John Raines and Outreach in an Educational Partnership
By Eve Mullen

In October of 2001 Dr. John C. Raines, with whom I had studied and for whom I had served as a teaching assistant at Temple University, forwarded to me a congratulatory letter from the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The successful grant application for which he was being congratulated was via the Educational Partnerships Program for work in the world’s largest Muslim-majority democracy of Indonesia. A journey of exchange with Gadjah Mada University in the diverse city of Yogyakarta was just beginning, a journey which has resulted in long-lasting friendships, academic exchanges, and which, in part, gave birth to the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) at Gadjah Mada—a vital center not only in Indonesia but in the world for dialogue, exchange, and the productive study of world religions.

The 2001 grant from the U.S. State Department came at an exciting time for me personally: I had just returned to the United States from a stint as Guest Lecturer for the Prietsch Foundation at Hamburg University in Germany. I had been teaching in the Education, Religion and Theology departments at Uni Hamburg since finishing my PhD at Temple University in 1999 and was hungry for more international experience. Already regarding John Raines as a mentor, pastor and friend, I read that shared letter of congratulations with enthusiasm: his handwritten notes in the margins suggested ideal dates for my first visit to Yogyakarta, encouraged me to help build that new religion library’s holdings in my areas of expertise, and advised applying to Fulbright as an ideal means for return visits in the future.

The grant in which John Raines had generously included me as a Co-Principal Investigator would make this and more possible; it led directly to two major Fulbright grants and indirectly to numerous exchanges with other institutions abroad and my service as a peer reviewer for Fulbright’s Senior Specialists Program. This international work is largely definitive of my professional career and has been immensely rewarding to me personally. I have grown as a scholar and a teacher in these contexts. It is no exaggeration to say that I have John Raines and his vision, resourcefulness and initiative to thank for it all. He provided me with a life-changing opportunity. And the program he helped nurture has been life-changing for many.

Universitas Gadjah Mada, or “Great Elephant University” in Indonesia is aptly named. It is a large, sprawling, powerful center of education in Yogyakarta, and like the elephant in the Baha’i metaphor of the blind man’s descriptions of its parts, is too grand to be defined in simple terms. Each of its departments and research wings is unique and notable. CRCS, however, maintains a special place in Indonesian educational history. It is the country’s first graduate center for the academic study of world religions, and this in the special context of Indonesia’s generally conservative Islamic democracy. CRCS holds a special place in the hearts of all who have been lucky enough to study, research or teach there, as well. Although the host institution and its students are majority-Muslim, the CRCS classrooms are somewhat religiously pluralistic themselves, offering many young people a first opportunity to reflect in an academic setting upon Indonesia’s internal diversity.
I have made several trips to Yogyakarta and plan more. Indonesian colleagues, friends and former students have visited me in the U.S. and have lectured at my home university of Emory in Georgia. The experiences I have enjoyed from simply knowing John Raines are sometimes, as with any great teacher, transforming. What my experiences thus far in Indonesia have made clear are the links between learning about global religious traditions, cultivating an understanding of the diversity of religions in one’s own community, gaining a better sense of the struggles and major economic and justice issues confronting many minority groups, and finally, the naturally resulting outreach to communities that often need aid in such struggles. True mutual understanding means more than mere tolerance of difference; it is seen best in active concern for and cooperation with others.

As a teacher I can attest to the fact that the subject matter itself, world religions, heightens student awareness of differences and also commonalities. In one course on religions found in China, which allowed us to explore Confucianism, Taoism and several types of Buddhism, students who knew little about these traditions opened their eyes to the religions’ forms in modernity and presences in Indonesia among Chinese-heritage families and many others, too. A course on Buddhism specifically showed the differences between Buddhist schools of thought in the conservative Theravada tradition, the most common in Indonesia, and the adaptable Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions.

Of particular interest to my students were topics such as women’s roles and empowerment in the varying religions and the traditions of nuns and women’s ordination in Buddhism, something absent from patriarchal Indonesian Buddhism. As one feminist Buddhist student presented her thesis on the struggles of women in Indonesian Buddhism to become nuns, she received applause and support from students representing other religions: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, other Buddhist sects. The few disapproving voices in the classroom, mostly from guests attending from a local Buddhist monastery, were matched by calls for change. The student presenting her thesis smiled throughout her presentation, confidence bolstered by the student support. The students later organized a quiet outreach to struggling local communities of women world-renouncers, lending them support in a society that favors support of male renouncers only. The nuns’ sangha thrives today.

This example is typical of several efforts at outreach I witnessed: by providing aid and services to different religious communities, the students furthered inter-religious dialogue, diplomacy and awareness of the social and economic issues affecting their neighbors. Another example of student learning and the extension of friendship came in a tragic time, the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, which killed over 6000 people. I was in Yogyakarta at the time and was moved to witness the outreach to diverse earthquake-damaged villages. Regardless of religion or ethnicity of their neighbors in need, the students mobilized to help. Trucks of food, supplies, and clothing went out, manned by students—and a few professors—to isolated villages.

These are just some of my experiences of the compassionate and progressive spirit in the CRCS community. Of course these are extraordinarily kind, generous people, and they were so before even the existence of CRCS. Yet the simple atmosphere of diverse, open
classrooms, in which a multitude of religious voices can be raised civilly and in an informed manner, can give rise to a cooperation and mutual support among students that was not there before. The bonds formed and the communication made possible via the classroom were new. The end result was a transformative learning experience, leading to active involvement in inter-religious cooperation. Such are the ripple-effects of one vision. John Raines reached out to others. He extended a hand to colleagues at Temple and potential colleagues abroad, to former students and potential students in a fledgling program. And the outreach continued from there. Those who accepted his extended hand reached out to others themselves. This is what great teachers do: they do not merely lecture about their messages to students in classrooms; they live them and thus inspire others in classrooms and beyond. A chain reaction begins and extends beyond the teacher’s original effort. John Raines’ footprints are visible far outside Philadelphia.

I sincerely believe, and it is one of the reasons I am passionate about my discipline and international work, that learning about others is an activity that replaces ignorance with wisdom, suspicion with welcoming attitudes, and the tendency to isolate ourselves with the joy of reaching out to others. Opening a viable window into another culture is, as Ninian Smart states, to allow "empathetic imagination" to take power: the understanding of another religion than one's own is then a "migration of mind and heart," and in entering another's world, a migration toward respectful understanding results.¹ The process fosters a respect not only toward the culture studied but toward others in the diverse classroom and immediate world. The process also results in a more thorough understanding of one's own cultural system: we often learn more about ourselves by learning about others. These are lessons that began during my studies at Temple University as a student, a researcher, and as a teaching assistant. My Indonesian experiences taught me a great deal more about these basic truths, and I am a better international scholar and teacher as a result. I thank John Raines for that. He is truly a scholar-teacher who is an active, positive presence in a world of diversity, well beyond the classroom.

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