

OBITUARY

Dr. Stuart Appelle, 1946–2011

Stuart Appelle pursued two intellectual careers with distinction. He was a professor of psychology at the State University of New York College at Brockport, an experimental psychologist who published numerous professional papers in his specialty of tactile perception. Later he assumed various administrative positions at SUNY Brockport, among them chairman of the Department of Psychology and Dean of the School of Letters and Sciences. In his conventional academic pursuits, his life was full and successful, but he devoted considerable time to another career that carried him out of ordinary academia into the realm of anomaly research. Since I knew him in this second capacity I will emphasize it even though his interest in UFOs composed only one corner of a much larger whole.



As early as 1972 while still a grad student, Stuart criticized a sociological “status inconsistency” explanation for UFO sightings in an article published in a scholarly journal (Appelle 1971). His participation in UFO research began in earnest in the late 1980s as alien abductions rose to prominence as a topic of dispute. Psychological explanations for the nature of these experiences and the distress of people reporting them proliferated, but he saw considerable bad science and stepped in as a critic of speculative theories that paid little heed to the evidence. In a benchmark paper published in the *Journal of UFO Studies* he reviewed with systematic care the entire range of solutions, assessing such proposals as hypnotic suggestion, false memory, fantasy-proneness, and sleep anomalies for their strengths and exposing their shortcomings. He concluded that the conventional answers offered so far are insufficient to explain abductions and called for research that truly reckoned with the evidence (Appelle 1995/1996). A further development of his criticisms and arguments appeared in a chapter of *Varieties of Anomalous Experience*, published by the American Psychological Association in 2000 (Appelle, Lynn, & Newman 2000). His co-authors were both prominent skeptics of abduction but he carried his case for the inadequacy of current research and theory throughout the chapter, thereby defending abduction as a potentially anomalous phenomenon in the mainstream scientific literature. He further defended the subject as worthy of scientific study in presentations at professional meetings.

If the theoretical treatment of abductions presented a chaotic landscape, the practices of case investigators gave even further cause for concern. Stuart viewed the often undisciplined, sometimes potentially harmful efforts of investigators as a key challenge to progress and crusaded to replace the prevailing amateurism of the field with scientific standards. He became a dedicated advocate for both improvements in investigative techniques and adoption of a professional code of ethics in the treatment of human subjects. He participated in the Ethics Committee of the Abduction Study Conference held at MIT in 1992, which drafted comprehensive guidelines based on current standards for clinical research and therapeutic practice (Ethics Committee 1994).

Alongside his contributions to UFO research and practice, Stuart also served for some 20 years as a board member of the Center for UFO Studies. A regular contributor of articles to the *Journal of UFO Studies*, he assumed editorship in 1995 and continued the high standards set by his predecessor, Michael Swords, for the only peer-reviewed journal dedicated to ufology.

With his sudden death on June 27, 2011, at age 65, UFO research lost a rare proponent who not only excelled in his academic profession but also committed his expertise and rigor of thought to reform the study of UFOs. His critical acumen set a welter of psychological hypotheses about the subject into perspective, and his advocacy of high standards guided a chaotic field toward scientific discipline. None of his efforts brought him gold or glory: In fact, amid general academic disapproval, only his curiosity and devotion to inquiry served as his reward. In addition, he has the enduring thanks of those of us who worked with him. More than anything else, Stuart Appelle was an admired colleague as well as a valued friend, and for those reasons we will miss him dearly.

THOMAS E. BULLARD

References

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