

# Michael J. Mahoney: A Retrospective

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Michael Mahoney, who made seminal contributions not only to the Society for the Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration (SEPI) but also to the entire field of psychotherapy, died a tragic death at the age of 60 on May 31, 2006. He published more than 250 scholarly articles and chapters, authored and edited 19 books (one of which was awarded a Citation Classic by the Science Citation Index), edited 4 journals, and served on 23 editorial boards plus numerous guest editorships and advisory boards. His research spanned a tremendous breadth without sacrificing depth. Primarily, however, he inquired into development across the life course, including but not limited to psychotherapy. Initially trained as a behaviorist, he played a significant role in the cognitive revolution in psychology; he was also a leading figure in constructivist psychotherapies. He was a Fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science, as well as a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He is survived by his two beloved children, Sean and Maureen.

Michael Mahoney was born on February 22, 1946 in Streator, IL. After dropping out of high school, he initially worked as a psychiatric aide while completing basic coursework, primarily in philosophy, at Juliet Community College. However, the harsh northern winters proved difficult for him due to respiratory problems, and he was eventually encouraged by his allergist

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to relocate to Arizona for the arid climate. Reportedly because of a chance coin toss, he elected to attend Arizona State University (ASU), choosing psychology as a major after a single influential therapy session with the renowned psychotherapist Milton H. Erickson, in which they discussed his decision. Michael threw himself wholeheartedly into his studies, and his aptitude emerged early in his academic career with the publication of “The Application and Reinforcement of Participant Modeling Procedures in the Treatment of Snake-Phobic Behavior,” with his undergraduate mentor David Rimm in 1969 (Rimm & Mahoney, 1969). Despite the dominant behaviorist paradigm entrenched in ASU at the time, even here one recognizes initial glimpses of Michael’s emphasis on internal processes as crucial to therapeutic change.

Michael was “awed and grateful” for the publication of Albert Bandura’s (1977) *Principles of Behavior Modification* (Mahoney, 2000), and, after the completion of his undergraduate degree in 1969, he left for Stanford where he began work with Jerry Davison and Bandura himself. Michael finished his doctorate in 4 years and then took a position at Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) in 1972, where he would remain until 1985. Michael’s work would eventually become central to the “cognitive revolution” in psychology, with his serving as the founding editor of *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, as well as regularly dialoguing with and debating key figures of the movement such as Albert Ellis, Aaron Beck, and Donald Meichenbaum.

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 Friederich Hayeck, William Bartley, Vittorio Guidano, Walter Truett Anderson, and Humberto Maturana, among others. The result was a postmodern emphasis on human beings as “actively complex, socially embedded, and developmentally dynamic self-organizing systems” (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002, p. 802) that came to be known as the movement of constructivism. After Penn State, Michael left for California in 1985, where he taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for 5 years. In 1990, Michael relocated to the University of North Texas, his longest appointment, remaining there for 15 years. In 1996, he also began consulting with Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, an association he maintained throughout his life.

Many consider *Human Change Processes: The Scientific Foundations of Psychotherapy* (Mahoney, 1991) to be his magnum opus, which brought his developmental constructivism—a genuinely integrative metatheory—into the psychological mainstream. Among his other important contributions are his landmark *Cognition and Behavior Modification* (Mahoney,

1974); his provocative and underappreciated *Scientist as Subject: The Psychological Imperative* (Mahoney, 1976/2004); and his distilled treasure trove, *Constructive Psychotherapy: A Practical Guide* (Mahoney, 2003a).

Michael was integrative throughout his career. He was willing, even eager, to be viewed as an iconoclast, having little patience with sacrosanct boundaries between schools of thought. His early work on self-control with Thoresen and Bandura (Mahoney & Bandura, 1972; Mahoney & Thoresen, 1974; Thoresen & Mahoney, 1974) brought behavioral principles to an area previously dominated by psychodynamic thought. Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) is now thought to be a single school of therapy, and Michael was instrumental in creating this unity. His 1974 book *Cognition and Behavior Modification*, which detailed the evidence for the role of cognition in human behavior, gave intellectual grounding not only to “looking into the black box” within behavior therapy but also made cognition fundamental. This was a revolution detested at the time by many within behavior therapy, who saw it as spoiling what was unique about the behavioral approach, but Michael was unconcerned about their disapproval and even mischievously enjoyed making them uneasy. His developmental constructivism included, but also transcended, his prior behavioral and cognitive work, integrating perspectives as diverse as humanism and wisdom/spiritual traditions with affective neuroscience, chaos theory, and other studies of complexity. Michael was asked to be on the SEPI Advisory Board from the time the Board was formed in 1985 and served in that role until his death.

Michael’s intellectual virtuosity as a researcher and instructor is undeniable, but what is most absent now to those who came in contact with him is the pure humility, compassion, and authenticity of his presence. Few who encountered Michael came away untouched, as evidenced by the numerous messages and postings received in print and online after his death. Students genuinely felt cared for, dare we say loved, under his attentive guidance, a quality so rarely supported in the graduate training of today. Although always engaged in process himself, Michael became more openly concerned with and critical toward the state of mentoring in the psychological and therapeutic disciplines (Mahoney, 2005).

As a graduate student, one always found his door open, willing to cease his most pressing project without hesitation to offer himself in the most heartfelt way, whether to discuss a class schedule, a weightlifting technique, the import of transcendental phenomenology for constructivism, or the ill health of a parent. With Michael, one felt no pretense, no façade. He brings a famous image of Zen Buddhism to mind, the Tenth Ox Herding Picture, which illustrates a master who has achieved the deepest enlightenment but then returns to the market place empty handed as an absolutely ordinary person with nothing special or noticeable about him at all. One always had

that sense with Michael, of being in the presence of someone so intelligent and deeply wise but who would respond in the most natural, relaxed, humane manner.

By the early 1980s, Michael had developed a technique he referred to as “streaming” in which the therapist would attend nonjudgmentally to a patient’s report of his or her immediate experience, or “stream” of consciousness. Although similar to psychoanalytic free association in many respects, for example, the patient would often recline facing away from the therapist and was encouraged to relate whatever came to mind, Michael’s approach was to remain respectful of patients’ potential need for privacy. Thus, the traditional command to hold nothing back and to convey *everything* was avoided. In addition, the streaming technique avoids any allusion to an absolute or final interpretation regarding the patient’s report. Rather, patients are encouraged to explore their own meanings, associations, and narratives. Precise interpretation of the patient’s content is secondary to compassionate engagement in the process of self-reflection.

To further elaborate on Michael’s use of streaming and to illuminate his mischievous side, we quote from Wachtel’s (2008) remembrance of presenting an all-day symposium with Michael in New York City in the early 1980s:

[Mike] had volunteered to bring one of his patients with him from rural Pennsylvania (this was when he was at Penn State) and the idea was that after each of us presented our theoretical orientations in the morning, we would each interview the patient in the afternoon to demonstrate how we work. I was up first (a vivid demonstration of “home team advantage” as you’ll see in a moment—with Mike, although he was literally the visitor since New York is my home town, playing the role of the home team and hence batting last). I did what I thought was a reasonably creditable interview (in retrospect, I might be more inclined to describe it as plain vanilla boring; you’ll see why in a moment). Then it was Mike’s turn. He wheeled out a couch on rollers, and the couch looked about as much like Freud’s couch in Vienna as any I had ever seen. I began to wonder how far the role reversal would go. He was supposed to be the cognitive-behavioral person, I was supposed to be the psychoanalytic. What was he doing with Freud’s couch?! But that was only the beginning. Mike proceeded to demonstrate what he was calling in those days “streaming” (based on William James’s ideas about stream of consciousness)—but distinguishing it from Freudian free association would have required an electron microscope of extraordinary magnification. As the patient continued to “stream,” she went into a kind of auto-hypnotic state, clearly a follow-up to essentially hypnotic sessions she had had with Mike. More and more, it began to feel like this demonstration of “cognitive-behavioral” therapy was far more similar to what went on in Freud’s consulting room in 1900 than anything I had seen or heard in my psychoanalytic training or any version of psychoanalysis as it was practiced in the present day. The patient began to recall sexual advances by her father and then began to engage, out loud, in a private dream-like experience. She was lying on the couch, with her hands extended upward to ward off “her father’s” advances. In a horrified voice, she began shouting, louder and louder, “No father! No father! No! No! NO! NO!”, and then, just as we were all

absorbing what was going on, her shouts turned to erotic cries of “Faster father, faster, faster. . . .”

Needless to say, I experienced my interview as “upstaged!” (You now understand my retrospective judgment of it as boring vanilla). When Mike and I discussed it at the end of the day, he had an elfin grin, but never explicitly acknowledged that anything had happened that either was reminiscent of Freud or that was all that surprising. I think there were two things going on in our conversation. On the one hand, there was clearly a big joke between us, one I could enjoy even if the joke was on me. On the other hand, I think Mike was simultaneously absolutely serious when he said it was streaming, not free association. What I meant at the beginning in referring to Mike’s “psychoanalysis problem” is that Mike was trafficking in psychoanalytic-like ideas much of the time, but rarely in ways that explicitly acknowledged this ultimate defection from Fort Skinner or that enabled the assimilation of his ideas by those in the psychoanalytic community or vice versa.

This is by no means a reflection of Mike’s personality. He was as open to ideas as anyone I have known. Rather, it is a striking example of what I referred to earlier as the “ethnicity” dimension in intellectual discourse. From the opposite side of the fence, search the literature of relational psychoanalysis, a body of thought that is pervasively constructivist, and you will find precious few references to Mike’s work. The problem is bidirectional, a function not of personalities but of gated intellectual communities. Mike at least *approached* the forbidden, as it were, even if he very largely did so through what might be called “serious jokes.” (Wachtel, 2008, pp. 36–37)

In addition to his work within behaviorism and CBT, as well as his “illicit” endeavors in psychoanalytic ideas, Michael was profoundly influenced by the work of Viktor Frankl, logotherapy, and existentialism, both European and American. Michael was vividly moved by Frankl’s account of his concentration camp experiences during World War II and his writings regarding his ability to endure and value one’s construction of meaning in the face of undeniable human suffering. Michael eventually met Frankl at an Adlerian conference in Vienna in 1981 and was quickly invited to his home. Out of this meeting, the two became dear friends lasting until Frankl’s death in 1997.

Michael was affected by his own early experiences as a patient in existential–humanistic therapy and through the work of renowned existential therapist James F. T. Bugental, with whom he also eventually developed a significant personal relationship. Shifting from his cognitive–behavioral bent, he became more accepting of the central importance of the therapeutic relationship and began to explore more experiential and holistic change modalities, including bodywork, Gestalt approaches, creative dance, restrictive sensory stimulation, and a whole host of meditation techniques.

Existential themes continued to resonate throughout Michael’s career, as clearly illustrated in one of his last articles, “Suffering, Philosophy, and Psychotherapy” in 2005. Michael felt that many approaches of mainstream academic psychology and psychotherapy resisted engaging many unavoidable existential realities—such as suffering, the self-construction of mean-

ing, and death—and that the human condition was increasingly dehumanized in favor of a reductionist, scientific, and grossly oversimplified approaches. In his essay, Michael took to task the underlying philosophical biases inherent in contemporary psychological theory and practice, including mind–body dualism, rational primacy, and the faith in certainty and justification, as well as offering enlightening critiques regarding the corruption of the scientific spirit and the erosion of excellence in education and the academy. Michael had grown increasingly concerned that an authentic therapeutic engagement with the dialectical tension of human existence had been overshadowed by the convenience of a utilitarian “manualized” approach to the good life, sanctioned through the doctrine of so-called empirical support, and unquestionably imparted through a dogmatic, orthodox training system that all but completely eradicate the sense of wonder, awe, compassion, and self-reflections from its students.

Similar to Frankl’s influence regarding human suffering and existential meaning, Michael was greatly influenced by his Penn State colleague Walter Weimer (e.g., Weimer, 1979), who illuminated the intellectual dangers of the “dogma of authoritarian epistemologies” that still run rampant through our universities (Mahoney, 2004). As Greenberg (2008) and Agnew (2008) stress, few psychologists have had the epistemological prowess that Michael had; and even more significantly, Michael practiced what he intellectually understood. Karl Popper (1959) called for scientists to engage in thorough self-critical reflection in which they not only seriously critique the questions with which they inquire but also—and this is even more difficult—to seek the falsification/refutation of their hypotheses/theories rather than the confirmation of such. Referring to Popper’s model of ideal science, Agnew wrote that “Popper would have been proud of him. Mahoney was good for science. But attempting to practice the Popperian ideal wasn’t necessarily good for Mahoney” (Agnew, 2008, p. 101). Addressing the issue of cognitive load in reference to Neurath’s boat analogy,<sup>1</sup> Agnew writes that “Mahoney seemed to have the capacity/compulsion to not only examine more than one plank at a time, but also to continually question whether his boat was seaworthy at all, and do so with no land in sight . . . most of us are not so self-aware as Mahoney of the fragility of our cognitive architecture” (Agnew, 2008, pp. 103–105).

Michael demanded a great deal of himself, including constant introspection. Regarding the psychological demands of being a constructive metatheorist he wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> “We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it and reconstruct it from the best components” and we must do so one plank at a time (cited in Agnew, 2008, p. 103).

No other family of modern theories asks its adherents to maintain such a degree of self-examining openness, to so painstakingly tolerate and harvest (rather than eliminate) ambiguity, or to so thoroughly question both the answers and the questions by which they inquire. It is not easy to be a constructivist . . . (Mahoney, 2003a, p. 207)

Such honest self-examination of one's own mental processes is an arduous task and is not without its risks. As he wrote with his son, Sean: "Tension reduction or the resolution of conflict does not necessarily lead to growth . . . and it may in fact retard development by diminishing both the energy and the challenges required for such development" (Mahoney & Mahoney, 2001, p. 660). Although he wrote—toward the end of his life—that his own self-care capacities had improved and that he "balanced better," he also wrote that "I am only human, and I make mistakes" (Mahoney, 2003a, p. 206).

### **MICHAEL AS TEACHER AND MENTOR: A LOVER OF LEARNING**

Teachers have played significant roles in our lives, and we occasionally capitalize the "T" in teacher to signify what we consider the sacred potentials resting dormant in this profession—potentials that Michael realized in every class meeting and every office hour discussion. We agree that Michael Mahoney was the greatest, most inspirational Teacher we have ever had. Being a student of his was not only an honor and a privilege, it was also a joy and pleasure. Our experience is corroborated by numerous teaching awards bestowed to Michael, including his being selected as Master Lecturer by the American Psychological Association in 1981, and as a 1988 G. Stanley Hall Lecturer by the American Psychological Association (an honor reserved for teachers of teachers), as well as receiving the 1997 Professor of the Year Award from the Texas Psychological Association Division of Students in Psychology.

Although the following recommendations are quoted from his *Constructive Psychotherapy* (Mahoney, 2003a), they were themes about which he mentored us in gentle, indirect ways throughout the sundry permutations of our evolving relationships:

1. *Prepare for each session in private reflection . . .*
2. *Honor the complexity and uniqueness of each client . . .*
3. *Give yourself and your client permission not to know and not to fully understand.* Life is much more than figuring things out; effective therapy does not require complete understanding or definitive explanations.
4. *Let clients set the pace, and honor their process . . .*
5. *Encourage (but do not force) emotional expression . . .*
6. *Allow and invite yourself to feel emotional in the process of counseling.* Let your heart lead your helping . . .

7. *Trust that your clients can endure their pain and be strengthened by the process . . .*
8. *Emphasize safety and offer as much structure as your client needs . . .*
9. *Affirm and encourage experimentation and exploration . . .*
10. *Teach compassion, forgiveness, and self-care . . .* (pp. 262–263, italics in original)

Michael's last academic position was at Salve Regina University. Upon arriving, some students of the holistic counseling program asked him what he would bring to the department; "his answer was 'heart'" (Childs, 2008, p. 6).

## CONSTRUCTIVISM

For those of us alive to the excitement of ideas, some of the proposals of constructive metatheory are music to make us dance.

—Mahoney, 1991, p. 113

Although his initial formulations of constructivism appear in his *Psychotherapy Process* (Mahoney, 1980), its fullest expositions are in *Human Change Processes* (Mahoney, 1991) and *Constructive Psychotherapy: A Practical Guide* (Mahoney, 2003a). As Michael often pointed out, the verb "to construct" comes from the Latin *con struere*, which means to arrange or give structure; for him, "the ongoing nature of structuring (organizing) processes is the developmental heart of constructivism" (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002, p. 799). Michael's developmental constructivism also connotes positive and progressive aspects.<sup>2</sup> Diverse expressions of constructivism are present in contemporary approaches to development and mental health services. Some emphasize a cognitive-behavioral legacy; others, existential humanism, psychoanalytic, or transpersonal. Michael's approach includes aspects of each of these legacies; hence, he termed it a *metatheory*—a family of theories. He further pointed out that the family resemblance appears to be reflected in a consensual emphasis on five principal assertions about human experience and development:

1. Human experiencing reflects continuous and primarily *anticipatory activity*.
2. The ongoing activity of humans is primarily devoted to *ordering processes* or the organizational patterning of experience; these ordering processes *are fundamentally emotional and tacit*, and they are the essence of meaning-making.
3. The organization of personal activity is fundamentally self-referent or recursive, making the body a fulcrum of experiencing and en-

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<sup>2</sup> Once asked—at a conference by a woman who stood between the doors of the elevator he and others were in—to give a one-sentence definition of constructive psychotherapy, Mahoney "on the spot" replied "In one sentence, constructive psychotherapy is the opposite of destructive psychotherapy" (Mahoney, 2003a, p. 13).

couraging a deep phenomenological sense of *selfhood* or *personal identity*.

4. Self-organizing capacities and creations of meaning are strongly influenced by *social-symbolic processes*; persons exist in living webs of relationships, many of which are mediated by language and symbol systems.
5. Each human life reflects principles of *dynamic dialectical development*. Complex flows among essential tensions (contrasts) are reflected in patterns and cycles of experiencing that can lead to episodes of disorder (disorganization) and, under some circumstances, the reorganization (transformation) of core patterns of activity, including meaning-making and both self- and social relationships. (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002, p. 800).

These themes suggest a view of the person that is “integral” in the sense of embracing many of the apparent dualities that have traditionally dominated psychology and philosophy. Michael’s constructivism emphasized a sufficiently comprehensive view to embrace and integrate the unity of principles and processes that are apparent in wide diversities.

An essential aspect of constructivism is the assertion that all cognitive phenomena entail active and proactive processes. However, emphatically critical of most cognitive therapies’ assumption of “rationalist supremacy,” Michael recognized the complex and reciprocal dynamics of the individual and his or her social and cultural worlds. Thus, any given person’s suffering may be better served by social action than by a change in how he or she thinks about or co-constructs reality (i.e., should we think differently about poverty, child abuse, discrimination and oppression, or should we engage in social action to change those aspects of our world?). Michael recognized that it is not only cognitions that organize our lives; emotions and behaviors are at least equally implicated, and he viewed humans as “active participants in the construction and experience of the whole range of human thought, feeling, and action” (Mahoney, 1991, pp. 100–101). Of note, Michael emphasized “the structural and functional primacy of abstract (tacit) over concrete (explicit) processes in all sentient and sapient experience” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 95).

Other integral components of Michael’s constructivism are the tacit dimensions that he referred to as *core ordering processes* (COPs). Operating primarily outside of our awareness, COPs are the organizational processes through which we perceive stabilities, continuities, and constancies. “To the extent that we come to ‘know’ our COPs, it is through witnessing our own actions and emotions in the process of examining them. One might call this *epistemotion*: the felt act of knowing as it unfolds” (Mahoney, 2003a, p. 51). Michael believed that when people change in a

significant, enduring manner, what changes most are the fundamental processes with which they structure and experience themselves and their worlds; in other words, their COPs. Michael thought of COPs in terms of the following four overlapping themes. *Reality* refers to one's world view and perceptual constancies along dimensions such as possible/impossible, real/unreal, and meaningful/meaningless. *Value* refers to emotional judgments (all judgment requires a *valence*—positive or negative) along dimensions such as good/bad, right/wrong, and approach/avoid. *Self* refers to that with which we identify and our processes of establishing a felt-sense of coherence, continuity, and order to our experience along dimensions such as me/not me, us/them, body/world, and worth/worthlessness. Finally, *power* refers to one's sense of agency along dimensions such as active/passive, hopeful/hopeless, in control/out of control, and engaged/withdrawn (Mahoney, 2003a).

Constructive psychotherapy, as Michael practiced it, is much less a matter of the specific techniques used than it is a compassionate sensibility grounded in the developmental pacing of individualized interventions to help people organize and reorganize their lives. Despite his remarkable philosophical, scientific, and technical acumen, Michael never forgot that care and compassion are at the heart of all our efforts to help. He frequently cautioned his students about “technolatry” and the *tyranny of technique*, for all too often, what we thought was a therapeutic “groove” was more a mechanically employed, technical rut. He would have agreed with Perls, who said that techniques, in and of themselves, are gimmicks, and we already have too many people running around collecting and abusing gimmicks. Techniques cease being gimmicks only when they are embodied by someone with a specific sensibility who is laboring to uncover and remove the obstacles to another's well-being through the use of techniques: “The art of human helping will not be found in specific words or meticulously repeated rituals, unless those words and rituals reflect something deeper than their own surface structure” (Mahoney, 2003a, p. 168).

In his typical, encyclopedic-yet-balanced way, Michael's “critical constructivism” (in contrast to “radical constructivism”) abandoned naïve objectivism and recognized the drawbacks of the modern university, professionalism, and credentialing without retreating to total subjectivism or extreme relativism. Moreover, he acknowledged the “existence and influence of an unknowable but inescapable real world . . . the individual is conceived as a “co-creator” or “co-constructor” of personal realities, with the prefix *co-* emphasizing an interactive interdependence with their social and physical environments” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 111).

In 1996, Michael founded the Society for Constructivism in the Human Sciences to encourage and communicate developments in theory, research,

and practices that reflect an appreciation for such diversities, recognizing “human beings as actively complex, socially embedded, and developmentally dynamic self-organizing systems.” In addition to scholarly research and theory, artistic expression in many forms was welcome—from poetry to photography. He was able to see beyond the limiting confines of forced unities that emphasize and prescribe particulars (e.g., the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*) and he encouraged others to do so as well (Mahoney, 2008).

**AN INTEGRATIVE WEAVER OF DIVERSE TAPESTRIES:  
“THE BIG PICTURE IS A SEDUCTIVE ONE FOR ME”  
(MAHONEY, 2003a, P. 2)**

As an integrative weaver of threads of wisdom from traditions as diverse as behavioral, psychodynamic, humanistic and transpersonal psychologies, along with brain and evolutionary sciences, philosophy, sociology, and dynamic systems traditions, Michael increasingly appreciated the relevance of studies of complexity, intersubjective field theories, and spiritual/wisdom traditions to the practice of psychotherapy. Thus, “constructive metatheory may be a particularly promising candidate for the continuing exploration of ‘integrations’ and convergence among the major psychological theories” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 113). His seminal research on “human change processes” within and beyond psychotherapy demonstrated that complex, nonlinear processes are involved (Mahoney, 1991). Important to the project of integration, Michael consistently maintained that the most promising and appropriate goal of the human sciences was the understanding and explanation of general, abstract *principles*, not concrete, specific “particulars.”

Constructivism is a philosophy of human knowing that affords a broad spectrum of expressions and subtheories. Indeed, this integrative and transtheoretical capacity of constructivism appeals to me, as well as the fact that it is inherently an organic philosophy (i.e., one that is both capable of and dedicated to growing in response to the challenges it faces) (Mahoney, 2008, p. 25).

**WIDE INTERESTS AND DEEP INFLUENCE**

The beauty of Michael’s being was reflected in his diversity of interests. While he was unquestionably a brilliant scholar and researcher, an inspiring teacher, and a skilled and empathic therapist, Michael’s passions reached far deeper and beyond the academy, laboratory, and consulting

room. Early on, Michael's interest in change processes were merged with another that would take on a dominant theme in his life; Olympic weightlifting. Although initially interested in baseball and other aerobic sports, Michael was introduced to weightlifting due to his respiratory limitations related to asthma that he developed in his early 20s. Despite his diminutive physical stature at just over 5 feet (1.52 m), his success within the sport soon paralleled his other accomplishments, eventually leading him to becoming a national champion and regularly placing and medaling in world competition in various age classes over his lifetime. Michael's interest in competitive sport eventually led to foundational articles in the field of sports psychology, as well as his serving as a resident psychologist to the U.S. weightlifting team at the 1980 Moscow games and the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, CO.

Despite his many other accomplishments within and beyond the academy, Michael often spoke of his psychological and philosophical endeavors as secondary to his captivation by another muse; writing fiction and poetry. We were fortunate to hear the boyish joy in his voice as he would mention his labor of love that he had been developing for decades; a semiautobiographical novel recounting the era of his youthful free-spirited days and beyond. Michael's etymological and semantic obsessions and elfish humor shine through in his originally proposed title, *Good Head*, playing on his intellectual/cognitive, and perhaps, well, other interests. Although the novel remains unpublished, we are fortunate enough to currently have a completed book of his moving and provocative poetry, titled *Pilgrim in Process* and published in 2003 (Mahoney, 2003b).

The three of us are among those students whose lives were transformed by their encounters with Michael: Diane from 1975 to 1979 at Penn State, Andre from 1997 to 2002 at the University of North Texas, and Scott from 1995 to 2005 at the University of North Texas.

Diane valued most the many quiet conversations in Mike's office about clinical psychology, and once she became a faculty member, looked back with amazement that he made so much time for her when there must have been many demands on him. Knowing she wanted an academic job, he took on several writing opportunities mostly to offer her a chance to coauthor and build her vita. After her first year in the clinical program at Penn State, he asked her if she wanted to coauthor a chapter on cognitive and self-control therapies for the second edition of Garfield and Bergin's *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change* (Mahoney & Arnkoff, 1978), a thrilling prospect for a novice to be able to contribute to such an influential publication. At that time at least, Mike ordinarily went through very few drafts of anything he wrote; he wrote so well that he had to change only a few words and the article or chapter was finished. But there was one edit Diane suggested about which she felt strongly. A section of the chapter

described an early cognitive–behavioral approach in which a behavioral method was applied nearly without change in imagination to become a cognitive method, such as covert reinforcement (imagining being reinforced), covert modeling (imagining seeing a model), and so forth, which Mike believed was not a powerful use of cognition. In the first draft of the chapter, Mike described these methods as “like ships in a bottle.” Diane protested that the metaphor was too disparaging. Whereas Mike was an established psychologist, Diane didn’t want to be hated before she had even started out! Mike graciously agreed to mute the comparison. When it came time for Diane to apply for academic jobs, he wrote a glowing letter that pulled out all the stops. When a department chair who knew Mike invited her for an interview, he remarked, “Mike says you can walk on water. Is that true?” Diane was happy to count Mike as a friend through the rest of his life.

Andre recalls how willing Michael was to relinquish his classroom agenda if he felt that some class/group dynamic was interfering with the development of an optimal learning environment. In every course Andre took from him, he would—at some point in the semester—attend to some here-and-now event and process it with the class to remove barriers to our learning and to illuminate some aspect of the teaching/learning process. Michael recognized that creating a community of inquiry with good “group norms” was more foundational to an excellent class than merely covering all the material that he had planned to discuss that day.

One of the more common teaching-and-learning moments involved students’ looking to him to provide “the answer(s)” to a given problem, issue, or dilemma. He would, like most good graduate instructors, engage students in Socratic discussions. Andre remembers more than one occasion when a student became frustrated and eventually said (in an agitated manner) “OK, we’ve discussed this long enough, now tell us the answer.” Michael gave that student—and other students struggling under the tension of ambiguity—a gentle, compassionate, empathic look and said, “You *really* think I know (the answer to the present quandary), . . . don’t you?” This statement of his yielded different responses from different students, but his point was the same: With subjects such as personality theories, human change processes, or the history and systems of psychology, there are seldom simple, explicitly cut-and-dry, black-and-white “correct answers.” In other words, much of psychology and psychotherapy remains mysterious, nebulous, and contestable, and although his level of authority on such subjects certainly exceeded ours, he did not want to teach as a beacon or dispenser of knowledge as much as to facilitate our assuming an appropriate amount of authority that required students to assume responsibility and ownership for their intellectual positions and tentative conclusions on these uncertain issues (i.e., questions regarding the nature of the

self; how much we can reasonably expect clients to change; and what forms of therapy are most appropriate for what kinds of people with all of the complexities they bring with them). He was, in such moments, diminishing the differences in his level of authority in the discourse and ours—facilitating both our active engagement with inquiry itself, as well as an experiential understanding that such inquiry usually yields further questions rather than simple answers. It was also in such instances that his capacities to revel in the uncertainties and Mystery of existence shone forth (Agnew, 2008); as he wrote, “the living is a loving in itself, and the secret is to ever be in quest” (Mahoney, 2003b, p. 63, adapted from Marquis, 2008).

For Scott, many of the aforementioned qualities and examples ring true: that Michael was relentlessly available, passionately engaged, and intellectually open and honest. He recalls the first encounter with Michael in a History and Systems course in which Michael took the time at the beginning of the first class meeting to inform the students that he would have to apologize if he appeared somewhat disoriented or otherwise odd, but that he had spent the last two weeks of the preceding holiday break at a silent Vipassana meditation retreat. The manner in which he would self-disclose so honestly to an unknown group of students in such a traditionally conservative atmosphere was both striking and inspiring for this author.

Scott also appreciated Michael’s efforts to both support and challenge students and the dynamic flexibility of his pedagogical approach. On one occasion, when it appeared that a class of students in a course on Constructivism was beaten down by the weight of the demands of their various academic programs, Michael simply elected to remove the major term paper from his syllabus and instead opted for an ongoing in-class “fish-bowl” type processing in which four students would gather at the center of the room to relate whatever they were willing to share as the remaining class observed from without. In clinical training courses, Scott recalls Michael’s uncanny ability to access the deepest emotions when conducting psychotherapy role plays and the complex and vivid characters that he was able to create from his clinical and personal experience. He seemed remarkably attuned to the developmental needs of each student in constructing patients for them to work with that would best address both their strengths and weaknesses.

However, as alluded to earlier, the most poignant memories for Scott are much less the professional or educational ones, but how personal, supportive, and truly empathic Michael could be in one’s time of need. Whether disclosing a difficult decision to leave the psychology program to which he had worked to ensure acceptance, sharing the struggle of coping with a mentally ill and drug-addicted parent, processing the loss of a romantic relationship, or discussing how Scott had failed on a number of

occasions to meet personal and professional obligations to him, Michael was always there; selflessly guiding him toward his growing edge and expanding his conception of what it means to be human. Therein rests the most moving memory and the deepest gratitude.

However, despite all of the accomplishments and endeavors, the appreciations and the platitudes, one stark and perplexing fact remains: In late May, 2006, Michael Mahoney—erudite scholar, compassionate educator and counselor, ceaseless proponent of therapist self-care—took his own life. It would be a dishonor to Michael to compose all of this and yet deny that brute existential reality and the resulting paradox; a reflection of his own rallying cry against the discipline's denial of suffering found in his last writings (Mahoney, 2005). Some of us may have had some insight into the complexity of his character and some limited knowledge of his shadow side within, but it is doubtful anyone had any indication of a forthcoming tragedy such as this. Undeniably, Michael had been deeply affected by the loss of his dear friend, Vittorio Guidano, in 1999 and had more than his share of infighting all too common to academic departments, but it was hoped that he was off to a bright, fresh start in his new home in Rhode Island and position at Salve Regina University in the fall of 2005. In the face of his death, the rationales fail. With his passing, we are left with so many, many open questions, perhaps most acutely: How does one reconcile the life of the man with the life of his work? One alternative, were it a conscious choice of his or not, could be that the mode of Michael's death creates a dialectical openness to his narrative reflected so often in his writings and his being. Michael was not simply this or that; he was, as we all are, infinitely complex. Maybe we should not be so presumptuous to consider our interpretations final or our conclusions sound. We must strive to abide as openly as can be in the not-knowing and compassionately embrace even the suffering and tragedy of his end.

Between the three of us, we were privileged to be in continual contact with Michael for most of the past 25 years. Throughout that time, Michael expressed the same warm engaging smile, the elfin twinkle in his eyes, his genuine interest in people's lives, his insatiable desire for knowledge, and his understanding of and compassion for human suffering. Michael ended his essay "Philosophy, Psychology, and Suffering" with "one of those compassionate crystals that deserves to be shared widely" (Mahoney, 2005, p. 349); so we share it:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither over a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

I have sought love, first because it brings ecstasy—ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of my life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness—that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss. I have sought it, finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it may seem too good for human life, this is what—at last—I have found.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered to me. (Russell, 1967, pp. 3–4)

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