

Bill Moeller Commentary: Centralia College and I Get Help at Same Time

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Last week I went through the process of filing my income tax return, and I'm happy to report that I'm still solvent, but not by all that much. One thing became apparent as I was preparing all the information I needed, and that's the observation that a lot fewer people are getting married these days. How do I know this?

To begin with, 2014 was the first year since I started officiating at weddings back in the 20th century that I've performed fewer than 30 ceremonies. Two of those years (1994 and 1995) I tied 60 marital knots! Last year it was 17. It wasn't just me: The courthouse issued a lot fewer marriage licenses as well.

One day, not long ago, The Chronicle's list of recent babies born in the county had 10 entries. In only two of them did the mother and father have the same last name. Sure, more women are keeping their own name than they did in the past, but not eight out of ten! (In last Saturday's Chronicle, though, the count was six to two in the opposite direction.)

I've stated before that I find no biblical reference to a need to have wedding ceremonies officiated by a minister, rabbi or judge. That doesn't mean I don't believe in marriage. After all, I've tried it three times. There should be some sort of formal documentation involved, though; anything less isn't fair to children of such a union.

Getting back to my original subject, I had one thing going for me in filing my tax statement that lessened the amount I had to pay, but let me first offer a little explanation. In the more than 30 years that I toured the Northwest as Mark Twain, I collected quite a few books both by and about that gentleman.

I was more interested in the latter than the former, particularly those books written by friends who knew him best. There's "My Mark Twain," written by one of his two best friends, author and editor William Dean Howells. (Given Twain's feelings about organized religion, his other best friend was, strangely enough, a Congregational minister, the Rev. Joseph Twichell, "Uncle Joe" to the Twain children.)

I had two or three books written by women who had been members of Twain's "Angelfish Club," restricted to girls under the age of 15, who were required to wear white dresses and sit on his lap. No, he wasn't a dirty old man.

References such as those are where I could go to delve into Twain's character. Without understanding the character, all I'd be doing onstage was parroting one-liners like a standup comedian.

Since my "Farewell Performance" in 2007 all those 150 or so volumes were sitting on my shelves, of no use to anybody else. My first thought was to sell them as a collection, but no dealer wanted to buy the whole set. Powell's in Portland offered to buy individual books at 20 percent of their asking price. (That's 80 percent profit or, to put it another way, a 400 percent markup!)

To use a cliché, the solution was staring me in the face. So, after my "Eureka moment" I donated the entire collection — 10 large, tightly packed (and heavy!) boxes — to the Centralia College Library! May I add that I felt pretty good about it afterward?

My shelves are now less crowded, and the books are where they can be accessed if any student wants to follow in the footsteps of the college's Twain scholar, Susanne Weil, and make one of the nation's greatest writers into a life's vocation. Or dare I say "obsession?"