the otherwise dark water, and after a while, the object emerged from the water again, very very slowly. Once it was clear of the surface, it accelerated rapidly. Within a matter of seconds, it looked once more like a star.

What struck me, the man said, now I’m an engineer, and for whatever reason, you might expect it to enter the water at a forty-five degree angle. But it tilted up at close to a thirty degree angle going in and coming out. That struck me, he said. It was almost vertical. I remember the way the water came off like there was something on the surface instead of the surface itself.

Over the years, reports like that, disclosed confidentially with appropriate affect, become evidence for the evidence of a phenomena that is consistent and consistently reported over time.

Captain Edgar Mitchell walked on the moon during the Apollo 14 mission, but it was while returning to the Earth that he had a life-changing experience. Mitchell intuitively apprehended the unity and interconnectedness of all things, and he has spent the years since searching for ways to communicate his insight using a viable scientific paradigm that references contemporary physics. I asked him about the possibility of extraterrestrial visitation of the planet.

"I run into a large number of old timers in government, the military, and intelligence going back fifty years," he said, "and privately they all say, yes, it's true."

Stories about the "Roswell event" made him question whether or not a group inside the government was managing events. Mitchell spoke to "a senior officer on a joint intelligence committee and asked him if some kind of core group responsible for managing the handling of the phenomena really existed. After he did some checking, a couple of weeks later, he said, 'Yes. There is.' But he wouldn't say anything more."

Later I spoke with a fellow Episcopal clergyman who knew Mitchell well. Clergy often speak to one another pastor to pastor, and it was during such a conversation that the priest recalled sitting in a hotel room with Hynek—whose public position as a consultant to the USAF on Project Blue Book was often cautious and noncommittal—and Mitchell. "They were talking about what these things [UFOs] might be," the clergyman said. "Hynek said he was convinced that they are not from our planetary system at all. Mitchell said, based on his involvement with NASA and the space program, they were not from our planet or they would never have sent him to the moon in a tin lizzie. When you eliminate all the cases that cannot be explained or dismissed, they both agreed that there's something left – but where are they from? They thought they might be from a parallel universe, which didn't mean they weren't just as real as the person sitting next to you on the sofa. I'll never forget it. I remember the conversation vividly."

"I hope you're talking to skeptics like Phillip Klass," said Dr. Jill Tarter, Director for SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) at the SETI Institute and the model for the scientist-hero played by Jodie Foster in the movie "Contact." "He knows the foibles, lack of rigor and downright lies that the majority of people in this field perpetrate."

You can't talk long with Tarter or Frank Drake, father of Project OZMA and author of the Drake Equation that suggests probabilities for finding intelligent life, without being impressed by their scientific rigor and passion for doing the search for extraterrestrial life the right way, i.e. the SETI way. Tarter, Drake and Klass focus on charlatans in the UFO field who intentionally misrepresent data. They excoriate the excesses and muddled thinking of many in the cottage industry. One obvious

requirement for the evaluation of current sightings, they suggest, understanding current technologies, is often overlooked.

I agree. I think of a colleague who lives near Edwards Air Force Base in California, for example, who has long observed silent black triangular aircraft over the desert. Those aircraft are frequently reported as unearthly visitors. Another colleague waited long nights in the desert near Area 51 and used night vision lenses to photograph what scientists at JPL identified as a bifurcated plasma, making the experimental aircraft look like a dripping luminous arrow. Another observed jets high overhead slowing to stall speed, then taking off rapidly in another direction, something that could easily look like a vehicle “stopping on a dime, then accelerating rapidly.”

Nevertheless, these passionate critics of the UFO domain often leave us thinking that the best evidence should indeed be considered seriously, not because their confidence in their own approach is unjustified but because that confidence leads them to reject all other approaches out of hand. Confidence becomes certainty and certainty breeds exclusivity and disdain for additional possibilities.

The sheer intensity of the negativity of a committed “debunker” like Klass, a contributing editor and long-time writer for Aviation Week and Space Technology, corroborated my priestly observation that atheists are often just as passionately and blindly committed to NO as true believers are to YES. They believe in not believing with a fervor bordering on fanaticism, which undermines an objective appraisal of the data.

Tarter rejected all UFO reports as unworthy of scientific attention. She told me tongue-in-cheek of a time she thought she had seen a UFO herself while flying one night and discovered that it was caused by a moon intermittently eclipsed by clouds. I observed that this did not disprove credible reports, only that some accounts are clearly mistaken. She did not buy that argument, but not for exclusively scientific reasons.

Tarter and Drake were explicit about their fear that Project SETI, which is currently seeking to establish an endowment of two hundred million dollars so the work can continue in perpetuity, would be tarnished by association with a discredited field. SETI has captured the imagination of many, but it has also earned its own share of criticism for being expensive, unwieldy, and unlikely to succeed. The UC-Berkeley SETI project, a separate SETI project in which computer users download software to crunch numbers and generate cool graphics on their home PCs is, Tarter acknowledged, a mixed blessing. It's a fine project in distributed computing but it's bad science because alleged “hits” can never be corroborated in real time, making conclusions about the data useless. To sustain credibility, Project SETI must draw a rigid line between itself and other searches for extraterrestrial life, so when someone like Silicon Valley millionaire Joe Firmage funds “bad science” and issues rambling non-scientific philosophical tracts about extraterrestrial life, SETI refuses his money lest it be associated with his dubious projects and perspectives. In a field full of illusions, SETI is struggling to establish itself as the only “scientific” search for extraterrestrial life in town. That leads them to dismiss serious scientists like Dr. James E. McDonald, Senior Physicist at the Institute of Atmospheric Physics, who appeared before the House Committee on Science and Astronautics in 1968 to urge serious study of the phenomena and mediums who channel alien space brothers with the same dismissive wave of the hand.

Russ Estes is also highly skeptical of much of the information circulating in the cottage industry. Estes was a television producer who spent more than thirty years in the entertainment industry. He explored the UFO domain for a documentary series. Time and again, red flags went up about someone's story or background. Estes says that every time he did the research, the red flag was validated. He titled his first documentary "The Quality of the Messenger," an indication of his unhappiness with the lack of credibility of self-anointed gurus and stars in the cottage industry.

I understand his cynicism. I have seen "professional investigators" revealed to be liars and researchers twist data until it fit the glass slipper of their pet theory. Still...there **are** those other accounts...so I asked Estes if the frequent lack of credibility discredited those stories too.

"No," he said. "It does not."

First of all, he said, the skew is just as bad on the other side. Agreeing with Sturrock, Estes was astonished by the closed minds of scientists. They often refused to consider anything outside their narrow focus, and if the science was done in another country, it was as if it didn't exist. Estes went to engineers at JPL scientists for comment, but as soon as he mentioned the subject, the door was slammed shut.

Then who, I asked, can be taken seriously?

"The people you don't know. The people you don't hear about. The ones who are researching on their own as so many of us are and who are not making themselves public and not going out and speaking in the cottage industry."

"I am cynical," he said, "but I believe there is something there. The congruence and consistency of stories like the ones we're talking about suggest that credible witnesses are telling the truth as they saw it."

There is a story of a man who caught an elf and made him identify the one tree in the forest under which gold was buried. He tied a yellow scarf around the tree and the elf promised not to remove it while the man went for a shovel. When he returned to the woods, however, he found yellow scarves around every tree.

We're looking for the real scarf.

Those who tend to believe going in will believe coming out. Those who don't, don't. That's true in UFOlogy as it is in science and life, as illustrated by the McMinnville photographs.

Farmer Paul Trent took two photographs of a UFO hovering over a farm building in 1950 near McMinnville Oregon. Now, my speaking audiences are very diverse, and I once spoke for the National Selected Morticians, an association of morticians whose funeral businesses have often been in a single

family's hands for many generations. I saw "McMinnville OR" on a name badge and, knowing that small-town morticians usually know their neighbors, asked about the photos.

Oh, Paul Trent, he said. Sure we knew him. In fact, we buried him.

What about the photos?

Paul always said he regretted making them public, the mortician said. It got him nothing but trouble. He never thought it was a UFO, he didn't know what it was, he thought it was something of ours from a nearby base. He saw it, he took the pictures, that was that.

Could he have perpetrated a hoax?

The mortician laughed. "Paul Trent was a country boy who wouldn't have had a clue how to fake a photo. Until his dying day he said that what was on those photos was what he saw."

Klass dismissed the photos as fakes, saying that shadows indicated the pictures were taken in the morning rather than the afternoon as claimed. Others say that clouds account for the shadows. Regardless of when the photos were taken, however, the man who buried him testified to his sincerity. One can provide a psychological explanation for why Trent might lie to his dying day, if he were lying, but a common sense approach asks, why would he? Why not accept what he said at face value?

Jeffrey Sainio, an engineer with QuadTech in Milwaukee WI, examines photos and video tapes for MUFON, the Mutual UFO Network. Over the years I have heard him describe in loving detail how fakes are faked. But he also recently said, either people all over the world – South America, Siberia, Israel, the United States – are using extremely expensive, sophisticated technology to create fake images on video tape – or they are photographing the same thing.

Klass' zeal is legendary. When I spoke with him, his vocal cords had been damaged permanently by surgery and he spoke from a rehabilitation facility with great difficulty. Still, his ardor for debunking was loud and clear.

I told him that his passion reminded me of Madelyn Murray O'Hair's atheism. I asked why, if UFOs were bunk and UFOlogists frauds, he maintained that lifelong passion even now that he had become seriously ill and kept writing articles and books to make the same point.

After a moment's silence, he said, "That's a good question."

I waited, listening to him breathe heavily. But I never got an answer.

Dr. Richard F. Haines was a NASA research scientist and Chief of the Space Human Factors Office at Ames Research Center. He was also Senior Research Scientist at the Research Institute for Advanced Computer Science. In his early days, he thought he could duplicate what UFO witnesses told him and

attributed their reports to misperception. The cumulative effect of talking to pilots, however, led him to conclude that there were some encounters that he could not explain.

Haines has compiled a number of catalogs of UFO incidents. One involves pilots exclusively. Another focuses on seemingly intelligent behavior by vehicles interacting with witnesses. Reading through such a large volume of similar accounts is suggestive, but it is even more suggestive when we read through accounts reported as news. Between 1947 and 1952, before official government policy shifted toward debunking UFO reports, hundreds of accounts appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post, and numerous local newspapers across the country. They often name military officers reporting sightings who, contacted later, confirm the details. The commonsense question is, was every single one of them wrong?

If even a single conversation reflects a trustworthy account of a person's real experience rather than a mistake, delusion, or fabrication, it is significant for our understanding of the world. But when we gather those accounts and look for patterns, all is not harmony. We hear discordant notes. We begin to see multiple reflections in the hall of mirrors.

We live in a world in which many things are not what they seem. Twentieth century advances in media and technology have raised propaganda and disinformation to a fine art. Perfected in the domains of advertising and public relations, based on theories of men like Walter Lippman and the practice of people like Edward Bernays, "the father of spin," the management of perception by governments, corporations, the military, the intelligence community, and the media is the cornerstone of both global commerce and the kind of low-intensity warfare in which we are unceasingly engaged. Creating and sustaining beliefs and using belief systems for social and political control are standard practices. Knowing this, however, and knowing the degree to which it is done, breeds cynicism. When we know we don't know but don't know what we don't know, we make it up, projecting fears and hopes onto a blank screen. Sometimes those projections are in turn sustained and manipulated, adding additional layers to the UFO puzzle.

The discovery that someone works or has worked for an intelligence agency often evokes a cry of "Disinformation!" in the UFO cottage industry. People like Russ Estes, however, who worked for the National Security Agency, know that it doesn't work like that. Working for an intelligence agency that employed thousands of people does not mean one was a member of the Illuminati. Compartmentalization – segregating information on a need-to-know basis – works; confidentiality oaths signed as a condition of employment effectively enforce silence. We will never get straight answers from people who don't know or if they did know can't say.

Nevertheless, meaningful conversations with people who work in intelligence do take place, but always off the record. That's why the stories from people we know well matter so much. My experience is that intelligence personnel who are not tasked to gather UFO data are often just as frustrated as the rest of us when they try to understand what's going on. They are not free to speak about what they suspect lest they sabotage their careers or reputations. But they are free to conduct the kind of person-to-person interviews that I conducted as a priest, and some of them have access to a large pool of unofficial but credible reports.

One trusted source spoke with military and intelligence personnel from all over the world. He asked on the side about rumors or reports and listened carefully and critically to their candid answers. Over the years he concluded that their stories constituted credible evidence for evidence of UFOs.

"The evidence is overwhelming," he told me. "A cultural penetration from elsewhere is taking place. Other governments know this too, but I do not see anyone except the French thinking coherently about this."

He went on to speculate that the focus of a species is very limited. We see what we need to see to survive. Frogs don't see people except as moving shadows. Ants don't see dogs. Human beings ought to transcend this but often don't. Our inability to see what doesn't connect with our built-in filters and receptors keeps us blind.

This unwillingness or inability to see becomes ingrained in bureaucracies. Officially, the phenomenon doesn't exist. Still, individuals are deeply affected by an unusual encounter, sometimes traumatized, and they have to talk it over with someone. That's why we hear these stories behind closed doors.

These are military officers, he said, and ranking intelligence officers, people in positions of authority, who can never report these events because of the consequences. But they tell me confidentially, "this is what I saw. This is real."

Another veteran intelligence officer was an expert in cover and deception. The practice is sophisticated, he points out, but has limits. If the domain to be contained is too large or includes too many people, illusion and misdirection may not do the job. It is difficult to keep a secret for fifty years; sooner or later something leaks out.

Critics often ask why there haven't been leaks, and the obvious answer is, there have been leaks, which is why we have these accounts. Once the reality is out in the open, it must be hidden in plain sight. We must tie a yellow scarf around every tree in the forest.

Illusion, misdirection and ridicule are the hallmarks of cover and deception, this expert observes. But the greatest of these is ridicule.

I think of the commercial pilot who told me of conversations pilots have among themselves, knowing that an accusation of being drunk would end their careers; I think of conversations with fighter pilots who speak of being scrambled to pursue a UFO, making visual and radar contact, then being left in the dust; I think of everyday people confiding their experience as if they were ashamed; I think of a government official who said yes, we know we have been visited, but if you say I said so, I'll deny it.

When people who speak out in a controlled environment are marginalized, a "black market" in truth develops. In the former Soviet Union, for example, lip service was given to "official" truth, but behind closed doors, people spoke in codes and whispers. The force field of distortion often twists those truths into half-truths and fantasies. But it's even worse than that. Anyone who knows how a complex system like our government works knows that no single person directs the whole show. The left hand often has

no idea what the right hand is doing. What looks like a conspiracy is often just bureaucratic muddle. But that muddle can also result in the truth being told by mistake.

One department may release a document without understanding its significance because they do not know the puzzle pieces that make that piece important. That's because they are not cleared to know, and do not have a need to know. People in another department might wince at the leak because they know how it can be linked to other public information and reveal sources and methods, missions and operations – but if they say so, that too is a clue to the importance of the incident. So the details must be debunked or neutralized by silence.

That report of a UFO encounter over Iran in 1976, for example, was released by the Department of Defense without obvious awareness of how much was revealed. The document describes an encounter in detail, states that the quality of information is high, confirms that multiple sources supplied and agreed on details, and names the source as the Defense Intelligence Agency.

In order to reach commonsense conclusions about UFO phenomena, our studies must include the intelligence establishment, the management of perception and the dynamics of the culture of secrecy. The battlespace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a tangled web of space, air and ground environments that defines a complex topography to be hardened, hidden and disguised. Many years ago, the USAF identified among the goals of space warfare the development of holographic image projection, cloaking devices, multispectral camouflage, and the creation of synthetic environments, which the attacker believes to be real. These are also metaphors for how all organizations must conduct defensive and offensive operations, counter-intelligence, cover and deception. What we call history is often well-designed myth, artfully woven into the consensus reality of the person-in-the-street. Revelations of how the cracking of German codes changed the history of World War II revealed how much historical revision must take place when new details are released.

The genius of the intelligence community is practical epistemology, the creation of false realities, the manipulation of beliefs and social behavior for multiple complex purposes but primarily to achieve diplomatic, military, social, political or economic objectives. Calling someone a “conspiracy theorist” is an easy way to discredit an investigative journalist. Attacking what someone does not say, as the New York Times, Washington Post, and L.A. Times did when they destroyed the reputation of Gary Webb who revealed links between crack cocaine, the CIA, and the Contras, without addressing his well-documented theses, is a good example of an event that suggests more than simple error on the part of those major dailies.

Conspiracies are plans that have not yet been discovered. They thrive in the culture of secrecy assailed for its many unintended consequences by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his book, “Secrecy: The American Experience.” UFO phenomena at all levels of understanding must be deconstructed into component parts such as aeronautical engineering and space-based weapons systems so that we can separate the wheat from the chaff. Then the use and misuse of UFO phenomena for other ends must be described with a “beginner’s eyes” by journalists and scholars as a precondition to seeing the big picture suggested by the most credible accounts. This is not a trivial task.

I asked a friend who works for the Department of Defense, for example, how one might identify one of those alleged organizations that manage UFO phenomena.

What kind of person, he asked, would be able to administer that task over a long period of time? It must be someone capable of dealing with rigid bureaucracy and at the same time be radically open to compelling new ideas. Once recruited, they would be recruited for life, and they would have to be capable of recruiting others, which means access, influence, and availability. Once those others are recruited, they pass through that door. Then they disappear from view, but you can still observe the space near the door where recruiting takes place.

He suggested different kinds of schools where people might be recruited. One might be a little-known private school, for example, with strong programs in engineering and the arts. It might be a school on a shaky financial footing but which nevertheless survives. Perhaps it received a large infusion into its endowment in the 1950s or 1960s. The school must be small enough for students to be observed over time in a variety of social and academic settings and would send its brightest alumni to government service or low-profile companies where despite their promise they are seldom heard from again.

In the hall of mirrors, it is easy to neutralize information to stall an investigation. Edgar Mitchell did ask someone "close to the center, close to the top" about that group and was told yes, it's real. But I also spoke with Colonel John B. Alexander, author of "Future War: Non-lethal Weapons in Twenty-first-century Warfare" and a staff member of the National Institute for Discovery Science (NIDS), who tells me that he too attempted to locate such a group and "I got to higher and higher levels and never found even an inference of such a program."

Some claim that NIDS is a cover operation with numerous links to intelligence operations. Others claim that Mitchell's testimony cannot be trusted. The point-counterpoint indicates that all it takes to stall momentum in any direction is an equal amount of energy from the opposite direction.

That's why Mark Rodigher suggests we stay with accounts that, if true, are more obviously evidential. He studies physical trace and vehicle interference cases, particular those with multiple witnesses, because while people can be wrong about subjective interpretations of lights maneuvering in the sky, they are not likely to be wrong about vehicles hovering near their cars, killing their engines, and leaving marks on the ground, their automobiles – or themselves.

John Schuessler is currently the International Director of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). He began with the human space flight program in 1962 at the end of the Mercury program and worked on the Gemini program, then SkyLab. He moved to Houston when McDonnell Douglas won the support contract for space shuttle operations and was director of engineering for McDonnell Douglas.

Reports of unusual returns on radar during space flights and stories from astronauts like Jim McDivitt, Deke Slayton and Gordon Cooper kindled his interest in UFOs. Schuessler notes that surveillance from space is so comprehensive today that many answers to our questions must be known, changing the questions from, is it real? and what is it? to who knows? and what do they know? People at the National Reconnaissance Organization (NRO), he says, would certainly know.

When I found myself at a meeting in Washington DC attended by the director of signals intelligence (SigInt) for the NRO, Brigadier General James B. Armor, Jr., naturally I raised the subject, and just as naturally Armor said, "It's an interesting subject, isn't it? We don't know any more than you do."

Which is true. Or false. Or both.

When I reflect on these conversations with Edgar Mitchell, Richard Haines, John Schuessler, Peter Sturrock, Russ Estes, Mark Rodigher, friends, colleagues and many others, it is difficult not to agree with Rodigher who said "It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that some UFOs are non-terrestrial intelligently piloted vehicles. Whether they are interdimensional, alien, or something more bizarre than that, we can't tell."

I listened carefully to critics like Tarter, Drake and Klass. I listened for evidence that would expose this domain as unworthy of exploration. I never heard it. I heard blistering critiques of unethical investigators, mistaken or deluded "witnesses," sloppy reporting, bad science, and flawed evidence, but I never heard a solid critique of those credible witnesses who compel us to listen closely to how we are listening or of the management of perception and how it distorts this playing field. Nor did I hear a critique of their own self-interested motivations for attacking the field. As Peter Sturrock observed, their approach to what looks like a legitimate domain of human inquiry was not as scientific as their hard science.

I have tried to indicate some directions where scholarship and good investigative journalism can be of value. My tentative conclusion, like that of my employee, is that people can't be seeing what they're seeing...but they are. If their reports are true, then the extraterrestrial hypothesis is the least unlikely, and the domain warrants serious investigation. That raises the question of where when and how that investigation has been conducted if it has been conducted for fifty-five years while research and development projects related to it hide either in plain sight or in billions of dollars of black projects.

We must gather the data, eliminating nothing prematurely, however absurd it might sound, and consider it all judiciously, factoring in the many ways we filter and transform the data and experience of our lives. Then when we collaborate to do together what none of us can do alone, we must remember the rules of the truth-finding, truth-saying, truth-communicating game.