Whose Rules? In Honor of John C. Raines, Ph.D.
By Gloria H. Albrecht

Yes, this is one of those “unexpected encounter” stories where, in the course of an ordinary life, a routine event sets into motion a new trajectory that becomes one’s life—the way it was meant to be, but wouldn’t have been, if not for the unexpected encounter.

In the 1980’s in Baltimore, I was an associate pastor of a Presbyterian church. I worked in ministries with the homeless who were increasing on our streets as Reagan moved to get the mentally ill off of Social Security disability while adding ketchup as a vegetable to the menu of school children. The men on the street spoke of lost jobs as the U.S. steel industry began to close, move, and go offshore. The talk was of working for day labor companies or of money subtracted from wages to pay for transportation, hardhats, or other needed equipment until nothing was left of the wages. Some hoped to be sent for thirty days to the same company in order to be eligible for a real job with that company. Some talk was about how the day labor management would never let that happen. The ethical dilemma discussed vigorously was whether it was better to allow oneself to be exploited by the day labor companies with the hope of catching a break, or to refuse to join in on that demeaning exploitation.

I heard that a professor named John Raines was coming to town to give a lecture for fellow Methodist clergy to earn the continuing education credits they needed. I was clergy, but not Methodist. His topic in the midst of 1980’s Reaganomics was economic justice. So I went to hear this Raines. So began what is now a twenty-seven year mentorship and friendship.

First the mentorship: How could a single mother with a demanding parish job and two teenagers, one with a serious chronic illness, possibly consider pursuing a doctorate two hours up the road from Baltimore? One of John’s skills is to make a way for his students when there is no way. He has a “whose rules?” approach to life that has not endeared him to some people in some places and institutions. But he convinced me that Temple’s Department of Religion would have the flexibility to absorb the unexpected events of parishioners and children that shaped my life.

And later, as chair of that department, John arranged to have feminist and womanist scholars travel to Philadelphia once a week to provide students with courses in cutting-edge liberative scholarship: Beverly Harrison from Union, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes from Colby, and Katie Cannon from Episcopal Divinity School. John has a knack for finding a way for his students where there is no way.

John also created opportunities for showcasing his students’ accomplishments. While still a student, I was invited to be a guest on his Sunday morning talk show “Dialogue.” I remember how John encouraged my first experience at the Society of Christian Ethics in 1992, and assured me of the importance of my feminist critique of a well-known, living, male scholar who had a reputation for publically chastising his critics.
As recently as the 2013 meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics, John’s presentation on
global financial transactions was presented with his Temple University graduate students,
Patricia Kolbe and Dan Jacobs, as (in John’s words) co-presenters. Over the years, John
called to tell me of a job opening just right for me. A few years ago I received a call telling
me about another of his students who was ideal for my Religious Studies department. (He
was right.) The path-making mentoring continues.

At the heart of this “whose rules?” openness to those who do not fit the mythical norm—
what Audre Lorde described as white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and financially
secure—is John’s intellectual shift from the typical lamentations about the unequal and
unjust distribution of stuff to an analysis of the unequal and unjust distribution of power
and the human products, called explanations, that justify it.

In recent years he has talked about the powerful impact on his own thinking and living of
his participation in Freedom Summer, 1964. What he describes is his encounter with
others through whom he encountered himself as one who is gendered, raced, and classed
with privilege, and the relative power that accompanies that privilege. What he describes
is a coming to consciousness of the explanations that had made him a passive participant in
structures and rituals that sustained the injustices of race and class and gender as
“natural.” In his own words:

But I got a second education I wasn’t supposed to receive when I faced the arbitrary
power of Southern white judges in the early 1960’s who found the activities of Civil
Rights workers worthy of jail. Up North, “my kind” had the power. Down South,
“their kind” had the power and used that power to send us to jail. That began my
lifelong interest in how power works and how privilege disguises from itself its
relationship to power by way of rituals of (usually male) deservedness.

Whether that experience gave rise to his interest in the possibilities of radical religion, the
intersection of a secular Marxist critique of power and consciousness in a capitalist state
with the prophetic tradition of Christianity, or whether this interest prodded his
participation in Freedom Summer, I cannot say. It is clear, however, that from his earliest
scholarship John saw the revolutionary potential in Christianity, despite its lapse at mid-
twentieth century into pietism on the one hand, or Christian realism on the other. He also
saw the value to radical Christianity of a social critique significantly shaped by the insights
of Marx. The result has been a scholarship guided by a question framed early in his
academic career: “If Christians come to view the problems of contemporary America in
ways that significantly resemble the original Marxist critique, what must they conclude as
Americans and as Christians?”

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2 John C. Raines, The Justice Men Owe Women: Positive Resources from World Religions (Minneapolis: Augsburg
   Fortress Press, 2001), 100.
3 John C. Raines and Thomas Dean, eds. Marxism and Radical Religion (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,
   1970), xv.
In his early essay, “From Passive to Active Man: Reflections on the Revolution in Consciousness of Modern Man,” John sets out what he calls “the problem of human consciousness.” He saw in the multiple revolutions of the 1960's the beginnings of a shift in western consciousness away from a passive acceptance of the status quo explained as “nature,” or God’s will, or reason. In revolutions (feminist, Civil Rights, anti-colonial) he saw the hope of a humanity coming to understand itself, in Marx's terms, as the active creator of its own history. He saw an active consciousness rising that was unwilling to accept existing structures of exploitation and marginalization and willing to work to create a new, inclusive, humane future that he believed was possible.

As evidence of this new consciousness rising, John's essay described three arenas in which he saw people engaged in the struggle to challenge explanations of privilege. Interestingly, these are three issues that would continue to shape and develop his own ethical analyses throughout the next five decades: human sexuality, political economy, and eco-justice. While John has continued to develop his thought in all three areas, my interest in the 1980's centered on understanding how a “free market” in a political democracy could produce so much unjust pain.

In this early essay, John described the dominant beliefs that function to “tranquilize radical social protest” with the promise of upward mobility and the assumption of middle-class affluence. Forty-plus years later, his critique of the claim that the U.S. economy creates unprecedented opportunities for social mobility is still valid. According to the Economic Policy Institute, 61% of families in the bottom income fifth in 1994 were still in the bottom income fifth in 2004. Likewise 52% of families that started in the top income fifth in 1994 remained in the top income fifth in 2004 while 28% had slipped from the top to the fourth income quintile. The reality, according to the EPI, is that the U.S. has less upward mobility than most industrialized countries.

In 2006 John described the educational impact of these statistics on economic classes in the U.S. and launched a challenge to those of us who teach in colleges. Noting that regardless of students’ test score level, higher socioeconomic status led to higher college completion rates, John asked what if...

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4 Ibid., 101-132.
6 Raines and Dean, Marxism and Radical Religion, 125.
7 http://stateofworkingamerica.org/chart/swa-mobility-figure-3b-share-families-bottom/
8 http://www.epi.org/publication/usa-lags-peer-countries-mobility/.
...the function of education becomes not discovering new and deserving talent, but instead assigning desired future places in our society to the already privileged, and getting the losers to blame themselves rather than the injustices of social class.9

John’s challenge remains acute. According to Tom Mortenson of the Postsecondary Education Opportunity newsletter, as reported in the New York Times, one in 10 Americans from families in the lowest income quartile held a college degree by age 24 in 2011; for those from the highest income quartile the figure was 7 in 10.10

In 1970 John’s data revealed that middle-class affluence was really a result of “massive moonlighting.” More than half of white families that achieved middle-income status had to rely on two wage earners.11 Today the Economic Policy Institute reports that 89.5% of the increase in annual wages earned by households in the middle-income fifth between 1979 and 2007 was due to increased hours of work by those families and not higher wages.12 Since the 1970’s when John named this issue, productivity has grown 80%, but median worker pay grew just 10.7%.13

As I write this, Detroit, my city for the last twenty years, is facing as much as $17 billion in long-term liabilities that it cannot afford to pay. Detroit may become the largest municipal bankruptcy case in U.S. history—a title to add to “murder capital,” poorest big U.S. city, and most racially segregated U.S. metropolitan area. How much more can city services be reduced, police and fire fighters laid off, schools closed, and the wages of city workers cut again? How much lower can home values go? This is very bad news for most Detroiter in a city where the median household income is around $25,000.14

But Detroit’s trouble is good news for a few. One multi-millionaire has bought nine historic buildings downtown and just received a fifteen-year extension of tax breaks for a recent site he purchased including exemption from city taxes, utility taxes, city and county property taxes, and state and business income taxes until 2032.15 In other words, Detroiters who pay their taxes are subsidizing a profit-making opportunity for a wealthy investor, because the explanation goes, his investment will create jobs in the future. Fifty years later, John’s words remain true:

We are instead sleepwalking within a social explanation that deflects us from noticing our actual situation, that defuses social anger, and maintains the given

11 Ibid., 126.
13 Ibid., 173.
game and rules of society – a brokering system, it might be noted, from which a small minority derives great and continuing wealth.\textsuperscript{16}

“If Christians come to view the problems of contemporary America in ways that significantly resemble the original Marxist critique, what must they conclude as Americans and as Christians?” John’s response has been to teach about class in America, to expose its reality and to demystify the claims that hold it in place, and to welcome those who do not fit the U.S. mythical norm.\textsuperscript{17} In another era of deep sleepwalking, he has enabled many students, myself included, to find the tools of a liberative ethic and to apply them both nationally and globally: critical thinking, intersectional analysis, structural analyses, awareness of the social construction of knowledge, suspicion of universalizing perspectives, suspicion of privatizing the causes of suffering, and, for those of us with some privilege, a hunger to understand and learn from the experiences and perspectives of marginalized and exploited “others.” In other words, he has given us the tools by which to sustain our work and our hope.

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Gloria H. Albrecht, Ph.D. \\
Professor Emerita \\
University of Detroit Mercy \\
Detroit, Michigan
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\textsuperscript{16} Raines, \textit{Marxism and Radical Religion}, 126.

\textsuperscript{17} I would add here John’s work in developing dialogue between Islam and the West, particularly his extensive teaching and research in Indonesia and Malaysia.