

## Ethics Hero Emeritus: Robert M. McElwaine, 1925-2010



Every time I hear about a new tell-all book by a famous person's former lover, spouse, political aide or appointee, full of embarrassing revelations about what celebrities, political leaders or admired (or reviled) historical figures did or said behind closed doors or in the dead of night, I admire Bob McElwaine just a little more. When he died this month, the Washington Post obituary described him as a man who knew how to keep a secret. He did, but he was much more than that.

Robert McElwaine was a gentleman.

An old story tells of a woman who asks a great king to make her son a gentleman. "Alas, I cannot," the king replies. "I can make him a nobleman, but only God can make a gentleman." Many affect the trappings of gentility, of course; that's a matter of taste, style and manners. Bob possessed all of those. The first time I saw him, he was sitting at a restaurant table at the Four Seasons Hotel in Georgetown waiting for me to meet him for lunch. As always, he had arrived early; in all the times I had engagements with him, he was never a minute late, though I often was, and usually by more than a minute. He was impeccably dressed in a crisp white shirt, a tie, blazer and slacks...nothing ostentatious, just perfect. Yes, Bob knew how to look like a gentleman.

Being one, however, is considerably harder. I had invited to Bob lunch because I had heard about his Hollywood career and long association with entertainer Danny Kaye, and wanted to pick his brains about my theater company's impending production of the musical "Lady in the Dark," which launched Kaye's career. When I arrived, Bob presented me with his copy of the autobiography of Moss Hart, who wrote the musical's book. A typical gesture, I discovered. A gentleman is thoughtful, generous and kind.

And a gentleman is discreet and loyal. One might even say Robert McElwaine became a professional gentleman, for although he was a talented and successful scriptwriter, playwright, producer, lobbyist and association executive long career, he truly found his calling as a Hollywood publicist. As Manali Oak wrote [in an essay about the qualities of gentlemen](#):

*"A gentleman is someone who does not take an undue advantage of his power or the weaknesses of those around him. He is a man who does not compel others to do anything against their wish. A gentleman never offends others physically or mentally. He never inflicts pain. In a broader sense of the term, a gentleman is the one who cares for the people around him, helps them with their problems and strives to remove every obstacle that impedes their lives. Easing and comforting everyone around remains the major concern of a gentleman. He is a thoughtful and has foresight. His wisdom helps him stay away from blunders."*

This is exactly how a great publicist is supposed to behave, and it describes Robert McElwaine perfectly. Danny Kaye, who was just one of Bob's famous clients, was a deeply disturbed and pathologically angry man, yet Bob made sure that the world saw no sign of that, or of his competitive and sometimes vicious relationship with his mentor and wife, lyricist Sylvia Fine, another McElwaine client. After both Fine and Kaye had died, publishers urged Bob to spice up his memoirs with juicy tales of the Kayes' fights, affairs and scandals, including the persistent rumors that Kaye was gay. Bob always refused. They trusted him, and he wouldn't betray their trust by selling their secrets, not when they were alive, not after they were dead, not ever.

Typical for him, Danny Kaye finally insulted Bob once too often, and after an incident of base ingratitude that still shocks me every time I recall Bob's description of it, Bob cut off relations with the Kayes. Yet he still not only protected their reputations but burnished them, turning their stormy, co-dependent union into a sunny and romantic two-character musical called "Danny and Sylvia," now running off-Broadway. I once asked Bob why he continued to celebrate Danny Kaye after the entertainer had treated him so badly. "He was a brilliant performer," Bob said. "I'm from Hollywood, and talent is what counts there. Danny deserves to be remembered for that talent. Nobody needs to know about the other stuff."

The other reason, though, was that Bob did not believe in settling score or holding grievances. He was blacklisted for several years in the Fifties, and while he expressed bemusement at the bizarre sequence of events that put him on the black list, he managed to laugh about it. "I didn't even know I was blacklisted," he told me. "I attributed my lack of work to incompetence!" Despite the fact that one of his former bosses, Cecil B. DeMille, was a supporter of the Hollywood black list, Bob spoke warmly about him and portrayed the director sympathetically in another of his musicals. As he was forgiving to those who wronged him, he was loyal to his heroes. Bob wrote a documentary drama about the Cuban Missile Crisis, and had access to a lot of material about the Kennedys that was not generally known when the play was originally scheduled for production at the Kennedy Center. He could have spiced up his script and made it more commercial by including references to JFK's womanizing, some of which occurred during and immediately after the crisis. Bob wouldn't do that. The play was about courage and leadership, not infidelity, and he knew that many of the people who gave him insiders' information did so because they trusted him not to misuse it.

"Other characteristics of a gentleman include his humbleness, his prudence, his calm, his patience and his principles," Oak wrote. "A gentleman never boasts of himself. He is merciful and tender. He can keep his cool in all types of situations. He never looks at people with prejudiced eyes. He refrains from getting into conflicts or debates. He keeps himself away from badmouthing people and making unreasonable allegations. He dislikes gossip." This was Robert McElwaine to the core.

Oak's essay on gentlemen ends with a question: "How many gentlemen do you know?"

I will always be able to say that I knew one.