By Rebecca T. Alpert

I first met John Raines in 1972 when I took his graduate course on Religion and Society. I was not his best student, but he generously invited me to teach a graduate seminar in the early 1990s when I returned to Temple as an administrator. Even more generously, Raines guided the process that enabled me to return to his department as a tenure track faculty member and later chaired the committee that granted me tenure, always treating me like a colleague and not a former student. It was John who persuaded me to take on the role of department chair, and he supported me in that position in every way possible. Whether I did a good job in that role is for others to decide, but I will say I did one thing right: nominating John for the prestigious teaching award he so richly deserved and rightfully won. What follows here is the letter I wrote on his behalf in 2005. In the process I learned how truly great a teacher he was, not just for me, but for so many others.

As chair of the Department of Religion, I would like to nominate John Raines for the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching. I thought to do so initially because Professor Raines has consistently received the best student evaluations in our department, often ranking in the 90th percentile on many questions and occasionally at 100. These evaluations are consistent across the variety of religion courses he teaches, whether they are large sections of “Death and Dying,” honors classes on “The Sixties,” or graduate courses on a variety of subjects related to religion and social ethics. He also receives glowing comments and solid ratings even in a course that is as challenging to teach as Intellectual Heritage. Students more often than not rate him as “the best professor I’ve had” and speak of his passion for the subject and of his respect for them. He is frequently described as inspiring and energetic, and the Honors Students voted him Professor of the Year in 2004. As we note from the evaluations and student reactions, Raines is dedicated to his teaching, innovative in his approaches, and thoughtful about his students.

Raines’ commitment to the intellectual and personal development of his students is clear from the letters of recommendation I solicited and from anecdotal comments from Temple alumni who studied with him. Terry Rey noted that Raines guided him skillfully through the dissertation process and then maintained contact with him throughout his career, providing advice and support when Dr. Rey faced difficult decisions about job choices, and then on through the tenure process. A picture of Raines, glowing with pride as he conducted the wedding ceremony for two of our outstanding doctoral students (Eve Mullen and Florian Pohl) that adorns the office wall of another of our faculty members speaks volumes both about his commitment to his students’ personal lives and the trust they place in him.

On occasion, John asks me to come to his “Death and Dying” class to guest lecture on Jewish approaches to grief and mourning. A check from his own pocket invariably arrives in the mail after the session. As I’m unaccustomed to this practice, I’ve asked John why he does it. His answer is simple: he respects teaching, and feels it is his responsibility to make sure that people who work in the classroom receive proper recompense. He also has a keen
sense of humor. Walking by John's classroom one invariably hears the sound of laughter, both his own and that of his students. John uses humor not only to provoke laughter in his classroom, but to invoke the pleasure of learning as a corporate enterprise. When students aren't laughing, I've observed them mesmerized by the stories John tells. Often those stories are at his own expense to illustrate a point he's trying to make to ensure students understand the works they are reading in a personal way.

Of the many stories John tells, a good percentage hearken back to his “great awakening” as a young white patrician who joined others going to Mississippi for Freedom Summer in the 1960s, the experience that forms the core of a specialized course that John teaches in the undergraduate curriculum. John guides them through his own mistakes and learning, and encourages his students to be willing to make mistakes in order to learn. Needless to say, the lessons John learned in the Civil Rights movement made him steadfastly committed to providing opportunities to students of color at Temple University. John understands that women also have experienced oppression and require some particular attention in order to achieve fair treatment. He has published an edited volume on the subject of “what men owe to women.” Women students talk about the respect they experienced learning with John and make it clear that he supports his students’ learning because of, not in spite of, the differences they bring to the classroom.

Professor Raines’ classes are perfectly organized. His syllabi reveal a coherent structure. When I went to observe Raines teach, I was astonished at the smooth progression and transition from topic to topic, always building on what had gone before. What I experienced as an observer was a sense of trust that the students shared in the guidance of the professor, while simultaneously allowing students the freedom of conversation and dialogue. It was most interesting to observe a discussion about suicide that appeared to range widely all pulled masterfully together and concluded so that students could appreciate how all those ideas fit together to present a clear picture.

I have also seen Raines intellectually challenge students in the classroom and in presentations he has given in our department. His ideas are provocative, and he does not expect everyone to agree. The question he asks most frequently and adeptly is “why”? Why do you think violence is necessary? Why do you think affirmative action doesn’t work? Why are you so fascinated by the 60s? Invariably, students are challenged to reconsider their assumptions. On his teaching evaluations, he always ranks highest in the category “I increased my ability to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view” because that is the hallmark of his teaching.

Professor Raines’ teaching ranges broadly across the fields of religion, social ethics, anthropology, sociology, women’s studies and American studies. For example in his death and dying course, he teaches not only what various religious traditions have to say on the subject, but how death is viewed in the United States from the perspectives of sociology and anthropology. When I observed his teaching I was struck by how he used statistical analyses of the effects of suicide on family members to help students gain insight into the religious needs that people experience after a suicide.
Through all this, Raines maintains the highest standards for his students. While in his Honors courses students receive mostly A's and B's, he demands a great deal of them in order to achieve these grades. We also see his high standards in relation to his graduate students who have produced 16 published dissertations. Most recently one of his students, Florian Pohl, received the prestigious Spencer Award for his dissertation research. The clearest evidence of Raines’ high standards and his ability to arouse student interest in advanced study has been through the work that Raines has done in developing a Master’s Program in Comparative Religion at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Raines has received significant grant funding to create a student exchange program between UGM and Temple. It was through Raines’ encouragement and his skillful financial support that three of our current graduate students and two alumna have had the opportunity to study and teach at UGM, and one of those students is writing his dissertation about Muslim schooling in Indonesia as a result of this opportunity for study. At least five of the Indonesian students have received Fulbright scholarships to study in the United States, also under the tutelage and with the encouragement of John Raines.

I see Raines at Temple, sitting at his desk, with a steady stream of students coming to talk to him during office hours, several days each week. With all that, he remains a productive scholar, who regularly presents his work at the American Academy of Religion and Society of Christian Ethics meetings. His recently published reader of works by Karl Marx on Religion came in part as a result of his teaching Marx in Intellectual Heritage and his recent work on feminism and religion informs his teaching in the course on The Sixties. He is also involved now in thinking about new courses for the General Education program. The course that he plans to develop for the Human Behavior course, “The Individual and Society: Liberty, Social Control, Oppression” is directly related to his scholarly interests in Christian-Muslim relations, globalization and U.S. politics.

Professor Raines is nearing retirement and it is time that he received the recognition he deserves for his many years of consistently excellent and dedicated teaching, beyond being featured in an article about Temple’s best teachers in the Alumni Review last winter and honored as the Honors Professor of the Year in 2004 and being nominated for the CLA Distinguished Teaching Award in 2005. He is an active scholar and a consummate teacher, and it is with great pride that I nominate him for the Lindback Award.

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