By Dena Blumenthal

When someone asks me if I am happy that I chose Temple University as my undergraduate institution, I can say, “yes” solely based on the fact that I had the honor of having Dr. John Raines as my professor. Had he been my professor once, it would have been enough. To have had him three times was a privilege and an experience that will stay with me always. I have tried many times to convey to others what it is like to be in a John Raines class. John Raines does not profess, but elegantly reveals the truths that he has lived first-hand.

The first class that I took of his was entitled “Death and Dying.” I was the only freshman among an intimate room of honors upperclassmen, almost all of whom had previously taken his “Political Protest and Culture in the 1960’s” class and had come back to hear more. My interest in the subject matter was already high, but as I walked into the room on my first day of college, I had no idea what a profound effect the white-haired man handing me a syllabus would have on my life and the way I viewed the world.

In every class, Dr. Raines wrote an outline of his lecture on the blackboard. I thought at the beginning of the course that was the most important part to note. Those written words were important, but not as important as the way in which he delivered them as he wove in his own stories and lessons. I soon realized that I was not merely taking notes on a subject; I was taking notes on life. His words were a spoken book of original quotes and ideas. I could not write them quickly enough, as evidenced by the margins of my notebooks littered with what he told us. A collector of quotes myself I was overwhelmed in a good way at the profundity of all that Dr. Raines said. For the first time in my life I was close to tears at the end of the last day of class because I did not want the experience to end.

Throughout this one particular class, Dr. Raines taught us, his students, the valuable facts we needed to know. He presented the stages of grieving and the ethical dilemmas that can arise at the end of a person’s life; but while doing so, he helped us understand what it is to be a man in this world, and to be a woman in this world. He revealed to us what it means to live. In so doing, he could teach us better about what it means to die.

When Dr. Raines speaks to a class he delivers a gentle sermon in a tone and a voice that makes one feel as if, somehow, he is discovering the ideas with the class, while also showing his deep familiarity with the truths in those ideas as one who lived them. He can, in a way I had never before seen, impart information in an extraordinarily honest and caring way that captivates the souls of all whom he teaches.

Dr. Raines taught me the importance and impact of making eye contact when I speak or listen to someone; that death and the act of dying are so much more complex than most people will admit; that life is made up of stories that can enrich others’ lives through the sharing of those stories; that if I want to, I can be a part of and even influence what’s important to me in the world, even if it means venturing into the unknown; that religion does not have to be an untouchable topic and that one can speak of one’s own religion without making others feel uncomfortable or inferior; that being religious and having an open mind are not mutually exclusive; that society’s ideas of what I should be, down to the
very last detail, are constructs of a culture, not truths of nature; that the delivery of
information may be just as important as the information itself; that some of life’s unfairness
can be changed for the better by those who acknowledge it; and that sharing the depths of
one’s character can have a profound impact on those who choose to listen.

To define Dr. John Raines as a college professor is to acknowledge a small part of a man
whose impact on his students and on society go beyond the scope of the ordinary and even
the extraordinary person. He is living, breathing history—proof that the social movements
about which everyone learns were in fact instances of real people making real changes to
the way the world thinks. He is evidence of the great potential of one human’s life. He is a
spiritual advisor and a catalyst of intellectual discourse.

Almost every day I think of Dr. Raines and of how lucky I am to have learned from a man
like him. The words he shared, the stories he told, and the wisdom he imparted all affect
the way I think. They affect the way I argue, the advice I give, the way I learn, how I decide
to be another’s friend, how I experience life, and yes, even how I experience death. For all of
that, I am extremely grateful.

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