

OBITUARY

Michael J. Mahoney (1946–2006): A Life Celebration

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On May 31st, 2006, I sadly lost my image of an idol, a teacher, a mentor, and a dear friend. The world lost the identity of Michael J. Mahoney, one of the most innovative and prolific thinkers in the discipline of psychology and psychotherapy for over the last 30 years. There is much to contemplate in his tragic unexpected death; the depth of his own personal struggle, its meaning and relevance for his work, and the somber resonance that echoes as we left behind strive to make some semblance of order from the fragmented ambiguity. Michael was undeniably a brilliant man, however those that came to know him either in person or through his writings were more struck by the depth of his serene compassion and kindness than his intellect. He did more for his students than any professor I have ever known, tending to them both personally and professionally, and in each case, cultivating a sense of positive regard and value I have witnessed nowhere else. For the most part, we all were in awe of the depth and breadth of his impeccable scholarship. However, what moved and shaped us was the infinite care of his rich soul.

Michael Mahoney was born on February 22, 1946 in Streator, Illinois. Due to respiratory problems, he eventually relocated to Tempe, Arizona where he attended Arizona State University, choosing psychology as a major following a chance encounter with the renowned psychotherapist, Milton H. Erikson. Michael's scholarly productivity began early in his academic career with the publication of *'The application and reinforcement of participant modeling procedures in the treatment of snake-phobic behavior'* in 1969. Despite the dominant behavior-

istic paradigm entrenched at ASU at the time, one recognizes initial glimpses of Michael's emphasis on internal processes as crucial to therapeutic change. Following the completion of his PhD under Albert Bandura at Stanford in 1972, Michael's work would eventually become central to the "cognitive revolution" in psychology with him serving as the founding editor of *Cognitive Therapy and Research* as well as regular dialogue with key figures of the movement such as Albert Ellis, Aaron Beck, and Donald Michenbaum.

Michael's knowledge of change processes were soon merged with another passion; Olympic weightlifting, a sport he had taken to due to his respiratory limitations and despite his diminutive size. His success within the sport paralleled his academic career, eventually becoming a national champion in various age classes over his lifetime. In the early 1980s, Michael's interest in competitive sport also led to foundational articles in the field of sports psychology as well as serving as a resident psychologist at the United States Olympic Training Center.

As the cognitive-behavioral approaches began to supercede the radical behavioral in the mainstream psychological academy, Michael's thought continued to push the envelope with his conception of change processes undergoing yet another shift, this time under the influence of the work and persons of James Bugental, Friederich Hayeck, William Bartley, Viktor Frankl, Vittorio Guidano, and Humberto Maturana, among others. The result was a post-modern emphasis on human beings as "actively complex, socially-embedded, and dynamically developmental self-organizing systems" that came to be known as the movement of constructivism. Michael's magnum opus, *Human Change Processes*, was published in 1991 and was largely responsible for bringing constructivist thought to the American psychological mainstream.

Michael continued his prolific work through the following 15 years, culminating with an extensive oeuvre of 18 books and over 250 chapters and articles. One of the projects most important to him was the Society for Constructivism in the Human Sciences and the related journal, established in 1996, for which he served as executive director and editor until 2005.

Again, while one may be astounded at the productivity and brilliance of such a man, what remains for most important me is the sight of a tear at the sound of my own suffering and a enveloping feeling of warm acceptance. To know that a mind of that magnitude was motivated by a compassionate, loving heart. True, I know Michael struggled with loneliness, depression, and other demons—despite his recognition and success—and it saddens me to think that somehow, in our many conversations, I—and others fortunate enough to call him a friend—may have missed that. From one of his recent writings; a response to a posting on the <http://www.gratefulness.org> message boards:

... When we are called into that higher perspective, we can be compassionate with the fears and failures of our ego. We can also learn, little by little, to discern between choices that may lead toward different ends.

The ego, bless its short-sighted heart, will tend to favor choices that lead to immediate and local satisfaction. The higher self, much closer to the divine, will call us to act in ways that serve beyond us and into the future. Discernment is the lifelong skill of learning to follow the needle of our heart's compass (Retrieved October 10, 2006, from http://www.gratefulness.org/qbox/item.cfm?qbox_id=206).

I don't know what difficult choices were before Michael on that evening in May. I can only hope that his discernment was wise and that he may rest well knowing the gentle beauty his life has blessed us with.