

Beings in NothingDrive

An Existential Analysis of the Travis Walton UFO Abduction

by Joan d’Arc

On the thirty-year anniversary of one of the most compelling UFO contact experiences, I present my interpretation of the Travis Walton abduction case of 1975. This admittedly kitsch interpretation is unlike any other, either of the skeptic or non-skeptic variety, and its intent is not to prove or disprove the facts of the case, but to marvel at the sense of wonder that embellishes the human condition and to convey the idea that we have a choice about how we look at the world.

I hope it will add to our understanding of this profound human experience as we subconsciously try to become more comfortable in the skin we find ourselves in.

On the evening of November 5, 1975, a crew of men working in the forests at Turkey Springs, Arizona jumped into their pickup truck and headed home to Snowflake for dinner. All at once, a brilliant yellow light blared through the trees. Upon coming to a clearing that afforded them a better view, the men realized the source was a flying saucer.

Travis Walton got out of the truck for a better look at the “golden machine,” which hovered silently about 15 feet above the ground only 90 feet away. As he later described it in *The Walton Experience* (1978), the object was estimated to have an overall diameter of 15 to 20 feet and was shaped like two deep pie pans, one inverted on top of the other, with a “small round bowl upside down” on top of that. The dome on top was luminous white with darker strips of dull silver outlining the glowing panels. The surface of the ship had a “luster of hot metal.” There were no seams, protrusions, antennae, windows, ports or hatches on the silent craft.

Walton approached the craft as the other men called out to him to come back. About six feet from the craft he got into a half-crouched position, staring up at its smooth surface. Suddenly the ship began to vibrate and wobble, giving off low- and high-pitched mechanical tones. A blue-green beam of light about a foot wide shot out of the bottom of the craft, with a sharp, crackling sound, striking him in the head and chest with a force he later described as “a high voltage electrocution.”

The men in the truck watched in terror as Walton’s body arched backward and was hurled about ten feet in the air. His body landed motionless on the ground. The driver sped off quickly, crashing over bushes and small trees until, through a clearing, the men watched the ship rise above the trees and take off at incredible speed. The men returned to the scene to pick up Walton, but he was nowhere to be found. Police authorities interrogated the men, thinking they had concocted this fantastic tale to cover up Walton’s accidental death or murder.

Only in Hollywood?

The Travis Walton story is one of the most well known UFO contact reports since it was brought to the silver screen in the film *Fire in the Sky*. Problematically, Hollywood did a bad job of explaining what Walton actually remembered about the incident aboard the spacecraft where he purportedly spent the next five days. As a result of the film, most people know only of the drama surrounding the ordeal his co-workers were put through concerning his absence. In order to fill in the void left by Hollywood, more pieces of the bizarre tale recounted by Walton follow.

As consciousness returned, Walton discovered he was lying on his back on a table. He initially had no recollection of the spacecraft. He had a burning, “crushed” feeling in his chest and

a splitting headache. He was remarkably weak. He recalls a bitter, metallic taste on his tongue, as well as intense thirst. His eyesight was blurred. He had no idea where he was but could hear a quiet shuffling. An odd light fixture hung down from a “triangular” shaped ceiling. He suddenly recalled being in the woods looking up at the glowing saucer. He reasoned that “maybe that thing had hit me with something” and he had been rushed to the hospital. He tried to move but he couldn’t. He tried to call out, but no sound came.

Walton became aware that he was still wearing his shirt and jacket, which were pushed up under his arms. He reasoned that he must have been injured so badly there was no time to remove his clothing. He then looked down and noticed an unfamiliar technological artifact lying across his bare chest:

“A strange device curved across my body. It felt cool and smooth. It was about four or five inches thick... [and] ...it extended from my armpits to a few inches above my belt. It curved down to the middle of each side of my rib cage. It looked like it was made of shiny, dark gray metal or plastic.”

Walton then tried to focus on the “blurry figures of the doctors” he suddenly realized were standing over him. Once his vision returned:

“The sudden horror of what I saw rocked me with the realization that I was definitely not in the hospital. I was looking squarely into the face of a horrible creature! My senses were instantly electrified into a new keenness. Everything clicked. The weird-shaped room, the strange device, the odd clothing, all added up to just one thing. ‘Good God!! I must be inside the craft!!’ [Emphasis his!!]

Emotion and the Horrible

The double exclamations Walton uses in his chronicle might perhaps represent his profound horror upon realizing the world has just shapeshifted beyond the predictable reality fixed squarely between the edges of his comfort zone. It has been noted by researchers that fear is the most common human reaction to meetings with extraterrestrials. In his writings on the supernatural in *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, Carl Jung wrote that mankind “feels an almost instinctive aversion to this kind of knowledge, for he fears its paralyzing effect.” As Jung noted, humankind may admit that unknown powers exist no matter what they are called, but one “turns away from them as speedily as possible, as from a threatening obstacle.”

Why is fear so automatic when one is confronted with the supernatural? From a purely phenomenological point of view, why does this constitute a threat? We might consider Martin Heidegger’s suggestion that our first sensory assessment produces a logical comparison or correspondence between subject and object—an assessment of facts devoid of meaning. He proposed that perceptions are logically distinguished when an object is isolated out of the stream of experience and held up to that which

it is not. However, the second assessment will move beyond this correspondence to the “meaning of the ground of the investigated beings,” revealing the nature of the relationship between them. If no meaning is revealed, if there is no melding of subject with “brute object,” we could surmise, as Jean Paul Sartre might, that an instance of existential nausea might follow.

A Science of Experience

Phenomenologist Edmund Husserl believed that in order to maintain its meaningfulness and integrity, the quantitative sciences developed by man should acknowledge that its roots are in the same sensory world which it studies and measures. He hoped that a new Science of Experience would someday re-establish “lived experience” as a basis of scientific method. Husserl spoke of the “phenomenal world,” the world of subjective experience, as being pure transcendental consciousness.

As David Abram writes in *Spell of the Sensuous*, each of the human senses lends its own unique mode of perception, which diverges, intercommunicates and overlaps with the others. In order to comprehend a particularly novel sensory experience, you must use all your senses in “dynamic participation.” These are the tools of a different type of science; one that we all know instinctively. Your tools in the Science of Experience are your naked humanness. Abram explains:

“The relative divergence of my bodily senses (eyes in the front of the head, ears toward the back, etc.) and their curious bifurcation (two eyes, one on each side, and two ears, two nostrils, etc.), indicates that this body is a form destined to the world; it ensures that my body is a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing Earth.”

In this novel situation, as Walton has noted, your senses are “instantly electrified into a new keenness.” Everything begins to click, and it all adds up to “one thing.” You have no trouble isolating this object out of your stream of experience, since it’s in your face and you cannot move. You feel like an animal being hunted and you begin to think like one. You attempt to categorize the nature of the beast exhibiting predatory behavior toward you. You deduce that it is like me, in that it has the same basic morphology, locomotive stride, number of limbs, body symmetry and other features; but it is not like me in a most disturbing way.

Walton has the existential creeps upon coming face to face with an outwardly humanoid entity whose mode of perception is completely alien to the Earth environment. He knows instinctively that these beings do not belong to this world. As he looks for some human qualities or even a counterpart to mammalian forms, his first assessment is that these beings gather information in a novel manner. These entities make no use of the five senses taken for granted on this planet, the senses which define us as human, the very senses we are using in the moment to comprehend this situation.

A World That Speaks

The conventional view of language is that it is a set of mutually agreed-upon signs, or representations for things, linked by a formal system of rules. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty disagreed with this assessment, believing that human language is rooted in our sensory experience of the “life-world.” He believed that meaning is spontaneously gestured with the body. We learn our native language, Merleau-Ponty pointed out, not mentally but bodily. He suggested that the conceptual meaning of words “must be formed by a kind of subtraction from a gestural meaning, which is immanent in speech.”

A gesture is not arbitrary or meaningless behavior accompanying language, but is linked with the particular words being used. In essence, gesture is the “bodying-forth” of emotion (“a motion emanating”) into the world; the tangible, visible aspect of a particular feeling. Speech is vocal gesture that communicates meaning, and is rooted in the sensual dimension of experience. It is born, writes David Abram in *Spell of the Sensuous*, of “the body’s native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole,” and is “a particular way of singing the world.” Further, Merleau-Ponty proposed that no phenomenon presented itself to humans as passive, but as dynamic

and engaging. He believed that humans are part of “a gesturing landscape” – in essence, “a world that speaks.”

Yet, if human perception is an open circuit that completes itself via its environment, what type of environment does this entity come from? What type of being does not require food? What type of being does not need to hear? Clearly, its home environment is highly technological. As Sartre indicates, it is the things to which I cannot give meaning which cause the phenomenological experience of what he has termed nausea. Human beings can only place this experience in the realm of the supernatural.

As Walton later wrote, the creatures were under five feet tall with the normal arrangement of features. They had five fingers on their small hands. Other than that, he recalls, “their similarity to humanness quickly became terrifyingly obscure.” The skin was pale, chalky and slightly translucent, and had a tight doll-like fit. They had “bulging, oversized craniums” and an infantile appearance. They had huge eyes with irises nearly an inch in diameter. Not a sound came from their tiny narrow mouths. They wore soft orange-brown overall suits and pinkish-tan footwear.

It doesn’t take Walton long to conclude that these beings are not from around here. They are visitors from a landscape that does not gesture, a world that does not speak. They are technowizards who somehow project thoughts into the mind from a distance. They exhibit no emotion as they go about their work. The physical qualities possessed by this novel entity seem to incorporate that of reptile, insect and machine. Although they are overtly humanoid, in no sense are they mammalian. In some sense we feel that these are not “free will” entities: the lights are on but there’s somebody else at the wheel. They are “Beings-in-NothingDrive.”

As H.V. Ditfurth wrote in *The Origins of Life*, “a living being that does not engage in a continual exchange of energy with its environment is simply unthinkable.” What sort of being is this? Writing in *The Day After Roswell*, Col. Philip J. Corso suggested the grays are the biological robots of a highly advanced visitor race. Psychologist John Mack further wondered if the traveling biochemists were on a mission to relocate a doomed human race to new homes in other planetary systems. Mack suggested we are but tagged animals in a cosmic trail of tears...

Magic: The Mind Dragging Among Things

Merleau-Ponty suggests a preconceptual relationship between the body and the sensible realm when he writes: “I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red.”

Sartre proposed that the world is in effect “a world of emotion,” and the various human emotions have something in common, that is, “they make a same world appear, a world which is cruel, terrible, gloomy, joyful ... but one in which the relationship of things to consciousness is always and exclusively magical.” He provides an example. Let’s say a grinning face appeared in the window, sending a reaction of horror throughout your entire body. Phenomenologically speaking, your body is invaded by terror. Sartre explains that in this emotional moment, “consciousness is degraded and abruptly transforms the determined world in which we live into a magical world.” Think about that. You haven’t changed; the world has! As P.D. Ouspensky notes in *Tertium Organum*, “the mystery of thought creates everything.” He writes:

“As soon as we understand that thought is not a ‘function of motion’ and that motion itself is a function of thought; as soon as we begin to feel the depth of this mystery, we shall see that the whole world is a kind of vast hallucination which does not frighten us and does not make us think we are mad only because we are accustomed to it.”

Sartre proposes that the world sometimes reveals itself to consciousness as magical (open-ended, subjective) instead of determined (solid, objective). Your survival response is to bring the world back to the confines of your safety nest: consensus-reality. But sometimes there is a lag in doing this, during which

your heart feels like it could have jumped out of your skin. When the gag is over we can laugh, but while we're suspended in Magical Existencia we have seemingly entered an aspect of the world that contains possibilities we would normally not entertain. As Sartre clarifies, we need not believe that "the magical is an ephemeral quality which we impose upon the world as our moods dictate. Here is an existential structure of the world which is magical..." (Essays, 243)

The category "magical," in effect, governs our interpsychic relations and our perception of others; the magical is "the mind dragging among things." Sartre sees magic as consciousness rendered passive. In this posture, "man is always a wizard to man, and the social world is at first magical." The rational superstructures which make up our consensus-reality are actually "ephemeral and without equilibrium." They "cave in when the magical aspect of faces, of gestures, and of human situations, is too strong." (Essays, 244)

Indeed, this may explain why nobody is a true believer until they have experienced strange phenomena first hand. Perhaps imagination is not a separate mental faculty, but is the way the senses have of throwing themselves beyond in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of things that we do not sense directly. P.D. Ouspensky has suggested these may be the manifestations of the 4th dimension into the phenomenal world.

David Abram writes in *Spell of the Sensuous* that debunkers of magic, putting a premium on detached objectivity, attempt to "halt the participation of their senses in the phenomenon" by imagining other phenomena (wires, threads, mirrors), or by simply looking away. We always retain the option to suspend any instance of participation, he writes. There will always be people who "simply will not see any magic, either at a performance or in the world at large."

What happens when, without sufficient notice to halt sensory participation, we are plunged into the irrational alternate universe lying on the other side of our rational superstructure? Sartre guesses: "consciousness seizes upon the magical as magical; and forcibly lives it as such." Let's see how Walton deals with his existentially horrible situation:

"A creature was looking steadily back at me with huge, luminous brown eyes that were the size of quarters! I recoiled at the sight. I looked frantically around me. There were three of them! Hysteria overcame me instantly. I struck out at the two on my right, hitting one with the back of my arm and knocking it into the other one. ... The one I touched felt soft through the cloth of its garment. The muscles of its puny physique yielded with a sponginess that felt more like fat than sinew. The creature was light and had fallen back easily."

I heaved myself to a sitting position. The exertion caused beads of sweat to pop out on my forehead. I lunged unsteadily to my feet and staggered back. I fell against a utensil-arrayed bench that followed the curve of one wall. My arm sent some of the instruments clattering against the back of the shelf. I leaned heavily there, keeping my eyes riveted on those horrid entities!

Human emotion is a "quality which penetrates us" and "exceeds us on every side," explains Sartre. He writes, "the emotion ceases to be itself; it transcends itself; it is not a trivial episode of our daily life; it is intuition of the absolute." With regard to the specific emotion of horror, Sartre suggests, it is not only the present state of the thing that is transcended, but it is "threatened for the future; it spreads itself over the whole future and darkens it; it is a revelation of the meaning of the world."

Future Shock

Walton's terrific fear quite possibly stems from something we might call future shock. If culture shock is the result of an unprepared confrontation between two entirely different Earth cultures causing "bewilderment and disorientation, a misreading of reality, and the inability to cope," it may be relatively mild, suggests Alvin Toffler, in *Future Shock*, compared to the ravages of future shock, "the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future."

Existentialists tend to see the essence of human existence as a journey; as being "between that from which the journey comes

and that to which it proceeds." The German word *dasein* (human existence) describes life as a project in which human existence projects itself toward the future. As Heidegger says, man is always "engaged in projects to realize himself in the future"; care for self means "care for the future." Yet, while we are always preparing for the future, we glide toward it slowly, marking it with various anniversaries and rites of passage. We do not expect it to arrive overnight.

Walton's fear may arise from the sudden realization that we are not alone in the world as we've always been taught; that our plane of existence might be shared with an ultra-life form we had not known about, if only due to our perceptual limitations or an enormous reality hoax. It would seem that this realization effectively transformed the world as he thought he knew it; and did, in fact, spread itself over the future as "a revelation of the meaning of the world" — a world which we as technological beings thought we owned and managed. But as that surety slips away, the horrible begins to hold a "substantial quality," which spreads itself over perceptual space-time as "horrible in the world."

Walton has seen various unknown technological devices, including the flying saucer itself, which must surely have his mind reeling with fright. For, although the humanoids are short, spongy and slight of build, he is technologically overpowered by the Goliath contraptions of a futuristic society. He has entered a magical realm without his slingshot! Physically unarmed and mentally disarmed, he tries to overcome this existential situation using caveman ingenuity:

"My action caused the device on my chest to crash to the floor. No wires or tubes connected it to me... Greenish rays came from underneath the overturned machine. ... My legs felt too weak to hold me up. I leaned heavily on the counter. The monstrous trio of humanoids started towards me. ... With the superhuman effort of a cornered animal, I ground out the strength to defend myself. ... I grabbed for something from the bench to fend them off. My hand seized upon a thin transparent cylinder about 18 inches long. It was too light to be an effective club. I needed something sharp and tried to break the tip off the tube. I smashed the end of the glass-like wand down on the waist-high metal slab. It would not break."

There seems to be trouble in Magical Existencia. How might Sartre explain Walton's reaction? Sartre distinguishes the concept of anguish from the concept of fear in that "fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before my self." He further distinguishes the concept of vertigo as "anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over a precipice, but of throwing myself over." He clarifies: "A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation." (Essays 120-124) Sartre gives an example:

"Vertigo announces itself through fear; I am on a narrow path—without a guard rail—which goes along a precipice. The precipice represents a danger of death. At the same time I conceive of a number of causes, originating in universal determinism, which can transform that threat of death into a reality; I can slip on a stone and fall into the abyss ... If nothing compels me to save my life, nothing prevents me from precipitating myself into the abyss; the decisive conduct will emanate from a self which I am not yet."

This is an important facet of phenomenology. A human being is essentially a changeling. Although we remain outwardly the same person throughout our lifetime, our interactions with people and with the world cause us to change inwardly. We do not react in exactly the same manner to each situation, unless it's required, nor do we get the same results each time we do react in similar manner. Each situation constitutes a different set of possibilities. Our actions and engagements must be constantly adjusted to a world that is constantly changing as well, making each interaction and experience a novel one.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram writes that from a sensory perspective there is no thing that "appears as a completely determinate or finished object." Every thing I see "presents some facet of itself to my gaze while withholding other aspects from view." Figuring out what constitutes this unknown factor is part of problem solving. If a particular situation is exemplary in its

novelty, we become excited and ask others for their opinion. Our lives are largely spent as intersubjective problem-solvers.

Second, because we are temporal beings, the self is a flowing entity existing over time. If you concentrate on your inner monologues you will have to agree that you are suspended in a built-in past, present and future. We all create mental pictures of ourselves in possible future scenarios. We project ourselves into the future in order to define ourselves in it. We know from experience not to depend too much on the pictures because life tosses banana peels in our path.

Sartre explains: "At this moment, fear appears, which in terms of the situation is the apprehension of myself as a destructible transcendent in the midst of transcedents, as an object which does not contain in itself the origin of its future disappearance." In other words, I don't know when I will no longer experience this self as subject, nor do I know the circumstances by which my death will occur. Sartre continues:

"I realize myself as pushing away the threatening situation with all my strength, and I project before myself a certain number of future conducts destined to keep the threats of the world at a distance. These conducts are my possibilities. I am in anguish precisely because any conduct on my part is only possible ... while constituting a totality of motives for pushing away that situation, I at the same moment apprehend these motives as not sufficiently effective." (Essays 123)

This leads to the third point, that we do not know what decision we will make with respect to the next banana peel thrown in our path, and we do not always trust ourselves to make the right decision. Humankind is always in a posture of questioning, of expectation, of not knowing what comes next or why. This is what Sartre called contingency. Thus, he suggests, "my decisive conduct will emanate from a self which I am not yet." Therefore, while my momentary self and my past self contain known qualities, my future self—that which I am not yet—is suspended in limbo. It is, in quantum physics terms, a possibility wave.

So we see that man's subjective world deals with potential threats, and survival tactics are at all times part of a repertoire of possible responses to the threat of bodily harm or death. We can try to "push away" this threat, but there is no promise as to the effectiveness of that action. According to Sartre, this risk constitutes mankind's absolute freedom in a free will universe.

Freedom: The Brute Resistance of the World

Back in his magically transformed world, Travis Walton is apparently lodged between fear and anguish, the proverbial rock and the hard place. He has just awoken from a long nap, like Rip van Winkle, and this magical place doesn't have any familiar tools at his disposal. There are no hammers, buzz-saws, and unfortunately no "two-by-fours." There is no Sartrean toolness about this reality, which is a situation that would surely cause any Earth man considerable angst.

On the face of it there aren't a lot of possibilities, but Walton is profoundly free to come up with some. As Sartre says, an obstacle is neutral; one is free to "go around it, or climb it, or to ignore it." The "brute resistance of the world" is worked into the overall pattern of solutions afforded to us by our existential freedom. Important to Sartre's position on the matter, freedom is a given which constitutes the framework of possibilities.

Walton's dilemma can be seen as an exercise in free will. What are his options in this novel situation? As always, when the going gets rough, a human being is free to wing it. With amazing suicidal grace, Walton chooses vertigo. He tries to throw himself over the edge. He manages to scare the pants off the perplexed gang by trying an alternate possible historical configuration; that of a screaming banshee:

"I lashed out with the weapon at the advancing creatures, screaming desperate, hysterical threats at them... 'Get away from me!!! What are you?' Then I shrank away in revulsion. The creatures continued towards me, their hands outstretched. 'Keep back, damn you!!' I shrieked. They halted. In a snarling crouch I held the tube threateningly behind my head. ...

"Their sharp gaze alternately darted about and then fixed me with an intense stare ... I felt naked and exposed under their scrutiny... Their mouths never made any kind of sound... Just as I girded myself to spring at them, they abruptly turned and scurried from the room! They went out the open door, turned right and disappeared... I collapsed back against the bench and struggled to slow my racing heart."

The Beings-in-NothingDrive backed off for a pow-wow and Walton won the first round, but all humankind is ever required to do is to win one round at a time. "I need only," Sartre says, to "make an appointment with myself on the other side of that hour, of that day, or of that month... [for] ... anguish is the fear of not finding myself at that appointment, of no longer even wishing to bring myself there."

To Sartre choice and intention are both acts; it is not the result that constitutes freedom, for all possibility is the consequence of existing, and all of my choices and acts are free. Even choosing to do nothing is an act. But, Sartre explains, "it is for the sake of that being which I will be there at the turning of the path that I now exert all my strength, and in this sense there is already a relation between my future being and my present being."

Through that last-ditch effort, posits Sartre, that last ounce of strength which constitutes the threat of my final annihilation, I am saved. He states, "It is through my horror that I am carried toward the future, and the horror nihilates itself in that it constitutes the future as possible. Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being." (Essays 141)

Strangely, Walton was left to wander the craft unescorted. He came upon a chair that had controls on its arms and tried it out for size. From across the room he saw a muscular human being about 6 feet, 2 inches tall, wearing a tight blue suit, and was relieved to see one of his own kind. The tall blonde man wore a transparent helmet that opened to a wide rim over the shoulders. Walton chatted animatedly with the man, asking him questions, but the man gave him the silent treatment. He led Walton down a narrow hallway to a door that slid open, and they disembarked from the ship down a steep ramp.

Walton was dismayed to discover they were inside an even larger mother ship that contained flying disks of various sizes and shapes. Entering a room where there were other humans, who looked alike in a "family sort of way," a man and a woman lifted Walton onto a table. The attractive blonde woman held an object that contained a "golfball-sized sphere." She pressed it over his mouth and he lost consciousness.

Travis Walton awoke on the side of the highway outside of Heber, Arizona, five days after he had been abducted by the craft. He had kept an appointment with a future self that was radically changed. He later wrote, "When I made that fateful choice to leave the truck ... I was leaving behind forever all semblance of a normal life, running headlong toward an experience so overwhelmingly mind-rending in its effects, so devastating in its aftermath, that my life would never – could never – be the same again."

Walton looked up in time to see the yellow center-line of the highway reflected in the bottom of the spaceship's "gleaming hull" before it shot vertically into the sky. "The most striking thing about its departure," he wrote, "was its quietness."

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