

The Truth is out there

JOSEPH FIRMAGE has given up serial entrepreneurship to spread the gospel of outer-space visitors. BY MARK WILLIAMS

The Truth
By Joseph Firmage
www.thewordistruth.org

IN 1930, amid the Great Depression, John Maynard Keynes took a contrarian tack in *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*. Considering how each generation adds new science and manufacturing technologies, Keynes tried to calculate when this accelerating process could make scarcity a thing of the past (at least in Britain). He concluded that the time was coming faster than people imagined: another century would increase productive wealth by a factor of more than seven.

If the whole global house of cards doesn't collapse, Keynes may be proven correct. Already, the United Nations reckons that \$40 billion a year could provide life's basic needs to everyone on the planet: that's \$151 annually from each American, or less than half of Bill Gates's present wealth. Likewise, the economic meltdown outside the United States doesn't result from scarce resources: it is the consequence of a deluge of speculative Japanese investment in Asia followed by an increase in manufacturing capacity. While overcapacity has always featured in capitalism's cycles, the world can now produce 60 million cars per year, even though there's demand for only 44 million.

Keynes predicted: "For the first time since his creation, man will be faced with his real, his permanent prob-



MEN ARE FROM MARS: Joseph Firmage, USWeb's former CEO.

lem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy his leisure, which science and compound interest have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well." Some folks, of course, have already arrived at the permanent-problem stage. Joseph Firmage founded his first company, *Serius*, at 18, and five years later, after Novell had bought it for \$24 million, became Novell's vice president of networking. In 1995 he cofounded USWeb, which merged with the CKS Group in 1998 to form a company worth \$2.1 billion. At this year's start, Mr. Firmage resigned from USWeb, re-

jected serial entrepreneurship, and chose...well, the most lateral career move conceivable, provided you reckon that career possibilities exist in propagandizing about the extraterrestrials that have secretly guided human history.

Mr. Firmage has summarized his beliefs in a 600-page work. It's accessible at his Web site alongside documents billed, for example, as President Truman's 1947 memorandum establishing the "Majestic-12" committee in charge of U.S.-alien relations or JFK's communiqué to the Central Intelligence Agency, "written ten days before his Dallas assassination," about "UFO intelligence files." The book's hardcover version will appear later this year. Meanwhile, Mr. Firmage has arranged a downloadable condensed edition. Having read it, I can tell *Herring* readers exactly what Mr. Firmage believes: everything.

THE SPACEMAN COMETH

Mainly, he thinks that emissaries from the cosmic civilizations have visited us throughout our history—perhaps even seeded Earth—in vessels tapping the universal quantum electromagnetic energy background so as to manipulate gravity and space-time. These visitors have guided humankind technologically and spiritually, disseminating religious memes (a *meme* is an idea that spreads in a viral fashion from person to person within a culture) so that we'll grow up to be good galactic citizens. Cue to Roswell, New Mexico, 1947: a crashed UFO and its dead occupants are analyzed by government scientists; humans reverse-engineer technologies like fiber optics and integrated circuits from alien fragments. Mr. Firmage stirs in every possible fringe

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tenet—Area 51, Gaia, crop circles, cattle mutilations, alien abductions (even, I'm glad to see, one of my personal favorites: UFOs travel from the future; their crews are our descendants)—as well as some standard New Age chestnuts.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENTSIA

But remember: Mr. Firmage is brighter than most people. A basic summary of *The Truth* doesn't convey the flavor of this strange porridge of a text. One chapter will be, say, a succinct history of the U.S. intelligence industry that could have been written by a professional journalist (since I recognized unattributed quotes from other people's books, part of it probably was); then the next, a long litany of biblical quotes with soggy earnest exegeses of how science and spirituality are "One"; this in turn might be followed by conjectures about vacuum and gravity engineering, which, though likely to resem-

ble *Star Trek* technobabble to lay readers, are within the speculative perimeter of cutting-edge physics. Mr. Firmage asks us to take him seriously: he has, he reminds us, more credibility to lose than most UFO cultists.

OK, Joe. (1) If humans managed to figure out general relativity or quantum mechanics' mathematical foundations, why do we need alien assistance for relatively minor, obvious technologies like integrated circuits? (2) The first generation of stars arose more than 11 billion years ago; if intelligence was going to evolve and achieve stable civilizations, it could have done so any time since then. Why don't astronomers see signs? (3) People like yourself and Frank Drake at the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence Institute apparently subscribe to a Victorian fallacy—the idea of progressive evolution, which Darwin himself rejected. Nature exhibits no inherent bias toward complexity—that is, intelligence—only

toward variation. Even on Earth the vast majority of successful life remains in the bacterial mode. It's plausible that the machinery of life might emerge everywhere in the universe, yet ours is the only world where intelligence has (briefly) developed.

Finally, Joe, in answer to your question, Why would so many people claim encounters with aliens if these hadn't really happened? Because human beings are hardwired with what biologists call epigenetic rules: genetically installed algorithms to invent, transmit, and receive certain cultural traits. Our infantile language-learning abilities and inclination to avoid copulation with people with whom we've shared our first 30 months of life are two prominent examples among 67 items listed by anthropologists as universal behaviors; others are cooking, cosmology, residence rules, religious rituals, and propitiations of supernatural entities. Our religious impulses derive from

mammalian algorithms for dominance hierarchies that the symbol-forming human mind, as the biologist Edward O. Wilson writes, has extended into abstraction—"hyperdominant if invisible members of the human group."

BRUISING MY RELIGION

The idea that religion is an innate human drive is provocative. Most people would tolerate historically established religious imagery but mock Mr. Firmage's claim that an alien being robed in light hovered above his bed; they'd politely bear with the convention of Easter as the time when a man rose from the dead but ridicule Mr. Firmage's beliefs as the self-delusion and poor taste of a faith fabricated from sci-fi kitsch and trash culture. But every religion throughout history has mixed universal principles with local peculiarities of the culture of its genesis: people must use the world as they find it to imagine

higher beings and states. While burning bushes sufficed for a wandering desert tribe, those immersed in the high-tech world might expect their angels to arrive in starships.

Mr. Firmage writes of his spiritual discontent before conversion, "[I]t is impossible to satisfy religious needs through material purchases." Indeed, as someone who could afford more toys at an early age than most people even dream of, he's vehement: "[U]nbounded consumerism is no longer a sustainable institution...I propose that consumers assert control of the economy and rebuild our economic system to serve nonprofit organizations." As a catalyst, he plans a cooperative electronic-commerce site where members will be able to purchase any good or service and designate which leading nonprofit they wish to receive their share of the site's earnings.

It's interesting. Though Mr. Firmage is slightly crazy—with, maybe, a juvenile vanity in his craziness—he's

had the imagination to be something besides a serial entrepreneur. If either his nonprofit e-commerce model or physics ideas generate anything viable, he might have more impact than he ever would by founding another company. Furthermore, let's consider Keynes's prediction that in a time not so far from now, the markets may have done their work well enough that we'll be free to face our "real problem." Is Joseph Firmage living "wisely and agreeably and well"? By his lights, he's trying. Perhaps we should start to think about what the world might be like when there's such abundance that wealth provides not even the distraction of keeping score, when nothing remains but the incessant, rising sound of individual people attempting to assert their spiritual aspirations. 🍀

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