Giving a Chance: Reflections in Honor of John C. Raines
By Edwin David Aponte

I remember visiting John Raines on the sixth floor of Anderson Hall sometime early in 1990. I was in the midst of a life transition that I did not fully understand at the time. I felt driven to pursue a Ph.D. in religion, and so there I was, opposite the director of graduate studies in religion at Temple University. I was trying to discern whether it should be in biblical studies, the path I had been pursuing up to that time, or something new that tugged at my soul. So I met with this stranger, Dr. Raines, and shared my growing yet embryonic vision of wanting to study Hispanic Protestantism. He engaged me and, through his questioning, encouraged me to say more about this dream.

To my surprise a flood of excitement about the broad topic came pouring out of me. Through John’s own growing interest and enthusiasm, he pressed me to say more than I realized I knew. John encouraged me and said that Hispanic Protestantism was a worthy topic of study that needed to be done, but he wasn't certain that it could be done at Temple. With whom would I work with on this still unformed field? Encouraged by the tenor of our conversation, I remember saying to John, "No one does it anywhere. Give me a chance!" John Raines and the department of religion at Temple gave me that chance. Since that conversation my life has been focused on the study of Latina/o religious communities.

As I started my graduate studies at Temple, John asked me to be the research associate for a Pew Charitable Trusts funded project. It seems that the Hispanic Clergy Association of Philadelphia and Vicinity was looking for someone to study the Hispanic Protestant churches of Philadelphia. Through that research project, I was thrown into the deep end of the pool of the social scientific study of religion coupled with a cultural studies approach. It was one of the best things that could have happened to me. In addition to the work and writing the research report required, the project provided funding to support my studies and priceless fieldwork for my dissertation as well as valued connections and friendship with the organization that eventually became Esperanza, led by the Rev. Luis Cortés. Again John Raines gave me this chance to learn field research, engage with a grass-roots faith-based organization (at a time when the term “faith-based” was not widely used), and in profound ways enabled me to become a researcher in religious communities that opened up a connection to the world of foundation-funded research in religion that continues to this day.

Early in my doctoral program at Temple, I received a call from John asking for a favor, and being the dutiful graduate student I said, “But of course!” It turned out that the noted activist Daniel Berrigan was scheduled to speak at an upcoming meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics in Philadelphia, but at the moment was leading a workshop at the Kirkridge Retreat Center in the Poconos. Berrigan needed transportation to Philadelphia. John told me that since I lived outside Bethlehem, which is almost to the Poconos anyway, would I be able to give Berrigan a ride? So, I soon found myself meeting Daniel Berrigan, the famous peace activist, protester against wars in Vietnam, Central America, formerly on the FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives List, and one of the original Plowshares Eight. To say that I was overwhelmed and a little bit awestruck would be an understatement.
However, in the nearly three-hour drive to Philadelphia, I enjoyed the easy conversation of an open, humble, and gentle person. I heard many stories of protests and arrests for the cause of justice. We arrived at the rectory of a church not far from Temple University’s campus to spend the night where Berrigan’s friend was the parish priest. The conversation over dinner between two old friends who enjoyed each other’s company recounted some of their shared struggles in a way that also included this younger man at table with them. As a budding cultural historian, I felt like I witnessed an important history retold by some of its participants. When dinner was over, I was content to retire to my assigned bedroom and let these two friends and comrades in the struggle have their time together. But no, there were other friends and comrades in Philadelphia to visit. They asked me to be the driver for this adventure, and a long night’s adventure it was. I will never forget this experience, and I am grateful to John Raines for giving me the chance for the interaction.

Over the years, sadly I have forgotten much that was said in the classrooms on the sixth floor of Anderson Hall, but one of John’s lectures stayed with me, profoundly effecting my own teaching and mentoring of students, research and writing, work as an academic administrator, indeed my entire outlook on the world. John started his lecture with a slight smile and a twinkle in his eye and said “A classroom is well named . . .” and then he continued to give his analysis of class stratification in education, and the implications for understanding the dimensions of class in wider settings. With John’s help, I acquired a better understanding of the nature of class, the reality of power and the ways it works, both overtly and covertly.

I don’t know if it was John’s intent, but I’ve been challenged by that analysis ever since. It impacted my work, especially in looking at the intersections between class, race, ethnicity, and religion. Moreover, it influenced my commitment to working toward a notion of justice that is far removed from being simple bloodlust revenge. At some point, perhaps John and I can discuss (over some appropriate beverage, my treat) whether it is the randomness of the universe or some greater providence at work, but for some years now I have found myself in positions of authority and dare I say it, power in higher education. I can see up close how the insidious power of class is still at work even within institutions that have the most benevolent and egalitarian language in their mission statements. Nonetheless it is due in part to John Raines that I approach the exercise of this authority and power in a very deliberate, counter-cultural way, with a commitment to push beyond the usual way of doing things and, despite the malicious persistent power of class, to make a creative effort always to give someone a chance.

Thank you, Professor Raines; thank you, my friend John.

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