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## In Memorium: Professor Patricia Taber Morgan

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Redeemer Lutheran Church  
Atlanta, Georgia  
August 11, 2002

## **A TRIBUTE TO PATRICIA TABER MORGAN**

**Charity Scott\***

I would like to share with you today the many ways in which I knew Patricia Taber Morgan: as a friend, as an attorney, as a teacher, as a colleague, and as a mother.

Pat Morgan was just about the first friend I made when I came to Atlanta nearly 20 years ago. I was looking for a job at the time, and as an attorney, wife, and mother of two young children, I was looking for a more family-friendly alternative to the big-law-firm experience I had just left up North. Pat also had initially gone into large and well-established practices after graduation from law school, having first joined Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan and then gone in-house with the National Bank of Georgia.

When I met her, Pat had recently joined a small start-up law firm which had attracted a number of young Baby Boomer lawyers who, like herself, were very smart, energetic, idealistic, hard-working, '60s-style liberal, and in retrospect, a bit youthfully and wonderfully naïve. They were all looking to create an alternative legal practice where, hopefully, the intellectually stimulating (as well as profitable) cases they had found at the traditional and highly-respected big firms could be combined with somewhat less mainstream, small-firm qualities, such as an informal and open working environment (in fact, the office space was so informal and open it was practically a commune, and there were windows not just on every outside wall, but on every inside wall as well). These young attorneys espoused high democratic ideals (no hierarchy in that office, the clients were all charged the same hourly fee no matter which attorney worked on the case). And with great enthusiasm they were setting about to create a novel and eclectic workplace (with fewer than a dozen

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attorneys, it had more diversity along the lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation than the typical politically-correct TV law firm of today). “Well sure,” I said, “count me in.”

As a practicing attorney, Pat always took on the hardest and most demanding cases—corporate transactions, business planning, securities law, and tax fraud cases—while I got to do what, I thought, was the more interesting stuff, the fun and sometimes kooky cases. The amazing thing was, Pat always managed to make the hard stuff look really interesting and fun, and even downright hilarious at times. And although she worked endless hours to ensure that a business deal closed successfully or that an IRS matter was successfully litigated or negotiated, she always managed to keep her sense of humor as fresh as it was ironic, and to let her gentle, tactful, and non-confrontational nature spread to those around her.

She loved the law and working on challenging cases, and she set the gold standard in terms of both quality and integrity. For such a young attorney, her high standards of excellence were already widely acknowledged and respected throughout the legal community. As a former client of hers from that time reflected recently: “She passed on standards that are not always seen today. She did not take short cuts, and she did not break the rules. I worry that she may be an endangered species.” It is a lasting tribute to Pat Morgan that she has indeed passed those high standards on to the legal profession. As a recent graduate of the GSU College of Law told me, “I know I will be faced with tough decisions as an attorney, but I also know I can always ask myself, ‘What would Pat Morgan do?’ and I’ll know I’m headed in the right direction.”

I left the small law firm and went into teaching a year before Pat did. Ironically, I started out teaching business law courses, and thank goodness I had Pat to turn to for advice. Because I knew that she thrived in the academic world from the stories she had told me about her law-student days at Emory (where, by the way, she had served as editor-in-chief of the law review, graduating at the top of her class), and because I was confident that she would be such a natural teacher, I pestered her to consider switching gears and going into teaching.

Pat took her first teaching position at the law school at the University of Mississippi, and from the very first day, she gave

stellar performances in the classroom. True to her nature, she prepared obsessively for every single class. She consumed the universe of everything there was to know about each topic, and she spent equal amounts of time carefully considering the best pedagogical methods for distilling and translating her expertise into manageable, understandable, and eminently authoritative amounts for her students. Her students promptly rewarded Pat with the first of what was to become a series of Teacher-of-the-Year awards.

A year after I joined the GSU College of Law, we managed to lure Pat back to Atlanta as a member of the faculty in 1988. Her colleagues had such confidence in and respect for her skills and integrity that she quickly rose to Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the early 1990s. As one faculty member recently said: “Pat had the consummate ‘poker face.’ You couldn’t tell just what she was thinking, but she always seemed to make exactly the right decisions.” Another colleague also recently observed that during Pat’s tenure as Associate Dean, her acute sense of humor softened many potentially difficult situations. When Pat returned to full-time teaching, she was distinguished by her generous and supportive attitude toward her colleagues, and she willingly shared her vast knowledge – as well as her impeccable notes – with others who taught in her fields.

As a teacher at GSU, Pat brought the same incredible talent she displayed as an attorney for making the intricacies of the tax code or corporate law look interesting, fun, and even downright hilarious at times. She was absolutely devoted to the classroom, which was perhaps the only forum where she ever really got over her innate personal shyness and reserve. She challenged her students, inspired them to their best performance, and cracked them up as well with her notoriously dry sense of humor. She thrived in the classroom, as illustrated by her receiving two more teaching awards at GSU, by her oversubscribed classes, and by repeated requests from other law schools for her to join them as a visiting professor and scholar.

Her students have recounted numerous stories to me of her gentle yet assertive nature, and of her extraordinary ability to teach her difficult subjects in ways that made the students enjoy, understand, and even to their own astonishment, become enthusiastic about them.

Her students have also expressed gratitude and appreciation for the humor Professor Morgan brought to her classes, and for the enormously caring attitude and affection she consistently showed toward her students, being genuinely concerned not just with their academic understanding, but also with their overall well-being.

As one student recently summed it up: “Professor Morgan’s Corporations class was one of the best experiences I have had in law school. I enjoyed every class and couldn’t wait for the next one. It wasn’t the subject matter, I can assure you. I am not at all interested in practicing corporate law. Instead, it was Prof. Morgan’s vigor and her visible love of the subject matter that made the class great. It was obvious that for her it was a sheer joy to share her vast knowledge with us, the students. Seventy-five minutes seemed like 5 minutes in that class, and I always wished there was more time every week just to learn. Just to enjoy Prof. Morgan’s unique brand of dry humor and wit. I felt inspired and lucky to be in that class then. Now I feel honored.”

Although she loved the law and teaching, Pat Morgan would not want to be remembered as all work and no play. She struck a good balance in her life, with friends and interests both inside and outside the workplace. Among her personal passions, she loved classic rock ‘n roll music—she herself had been a concert-goer at Woodstock in 1969. Pat was as knowledgeable about sports as any *Sports Illustrated* editor, but she did not engage in only spectator sports. At one time she played ALTA tennis, although when she and I played together I have to admit we probably spent more time at the net just talking and joking than actually hitting the ball. She was a golfer, too, and loved to sneak off on an afternoon to get in a round. No duffer at the tee, Pat could sink a birdie more often than most who played with her.

And she was an intense Atlanta Braves fan even in the bleakest years when the Braves were struggling just to keep their dignity. One year when the Braves had started the season really badly, another of her colleagues, who was an equally avid fan, had gone to a game in which the players had committed error after error. In a fit of pique, the colleague wrote the Braves a letter, chastising them for letting down their loyal supporters. When he told Pat about it, she

said, “You know, I have a feeling the Braves are going to win the pennant this year.” He thought she was crazy at the time, but of course, she was right.

Much as Pat loved her friends, her colleagues, and her students, it was her family that was the central and defining experience of her life. It was also to that deep wellspring of family love and support that she constantly returned over the years. Pat was always extremely modest about her many achievements, and she often questioned her own abilities. In many ways, she was her own harshest critic. I suspect that her self-effacing demeanor had its roots in her Catholic childhood, where she grew up as the 4th out of 13 children. As one of the older children, she helped to raise the younger ones and shouldered many of the grinding daily household chores. A child herself, she strove to juggle her multitude of responsibilities in ways that would simultaneously please her parents, her siblings, and her peers, as well as those fearsome nuns who were her teachers.

From earliest childhood, she seemed to think it was her role to be the responsible and dutiful one, and in the midst of the chaos that was often inevitable in such a large family, she frequently felt herself not up to the challenge. Even in adulthood, she often would perceive herself as on the brink of failure, about to fall over the precipice into personal incompetence—or worse, the disapproval of others—with disaster being only narrowly averted by a stroke of good luck and good timing, not by her own immeasurable talents. Pat told me once that she had known, in her gut, that the elementary-school nun had been speaking directly to her, not to any of the other children in the class, on that day when the nun had threatened perdition to anyone who did not get their homework in on time.

Consideration and generosity towards others, always helping other people, always putting them first, and putting them at ease with her self-deprecating humor—these were hallmarks of Pat Morgan which she displayed right up to the end. One day last month in the hospital, when one of her sisters and I were visiting with Pat, just the three of us chatting and laughing, probably a little too loudly, it happened that a new hospital employee came in, a young divinity student. Seeing us in a playful mood, he picked up the spirit, and in a pleasantly

jesting tone explained that there were three beautiful people in this room, but that the hospital's policy allowed no more than two beautiful people in the room at any given time. Joshingly, he chided that Ms. Morgan had evidently exceeded her limit. Faster than either her sister or I could respond to the pleasantry, Pat replied that that was all right, not to worry, as soon as he left we would be back within the limit.

Even in her last days in Hospice Atlanta, Pat never once complained, and she always seemed more concerned about the welfare of the many friends and family members who filled her room than she was about her own. In a rare quiet moment, a colleague asked Pat what she was thinking. Pat replied, "I'm just thinking how lucky I am."

Most of all, Pat often thought about the wonderful life she had found with Ellen and their sons, Adam and Ben. From her enormous childhood family, Pat brought vastly more experience to the table than most of us when it comes to parenting. But it was not just lots of practice that made her an exceptional mother. She had a natural understanding and affection for children, which I saw in her devotion to my own kids. When she and Ellen decided to adopt, it was unquestionably the most important and deeply satisfying event of her lifetime. Since she had her stroke last year, Pat often reflected on how those two wonderful boys were, above all else, what kept her going. Even in her most trying days in hospice, it was not her own suffering, but the future welfare of the boys, that weighed most poignantly on her mind.

I'll close with one more story. One day over the kitchen table when Pat was at home, after she had been diagnosed with lung cancer, she was talking with me about a recent magazine article she had been reading. The article was about a middle-aged woman who was enumerating all the regrets she had about her life, all the things she wished she had done. Pat reflected that maybe she was supposed to be looking back on her own life and finding it deficient or full of should-have-dones and missed opportunities. But actually, as Pat thought it all over, she said that she knew she had had a wonderful life, she had no regrets, and what she looked forward to each day

now was just spending time and sharing love with Ellen and the boys, who were the very best part of her whole life.

Living a full and rich life with no regrets—what better legacy than that could Patricia Taber Morgan have left to all of us, but especially to her family, to Ellen, and to Adam and Ben?

