

## **Obituaries**

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IN MEMORY OF MICHAEL A. THALBOURNE WHO DIED MAY 4, 2010



It is with deep regret that I announce the passing of Michael Anthony Thalbourne (Maitreya). He died in the Royal Adelaide Hospital, on May 4, 2010, after being in a coma for over two days. Michael was born on March 24, 1955, in Adelaide, South Australia. Professionally, he will be remembered as a psychologist and parapsychologist of considerable merit. Family members and friends will remember him as a loving, convivial and supportive soul, while scholars who knew Michael well, will remember him as a trusted colleague and academic.

Michael set the standard from an early age. Excelling in his studies, he achieved continued success at school. His teachers had great expectations of him. He didn't let them down. Usually topping his class—and it was not unusual for him to get perfect scores—he was not only a dux student at St. Paul's College, but was top student in the state of South Australia. Naturally, he went on to study at university.

Interested from an early age in all things paranormal, and subsequent to earning Ordinary and Honours Degrees at the University of Adelaide, Michael headed for Scotland to embark on a rigorous education in parapsychology. He was one of the first to complete a Ph.D. in parapsychology, supervised by the late Dr. John Beloff, at the Koestler Parapsychology Unit, Edinburgh University. He met and befriended many a fledgling parapsychologist, most of whom are now guiding lights in the parapsychological community today.

After graduation, Michael worked for short spells in Iceland and India with Professor Erlendur Haraldsson, researching such challenging topics as reincarnation, and the psi abilities of the Indian mystic Sai Baba. He then took up a post as a junior parapsychologist in the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research at Washington University in St. Louis,

Missouri, working under the supervision of Dr. Peter R. Phillips (see picture below). It was in the so-called 'Mac-Lab' that Michael's colleagues came under attack by the infamous and now ailing hard-nosed skeptic and magician James Randi, who sought to discredit Mac-Lab staff using a 'sociological experiment' that most university departments would reject as unethical. He had two of his poorly trained magicians infiltrate the lab so they could indulge in deceptive practices that included cheating and all manner of fraud to see if they would be detected. This reprehensible behaviour did not go undetected, and no published works ever emerged from Randi's farcical escapade. Nevertheless, Randi launched a press conference in New York to reveal the deception without informing Dr. Phillips or other Mac-Lab staff of his intentions. Ultimately, the Mac-Lab closed down due to funding problems.



Staff of the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research, Washington University, 1982 (standing, left to right, Dr. Peter Phillips, Janet Jungkuntz and Mark G. Shafer; in front, left to right, Michael Thalbourne and Michael McBeath).

As an aside, it was about this time, in his late twenties, that Michael developed bipolar disorder (manic-depression). Michael would often try to see the 'good' side of his mania, claiming, as he mentions in the article on transliminality above (see p. 75), that mania gives "optimistic elation" and

“often pleasant but unpremeditated delusions.” But as Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung once said, “my work will be continued by those who suffer”, and Michael in his suffering from the highs and lows of bipolar disorder and psychosis would gain insights and inspirations that few can rival or muster. These influences are most telling in the advantages they gave him in seeing things with clarity that others only glimpsed as if through a glass darkly. Michael would make associations, connections, and correspondences; he would try to see patterns in the fabric of this reality, and others. Accordingly, he would conjecture and propose novel ideas; launch new theories; and muse over and write about the possible, the not so possible, and the unequivocally impossible. Thereby, Michael held his own as a unique and innovative researcher. There is no telling where Michael would have gone with his ideas but, sadly, these are now lost to the world.

After leaving the Mac-Lab, Michael returned to Australia, and took up a position in the School of Psychology as a Visiting Research Fellow (VRF) at his *alma mater* the University of Adelaide. For a good two decades, and more, Michael published numerous articles, and I have it on good authority that the income he generated from his publications alone often helped balance the School’s books. In 1998, Michael took on the role of supervisor of my Honours thesis, and went on to supervise me during my Ph.D. years from 1999 to 2001, so I owe him a huge personal debt. From that time, we worked on a number of research projects, funded or otherwise, and co-authored more than a dozen articles.

In 2001, while still a VRF, Michael ventured into the arena of journal editing by launching (with Robb Tilley’s assistance) the peer-reviewed *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*. At that time Michael had already taken on the role of President of the Australian Institute of Parapsychological Research, Inc. (AIPR), and his first task was to consolidate the AIPR (founded in 1977) as the leading institute in parapsychological research in Australia. While there are many amateur paranormal investigation groups throughout Australia, none of these has created such an environment for the furtherance of academic research as Michael achieved with the AIPR by collaborating with parapsychological communities on the national and international scene. For five years, and ten issues, Michael assiduously and skilfully edited the journal before handing it over to me in 2006. I have endeavoured to keep the flame burning that Michael lit a decade ago, and our journal is now in its tenth year, and still going strong.

Often, however, a career can take a turn for the worse, and the nadir of Michael’s career must surely be his sudden, dreadful and unnecessary demise at the University of Adelaide. In 2007, the School of Psychology administration decided that parapsychology would no longer figure in the School’s research profile, leading Michael to resign out of sheer frustration.

Though his academic freedom had been depotentiated by the powers-that-be, Michael didn't make his decision lightly, as he knew full well that his VRF appointment and contact with the university were major constants in his life, and for a man with his delicate demeanour there was considerable risk involved in abandoning the relative security that the university offered. Nevertheless, over the last couple of years in semi-retirement, Michael kept his chin up for the most part, and continued to work from his humble flat in Kurralta Park. As is evidenced by our journal and many others, his publication output maintained the same steady rate that was typical of Michael, which is a credit to him, given the restrictions forced on him by not having the resources of a university behind him.

Around this time, Michael expressed some frustration about the restrictions on psi research (see Correspondence, pp. 110-112), and sometimes it would appear that his occasionally disturbing actions were precipitated by this state of affairs. However, he shared with his colleagues a vision of a light at the end of the tunnel, and for the most part he remained optimistic and cheerful to the end. Sadly, it was over the weekend of April 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> that Michael slipped into unconsciousness while snuggled up in his bed. He was discovered by his parents and taken immediately to hospital, but sadly passed away while still in a coma on Tuesday night April 4<sup>th</sup>. (At the time of writing, the cause of Michael's death is still unknown.)

From an email sent by Michael's brother Bryan to Michael's many friends and colleagues on the news of his passing: "As his brother I have been privileged to know him for 50 years and it helps to know that you have held him in high esteem." I can only confirm Bryan's sentiment. In the fleeting 12 years that I have known Michael as a supervisor and colleague, but most importantly as a friend, I will always recall with fondness, admiration, and respect, Michael's gentle manner, his extensive knowledge, and his unremitting support, oftentimes under, and in spite of, the pressures brought on by his occasional suffering.

Michael's legacy lives on in his vast *oeuvre*. To his undying credit, and society's and academia's everlasting benefit, he wrote or co-wrote hundreds of peer-reviewed journal articles, papers, and letters (see below, his CV, pp. 95-109); he co-edited two books on parapsychology, compiled his pivotal *Glossary of Terms Use in Parapsychology* (2003), and penned his thought-provoking monograph on Psychopraxia, *The Common Thread Between ESP and PK* (2004).

At a more personal level, it is only just dawning on me, and slowly cutting deeper and deeper, the inexpressible loss I feel in Michael's passing. No longer can I seek out his thoughts on a given topic, or depend on him for an obscure psychological or parapsychological reference, or consult his vast encyclopaedic knowledge, or (and what I miss the most) chat over a lunch-time hamburger at his favourite fast-food restaurant. From the depths of my

being, and on behalf of Michael's family, his many friends, and especially the psychological and parapsychological communities worldwide, and in harmony with the words of French songstress Edith Piaf, "death is the beginning of something", we send our love and gratitude to you Michael wherever you are. You were, and are, an inspiration to us all. You are sadly missed.

—Lance Storm

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#### MICHAEL THALBOURNE IS NOT DEAD

Michael Thalbourne is not dead, unburdened now, with no body to slow him down. He is free—unbounded in time and space, wandering the multiverse and having a good look around. We can summon him back with our emotional thoughts when we recall him.

This journal, the *Australian Journal of Parapsychology* (*AJPara*), was Michael's idea; the cover design and colours are also his. Michael's knowledge and enthusiasm got us started. Michael is a scholar and a gentleman.

I had an odd dream that night of his passing. I found two old worn-out copies of *AJPara* in a derelict storeroom full of junk and discarded items; the place felt like an old department store with things covered in dust; the place had fallen into disuse.

In the dream I couldn't remember ever publishing these two issues—one *AJPara* had a clear plastic cellophane bubble on the cover with some kind of metallic gadget rattling around inside it. I didn't want to pay for the journals and thought about stealing them. In the end I just gave up and hoped that somehow I would obtain both copies.

Earlier that same night, before the dream, I had sensed a man in the room. I couldn't identify him. I asked the 'good spooks' if they should help Michael, but they gave me the clear impression that he didn't need any help—just leave him alone, he's doing fine.

The good spooks have always helped out when I've been asked to clear haunted places, going back 15 years now; they always succeed.

Those doing the haunting are generally in need of help. Michael doesn't need our help, he knows where he is far better than most of us.

—*Robb Tilley*

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## TO MICHAEL, ON HIS PASSING

I have known Michael through our shared interest in parapsychology for many years. I also went to Saint Paul's College with Michael, though being a few years younger only knew of him because of his academic reputation as a great scholar. I, on the other hand, was at the other end of the academic spectrum, perhaps experiencing, maybe paradoxically, a similarity to Michael in the sense of being 'noticed' as a child. And I mention this now for it was in the context of a certain force of oftentimes contrary ideas that we engaged. Of the great academic I would often ask, What is this psychic thing? How does it work? Is there a common ground for everyone, regardless? So I would say Michael and I disagreed radically, but then we also agreed. I do also feel that we never finished our conversations.

Although I am happy to entertain many an idea in parapsychology, I am primarily interested in it because of my interest in spirituality. In the world of parapsychology there seems to be two spectra of ideas—one based on a Materialistic perspective, and another that embraces some kind of Spiritual slant. On many occasions I would care to challenge Michael on a point of view that I thought was parapsychological, but was also spiritually based. Yet, on a very basic level, Michael and I agreed there was something

spiritual going on. And for Michael his basic spur was, Now how does one explain it? How does one prove it? And no doubt I believe it was also, How does one *live* it? I always felt that Michael, regardless of his many ups and downs, held in high regard issues to do with reality, life, and spirituality. Rarely do you meet a person in life with such a passion and love for these basic human concerns. But then there was the other side of Michael—that side that he himself would call his ‘mental illness’, and somehow the two collided.

I sense, in the passing of Michael, a certain fruitlessness of many an academic debate we had, which contrasts with our friendship; our social interactions as humans; the various feelings that I had for him and sense he had for me; and what we, as growing individuals, tried to accomplish in our debates. And now in Michael’s passing one tends to be stripped of superfluous things, and be left with the basics—the basics of Michael for me was that he was a gentle, even sweet man; and a man who had genuine feelings for people and issues of concern. His deep vulnerability was, for me personally, chilling in its depth; a chill that I will spend a lifetime attempting to understand in its warmth, for surely it was always there. In his voice I could hear a certain great curiosity which, I believe, was related to his intelligence.

I, perhaps like many, wished that Michael had an easier life. I now might even lament his misfortune. But there is a reason for everything, and perhaps the reasons pertaining to our respective personality types is one of the most important piece of information we can obtain. I know Michael searched for his basic nature in a way that was persistent, gallant, brave, and respectful, so that he was deserving of the title ‘a real authentic human being’.

I also believe that life goes on after; physically, this life apparently does not go on. In what manner ‘we go on’ was one of Michael’s favourite subjects and so, without pondering too deeply the manner of our existence, I wish for you, Michael, to feel comfortable, to let go any hardships experienced in this life, for in the healing that I sense releases our potential, even in death, I wish for you to find the essence of yourself, something we all make inquiries about, and show signs of achieving in this life. But in your case Michael, you made it a life-long mission.

Will miss you Michael.

—Dominic Gill

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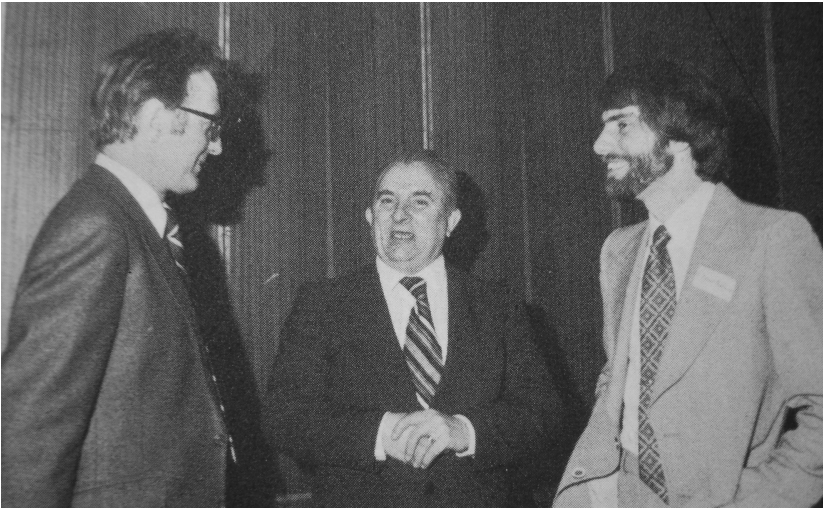
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## AN OBITUARY TO MY FRIEND MICHAEL

During his years as a student in Edinburgh, Michael Thalbourne spent a few summers in Iceland working for me and with me on various projects. Michael was a highly gifted person who had obtained excellent grades in school so that he would have been accepted into Oxford or Cambridge if he had applied. Instead he chose Edinburgh so that he could take a Ph.D. in parapsychology under John Beloff.

Michael was very skilled in statistics and one of his first projects was to analyse various personality data that I had gathered on subjects who had taken part in various ESP tests. That was the beginning of his long preoccupation with the psychology of sheep and goats and related topics.

Michael was a very gentle person and my wife and I were always very pleased to have him over, and we became close friends. We kept in touch fairly regularly over the years, also during his stay in St. Louis and later in Australia, and during the difficult phases of his life.



Left to Right: Dr. Erlandur Haraldsson (Iceland), Professor Martin Johnson (Holland), and Michael Thalbourne at the Society for Psychical Research Third Annual Conference April 1979 in Edinburgh.

In the early 1980s, when I spent a sabbatical in India continuing my research of the phenomena associated with Sai Baba, I invited Michael to



join me when I made my last round of interviews with numerous persons regarding their observations of Sai Baba. I wanted a witness to the correctness of the interviews that were published in my book on Sai Baba, *Miracles Are My Visiting Cards* (1987), and Michael was ready to go, and found them of great interest. I noticed then that strenuous travelling, and having to live under poor conditions, even if for short periods, was not easy for Michael.

Michael was all his life a hard working man, of great enthusiasm, and also a very kind and gentle person. He inherited a sickness that made life difficult for him at times. It cast a saddening and difficult shadow over the life of a highly gifted man.

There was something tragic about Michael's life and the fact that it ended so prematurely. He will be warmly remembered for he enriched the life of those of us who came to know him well.

—*Erlendur Haraldsson*

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Haraldsson, E. (1987). *Miracles are my visiting cards*. London: Century/Rider.

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#### FOR MICHAEL

I pose you a question Michael,  
(A starting point you often said),  
What is it dies, my poet friend,  
Is death a thing to dread?

A thing to dread? . . . I think it's not,  
For death is not the end,  
You live on in so many ways,  
It is not the end, my friend.

You are Michael, you're Maitreya,  
It was enlightenment you sought,  
And from the furnace of your learning,  
A clarity of thought.

You are a son, you're a brother,  
You are in your fam'ly's eyes,  
You gave of love and received it,  
And such love never dies.

You are Doctor, you are Poet,  
You are thoughts, you are rhyme,  
You are student, you are teacher,  
A traveller in time.

You are the many words you wrote,  
Your wisdom lingers on,  
You are the knowledge others quote,  
In that you have not gone.

It is our mind that thinks of death,  
Thoughts of life are in our heart,  
Within that depth is where you're held,  
From there we will not part.

—*Maurie O'Brien*

## CURRICULUM VITAE: DR. MICHAEL A. THALBOURNE

### BOOKS

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2. Thalbourne, M. A. & Storm, L. (Eds.). (2005). *Parapsychology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Essays on the future of psychical research*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
3. Thalbourne, M. A. (2004). *The common thread between ESP and PK*. New York: Parapsychology Foundation.
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