I Chose Temple (because of John Raines)
By William Grassie

Back in the 1990s, Temple University ran an advertising campaign in print and on television with images of happy students repeating “I could have gone anywhere — I chose Temple.” I could have been one of those students, thanks to John Raines, who recruited me to Temple’s Department of Religion.

I came to Philadelphia in 1980 to work on nuclear disarmament for the Friends Peace Committee. As a Quaker activist in Philadelphia, it wasn’t long before I met John Raines from a distance at various gatherings.

In 1983, my peace activism took me to Berlin and the divided Germanys, where I worked with Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste (Action Reconciliation/Service for Peace), a remnant of Dietrich Bonhöffer’s Bekennende Kirche. The organization was founded after the war to do reconciliation work in countries that were victimized by the Nazis. Aktion Sühnezeichen was also a leader in the opposition to the deployment of new short-range nuclear weapons in Europe. The recently past and possible future Holocaust in Europe was linked in my moral, political, and existential angst. How could humans be so inhuman?

My work involved the selection and training of German volunteers for the United States, who would do two-years of service work. The training involved extensive studies of World War Two, including two separate week-long sojourns at Auschwitz with the volunteers. Upon returning to Philadelphia in 1984, I joined the Philadelphia Interfaith Council on the Holocaust, where I again encountered John Raines (and Gerald Sloyan) as fellow board members.

In the Spring of 1989, I was admitted to Harvard Divinity School (HDS) and was planning to move my wife and then young children to Cambridge, Massachusetts. HDS, however, had made a mistake on the promised financial aid package and reneged on a big chunk of change. I was contemplating incurring a massive debt for a two-year master of theology degree.

I discussed my plans for graduate school with John Raines, who encouraged me to apply to Temple’s Department of Religion (TUDOR). I need not actually get a doctorate, he told me, but if I applied to the doctoral program, Temple might offer me a teaching assistant (TA) fellowship. The TA fellowship would cover my tuition and pay me ca. $12k to teach one course each semester. It was also pretty clear after visiting Harvard Divinity School, that TUDOR had a much more interesting interreligious and international student population than HDS, if not the same prestige. It turned out to be an easy decision. I chose Temple.

And when I got into the classroom at Temple, I quickly fell in love with teaching, which I recognized to be significant social change work. I decided to go all the way and get the doctorate. In the end, of course, I was changed more than any of my students.
In all, I spent ten years at Temple — five years as a graduate student in the Department of Religion and five years as an assistant professor in the Intellectual Heritage Program. I took a number of courses with John Raines, who also served as chair of my dissertation committee. Later we would be colleagues in the Intellectual Heritage Program. For a time, he served on the academic board of Metanexus Institute. Throughout, John Raines was an exceptional teacher, mentor, friend, and colleague from whom I learned to combine a passion for justice with intellectual depth and self-critical reflection.

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