

Obituary

Michael Mahoney (1946-2006)

Michael J. Mahoney, age 60, of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, USA, died in his home on May 31, 2006. Michael was born on Feb. 22, 1946 in Streator, Illinois, USA.

Michael was my friend and colleague from the time I met him in 1991, shortly before I was hired as a beginning professor in his department at the University of North Texas. When I say that Michael was my friend, I know the enormity of the company in which that places me. Only a brief survey of his on-line obituary and message-page reveals the scores of people from literally all over the planet who knew Michael as an extraordinary person, and an extraordinary friend.

Michael's professional vita was as extensive as any could be, and peppered with contributions that affected the course of psychological thought and psychotherapeutic practice on par with the most influential writers of the latter half of the twentieth century. He began his prolific scholarly productivity with the publication of *'The application of reinforcement and participant modeling procedures in the treatment of snake-phobic behavior'* in *Behaviour Research and Therapy* (1969, Volume 7, pp. 369-376, in collaboration with David Rimm) while Michael was still a student. Even in this earliest of his publications, one could see a tableau of what was quickly to come: Michael's turn to the importance of internal processes as important to therapeutic change. Thus, by the early 1970's, Michael was writing about 'covert' and self-regulatory processes...writings that would become important foundational pillars in what was later called the 'cognitive revolution' in psychology. As the revolutionary became the ordinary (by virtue of its success), Michael never lost his taste for pressing against the edges of the comfort zone of mainstream psychology. As early as 1976, with the publication of his oft-cited book entitled, *'Scientist as Subject: The Psychological Imperative,'* Michael began pointing therapists and researchers toward the complex wisdom and self-organizing capacities of human beings, re-

gardless of which side of the couch (or laboratory apparatus) they might be occupying. So, while many of the other pioneers of the cognitive age within psychology were busy enthroning their theories (and themselves?) with the trappings of orthodoxy, Michael was forging ahead into constructivism, autopoiesis, and other postmodern conceptions of human beings, how they live, and how they change. By way of this pioneering spirit and voracious incorporation of theoretical and philosophical work far afield from what most psychologists read, Michael played a central role in bringing constructivist thought to the breadth of the field of psychology by the end of the twentieth century, in no small measure due to his book, *'Human Change Processes'* published in 1991. For the last 15 years of his life, he continued developing and extending these boundaries of psychological thought, publishing another half-dozen books, two dozen book chapters, and nearly three dozen journal articles. Michael's body of scholarly contributions shows a rare combination of prolific quantity, ingenious depth, and far-flung influence.

As extensive and influential as his professional writings have been, I would argue that they were the mere entree into the hearts of persons not yet introduced personally to Michael-the-man. Having known how Michael impacted me, and having seen his impact on dozens of graduate students and professional colleagues we have known in common, over the years I have often pondered over exactly how he was able to have such a profound effect on people, often with seemingly little quantity of contact. Certainly, with his passing and with the sharing of grief amongst those of us who knew him, I have pondered this all the more deeply. I find myself little closer now to the knowledge of 'how he did it' than ever. But I have abstracted a single observation that I rely upon to anchor my own memories of Michael: Michael believed that humanity is interconnected with all of humanity and with all

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of nature, and he made it his life's quest to acknowledge and magnify that connection. This made emotional communication Michael's primary language. This incredible talent may have become Michael's most dangerous vulnerability...he experienced and expressed his emotions at a level most human beings simply never access. Those of us who experienced those connections with and expressions from Michael over the years remain in awe of their depth, their sincerity, and their life-changing meanings.

Michael's accomplishments and choices are now part of our collective human and cosmic history. As with all mourning, the crucial choices yet to be made lie with the mourners. How will we remember Michael J. Mahoney? The funniest 'joke' Michael ever told me addressed this very point. Michael, embracing his Irish heritage, could perform a mean Irish brogue; so his affinity for this story likely rested with its ample opportunity to employ the Irish accent. The story begins with an American in a pub in rural Ireland. Noticing that many of the locals seemed to be addressed by nicknames rather than proper names, he approached a grizzled Irishman downing a warm ale and asked, "*What do they call you, Mister?*" The old man explained and complained (all with Michael's Irish brogue) how he had done many things in his life, such as building barns, constructing stone fences, brewing quality ales, and the like...all of which would have made for good monikers. "*But do you think they call me 'O'Malley the Barn-Builder' or 'O'Malley the Fence-Builder' or 'O'Malley the Ale-Brewer'?* NO!!! *They don't call me any of those things. But...a fellow makes love to just ONE GOAT...*"

Michael's life was lived with much vigor, power, and emotional generosity. He chose to give us those things as gifts. He also made choices in the ending of his life that we may never comprehend. But how we will remember Michael remains our choice...our responsibility. I

will remember the sense of humor (and yes, the exaggerated Irish inflections during his 'just ONE GOAT...' story). I will remember his ability to connect with and validate the existence of the many wanderers and seekers who came his way (myself included). I will remember the mighty (though diminutive) man who lifted weights above his head as if to dare gravity to fight him. I will remember my friend. What will you remember?

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REFERENCE

Sewell, K. W. (2006). Michael Mahoney (1946-2006). *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 3, 14-15.

(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp06/sewell-mahoney06.pdf>)

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EDITORS' NOTE

Readers may be interested in Michael Mahoney's Autobiographical Reflections published in 2000: *Behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism: Reflections on persons and patterns in my intellectual development*. In M. R. Goldfried (Ed.) (2000). *How therapists change: Personal and professional reflections* (pp. 183-200). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Also at: http://www.constructivist.net/mahoney/Autobiography_2001.htm

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