

Standing Up for Recovery: The Example of Mercedes McCambridge

Looking back on the history of American recovery efforts, one can see waves of grassroots groups coming together in distinct movements that rise and dissipate over time. Some rise and collapse quickly and others slowly swell and dissipate as momentum is lost, conditions change and key leaders are lost. Our modern era of recovery advocacy traces back to the early 1940s. There are key figures in this history and perhaps one of the most interesting personas that moved things forward and helped save countless lives was that of Mercedes McCambridge. While few around now would recognize her name, she was a well-known radio, TV and film star who



worked with people like Orsen Wells, Elizabeth Taylor, Katherine Hepburn and James Dean. She was the voice of the demon in the movie [the Exorcist](#). She also played a key role in the Modern Recovery Movement and the advent of publicly funded research and treatment. She wasn't particularly popular in Hollywood. She was known as both very smart and very difficult - she would argue her head off with directors until they gave up on her. There was also the sad fact that a lot of the time in the era before she found recovery she was often quite impaired by alcohol (The Independent, 2004).

She wrote and published a book about her life that was published in 1981 titled [The quality of mercy: an autobiography](#). My favorite section was in Chapter 15, where in a restaurant in Pennsylvania she encountered fans who loved her work as an actor and asked for her autograph. She signed a napkin and then when walking away, she overheard snickering at her for being an alcoholic. She spun on her heels, walked back to the table, picked up the napkin, shredded and deposited it on top of the two-faced admirers' half-eaten dinners while riley noting that they would not be needing that autograph. It seems to capture the essence of who she was from what can find on what has been written about her.

Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Alcoholism and Narcotics (1969)

In that same section of her book, in her own words, she recounted how Senator Hughes had located her following a search for any Hollywood actor in recovery who would be willing to be open about their addiction and recovery. Although a number of actors were in recovery, not one of them would stand up publicly. It was considered very risky to do. Senator Hughes found her through a mutual friend in New York, who was most likely [Stanley E. Gitlow](#) one of the co-founders of the American Society of Addiction Medicine. He knew she was in recovery and as she wrote in her book. This friend, most likely Dr Gitlow called Mercy and asked her if it would be okay if he shared her personal phone number with a US Senator. She said yes while wondering why any US Senator wanted to talk with her.

Shortly after that, Senator Hughes called her with a voice that she described as if booming from the bottom of the Grand Canyon. He asked if she would be willing to testify in the very first recovery hearing to ever occur. The July 1969 hearing in front of the Senate Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics. Other notable figures who testified included Bill Wilson, cofounder of AA, Marty Mann the first woman of AA, as well as the mother of modern recovery advocacy and Dr. Luther Cloud president of the National Council on Alcoholism.

At the time Senator Hughes asked to testify he asked her to consider the negative impact it would have on her life. He warned her that doing so would likely ruin her acting career. She unflinchingly said yes, she would stand up and speak out for recovery. Then again on the very morning of the hearing, Senator Hughes once more cautioned her and told her it was not too late to back out. Once more, Hughes stressed that being open about her alcoholism and recovery would have consequences. Mercedes said she would testify despite the risks. The [record shows us](#) that she spoke to how alcoholism is a physical disease and should elicit no more stigma than being a diabetic. In that hearing transcript (page 81) she said things that were radical true in that era as it is still true in our own era:

“The AMA tells me that my alcoholism is the third, if not fourth, largest killer of people in this country. Therefore, with those statistics, I must be convinced that my disease can be terminal. I am equally convinced that my disease

can be arrested. My own disease is in that state now and has been for some considerably rewarding, splendid, and truly awesome time. I say "awesome" because the remarkable thing about my disease, which could be terminal, is that I, in a certain sense, hold jurisdiction over it. I can choose to accelerate my disease to one or two inevitable conclusions-an alcoholic death or incurable insanity, or I can choose to live within my thoroughly human condition. I submit that is a remarkable thing.

It has never been more remarkable to me than it is at this moment when I am aware that perhaps my own survival, when so many have died, is for this purpose, so that I can sit with you at this level with the utmost respect and talk to you about this matter of life or death - my life or my death. As I sit here, scores of women like me are being arranged on slabs in morgues throughout this country with tickets tied to their toes that read "acute alcoholism," or if they have been protected as I was, those tags may read "liver ailment," "pneumonia," "chronic bronchitis," "massive hemorrhage," but the mother of all of those veiled, protective tickets may well be alcoholism, pure and simple."

Years later, in talking to students at Notre Dame about alcoholism, she described the morning of her testimony as the roughest one of her life. She knew she was to pay a price for her open advocacy, and she stood up for us all and did it anyway, despite the personal cost it would have for her. What is clear looking back was that the hearing set in motion a lot of things that helped save countless lives, including my own. I was able to access publicly funded treatment because of what they did, something also true for millions of Americans. This is the kind of courage we should never forget, Mercedes and others like her who stood up a generation ago so we could get help.

A few years later, she participated in Operation Understanding in 1976, where she recited a [section of a speech](#) about alcoholics by Abraham Lincoln and closed by noting that Lincoln Was Right. As described by [recovery historian and filmmaker Greg Williams](#), It was organized by Ms. Marty Mann, founder of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, and the others who came together that day envisioned a future where addiction was seen as a public health issue. Progress was made that day, but not enough. A few years after that, the war on drugs changed the trajectory and recovery efforts went underground again.

Things that had moved forward took two steps backward. Setbacks incurred as public sentiments shifted towards carceral solutions. This created the need for new efforts to emerge, which they did in the following era, that of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement. It is how history often unfolds. Forty years have passed and the need to shift public opinion and policy persists. It is through such history that we may also find the courage to stand up for recovery in places and times when to do so carries consequences yet still needs to occur.

After her 1969 Senate Testimony

Hughes was also right, she paid for her bravery and standing up for recovery. She estimated that she lost over one million dollars of work because Hollywood was uncomfortable with acknowledging addiction and holding up recovery in that era so she was blacklisted from work. She was aware of these risks to her career, and she stood up to advocate for recovery anyway.

While her motivation may not be clear looking back, it may have been because she felt strongly that it was something she needed to do. As she told [Women's World in 1981](#), in recovery, she focused on being honest with herself and doing what she thought was right. 'An honest look,' she said, 'because one of the things a recovered alcoholic must learn is honesty. I have to live with myself.' She also noted that women alcoholics experienced additional challenges. Mercy also gave regular addresses to fight the stigma associated with alcoholism, particularly the double standard facing women struggling with alcoholism. "Alcoholism in male performers is macho. But the woman alcoholic who is a performer has a rougher row to hoe (Loyola University, 2023)."

In January 1970, McCambridge was announced the honorary chair of Alcohol Information Week and in December 1970 was named honorary chair of the National Council of Alcoholism and later became involved in the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (Alexander, 2013). She helped run a Pennsylvania treatment center Livengrin by joining, the Board in 1972 and then took over as CEO in 1977, serving in that role until 1982 (Bucks County Courier, 2016). Because of her dedication to the cause of eradicating alcoholism, she received numerous awards and was honored at the White House for her humanitarian work.

Postmortem Reflections on a Great American Recovery Advocate

Mercedes McCambridge passed away on March 2, 2004 at the age of 87. She would be one of the people I would love to have the opportunity to go back in time and ask some questions. Why did she say yes? Did she have any regrets about standing up for all of us so that people could get help. As one of those people that was helped with public dollars that came out of her efforts, I wish I could look her in the eyes and thank her for her courage and tenacity. I would tell her, that what she did was worth it for a whole lot of people she never had the opportunity to meet and who never had the opportunity to thank her.

I have combed through the records I could find and searched for people who knew her to learn what she was thinking and why she did it despite knowing it would cost her professionally. I can only speculate that in recovery, she developed what we know term a recovery identity. This means that recovery was a transformative process for her and that all other considerations became secondary to doing things that would support recovery for herself and others. For me, the major clue is in her very testimony to the US Senate in 1969 in the quoted testimony above.

In 1969, when she testified, she was 53 years young. One can feel in the weight of her words that when she spoke about her own recovery and noted that women just like her were being arranged on cold slabs with toe tags in morgues that she was seeing herself and how fortunate she was to not be one more tragic statistic and that through her efforts, perhaps she could pay it forward to save another from that fate. I think that is what she did what she did. I think we need to recall such bravery as there are key moments we also have in our own era in which we face difficult decisions. The choice to stand up and risk our own comforts for the sake of others. As I read through what I could find out about her, she decided to be true to her convictions and to her recovery over other pragmatic matters. I would further suspect from the things that I was able to find that she had no regrets. I suspect that she found her courage in that moment, she found her true purpose.

Mercedes McCambridge had more than the average amount of tragedy in her life as well as an amazing highlight reel of successes and accolades. If I could go back and ask her what kept her going over the course of her recovery, I suspect she would say that it was because she was serving a purpose greater than herself and that in serving that purpose it preserved her own life through many hard times. While I wish I could hear her answer, I would in the same breath ask each of us to consider such examples and to do what we can to pay things forward, even at or perhaps especially at times when to do so presents us the choice between what is right for us to do and what is comfortable for us to. That is perhaps one of the universal truths about recovery, at least from my humble perspective.

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