

## Mary K. Bonsteel Tachau: The Happiness Factor in Forwarding Women's Rights

In May 1988, Dr. Tachau addressed a gathering of graduates at St. Catherine College in Springfield, KY. Her topic was happiness, how to find it, nurture it, and pass it on. In her remarks, she stressed the importance of giving from a place of contentment with oneself, and gratitude for all that had been received. Only then, she suggested, could one's education and honed skills be put to use for the greater good. This commencement speech, reflecting on Tachau's decades as historian, feminist, advocate, teacher and mentor, created a blueprint for a graduating class. Likewise, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Women, still confronting the inequalities that Tachau so strongly fought to remedy, can take to heart and apply the precepts that guided her life.

That May afternoon, a decade before the Dalai Lama's handbook on happiness appeared to critical worldwide acclaim, Mary K. Tachau delivered a nine-part address, given from the perspective of a "Dutch Aunt," in which she offered advice about obtaining happiness. Here, we will examine her key points, and reflect on Tachau's career and life in each of the nine parts. I will argue that these nine parts were experiences lived out in a most impressive and humble way, in the life of a woman who left us too soon.

"For at least thirty years," her speech began, "I've wanted to give a commencement address, but no one asked me before. From time to time, I'd have ideas that I thought should go into a commencement address." Confessing that she had not written down her "tidbits" she took the occasion to gather her thoughts, claiming that her speech "comes from my heart, as well as my head." Drawing from her journey through academia, political encounters, maintaining relationships with family and friends, and an extensive range of extra-curricular activities, Tachau compiled a list of recommendations that are as relevant today as when she presented them 30 years ago.

Those who experienced these journeys with Tachau will likely find in these recollections, the material life made manifest in a woman for whom happiness was tied less to an ideal, but to an attitude backed up by intentional action. For those of us who are just now learning about Tachau, her nine-part address inspires us to measure our level of happiness against the criteria that became her life's work.

**First, learn to like yourself.** Tachau's letter of 1990, acknowledging the UofL Faculty Senate's recognition at her retirement, speaks to self-acceptance and appreciation. "...the candor and joy we had in reaching consensus, the exhilaration of good fights well fought for timeless principles, and the friendships that I know will endure forever," are the remarks of a woman who placed herself among peers, in intellect, in passion and in friendship. A professional letter, sent with suggestions about an amicus brief written in support of affirming Roe v Wade in its current (1989) state, reflected a gracious and confident woman. Dr. Tachau, in her letter, spoke to the desire of making "something [the brief] better." She introduced her edits "trusting that you understand that I do so because of my admiration for what is already a splendid piece." Does a woman who does not like herself write with such sincerity and positivity? Tachau's nine points began with liking one's self. "Self-improvement," according to Tachau, was not the goal. "Accepting your faults and limitations," she suggested, increased one's relationship with the only person we will spend every moment of life with, our own company. "Acceptance is the goal."

**Second, stay loose.** Tachau's take on looseness contrasts with a life of rigidity. Making mistakes, she suggests, is how we learn best. "Think of a mistake as something that will make it easier for us the next time around." Keeping balance is a measure of staying loose. Reading about Tachau's return to college for her Ph.D, at the age of 41, with three children at home, likely challenged her ability to maintain balance and stay loose. She credits her husband, Ed, for

guiding the family through tough times. “He believed in what I was doing,” she shared during a 1973 interview for *The Louisville Times*. Staying balanced, coaches Tachau, appears to have the necessary flexibility to lean on others, when necessary.

**Third, don’t burn your bridges.** Tachau was a master wordsmith. She understood how to write in a way that encouraged the reader to continue rather than dismiss a suggestion defensively. In her letter to Sylvia Law, Law Professor at NYU, Tachau edited an amicus brief written by Law, regarding Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services, a case to be presented before the US Supreme Court. In Tachau’s five pages of comments, she addressed several instances where language would either shut down discourse or invite it. “I am mindful of the lesson in strategy that Louis Brandeis and Josephine Goldmark provided in the brief for Miller v. Oregon.” Their successful approach, Tachau suggested, lay in “protecting the egos of the Justices.” Therefore, she suggests, “we must be cautious with language in order to persuade the Justices who are potentially undecided and possible those who are now in opposition.” Tachau was not naïve in using strategy to her cause’s advantage. Although a committed feminist, she knew when playing up the feminist card would not serve. To Law she advised, “I want you to win this case. Quoting anything that was published in *Feminist Studies* is not going to convince Rehnquist, Scalia, Kennedy, White, O’Connor and probably not Stevens.” Tachau, not an attorney, but so skilled in interpreting the law and the personalities of the Justices, knew when to hold back.

In 1993, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg was voted onto the US Supreme Court with a margin of 96-3. This appointment occurred after Dr. Tachau’s death, in 1990, but she was likely a strong advocate for Ginsberg, who, in 1990, completed her tenth year on the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. In contrast to Ginsberg’s senate confirmation vote, the 2018 appointment of Brent Kavanaugh, at a margin of 50-48, illustrates a vastly different process

and mindset then the Ginsberg appointment. The number of individuals who burned bridges during the summer and fall of 2018 is astounding. Tachau would likely have shaken her head, sighed, then moved on to her next hurdle.

**Fourth, get enough education.** Burning bridges wasn't limited to making arguments before the US Supreme Court. It also applied, said Tachau, to decisions made by graduates of St. Catherine College, when she advised them not to get married "too quickly or have children too soon." Holding off marriage and child bearing could keep options open. In the aforementioned 1973 article for The Louisville Times, reporter Lucinda Inskeep interviewed Tachau about the trajectory from full-time mother to part-time graduate student at The University of Louisville, to Ph.D. candidate at The University of Kentucky. "Did you realize," Tachau asked Inskeep, that many universities still [1973] don't allow graduate students to come back except as full time students, which, of course, keeps out all kinds of women?" Tachau's college credits were hard won; the energy and enthusiasm that she felt returning to school, she passed on to her students. "I remember there were really no women there I wanted to be like," she said, "I guess I simply expected to follow the cultural pattern of the time and not have a career." When she had the opportunity to teach, Tachau decided that her role was multi-faceted. Not only would she prepare students academically, but she would prepare them for life using a variety of teaching strategies. "Your enthusiasm and knowledge," wrote one admirer, "were great to witness. It was fun listening to your stories and anecdotes." Another student echoed the sentiment, "I also learned...that being a teacher can be so much more than preparing a syllabus."

**Fifth, be courageous.** Tachau advocated that students "try out jobs that seem interesting," suggesting that unless a contract was involved, anything that appealed was worth exploring. Closely related to courage in trying out various jobs was one of her most emphatic

recommendations; **learn some way to support yourself.** Rather than wait for the ideal job and career to come along, Tachau stressed the satisfaction that comes from feeding, clothing and housing one's self. There was no job that wasn't worth taking. Even working at McDonald's, a minimum wage position, may be the job that will "keep you going while you're waiting for your dream career to show up." Today's graduates, facing a tough job market, might heed Tachau's advice, and trust that any job has something to teach, even if it provides a strong contrast to the job you want. The fact that Tachau placed taking a job to support oneself, even a non-glamorous one, as a key to happiness, shows a wise and realistic woman.

**Seventh, develop some consuming hobby.** In the hours I spent reading about Mary K. Tachau, I found little that would fit into the category of hobby. She read volumes; that was clear from the hundreds of book reviews that she wrote while Professor in the University of Louisville History Department. Other hobbies weren't so clear. That said, her advice to graduates suggested that she had one, or many hobbies. Her recommendation for nurturing a hobby was practical; "The purpose of developing a hobby is to help you keep your sanity while you're working at McDonald's or digging ditches, or whatever."

**Eighth, to find out what you want to do with your life, be a volunteer.** She admitted that her desire to teach came from a volunteer role with a home for disabled adults. I can vouch for the investment of volunteerism. Beginning early in my career, I sat on a committee that awarded non-profit organizations funds raised through Metro United Way. In this role, I learned about budgets, presentation and leadership skills, and diplomacy and negotiation among a group of citizens representing various roles within the community. I continue to volunteer, now finding more satisfaction in hands-on work with Just Creations Fair Trade Store, and the Waterfront Botanical Gardens, currently under construction.

**Ninth, “take advantage of every reasonable opportunity that comes along,** but don’t feel frantic if it turns out to be frustrating. Remember that you have seventy or eighty years ahead of you.” Speaking to a graduating class, most of them in her 20s, Tachau was predicting a long life for the mostly female audience. Sadly, her own life ended at the age of 64, two years after she retired from UofL and delivered her commencement address. However, in her four decades of adulthood, she took advantage of many reasonable opportunities including: board member of the Kentucky Civil Liberties Union, first woman department chair for the UofL History Department, First Woman President of the Faculty Senate, and Chair of the mysterious Committee W. “That’s the one on the status of women here at UofL,” she told Lucinda Inskeep of *The Louisville Times*, “the committee that got equalization of pay for faculty and staff women.” Her willingness to try opportunities while deciding whether they fit kept her on a positive, upward trajectory.

According to Tachau, the purpose of life was not securing happiness or contentment or satisfaction, but she believed that “people who were happy or content or satisfied found it easier to make the world a little better.” Still speaking at St. Catherine, she concluded, “We can start at home, in America,” she said, “by remembering that the success of democracy cannot be measured by interest rates or Dow-Jones averages or the GNP, but by the adequacy of the food, clothing, and shelter of the poorest families in our communities.” Although Dr. Tachau enjoyed a national reputation, she cautioned graduates that local decision-making impacts our own communities and that these decisions matter. “The majesty of the law is measured not only by decisions made in a marble building in Washington, but also in rickety courtrooms where the litigants are ignorant and poor, and sometimes insane.”

Her twenty-minute commencement speech challenged graduates to perform a field study, and continue their research, not with data sets and APA formatting, but qualitatively, looking at the faces of people they encountered on a daily basis, and evaluating faces for signs of happiness. She suggested that graduates take a poll of people they knew “over the age of forty who were satisfied with their lives.” Observing these people and questioning them about their lives, she suggested, would provide graduates with answers both interesting and diverse. “One way to find out who the people are who are satisfied with their lives is to look at their faces,” she said. “Occasionally, you will run into someone like me, who was every bit as uncertain as the most uncertain among you when I was even older than you, but found where I belonged in the world when I taught my first class.”

Among Mary Tachau’s numerous contributions, the most meaningful might have been her mentorship of students. “I am sincere when I say I probably learned more in these two semesters of class than in any other class I’ve had,” wrote a student named Lucy, “You shared a lot of great knowledge with us, and treated us as individuals to be respected, not as students to be lectured at.”

Lucy concluded her letter with a P.S. “This test was hard,” underlined three times. The person of Mary Katherine Bonsteel Tachau asked much of her students. And yet, she met her expectations of them with the highest level of integrity, dignity for the court of law, and humility to share her shortcomings. For her fortunate students, and for those of us learning about her in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Dr. Tachau models what it means to be a contented, happy woman, even in the midst of controversy, injustice and plain hard work.

Works Cited

The American Club. "To Mary K. Tachau," 2 Feb. 1978.

Inskeep, Lucinda. "UofL's Token Woman." *The Louisville Times*, 16 Jan. 1973, p A4.

"Ruth Bader Ginsberg." *History* [www.history.com/topics/womens-history/ruth-bader-ginsburg](http://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/ruth-bader-ginsburg),

retrieved 10 Oct. 2018.

Staley, Lucy. "To Mary K. Tachau." 27 May 1982.

Tachau, Mary K. Bonsteel. "Commencement Address." St. Catherine College Graduation, 7 May

1988. Springfield, KY. Keynote Address.

Tachau, Mary K. "To Sylvia Law." 4 April 1989.

*Who's Who in American Law*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Marquis Who's Who, Inc., 1981.