Michael J. Mahoney (1946–2006)

Michael J. Mahoney made immeasurable contributions to the field of psychology as an influential researcher, a prolific writer, and an innovative pioneer in bringing constructivist philosophy into psychotherapy. A deep thinker, a revolutionary-spirited theorist, and a passionate philosopher, Michael challenged the dominant paradigms of behavioral and cognitive psychology, inspiring psychologists to consider ever more complex models of human experience, to think in a more interdisciplinary way, and to relate more compassionately to the inevitable human experiences of suffering and change.

Michael’s professional and personal evolution can be seen by tracing the line from his first scholarly publication as a 23-year-old student (in collaboration with David Rimm), “The Application of Reinforcement and Participant Modeling Procedures in the Treatment of Snake-Phobic Behavior” ( Behaviour Research and Therapy, 1969, 7, 369–376), to one of his last articles, “Suffering, Philosophy, and Psychotherapy” ( Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 2005, 15, 337–352). Through them one can observe his change from an observing behaviorist, to a thinking behaviorist, to a constructivist, and ultimately to a constructivist as the founding editor of Cognitive Therapy and Research, and later as the editor of Constructivism (1996–2005), the journal of the Society for Constructivism in the Human Sciences, Michael helped to shape the discourse of the cognitive revolution. In all, Michael authored or edited 18 academic books and more than 250 articles and book chapters. Many consider Human Change Processes (1991) to be his magnum opus, which brought constructivist thought into the psychological mainstream.

Michael was born February 22, 1946, in Streator, Illinois, to Daniel F. and Zeta E. Fitzgibbons Mahoney. He grew up in Illinois and attended Joliet Junior College before completing his bachelor of arts degree at Arizona State University in 1969. There, a personal encounter with Milton H. Erickson inspired him to become a psychology major. He received his doctorate in psychology from Stanford University in 1972 under the mentorship of Albert Bandura. During his career, he taught at Pennsylvania State University, the University of California, Santa Barbara, the University of North Texas, and Salve Regina University in Providence, Rhode Island. He died in his home on May 31, 2006, suddenly and tragically. Michael is survived by his son Sean M. Mahoney, his son’s wife Elizabeth, his daughter Maureen Mahoney, his brother Patrick Mahoney, and his sister Margaret.

News of Michael’s death shocked and saddened family, friends, and colleagues throughout the psychology community. Hundreds of messages of sympathy quickly accumulated at his on-line memorial site, revealing the range and depth of his influence, both in the United States and around the world. A clear and consistent theme was evident in those messages: His vast intellectual accomplishments notwithstanding, Michael will be remembered most by those who knew him as an inspiring and caring human being who felt genuine compassion and empathy for the pain and suffering of others.

Michael’s sensitivity to human suffering and the struggle for existential meaning was heavily influenced by Viktor Frankl’s writings about his search for meaning following the horrors of his concentration camp experiences during World War II. Michael was deeply affected by his personal encounter with Frankl at his home in Vienna shortly before Frankl’s death in the early 1990s. Michael came to understand that life itself encompassed inevitable challenges, complexities, suffering, and tragedy, and he became increasingly concerned that these qualities of human existence were not being adequately addressed by the cognitive behavioral therapies. In his essay “Suffering, Philosophy, and Psychotherapy” (2005), Michael poignantly summarized his views of current developments in the field of psychology and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). Addressing the underlying biases of Western philosophy that tend to separate body and mind and to privilege rational thought over more holistic processes, Michael lamented how these biases have contributed to a dehumanization of the field of psychology, especially in the areas of psychotherapy, science, mentoring, and academic excellence. In his essay, Michael observed that while “pain and suffering are the primary motivators for seeking psychotherapy . . . psychotherapy has become a profession that specializes in pain and suffering without getting too close to them” (p. 347). Michael was especially concerned that the CBT formula for the good life was becoming too simplistic, with so much emphasis on modifying maladaptive behaviors and straightening out “crooked” thinking, while ignoring the existential realities of human existence and the inherent struggle therein.

While acknowledging the usefulness of behavioral and cognitive techniques, Michael emphasized that genuine empathy and compassion are the sine qua non of successful psychotherapy. He felt that a critical component of psychotherapy and human change involved the psychotherapist’s being present with, and affirming, clients in their efforts to experience happiness and create meaning out of their existence against the backdrop of inevitable human pain and suffering. I recall witnessing firsthand, in the early 1980s, Michael’s presence during “streaming sessions” that he conducted with clients during our clinic team practicum at Penn State University. While as students we had some difficulty conceptualizing Michael’s streaming sessions within a cognitive–behavioral framework—he saw his sessions as akin to free association—we were struck and deeply moved by the care, concern, and compassion that Michael conveyed to his clients during streaming and the degree of personal validation and affirmation they felt as a result.

Michael made it his life quest to influence the direction and evolution of the field of psychology and to make
it more humanistic, compassionate, and genuinely scientific. He challenged psychologists to become aware of the philosophic underpinnings of their own practices and interpersonal relationships. In “Suffering, Philosophy, and Psychotherapy” (2005), Michael expressed his concerns about the corruption of the scientific spirit and how some have turned science into scientism:

Science is dogmatic faith and rigid closure, often accompanied by condescending arrogance and insularity . . . scientism presupposes its own superiority and rules out any respectful dialogue with proponents of methods, questions, or findings that it deems to be outside the “one true way.” (p. 344)

By contrast, Michael asserted,

Science is a humble openness to discourse . . . . Science is about questions, about quests. The best questions are those that explore the edges or center of our understanding. The best answers are those that lead to better questions and further quests. (pp. 343, 345)

As a scientist himself, Michael continued to question his own conclusions and never accepted any algorithmic formulas for human experience and change.

In the same essay, Michael passionately voiced his concerns about the lack of adequate mentoring and the erosion of excellence in our graduate schools:

Graduate training in psychology is supposed to be about human relationship skills and communication, yet many of the faculty cannot or do not communicate with one another. The learning atmosphere is all too often toxic, and students who survive their training frequently must do so at tremendous personal and emotional costs. (p. 346)

Michael was especially concerned that devoted, personal mentoring was all but absent from our psychology graduate training programs, along with the notion of therapist self-care. He openly shared in his writings and lectures how painful it was for him to witness the frequent harm that therapists inadvertently caused themselves, noting that “some of the most compassionate therapists I know are the least compassionate and forgiving with themselves” (p. 348).

While Michael was at the cutting edge of the evolution of psychology and psychotherapy, he was also a man of diverse interests. Though small in physical size, Michael was a weightlifter and continued his involvement in international weightlifting competitions throughout his 40s and 50s, winning several national championships. In 1980 he was a resident psychologist to the U.S. Olympic Weightlifting Team in Moscow. He also published a book of poetry (Pilgrim in Process: Collected Poems, 2003) and wrote a novel near the end of his life that remains unpublished.

Beyond his many accomplishments, Michael will long be remembered by those who knew him for his transformative encounters on a personal level. Michael was an extraordinarily warm, loving, and caring human being. He was a humanist in the truest sense. Emotional communication was Michael’s primary language. Michael himself experienced the wide range of human emotions throughout his life and profoundly touched the lives of many people around the world with whom he came into contact. He had a penchant for personally affirming and validating students, clients, and colleagues—the seekers and wanderers—struggling in their quest to make sense of their lives. Michael had a manner and an aura about him that left others feeling deeply touched, affirmed, and validated. What was so amazing about Michael was his uncanny, natural ability to have such a profound—and often transforming!—effect on the lives of people with only a minimal amount of direct face-to-face contact with them. For many, a brief face-to-face meeting with Michael was akin to having an encounter with a Zen master.

I was one of those fortunate students whose life was transformed by my encounters with Michael during my years as a graduate student in clinical psychology at Pennsylvania State University. At a low point while in graduate school, I went to Michael for help. In his unassuming and supportive manner, Michael listened intently and then minutes later graciously offered to become my advisor and mentor. After that, Michael’s door was always open. At times, I remember knocking on his door while he was dictating a book chapter onto an audiotape. After finishing his sentence, he would turn off the tape recorder, welcome me with a warm smile, and be totally present with me while I shared with him what was on my mind. He had a way of offering powerful encouragement and support with very few spoken words. Michael “accompanied me” with his personal support and affirmation through my apprehensive taking of comprehensive exams and my dissertation writing and defense. I shall always remember how, at the very end of my dissertation defense, Michael looked at me with a reassuring smile and said with conviction in his voice, “Merv, you are an excellent writer. Don’t ever stop believing in your abilities.” Michael’s words of affirmation and validation in that setting had a profound—and transforming—effect on my developing professional self and personal schemata. Reflecting on Michael’s death has made me aware that his words to me 25 years ago have accompanied me throughout my entire professional life and remain very much alive within me today.

My last contact with Michael was in 2005 at the International Congress of Cognitive Psychotherapy in Gothenburg, Sweden, after the public conversation between the Dalai Lama and Aaron T. Beck. I saw in him then the same warm engaging smile, the 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.

One of Michael’s favorite quotes was from Bertrand Russell’s preface to his 1967 autobiography, and it eloquently summarizes Michael’s approach to life:

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

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