

Behind That Intimidating Exterior: A Tribute to “Uncle Michael” Scriven

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Real Evaluation & the Faster Forward Fund

Kia ora koutou—hi everyone. My name is Jane Davidson. I am delighted to contribute this short piece, which I hope will give you a slightly more personal feel for Michael Scriven, who was a mentor, friend, and colleague of mine for 26 years.

By way of background, I am originally from Aotearoa New Zealand, where I grew up and have spent most of my life. These days, I am grateful to be living on the traditional lands of the Duwamish tribe, who have been the custodians of Seattle and its surrounding areas since time immemorial.

I'm also an alum of Claremont Graduate University, where I completed my doctorate as an international student who had just arrived in the States for the first time. At the beginning of my second year in the program, in the fall of 1997, Michael Scriven joined the faculty.

Into the Fire: Michael's First Evaluation Class

I remember distinctly the very first class that Michael taught at Claremont Graduate University. It was a pretty full enrollment, and a lot of students and faculty from across the Claremont Colleges were also sitting in to listen to what Michael had to say.

Michael cast his eyes around the room and launched into some introductory thoughts about the nature of evaluation, with the inevitable sprinklings of philosophy. It was quite heavy-duty stuff, and he also had a fairly organic speaking style, so most of us were never entirely sure of where he was going ... and then all of a

Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation
Volume 20, Issue 47, 2024

JMDE
Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation

ISSN 1556-8180
<http://www.jmde.com>

sudden, he stopped and said, “What’s the problem with that?”

Pretty much the entire class, including me, was trying to figure out, “Errr, what’s the problem with what??!” Most of us had been completely lost in Michael’s stratospheric philosophical meanderings and had no idea what the question was referring to. Remember, this was long before the days of automatic transcribers and other miraculous tools!

So there we were, feeling Michael’s question fly right over our heads. All of us, that was, except for one of my classmates, a particularly brilliant guy called Rick Strycker. Rick was one of the few who had studied philosophy before and was—miraculously—actually following what Michael was saying.

So, Rick piped up with a possible answer, the details of which I can no longer recall, but I remember thinking it sounded impressive and was certainly way above my head. I was just relieved that someone had answered intelligently so that Michael wouldn’t be utterly appalled at the caliber of the students in front of him.

Michael’s response: “Well, that’s a bit vacuous, isn’t it?”

A mixture of gasps and giggles rippled through the classroom.

At that point, almost every one of the students—especially those who’d come straight out of undergrad and felt particularly intimidated—swore silently that they would NEVER raise their hands to answer a question in Michael’s class.

A story like this will feel very familiar to anyone who took a class or a workshop from Michael. I think it’s fair to say that he had a

reputation for being intimidating. He was bringing this Oxford University–style Socratic method of teaching, which most of us hadn't experienced before. It was like being on the front row of the rollercoaster at Magic Mountain (an amusement park in Southern California) and one heck of a white-knuckle ride.

Understanding Where Someone Comes From Helps Us Understand Where They Are Coming From

Over the years, several of us got to know a lot more about Michael as a human. As we often say back in Aotearoa New Zealand, when you understand where someone has come from in terms of their ancestry, their culture, and their life experiences, you can get a better understanding of where they are coming from in what they say and how they work.

So, I want to share with you a few things that I know shaped who Michael was and therefore how he approached his life and his work.

Early Experiences as a Loner

At the age of 6, Michael's parents sent him off to boarding school. As he was being dropped off, he recalls one of the school staff saying to his mother, "Now, we don't like the parents to come back and visit for at least 6 months, because it unsettles the children." Poor little Michael burst into tears, devastated that he would be away from them for so long.

Michael was born in 1928, so he was 11 when World War II began. His dad was a fighter pilot in the British air force, and that was totally what Michael wanted to do when he grew up. He absolutely loved fast cars, fast planes, anything with speed and thrills.

So, he was actually quite irritated when the war ended in 1945, while he was still 17 and too young to join the air force. That torpedoed that career idea, and Michael went off to explore other options.

During the war, his mother, who was Australian, decided that they should move away from the danger in England and spend some time in Australia. Over the years, they traveled back and forth by ship, which was a several-months-long voyage each time.

I took my own kids to visit Michael 6 years ago, and one of the questions they were curious about was what it was like to travel on a big ship between Australia and England. Like being in a

huge, floating hotel, he said. The kids on board would play together over the months that the journey took, then say goodbye and never see each other again.

As a kid growing up on two continents and at sea, this to-and-fro life between Australia and England repeatedly ripped Michael away from every friend he ever knew, which he said was incredibly hard, and as an adult he had no friends from back then who he kept in contact with.

So, it's not surprising that many of these experiences turned him into something of a loner.

Professionally, Michael wrote and worked solo most of the time, only occasionally collaborating on larger projects or papers. For example, in all the 26 years we spent talking and thinking together, we never once worked on an evaluation together, we only ever coauthored one book chapter, and we collaborated on running a few workshops at AEA and other conferences as he got older and found them difficult to run solo, but that was it.

The Meeting of the Minds (and Hearts!) That Changed Everything

Those of us who majored in psychology know that early experiences, like being dropped off at boarding school at the age of 6 and having repeatedly broken childhood friendships, can make it difficult to form secure attachments in relationships later in life. So, it's not surprising that this tall, blond genius reportedly had a series of stunning girlfriends on his arm in his younger years but for a long time resisted any pressure to settle down.

But then everything changed when he met the absolute love of his life, Mary Anne Warren. She was a student of his initially, so of course he wouldn't cross any lines there. But then he transferred away from the institution where they met, and she came after him, insisting that they should be together.

Mary Anne was 18 years his junior, and Michael said that he felt that this would be, in his words, "corrupting the youth of America," so he resisted for a long time. But eventually she prevailed, and so began a truly amazing love story. Mary Anne was a professor of feminist philosophy and absolutely brilliant as well, so it was an epic meeting of the minds as well as the hearts. She had a huge influence on helping Michael see the world through more of a critical feminist lens, a much-needed intervention for any white guy born in 1928, so we can certainly thank her for that.



Mary Anne Warren and Michael Scriven in Point Reyes, CA.

Michael's Tough Exterior as a Professional Shield for His Much Softer Core

As many colleagues will remember, Michael was very keen that evaluation be independent and that evaluators not get too close to program staff, to ensure that their conclusions would not be inappropriately sympathetic or positively biased. Of course, other colleagues, such as Michael Quinn Patton (MQP) and many others, argued just the opposite, saying that the best way to get evaluation used was to work closely with these people, not just keep them at a distance.

I recall, at the American Evaluation Association conference one year, Michael Scriven remarking to MQP that he was nothing more than “a wolf in sheep’s clothing”—coming in all friendly and collaborative and then putting the

knife in when it came to giving feedback. MQP retorted that Michael was actually “a sheep in wolf’s clothing”—pretending to come in all rigid and distanced when the opposite was actually the case.

MQP was right about this. Despite that intimidating persona, those who knew Michael Scriven well understood that he was absolutely as soft as butter; he had an instinctive need to be kind to people that he liked. In fact, one of the reasons he was advocating for keeping the program staff at arm’s length was precisely because he knew that he would find it incredibly hard to tell them a difficult truth if he spent any time connecting with them in a meaningful way. And I think what he was saying at the time was that MQP was probably better at that and could tell a hard truth to people he was close to. But that wasn’t really in Michael Scriven’s makeup; he couldn’t work like that, and so he had to maintain a distance instead.

Michael's Work on Evaluation Theory: "The Nature of the Beast"

Michael's most important contributions were to evaluation theory, and he used an approach quite different from everyone else's. Most evaluation theories tend to center on a particular approach to doing evaluation or getting something crucial right—whether it's culturally responsive, utilization-focused, theory-driven, or whatever.

Michael was more interested in what he called "the nature of the beast." What is evaluation, at its core? What is distinctive about what we do, compared to various adjacent professions and disciplines?

The most important piece, in my view, was clarifying that evaluation is fundamentally about "values." People tend to misunderstand this part, so how I break it down is this: Evaluation is fundamentally about asking and answering *evaluative* questions. That means asking not just what happened, but whether it was good, worthwhile, and—very importantly—ethical. When it came to answering those questions, Michael's focus was on the logic and evaluative reasoning needed to do so validly.

Ethics, Equity, and Environmental Sustainability

As a philosopher married to a philosopher, Michael spent a great deal of time thinking and talking about ethics, including with his wife Mary Anne Warren, who was a specialist in feminist ethics. Michael was adamant not only that good evaluation should be conducted ethically, but that ethical analysis should be applied to programs and policies themselves. An example he often pointed to was Mary Anne's ethical analysis of abortion clinics, which he considered to be a powerful example in a controversial space.

In recent years, Michael and I delved deeper into this topic. He agreed that an important part of the ethical analysis of policies and programs is checking to see how equitable they are—particularly how well they serve those who have historically been least advantaged in society. And secondly, ethical analysis should always cover environmental sustainability, because a program that helps people while destroying the natural environment on which we all depend is ethically unsound.

Although many others have developed these topics to much greater levels of detail since then,

I do credit Michael with helping us to send value-free social science packing and to make sure that values like equity and sustainability are front and center in our work.

The Faster Forward Fund

I am not sure this was ever a regret for Michael, but I have often wished that he and Mary Anne had had children, because they would surely be brilliant, thoughtful, and fascinating humans! Instead, Michael leaves behind several generations of intellectual offspring, those of us who have learned from and been influenced by his work.

In his final few years, Michael decided that he wished to leave his estate to the discipline of evaluation, focusing in particular on the things that were closest to his heart. Important parts of the backdrop here were Michael's left-wing political leanings. He once told me that one reason why he applied for American citizenship was so that he could freely speak out with views that would have been labeled "communist" at the time, without fear of being deported.

Michael was very adamantly progressive in his views and felt that a strong society should always be looking to support those who had not enjoyed the same multigenerational advantages as some others. He also argued that poor evaluation cost people at least 15% of their income when they wasted time or money on things that weren't effective. So, to him, evaluation was an important avenue for putting the right information in the hands of those who needed it most, as well as a powerful voice for speaking out against programs and policies that continued to exacerbate societal inequities.

Michael always had an affinity for mavericks, people who dare to try outside-the-box ideas with the potential to break us out of limited ways of thinking and show a path to better ways of doing things to build a more equitable society for all. In the evaluation space, he felt it was difficult for mavericks to find funding for these ideas, so he wanted to find a way to support clever "moonshot" ideas that more traditional funding sources usually wouldn't touch. And so the idea of the Faster Forward Fund (3F) was born. Things are a little in limbo while Michael's estate is settled, but we hope to be up and running later in 2024 and invite you all to stay tuned.

Final Thoughts

I think every single one of us has been influenced by some of Michael's thinking in some way, even if we didn't align with all of what he said. Many of us were also blessed to know this intellectual giant on a more personal level, which put some of his musings into a clearer context. I hope this short piece helps a few more understand where "Uncle Michael" was coming from in some of the things he said, and perhaps there was even something that surprised you.

Michael was one of a kind, that's for sure, and I know my life took a much more interesting trajectory because of him. I feel lucky to have been able to thank him in person in the months leading up to his final departure. As we joked with him back at Claremont Graduate University, if we atheists turned out to be wrong, he would surely be spending some time at the Pearly Gates debating with Saint Peter about his admission criteria!